

The Korean Government and public administration: retrospect and prospect

The debate on the role of government never ceases. Liberals advocate the active role of government to deal with complicated social and economic problems, while conservatives emphasize lesser government intervention. No matter which perspective one favors, history reveals that the interplay between government and market has not been as static as Karl Polanyi, using the notion of “dual movement,” pointed out in his seminal book, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Putting scholarly controversies aside, government in developed as well as developing countries has been more likely to expand its scope over time. Assuming that government is and will still be important in governing a nation, how to make government more accountable, responsive, efficient and effective should be the key concern instead of what the right size government should be. Taking South Korea as a case, this special issue aims to explore what government has done and what it needs to do.

South Korea is notable as a country that has successfully transformed itself from a poverty-ridden economy and authoritarian rule to affluence and democratic governing. Behind this transformation has been the pivotal role of government epitomized by the developmental state model. The rapid rise of the Korean economy during the 1960s–1980s was the result of state-led resource allocation in a half-blown market environment, indicating the dominant role of the state bureaucracy in the trajectory of national development. Utilizing state autonomy and capacity, the Korean Government deployed diverse policy tools for the nation’s economic success. However, this economic success was not achieved without a cost. The authoritarian rule that began in 1961 by President Park Chung-hee continued until 1987 when the nation-wide June Democracy Uprising led to constitutional amendment and the subsequent direct presidential election. Although the Korean polity changed formally to a democratic regime, it underwent substantial democratization in 1993 when Kim Young-sam, a Civilian President, was elected. The legacy of the developmental state in which the state bureaucracy was dominant in deciding national affairs was inherited by the Kim Young-sam administration whereas the relative strength of the state *vis-à-vis* the market and society somewhat dwindled. Although the Korean Government continuously sought to reform the civil service, traditional bureaucracy was the prime ground on which the nation’s public administration operated until 1997.

In the last two decades, particularly after the financial crisis of 1997, New Public Management (NPM) and New Public Governance (NPG) have come to the fore in the *modus operandi* of the Korean Government and public administration. Due to the ethos of NPM and NPG, the Korean Government has placed more emphasis on public sector reform centering on, among other aspects, competition, performance and a new national–local collaborative governance. Even after almost 20 years of such management and governance practices, there is no consensus in the scholarly community of public administration in South Korea with regard to whether the path of Korean public administration has been on the right track and the direction the government should head. This special issue of *Asian Education and Development Studies (AEDES)* intends to explore the evolution of the Korean Government and public administration in six focal areas: government reform, personnel management, performance management, central–local financial relationships, decentralization and local autonomy, and corruption control. Contributions to this special issue attempt to assess the achievements of the past and current practices of the Korean Government and identify the challenges ahead.



This special issue is structured as follows. Jin Park identifies the main focus of government reforms in each administration in South Korea, and provides suggestions for future reform initiatives. Classifying the national reform agendas into public management reform and public policy reform, he argues that the Korean Government needs to strengthen the reform driving system in order to facilitate public policy reform which proceeds relatively slower than public management reform. Among the array of government reform agendas, human resources reform in the civil service constitutes a core in civil service reform. Chang Kil Lee explores how the senior civil service (SCS) has operated in the Korean Government. Unlike the initial intention of maximally utilizing the professional expertise of senior civil servants, the SCS has led to the unintended negative consequence of the politicization of bureaucracy. Next, Jongho Roh examines the strengths and weaknesses of performance management in the Korean Government. He assesses that the performance management system has contributed to enhancing the performance of government agencies. Nonetheless, he claims that the current system requires further improvement in its institutional, operational and value dimensions. While these three articles seek to assess the achievements and challenges of the civil service reforms already undertaken by the Korean Government, the two articles written by Im Gon Cho, and Jun Koo and Byoung Joon Kim address currently ongoing reform agendas focusing on decentralization. In doing so, Im Gon Cho argues that a strategic step-wise approach is essential to make fiscal decentralization successful because of the complex fiscal relationship between central and local governments, and between high-level and low-level local governments. By examining the history, progress and challenges of decentralization and local autonomy in South Korea, Jun Koo and Byoung Joon Kim discuss the wide discrepancies among political, administrative and fiscal decentralization. Reflecting on the history of decentralization in South Korea, they highlight the importance of fiscal independence of local governments as a critical factor to realize the idea of decentralization. The last article in this special issue deals with corruption in South Korea. Jin-Wook Choi argues that although the Korean Government has built anti-corruption institutions, it has failed to prevent and control high-level grand corruption because the anti-corruption institutions have not been properly institutionalized. To be effective in curbing corruption, Jin-Wook Choi suggests broader political reform, and independent and impartial zero-tolerance law enforcement as crucial factors. Of the six articles, Chang Kil Lee's article will appear in the next issue, Issue 4, of *AEDS* due to a technical problem that arose in the production process of this special issue.

This special issue owes much to the following colleagues: Sonny Lo, Managing Editor of *AEDS*, proposed the idea of publishing an issue on the Korean Government and public administration for *AEDS* readers and suggested that I serve as Guest Editor. For the six articles in this special issue, I invited colleagues who gladly agreed to review and provide constructive critical comments. They were Jon S.T. Quah, a renowned Anti-corruption Consultant; Joonghoon Park of the Korea Institute of Public Administration; Jaehoon Kim of Seoul National University of Science and Technology; M. Jae Moon of Yonsei University; Seung-Bum Yang of Konkuk University; and Hyung Jun Park of Sungkyunkwan University. Along with these invited reviewers, I played the role of second reviewer of the papers. Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank Minxing Zhou, Associate Editor of *AEDS*, who has provided valuable assistance and support at every stage of the preparation of this special issue.

I hope the complimentary perspectives in this special issue foster a better understanding of the issues, challenges and opportunities for government and public administration in South Korea.

Jin-Wook Choi

Department of Public Administration, Korea University, Seoul, The Republic of Korea