Cutting Corruption without Institutionalized Parties:
The Story of Civic Groups, Elected Local Government, and Administrative Reform in Korea

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How did South Korea come to adopt successful anti-corruption administrative reforms in the early 2000s which markedly improved the nation’s corruption perception and bribe survey scores? Emergent democracies generally lack the institutionalized political parties needed to push through anti-corruption policies, and Korea was no exception. While Korean civic groups took the lead against corruption, they failed to sufficiently press President Kim Young Sam, who implemented reforms which instead focused on increasing executive control over the bureaucracy. NGOs eventually succeeded by redirecting efforts towards the more accessible, newly established elected municipal governments, to introduce administrative reforms like the E-government OPEN program, which reduced uncertainty and strengthened the pro-reform political coalition, paving the way for President Kim Dae Jung’s eventual adoption of anti-corruption administrative reforms in 2000. The Korean case shows how elected local government offers civic groups an avenue through which to advance reform, offering hope to the many young democracies lacking institutionalized parties which struggle to contain corruption.

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How did South Korea come to widely adopt anti-corruption administrative reforms in the early 2000s, raising the nation's corruption perception and bribe survey scores and cleaning up bureaucracies nationwide, including Seoul city's notorious ‘Den of Devils’? Emergent democracies generally lack the institutionalized political parties

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needed to push through anti-corruption policies, and the Korean case is no exception. Yet, in nine years, beginning in 2000 Korea improved its Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (CPI) score (Transparency International) by 47% and World Bank Governance Corruption Control Indicator (World Bank Governance Indicators) by 60%, and has sustained these lower corruption levels. How Korea attained this success, beginning with the civic group introduction of anti-corruption administrative reform to the country’s first elected local governments, holds a lesson for all young democracies.

This in-depth study of the Korean case examines the process by which civic groups, beginning in the mid-1990s, began to push through the anti-corruption administrative reforms that introduced competitive incentives for officials and promoted transparency and citizen participation, all in the absence of institutionalized parties, which normally channel popular reform pressure in mature democracies. Civic groups overcame bureaucratic opposition by introducing reforms to newly-established elected local governments, building a foundation of support for clean government reforms, such as E-government, which spread from Seoul City government throughout the nation, cutting Korea’s corruption rate.

Powerful, recalcitrant bureaucratic ministries repulsed initial civic group attempts to introduce anti-corruption administrative reform to the central government. Absent sustained grass roots pressure, President Kim Young Sam was free to introduce administrative reforms like the Administrative Procedures Act (APA), which were primarily aimed at strengthening executive control over the bureaucracy, rather than combat corruption. Kim was unwilling to expend sufficient political capital to push potential corruption-fighting reforms, like the Korean Freedom of Information Act (Act on Disclosure of Information by Public Agencies or ADIPA) and the Ombudsman system, past powerful central bureaucratic ministries, rendering these reforms compromised and largely ineffective.

Civic groups eventually prevailed over bureaucratic opposition by introducing anti-corruption administrative measures to newly-established elected municipal and provincial governments from 1995, which lowered uncertainty surrounding the benefits and beneficiaries of reform and strengthened the pro-reform coalition. The introduction of elections for municipal and provincial governments provided an attractive venue for civic groups to advance their agenda. Local politicians with smaller constituencies were more accessible and more dependent on civic groups for policy support, and lower ranked local bureaucrats offered weaker resistance. With civic group encouragement, local governments enacted transparency, participation and competition-enhancing administrative reforms from 1995 to 1998, which discouraged corruption by reducing