



Continuities and Changes in Korean Government Innovations

This article surveys public sector innovation initiatives, which had been conducted under past Korean administrations. With a special focus on civil service reforms (innovations in public personnel administration), this article attempts to find out continuities and changes of the reforms, and to draw implications from the study of these practices.

Introduction

Government innovation is nothing new. There are always ebbs and flows of innovation initiatives in the public sector, and Korea is no exception. The history of Korea after World War II shows that the government has constantly pushed government reforms and innovations, particularly following the cycle of political and administrative changes. After independence from Japan, the Korean government made efforts to establish political institutions in the middle of severe ideological battles between the right and left camps. The Korean War made it clear that democratic capitalism was to be the foundation of South Korea. The government also began to build a strong bureaucratic capacity in the course of economic development promoted by President Park (1963–1979), who took power through a military coup. The bureaucracy continued to grow in volume and capacity during the Chun Doo-whan (1981–1987) and Roh Tae-woo (1988–1992) administrations, and it played a pivotal role in modernizing the economy through aggressive economic development plans and industrial policies.

In the process of growing the Korean bureaucracy, each administration has promoted government innovation initiatives, particularly those focusing on civil service reform to make government more efficient, effective, and transparent. These efforts often serve as symbolic political gestures to bolster the government's reforming image. This civil service reform effort is often an important tool for igniting large-scale public sector reform. Since the advent of civilian government with the Kim Young-sam administration (1993–1997), the Korean government has made

continued efforts to reform its civil service to reform its civil service system and the public sector in general. For example, the Kim Young-sam administration attempted to pursue a cleaner, smaller, and stronger government, whereas the Kim Dae-jung (1998–2002) administration initiated more aggressive reform programs for smaller and more efficient government by downsizing government as part of four major reforms designed to overcome the financial crisis of the 1990s.

Pursuing a participatory and enabling government, the Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2007) administration continued some of the previous innovation efforts while exploring new paths for public sector reform. It distinguished itself from previous administrations by the magnitude and scope of its innovation initiatives. Many government innovation programs were envisioned and fabricated by the Presidential Committee on Government Innovation and Decentralization (PCGID), which was a major agent of government innovation under the Roh Moo-hyun administration. The PCGID outlined eight major innovation areas—administration, personnel policy, public finance, e-government, innovation management, policy public relations, and innovation evaluation—and then identified core innovation agendas in each area. Each core agenda includes key practical innovation programs and basic innovation projects. For example, the PCGID identified 30 key practical innovation programs under 10 core agendas that represent the level of complexity of government innovation.

This article focuses on civil service reforms (innovations in public personnel administration) and attempts to answer three questions: (1) What are continuities and changes in the civil service reforms in different administrations? (2) Can government innovation initiatives be sustained? and (3) What are the lessons learned from the Korean experience of government innovations? ■

Civil Service Reforms and Their Sustainability

Many reforms enter and exit the public sphere; some stay for a long time, others fail early on. In his examination of three reform initiatives, Patashnik (2003) describes the attributes of politically sustainable policy reform efforts. He defines political sustainability of reform as “the capacity of any public policy to maintain its stability, coherence, and integrity as time passes, achieving its basic promised goals amid the inevitable vicissitudes of politics” (207). To enhance sustainability, he encourages substantial “changes in institutional arrangements and positive feedback effects” (226) and points out that

Two key factors affect the long-term durability of any given reform measure: whether political institutions discourage government actors from adopting new policies contrary to

policy reform's letter and spirit; and whether the "policy feedbacks" from a pre-existing reform give relevant social actors the incentive and capacity to defend the reform's maintenance. In sum, sustainable policy reforms are characterized by the successful reworking of governing arrangements (making policy change difficult) and the creation or empowerment of groups with a stake in the policy reform's continuation (rendering policy change unattractive).

Patashnik's work implies that civil service reform can be unsustainable if government experiences political and bureaucratic changes such as new political leadership; increasing political costs related to bureaucratic resistance; negative feedback from politicians, citizens, and bureaucrats; or the failure to empower stakeholder groups.

<Table 1>
Antiphons of
Administrative Reform
Source: Peters (1998)

Elements	Attributes for initiation of effective reform: Driving factors	Attributes for sustainability of effective reform: Sustaining factors
Advocacy and ownership	Administrative reform cannot succeed unless top government is involved and committed.	Administrative reform will not succeed unless it is owned by the lower echelons of organizations.
Central agency	Central agencies are often the source of reform and drive reform efforts.	Central agencies have a difficult time reforming themselves and are generally the least reformed parts of government.
Time	Reform must have clear programs and deadlines.	Reform must be continuous.
Body count	Clear goals of cost savings and employment reductions may be politically necessary.	Target figures invite resistance from employees and may make otherwise successful efforts appear to fail.
Importance of personnel	Effective government will only work by reducing the power of the civil service and empowering their nominal political masters.	The principal goal of reform is to empower public employees, create autonomous and effective public managers, and make government a more attractive employer.
Budget-driven change	Administrative reforms should be driven by managerial concerns, not simply by financial concerns.	The budget is the central priority statement of a government, and any meaningful reform must be connected to the budgetary process.
Uniformity	If government is to reform, the same principles should be applied to all parts of government.	Reform must be conducted on a contingency basis, with different targets and procedures for change in different organizations.
Reality of reform	Administrative reform is a rhetorical exercise.	Administrative reform is an exercise in the genuine transformation of the public sector.

Peters (1998) examines the attributes of successful administrative reform that apply to civil service reform. He believes that no consistent and universal factors determine effective administrative reform. Instead, administrative reform is made up of various *antiphons*, dimensions that comprise conflicting and dualistic arguments. In his view, successful organizational change, administrative reform, and civil service reform are characterized by at least eight antiphons. These dimensions include advocacy and ownership of reform, the role of the central agency, time, the scope of reform, personnel, budget, uniformity, and the practical reality of reform (See Table 1).

Rather than conflicting, however, the two sets of attributes seem to complement one another. One set appears to be more important for effectively initiating administrative reform, whereas the other set is critical for sustainability. For example, a strong political commitment from elected officials and a top-down approach may be effective initially, but the shared commitment and acceptance (ownership) of lower-level public servants may be critical to the durability and success of administrative reform.

Arguments along the time dimension apply in the same way. The government should introduce reforms by setting clear goals within a specific timetable. To make reforms sustainable, government should continue to push for reform until the goals are met. Likewise, managerial concerns are a primary factor during the initiation stage, whereas reform is more likely to be sustained when its elements are reflected in regular budgets. The attributes of effective initiation and sustainability offer a useful framework for assessing the effective implementation of civil service reform. ■

Continuities in Civil Service Reform

▲ Promoting Balanced Personnel Policy

■ It has long been known that women are underrepresented in the Korean civil service. Although the size of the Korean civil service doubled during the past two decades and the percentage of women in the civil service nearly doubled (from 16.8 percent in 1978 to 31.7 percent in 2001), women continue to be underrepresented in high-level positions. For instance, in 2004, only 7.4 percent of central government managerial positions in Grades 1 through 5 were occupied by women, although the number had improved significantly since 1998, when women occupied only 2.9 percent of such positions. In fact, the government planned for women to fill about 10 percent of high-level civil service jobs by 2006 and actually achieved 9.8 percent. This percentage will continue to grow as more women pass the high-level civil service examination. In 2003 and 2004, 31.8 percent and 38.4 percent of those who passed the high-level civil service exam were women; in 2007,

about 50 percent were women. The continuing push for equal employment of women has created uneasiness and resistance within the Korean civil service; the acceptance of female leadership will require much bureaucratic cultural change.

Taking reform one step further, the Roh Moo-hyun administration also attempted to reduce discrimination in the civil service against engineers and the disabled, as well as regional discrimination (Lee, 2003). As a result, the administration achieved 2.04 percent employment of the disabled in 2004, which exceeded the legal requirement of 2.0 percent. With a newly established system for correcting regional discrimination, the government recruited 50 persons for sixth-grade positions in 2005. The government has also continued to make efforts to recruit more high-level officials who have science or engineering backgrounds. ■

▲ Making the Civil Service More Open and Competitive

The Korean government has pushed hard to make the civil service system more open and competitive. This reform is designed to change a long-standing system that is notorious for noncompetitive and closed recruitment and seniority-based promotion. First of all, the Korean government mandated the Civil Service Commission(CSC) to establish an “open employment system,” and in 2003 the Korean government opened up about 140 positions to competition, including 20 percent of bureau director positions. The actual share of open-competition positions doubled from 15.9 percent under Kim Dae-jung to 30.6 percent under Roh (*Seoul Daily*, January 29, 2004). Workers recruited through the open-position system tend to earn much higher levels of compensation than comparable position holders.

The CSC has tried to enhance the internal openness and competitiveness of the civil service system by promoting personnel exchange between ministries, between central and local governments, and between government and business (Kim, 2000, 2001). The personnel exchange program is a preliminary attempt to duplicate practices used in the U.S. Senior Executive Service. In January 2004, the Roh administration appointed 10 new directors-general from outside the traditional civil service system through open competition, and it reshuffled 22 directors-general among departments. For example, a bureau director at the Ministry of Unification was appointed to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism because of his expertise in South Korea–North Korea relations, and the director of the Information and Communication Bureau in the Ministry of Information and Communication swapped his position with the director of the Industrial Policy Bureau (*Donga Ilbo*, January 20, 2004).

The open employment system is expected to attract many competent persons from the public and private sectors. Although the reforms have provided a positive stimulus to the traditionally closed Korean civil service system, positive outcomes perhaps should not be considered for a few years. Many open-employment positions have been filled by former public employees, and few private candidates have expressed interest in those positions because of the uncompetitive salaries and negative perceptions of the closed bureaucratic culture. The more open, competitive mechanisms for recruitment are preferable to the highly personal, politicized, and largely noncompetitive forms of appointment (Peters, 1997). The government should continue to cultivate a more open and competitive bureaucratic culture, but it also needs to play an active role in establishing new recruitment standards and procedures in order to prevent employment based on a spoils system. ■

^ Promoting Performance Management

Performance management is one of the most popular agendas and one for which managerial techniques have been developed. It has been adopted in government in many forms, including management by objective, total quality management, and zero-based budgeting. Following the model of the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 in the United States, performance management has once again become a powerful managerial concept that promotes quality of public service, government accountability, and effective governance. Although performance management is not new to the Korean government, its application has been narrowly conducted at the individual performance level of job appraisal. Job appraisal is regularly handled by managers and used for personnel decisions such as promotion, job assignment, and performance-related pay.

In fact, performance-related pay was first introduced in a primitive form in 1994, but it is only recently that the Korean government has actively implemented the system. In 1999, the Kim Dae-jung administration reformulated the performance-related pay scale and offered bonuses of 150 percent, 100 percent, and 50 percent of the basic salary according to one's performance level (top 10 percent, top 10–30 percent, and top 30–70 percent, respectively).

Although the basic principle of performance-related pay is often distorted as a result of Korea's conventional and group-oriented bureaucratic culture, the significance of performance has gradually taken root in the civil service system. The government has made a serious effort to make performance evaluation more objective, rigorous, and productive by developing multiple evaluation methods, such as the 360-degree evaluation, team performance assessment, and balanced scorecard. It has also introduced the

integrated administrative innovation systems, which are designed to incorporate various performance evaluation methods into information technology-enabled administrative process systems.

Enjoying the benefit of e-support (*e-jiwon*) in the presidential office, the Roh Moo-hyun administration encouraged public agencies to develop information technology-enabled integrated administrative innovation systems that not only support business process reengineering, performance management, and customer relationship management but also enhance the transparency, accountability, and effectiveness of public agencies. The system allows public officials to handle their tasks, communicate with others, and receive evaluations from managers and others of interest, such as colleagues and citizens. The Real Name Tax Administration System and the Hamoni¹ System are exemplary cases. In the Hamoni system, for example, public officials perform and document their daily tasks and then submit reports to managers (team or division leaders) and to policy adjustment meetings (minister, vice minister, and senior managers) for review, approval, and evaluation. Public officials can work online through the integrated administrative system, communicate with other organizational members of interest, check administrative processes in real time, obtain electronic signatures from responsible managers, and receive performance evaluations from responsible managers and customers in real time. The information technology-enabled administrative innovation system not only makes the administrative process more efficient and transparent but also makes individual public employees and working units more accountable and better performing. Individual and team evaluations are then reflected in performance-related pay and personnel decisions. ■

Changes in Civil Service Reform

- ▲ Focusing on the Government Innovation System, not the Innovation itself

The Roh Moo-hyun administration stressed the same managerial values and continued most of the civil service reforms begun during the Kim Dae-jung administration. In fact, it introduced even more aggressive mechanisms for an open, balanced, and competitive civil service system and attempted to install a sustainable government innovation system. At the outset of the

¹ Various innovations were incorporated into the Hamoni System: (1) simplified memo reporting to the minister, which shortened reporting time; (2) the introduction of an e-reporting system and termination of the hierarchical reporting system, which led to prompt decision making; and (3) policy adjustment meetings to encourage discussion and coordination among teams of interest (MOGAHA, 2005). The Hamoni System has since been replaced by the On-nara System.

Roh Moo-hyun administration, the PCGID carefully designed government innovation road maps² that were later used to navigate detailed innovation agendas. One of the distinctive characteristics of the civil service reforms implemented by the Roh Moo-hyun administration is that the administration carefully and strategically designed a long-term innovation system.

The government innovation road maps were carefully molded by the PCGID with the political support of the president, and they have been aggressively introduced and diffused to public agencies through specific innovation programs. To effectively coordinate government innovation, the president appointed a staff that is in charge of government innovation and collaborates with the PCGID and other public agencies. At the government-agency level, each agency formed an innovation support team to facilitate innovation and attempted to internalize the government innovations and cultivate an innovation culture. In order to sustain each innovation road map, the administration monitored the progress of each innovation project and offered feedback to ensure the continued advancement of innovation projects. In the course of monitoring and advancing the implementation of the innovation projects, the PCGID shifted its role from initiator to monitor and promoter. The administration has also promoted integrated administrative systems such as the On-nara System, which merged multiple managerial innovations—performance management, customer relationship management, and business process reengineering, for example—with information technology-enabled administrative innovation systems. These automatized administrative innovation systems are expected to sustain innovations, because systems tend to last longer than individual innovations. The administration also adopted change management and pushed a top-down innovation agenda through various innovation evaluation processes.

Despite its continued reform efforts, the administration faced a bumpy road. Many public servants began to feel “innovation fatigue” and often expressed a pessimistic view about the innovation initiatives. In particular, the top-down and evaluation-oriented approach failed in promoting voluntary participation of public servants in the government innovation stream. ■

^ Establishing a Senior Civil Service

The Senior Civil Service (SCS) was under consideration since the mid-1990s, when the government wanted to make high-level policy personnel administration more flexible. The government first began to pay attention to this system as a tool for public sector

² The grand government innovation road maps comprised five areas: government reform, personnel management reform, local decentralization, finance and tax system reform, and e-government.

reform during the financial crisis of the late 1990s. However, it did not receive much support from the Kim Dae-jung administration. At the outset of the Roh Moo-hyun administration, the idea of the SCS was resurrected and adopted as a core innovation project of the public personnel administration road map prepared by the PCGID. The SCS was considered an effective way of improving the career development program and making senior policy positions more competent and effective. As a responsible agent, the CSC strongly promoted and introduced the SCS after comprehensive preparatory work. In particular, the CSC used behavioral interviews and subject expert interviews to build a comprehensive competence model for the SCS and came up with five core competences: basic behavioral, job-related, managerial/network, knowledge/skill, and finally, other competencies. Although the SCS is a major change that is designed to restructure the civil service system and enhance professionalism and flexible personnel administration for high-ranking officials, the actual changes and prospects are not clear. Many have also expressed concerns about the possibility of politicization of senior public servants. ■

▲ From Downsizing to Upsizing then downsizing

The Kim Dae-jung administration actively pursued (or at least proclaimed) a small and entrepreneurial government through downsizing, restructuring, and privatizing initiatives, whereas the Roh Moo-hyun administration promoted an “enabling” government rather than a small government, and pursued balance, fairness, and a concern for the underprivileged—elements that are often undervalued in efficiency-driven New Public Management reforms. Pursuing more process-focused innovation than previous administrations, the current administration puts more emphasis on the establishment of sustainable government innovations and an autonomous innovation system by changing administrative processes, administrative software systems, and administrative culture and practices. The administration continues to monitor and assess its government innovation programs through innovation assessment programs and autonomous integrated administrative systems (such as the On-nara System) in order to institutionalize and ensure sustainable government innovations. Promoting an enabling government and dealing with the continuing economic downturn, the Roh Moo-hyun administration gave up on downsizing and upsized the public sector by increasing the number of public servants by about 50,000. This shift from small government to big government has been criticized for promoting inefficiency. Reversing the Roh Moo-hyun administration’s policy, the Lee Myung-bak administration adopted a strong policy of downsizing and streamlining government. Promoting a practical and utilitarian government, the Lee administration pursues a small but strong government by reducing the number of cabinet level departments from 18 to 15 as well as downsizing the body of civil service. The administration

also promotes a large scale department and bureau in order to support downsizing effort. ■

▲ Total Wage System

The total wage system (TWS) is designed to promote the managerial discretion of agency heads in personnel-related decisions, such as personnel size and organizational structure, based on allocated annual total wages. With this discretion, agency heads are supposed to be responsible for agency performance. In July 2005, the Roh Moo-hyun administration introduced TWS in several central government units, including MOGAHA (*former Ministry of Public Administration & Security*), the Board of Planning and Budget, the Civil Service Commission, the Department of Labor, the National Statistics Bureau, the National Procurement Administration, and the National Patent Administration, as well as 23 other public organizations, including the Driver's License Management (*Yonhap News*, June 30, 2005). Ten local governments³ also introduced TWS in 2005.

According to the TWS guidelines, MOGAHA controlled only the total number of public officials in the central government and the ceiling on the number of public officials at the departmental level. Each department had discretion in deciding how it allocated its personnel by rank and by position. Each department could also design an organizational structure at the division level at its own discretion, although the design of the bureau level still needed to be approved by MOGAHA.

The TWS is inevitably associated with the salary system. In addition to managerial discretion in organizational structure and personnel decisions, each department has great managerial autonomy in salary decisions, such as performance-related pay, additional compensation for special workplaces, and other compensation decisions. The administration is planning to offer more departmental discretion in organizational management and performance management as it implements the TWS on a full scale. Although the TWS has become an effective tool for granting department heads managerial discretion and more flexibility in personnel and organizational management, some observers have pointed to potential problems, such as skewing toward higher-ranking positions and imbalances in salary, and performance-related pay among departments. Some local governments have indeed taken advantage of the managerial discretion granted to them by creating more administrative units and more high-ranking managerial positions (*Seoul Daily*, March 17, 2006). In response to these problems, MOGAHA undertook to control potential abuses of the system by strengthening internal and external accountability mechanisms and by offering more

³ Kyungsang Buk Province, Jeju Province, Kimpo City, Bucheon City, Jungup City, Changwon City, Hongsung Gun, Jangsung Gun, Kangnam Ku, and Kwangsan Ku.

financial discretion over the operating budget to administrative units that under spent their salary budgets. ■

Conclusions and Implications

This article has examined innovations in personnel administration that have been continued, initiated, promoted, and implemented by the Roh Moo-hyun administration. Many of the innovations are essentially bold, innovative, prescription oriented, and entrepreneurial. They are designed to restructure the traditionally closed Korean civil service system by promulgating values such as openness, competition, performance, autonomy, and efficiency. The innovation initiatives at first seemed successful at introducing reform agendas and at constructing and implementing reform programs. Despite bureaucratic pessimism about their effectiveness, the initiatives have survived the early policy-making process (from agenda setting to initial implementation). In particular, those initiated during previous administrations seemed to settle down as established tools as the Roh Moo-hyun administration expressed its emphasis on innovating the traditional civil service system. This initial success was driven by the leadership's strong political advocacy, the roles played by the central agencies (PCGID, CSC, and MOGAHA), the specific timeline placed on the programs, and the strong rhetoric shared by politicians and citizens. After the Government Organization Act and the Civil Service Act were amended to merge the personnel divisions of the MOGAHA and the CSC in early 2004, the personnel function of MOGAHA was transferred to the CSC, including its merit protection and training programs. Although such a development helped to make the CSC more competent in carrying out civil service reform, it led to tension between the two agencies regarding civil service reform agendas such as the SCS.

The implementation of reform, however, faces both expected and unexpected obstacles that threaten its sustainability and effectiveness: decentralized leadership, unmet goals, inconsistent and unfair application of reform principles, and bureaucratic resistance. As Patashnik (2003) warns, politicians and reformers who are allied to support the initial adoption of civil service reform may recalculate its political costs and benefits, change their policy priorities, or leave office before the reform matures. To some extent, the constitutional one-term limit of the Korean presidency makes it difficult to sustain reform.

Despite doubts about the sustainability of Korean civil service reform, we believe it will benefit Korean society, at a minimum, by questioning the long-standing closed civil service system and infusing the bureaucracy with a new set of managerial values; these values, it is hoped, will eventually help bureaucrats to change their views, attitudes, and behaviors. In advocating civil

service reform initiatives that often seem designed to bash, tame, or reorient the bureaucracy, the government should address the declining spirits of civil servants. More than a stick for beating change into the current system, reform should be also a carrot that entices administrative culture to rebuild itself; otherwise, reform efforts may not be sustainable. In addition, policy makers need to be prepared for the expected and, to the extent possible, the unexpected political costs of reform sustainability. These costs often can be offset by having more bureaucrats and citizens share in the reform initiatives. The Korean government's experience suggests the following lessons, which will benefit not only future administrations but also other countries that pursue government innovations:

1. Be careful with the top-down approach. A top-down approach and the role of agent of change are critical at the beginning of government innovation. But to be successfully implemented, the government innovation agenda should be shared among agencies and individual civil servants.
2. Beware of innovation fatigue. Bureaucrats tend to be resistant to any aggressive changes.
3. Don't play the bureaucratic power game. Power struggles and tensions among agents of change are detrimental to the success of government innovation.
4. Don't play the political game. If the government innovation is presented as a must-go initiative, the administration should not identify the government innovation agenda with the administration.
5. Be careful with the trade-off between changes and continuities.
6. Be careful with headcounts. Downsizing and upsizing of the civil service is always a political agenda.
7. Be aware of the cycle of government innovation politics. Remember that the president's term is limited.
8. Use sticks and carrots to effectively implement government innovations.
9. Promote small wins and small changes as successes. Do not expect big changes at the beginning. Government innovation is a process-a means and not the end.
10. Promote citizen support. Citizens are the ultimate judges of government innovations. ■

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