

The
Presidency in
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The Presidency and Building a Political Support Base

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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 April 5th, 2012, the EAI held its third roundtable discussion with Dong-Kwan Lee, former Senior Secretary to the President for Public Affairs. The following is a summary of the discussion.

Sharing the Same Political DNA

A successful presidency depends upon the support of strong political forces. In order to be effective, these groups must share the same political DNA, or the same political values and ideologies with the president. When the president experiences difficulties, the number of different political forces that he or she can depend upon is an important determinant in pursuing policy objectives.

Since democratization, the previous administrations of Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-jung, and Roh Moo-hyun were all supported by strong political forces. However, the Lee Myung-bak administration has not been able to build up reliable support base of strong political forces that he could depend upon. During the 2007 presidential election, President Lee was able to draw upon the so-called “new right forces” that were unhappy with the strong left-leaning policies of the Roh administration. Their values of neo-liberalism, national sovereignty, globalization, liberalization of education, and human rights of North Korea came to form the core of the Lee administration’s policies. However, this support base failed to become a strong political force involved in governance and was then unable to support the Lee administration during the difficult periods.

Building a Support Base

The lack of supporting political forces makes it almost impossible for a president to overcome the limits inherent in the five-year, single-term presidential system. Regardless of how well a president is prepared, the administration will struggle in persuading the people to back its policy choices. It also becomes difficult to manage the trials and errors that arise at the beginning of the inauguration. Furthermore, the administration tends to be the target of fierce political attacks during the mid-term elections. Without strong political forces that can be relied upon, it is hard for

the president to defend against such fierce political attacks which then undermines policy approaches.

This is one of the reasons why the current Lee administration has failed to defend itself against political attacks from the opposition. With the experiences of the previous administration in mind, the next Presidential Transition Team should not only focus on designing policy but also consider how they will build an influential political force that can help them govern over the next five years.

Image and Communication Counts

The mishandling of the president's image at the beginning of the Lee administration was arguably the biggest difficulty in implementing its policies despite the fact that the administration entered office with a high public approval rating. The Lee administration tried to portray itself as "people-friendly pragmatic centrists" and advocated policies that were progressive in terms of society and conservative in terms of national security. This ideological flexibility can also be understood through the Lee's administration slogan of "left or right, so long as it helps the people, we must adopt the policy." Despite this flexible approach, the Lee administration has been generally perceived as cozying up too much to big business and the rich. This is mainly a result of the failure in the way the administration has managed its image from when it first entered office.

This perception though misses the fact that the Lee administration at the beginning of its term in 2008 faced the global financial crisis and in response adopted an export-led and large corporation-based strategy as a way to overcome economic difficulties. Still, the responsibility for failing to push through follow-up policies such as creating new jobs or

education reform lies with the ruling Saenuri Party-led populism. This opposition within the ruling party made it impossible for an administration without any supporting political forces to push forward all its centrist-reform policies.

The lack of communication can also be interpreted in a similar regard. Without supporting political forces, the administration lacked "amplifiers" for its policies. Blue House officials also tend to only speak out on issues when it is beneficial to the administration and fail to defend themselves when facing strong criticism. The success of putting across the president's message as well as the management of his image does not solely depend on the efforts of the president and his staff in the Blue House. Academia, civil groups, and the media that are part of the president's support base should act more in their role as "speakers" to support certain policies.

With a five-year, single-term system, there is not enough time for a president to revise errors that have occurred at the beginning of his or her term in office due to new officials replacing the previous administration during the transition period. In this respect, there needs to be a mechanism in place that can harness the experience of the previous administration to support the president-elect. While this could work in theory, in practice this would be very difficult as there are usually strong ideological differences in South Korea. The decline of the Chosun Dynasty in Korea is an important lesson on how internal political conflicts can weaken vastly a country's power.

The Neglected Center

The virtues that the next president in South Korea must possess are communication and political leadership. President Lee, whose

strengths lay in managerial leadership, lacked these virtues of communication and political capability as noted before. There are also cases where no matter how good or right the direction of the policies, the absence of political support means that a president will unlikely be positively evaluated in the future. U.S. President Jimmy Carter failure to be reelected is a very good example in this regard that highlights the importance of both political leadership and supporting political forces.

The centrist forces in South Korean society are not well reflected in current party politics, which are hindered by division of interests, intensification of ideological disputes, and political mudslinging. As both the ruling party and the opposition party are only interested in pursuing their self-interests, the isolation of the centrist political forces intensifies as does their criticism of mainstream politics.

The recent popularity of political outsider Ahn Chul-soo when he entered the presidential race can be interpreted as the result of the disillusionment with mainstream politics among the centrist political forces. In the 2012 presidential election, the candidate who wins the support of the centre will certainly succeed. However, no matter who becomes the president, if he or she fails to build a strong political force to support his or her policies then it will become difficult again to run a smooth administration. With only a five-year, single-term system, the president must build a strong and effective political force; otherwise he or she will be unlikely to build a positive legacy. ■

About the Speaker

Dong-Kwan Lee

Dong-Kwan Lee received his B.A. in Politics at Seoul National University. He joined *Dong-A Ilbo* in 1985 and was Tokyo Correspondent, director of the department of politics and editorial writer. He mainly had expertise in the field of Korean politics and inter-Korean relations and was awarded the Korean Journalist Award and the Seoul Press Award. After consecutively serving as the Spokesman for the 17th Presidential Transition Team, Spokesman for the Blue House and Senior Secretary to the President for Public Affairs, he assisted the President as Executive for Public Affairs. He also worked as Special Assistant for the Blue House Media from January 2011 to December 2011.

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