

The
Presidency in
Korea 2013
No. 4

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This product presents a policy-oriented summary of Presidency in Korea 2013 roundtable

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The Presidency and Effective Leadership

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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 May 11th, 2012, the EAI held its fourth round table discussion with Won Jong Lee who was former Senior Secretary to the President for Public Affairs. This is the main summary of the discussion.

The President's Historical Legacy

Under both authoritarian regimes and democratic administrations, it can be said that presidents in South Korea have to some extent managed to establish some sort of historical legacy during their term in office. In the case of President Rhee Syngman – the founding of the nation, President Park Chung-hee – the industrialization of the country, President Chun Doo-hwan – stability after the collapse of

the Park Chung-hee government, and President Roh Tae-woo achieved his legacy through his *Nordpolitik* policy. President Kim Young-sam achieved his legacy by transforming the country from the military-based values of the past thirty years to new civil-based values. President Kim Dae-jung advanced discussions on unification and peaceful coexistence with North Korea. The Roh Moo-hyun administration created the circumstances and environment for participatory democracy through a non-authoritative leadership. However, in case of the Lee Myung-bak administration, the legacy that it will leave behind does not seem to be clear. The Lee administration successfully came to power by understanding the needs of the time and emphasizing his role as an “economy president,” however, it is quite hard to see what legacy the administration has been trying to establish since.

What kind of historical legacy should the next president aim for? It is not so easy to predict since a president's historical legacy is not just something given. However, it is clear that a future president should avoid relying upon populism to establish a historical legacy. Effective political leadership can understand the voices of the time with a historical context and vision in order to foresee the changes that are about to emerge in the world. Furthermore, close cooperation with the public can help to prepare and develop policies toward forming a legacy.

The Political Environment Needs Change

The political environment that a president currently operates in limits the chances for success due to the fact that politics is usually dominated by personalities rather than ideas or visions. Discussions should be held to determine which issues must be changed and adjusted to fit the reality and how democratic political parties can properly facilitate the politics. Political parties in South Korea tend not to form around any ideology or beliefs, but are mainly focused on support from a particular region. Since the party does not have common beliefs, the ideology or vision of the party leader ultimately decides the party's identity. The problem of this personality-based system is an outcome where if voters only support a specific person of a party, the content of the policies tend to matter little. Similarly, if the voters are against a specific person, regardless of quality of the policies suggested, they will unconditionally vote against the person. Under such a reality, it is hard for a successful president to emerge.

The parties must recognize the need to change or their political role will be taken over by civic groups who can address the issues more effectively. In order to overcome this problem, political parties in South Korea must become comprehensive issue-based parties. Only in this way can democracy prosper.

Reform of the political parties must also seek to resolve the problem of communication. This begins by recognizing or acknowledging who the "others" are. In this sense, it is critical for parties to have a clear identity so that it will be an easy for the people to decide who to support. It will also make it possible to differentiate between a person who is supporting the party and a person who blindly follows a specific politician. Such a reform will ultimately lead to enhancing a party's responsibility.

Another priority is to change the nomination system within the political parties. The current top-down system where a political leader is only concerned about support from other powerful politicians within the party rather than the public should be transformed into a more practical bottom-up system. In this regard, an open-primary system would go some way toward democratizing the selection processes within the political parties. Beginning with party reform, a successful president can be established.

Define Clear Roles for Blue House Staff

Since the Blue House is the center of governance, the success and failure of a president depends upon the role of his or her staff. The structure of the Blue House can be altered depending on the political tendency of the president. In the case of the Roh Moo-hyun administration, the President's Office was divided into a secretariat office and a policy office. However, this duality has been shown to be difficult for the president to practice effective statecraft.

In what ways can changes be made to the presidential staff in order to enhance the success of the president? Theoretically, the presidential staff should deliver the president's vision and the political philosophy so that the ministers of each department can put into practice his or her political will. An additional task of the president's staff is to monitor whether the policy of the government aligns with the president's political philosophy. On top of that, the staff should also keep the president informed with related facts to facilitate the implementation of his or her policies. However, if the Blue House tries to do everything and leaves no role for the cabinet, it becomes impossible for the president to be able to practice statecraft efficiently.

Since democratization in South Korea, relations between the president, parties, and the National Assembly have become an important variable in achieving success. The Blue House must define its role with the ruling party and avoid running into a deadlock. Theoretically, it is the ruling party that has managed relations with the opposition. However since the Kim Dae-jung administration, the Blue House has begun to take on responsibilities from the ruling party by defending against criticism from the opposition. As a result, rather than sharing statecraft roles, the ruling party now tends to pass on the responsibilities to the Blue House.

The President's Political Leadership

In this era of governance, the more forceful leadership that was seen during the Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung administrations is no longer feasible. Presidential administrations these days must possess the capacity to mediate and integrate, which are considered to be the ultimate goals in achieving success in politics.

When a new administration enters office, they must promise to reform the limitations that faced the previous administrations. At the beginning of the administration, it is relatively easy for the president to push his or her reforms as there is a relatively high support from the public. However, as the president's time in office progresses, not only will public support decrease but he or she will also face complex interests which will make it harder to push through their reform policies. Again this highlights the need for political leadership that holds the capacities to mediate and integrate.

Political leadership in South Korea should not adopt an authoritative style in managing government officials. Although

government officials in South Korea are competent, they can also be somewhat closed and exclusive making cooperation hard to earn. This does not mean that government officials should be the target of reform or considered adversaries, it means that the president must have the leadership qualities to make full use of government officials' abilities. Yet this can be too much for the president to manage by himself. Assigning the responsibilities of personnel management to the cabinet is one way of addressing the issue of responsibilities. In this case though, the president should still assume overall responsibility and must not pass all the blame onto the cabinet for any failings.

Finally, most of the misfortunes that occurred under previous presidents did not come from policy failures but largely from cases of corruption among the people close to the president. This kind of corruption is not an individual problem but an issue of power due to one's ties with the president. Given this problem, a president must always be aware of the fact that this could happen among the people around him. In the eyes of the public, corruption among relatives or people close to the president will be a sign of a betrayal. It is crucial that the president keep this mind so that he or she can avoid this pitfall. ■

About the Speaker

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Won Jong Lee received his B.A. in the Department of Economics at Korea University. He served as the press secretary for New Democracy Party in 1976 and Special Assistant of the Public Information for the Democratic Reunification Party in 1987. After serving as the under secretary of the Public Information Agency in 1993, he worked as the Senior Secretary to the President for Political Affairs at the Presidential Secretariat. He is currently serving as the chair-

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