

The
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The Successful Execution of Presidential Duties

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In an effort to address the challenges facing South Korea since its democratization in 1987, the East Asia Institute (EAI) has proposed new institutional strategies for the desirable role, power, and responsibility of the president through the projects *The Presidency in Korea* in 2002 and *Presidential Transitions in Korea* in 2007. Today, the rapid growth of social networking technologies creates new dynamics which requires South Korea to meet the demands for increased political participation and interactive communication.

In response, the EAI has reviewed achievements from previous government administrations and launched *The Presidency in Korea 2013*, which seeks to develop governance that will facilitate the decision-making process of the president engaged in this new political environment.

On March 22, 2012, the EAI invited to its second roundtable discussion Kim Byong-Joon, Kookmin University, who has served various posts under former President Roh Moo-hyun, such as Chief National Policy Director in the Office of the President, Deputy Prime Minister, and Minister of Education and Human Resources Development. The following is a summary of the main contents of the meeting.

A Successful Presidency Begins with the Transition Period

Once the president-elect takes over the duties of the previous administration, he or she is expected to map out the new administration's plans for the future. Ideally, the president must take on both the achievements and failings of the previous administration and use them to his or her advantage. Achievements are inherited, while failings are lessons to draw upon.

Contrary to this basic notion, the Lee Myung-bak administration did not build upon the efforts of the Roh Moo-hyun administration, perhaps due to the "amateurish government" label associated with the Roh administration. However, such an approach ultimately resulted in the waste of important political resources due to an abrupt shift in policies. For example, the sudden change in approach to North Korea by the Lee Myung-bak administration resulted in the breakdown of ties with Pyongyang and led to the loss of vital contacts with counterparts in the North that have been developed over the past decade under the previous two administrations.

Despite the importance of one's own skills set, the president-elect cannot by himself achieve a successful outcome during the presidential transition process. Rather, the problem lies in the fact that there is no system that is designed to facilitate a smooth succession process. This makes it appear as if there was no plan on how to actually start running the new administration.

A successful execution of presidential duties begins with the presidential transition

team creating a road map for the management of the new administration's policies and requires an environment that enables for active participation in state affairs. Therefore, the composition of the transition team is crucial. Usually, the transition team consists of both scholars and politicians. While scholars tend to focus on producing policy reports, politicians are more concerned about lobbying their position to ensure that they will be involved in the new administration. Therefore, recruiting scholars or experts who are devoted to policy analysis as the majority members of the transition team is desirable.

Establish a Clear Road Map

The president in South Korea is subject to the high expectations of citizens, yet has to operate within a narrow base of authority. As such a roadmap outlining how the new administration will manage state affairs is essential. Without a clear road map, the administration will certainly struggle. As the president will always be subject to endless criticism, the lack of a road map will inevitably lead to more confusion over the administration's policy approach.

Along with establishing a road map, the role of an advisor who can understand the president's intention is important. This is because in the early stage of the administration, due to the overconformity from government officials, setting a direction for state affairs can deviate from the president's policy objectives. Without a clear road map or if government officials do not understand the president's objectives, there will likely be inefficiency in statecraft. One way to prevent this problem is to separate the policy office from the presidential secretariat in the Blue House as the

tasks carried out by the two departments differ. The role of the president's chief of staff is suitable for one with much political experience but politicians often lack specialty in certain policy issues. Thus, in order to accurately reflect the administration affairs and prevent distortion of the president's political will, a more capable and stronger chief of policy is essential.

Communication Problems Leads to Failure

Of great importance when carrying out presidential duties is to avoid the distortion of information. Due to the president's authority and conduct, cabinet members and advisors tend to avoid reporting certain information to the president. The distortion of information can worsen depending on the president's behavior, especially when the president expresses strong opinions on certain issues. Information regarding public opinion is particularly easily distorted; such misrepresentation can bring about serious problems in the administration.

The president must ensure against any failings in communication with his or her staff. Above all else, the president's views on administrative issues must be delivered clearly. Government officials are more attentive to the intentions of the Blue House rather than the orders of the ministers because the president has the ultimate authority, particularly when it comes to the promotion of high-ranking government officials. To avoid administrative conflicts that may consequently arise, the independence and empowerment of governmental departments must be strengthened.

A Government Works Together

The president must direct the government to work in unison. The degree of the government's commitment toward the president differs with each department. Unlike the departments focused on domestic affairs, those agencies related to finance tend to value their own judgment. The government officials in the finance-related agencies also tend to be less motivated to stay in office. Because the senior-junior relationship is more important for high-ranking officials after retirement, a government official's commitment towards his or her senior outweighs that shown toward the president. In addition, this seniority structure and the partition between departments limit the effectiveness of the president's management of human resources.

It is therefore crucial to have in place a mechanism that ensures the loyalty of government departments. Such a mechanism does not seek to place the departments under the president's direct control, but to make the government officials consider that they work for the benefit of the nation. In order to resolve such issues and promote effective management of human resources, the Roh administration introduced the Senior Executive Service. Under the current government though, this initiative seems to have stalled.

Strengthen the Role of the Prime Minister

In order to manage the various administrative tasks, inter-departmental cooperation must be more efficiently organized. Such a reform of the administrative system will depend upon the role of the prime minister's office which can only be defined by the president. Ideally, the president is expected to assign appropriate duties and grant a certain degree of authority to the prime minister. One way this could be

done is to let the Blue House primarily focus on foreign affairs and defense as well as the president's own agenda, while the prime minister focuses on more domestic issues. But as power has always been concentrated upon the president, empowering the prime minister has always been a difficult challenge. For example, during the Roh administration, despite granting certain powers to the prime minister, the Blue House intervened in order to overcome certain obstacles. The role of the prime minister also depends heavily on the prime minister himself. People who are familiar with policy issues and can successfully carry out the role as a coordinator, such as former Prime Minister Lee Hae Chan, are likely to achieve many accomplishments. In reality though, due to the high expectation citizens have toward the president, even the smallest problems usually results in the president intervening.

One possible solution would be to select the prime minister from the ruling party. Such an option would detract presidential intervention as well secure governmental responsibilities from the ruling party. Still, in reality this too would be difficult to accomplish. Another option would be the creation of a committee of relevant government departments organized as a task force which would help to make progress in policy issues. Such a committee though would not possess any decision making rights or the right to introduce bills to the National Assembly, as its effectiveness can be secured by enabling relevant ministers to participate as members of the committee.

Enhance Consultations between the Government and the Ruling Party

When general elections or even by-elections are held during the president's term in office,

they often create an obstacle toward effective governance. In particular, the period before and after the elections are usually ridden with conflict between the government and the ruling party over policies. As the president's popularity declines at the end of the "honeymoon period," the ruling party faces a disadvantage during the off-year election. In such a situation, the president tends to avoid promoting policies which are at odds with those advocated by the ruling party. After the elections, the blame game between the government and the ruling party hinders effective government administration. Also, when policies disapproved by the opposition party are promoted, they often become subject to public criticism.

Given such disadvantages, policy negotiations between the government and the ruling party are crucial for enhancing effective governance. It is important to point out that the president cannot wield his power over the ruling party, since he does not have the authority to nominate members within his affiliated party. As such, without proper consultations between ranking administration and party officials, managing policy issues only becomes more difficult. Towards the end of the president's term, the so-called "lame-duck season," the authority of the president weakens considerably while the political parties wield a relatively stronger influence. If the relationship between the ruling party and the president sours during this period due to political differences, it is almost impossible for the administration to be effective at all. What is needed then is administrative reform that will facilitate effective governance. Measures to consider include making the president's term equal to that of the National Assembly or limiting the presidency to four years.

Political parties must train policy experts, who can concentrate on the bigger picture and

map out clearly policy issues. In order to reinforce the administrative responsibilities of the ruling party as well as those of the president, it would be more effective to bring members of the ruling party into the Blue House. However, the lack of skilled policy experts in the party often results in bureaucrats filling up positions in the Blue House. The lack of capable policy experts is what makes South Korea's political system different from other countries.

Distinguish Long-Term National Issues from Administrative Tasks

Political polarization is a severe issue in South Korea that needs to be addressed. Although tackling political polarization was set as part of the national agenda during Roh administration, the severity of the problem means that it has yet to be resolved. Polarization is beyond the capacity of any single administration; it is a deeper problem. Given this challenge, the president must be capable of distinguishing between long-term national issues from administrative issues within his term. Selfish administrative decisions to boost his performance as president may waste the resources of the national budget and will only result in policy failure.

The public must also stop using the president as a scapegoat for every administrative failure. Policies must be designed under the premise that individuals show support only for those that will benefit them. The public looks at the outcome rather than the purpose behind the efforts. Thus, devising a system that can benefit the majority is critical. It is therefore imperative that we form a working system that can maximize public benefit. ■

About the Speaker

Byong-Joon Kim

Professor Byong-Joon Kim received his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Delaware, and is currently a professor in the Department of Public Administration and Public Policy at Kookmin University. Professor Kim was the chairman of the special committee on local self-government for the Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice and policy advisor to former President Roh during the 2002 Campaign. Professor Kim also served as the chairman of Presidential Committee on Government Innovation and Decentralization, Chief policy secretary, Deputy Prime Minister, and Minister of Education and Human Resources Development under the Roh administration. Kim is currently the Director of Social Design Institute and Director of Institute for Public Policy and Management. His recently published books include *There is No President for the 99%* (2012).

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