Comparison of Civil Service Reform in the United States and Korea: Central Personnel Agencies and Senior Civil Service Systems*

Soonyoung Choi**

Abstract: Recent changes to the Korean civil service system, such as the introduction of the Senior Civil Service system in 2006 and the elimination of the Civil Service Commission in 2008, superficially resemble changes introduced by the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 in the United States. This study compares the structures and characteristics of the two countries' civil service systems, their reforms, and the political context and processes by which reform legislation came to pass. Based on this comparison, policy implications are drawn for improving the Korean civil service system.

Keywords: central personnel agency, Senior Executive Service, Senior Civil Service, Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, National Civil Service Act

INTRODUCTION

The Korean government has tried to introduce a public administration system based on the United States system since its foundation in 1948. The civil service system, as a subsystem of public administration, has therefore been influenced by the US system, which is based on shared powers and under which public servants are accountable both to the president and to Congress.

The Korean government adopted the American system of presidential government with its separation of powers among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Korea experienced strong presidential governments during its period of government-driven rapid economic growth. After the ninth revision of its Constitution in 1987, the Korean system became more characterized by shared powers than before. The president

* I would like to thank Prof. Beryl Radin at American University for her insightful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
** Soonyoung Choi is a research fellow at the Korea Institute of Public Administration. E-mail: csyoung@kipa.re.kr, csyoung1020@naver.com.

Manuscript received June 8, 2012; out for review June 26, 2012; review completed August 14, 2012; accepted August 21, 2012.

© 2012 by the GSPA, Seoul National University
is limited to one five-year term of office. With changes in president, the personnel system has experienced concomitant changes.

Recent civil service system changes, such as the introduction of the Senior Civil Service (SCS) in 2006 and the elimination of the Civil Service Commission (CSC) in 2008, superficially resemble those brought about in the United States by the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978. This article explores the ways in which recent Korean civil service reforms are similar to and different from those introduced in the United States.

In Korea, the introduction of the SCS and the elimination of the CSC were carried by the Rho Moo-Hyun and Lee Myong-Bak governments, respectively, two administrations with different political points of view. Similar reforms in the United States were implemented as a package by the administration of President Jimmy Carter in 1978. Comparing the two countries’ civil service systems, this article focuses on the central personnel agencies and the senior civil service systems. Such an evaluation may make it possible to gain a better understanding of these reform initiatives, conduct more appropriate comparisons, and identify policy implications.

The US public service has never been an elite service, and the United States in general values the private sector more than the public sector. In contrast, the Korean system has been an elite service, and in the past, Korea valued the public sector more than the private sector, although this is currently changing. These very different assumptions about the role of the public sector make comparison difficult.

Civil service reforms serve as vehicles to establish and defend political actors’ standing and capacity to influence the authoritative allocation of values (Nigro, Nigro & Kellough, 2007, p. 305). They may produce shifts in the internal political dynamics of a central personnel agency and other departments and in the balance of power among agencies and branches of government (Nigro, Nigro & Kellough, 2007, p. 305), especially when there is structural reorganization or modification of the authority and jurisdiction of a personnel agency. Accordingly, the background from which civil service reforms emerged, the political dynamics and administrative strategy employed in the reform process, and the values that drove the reforms need to be explored in order to get a better understanding of the reforms.

**CIVIL SERVICE SYSTEM CHANGES IN THE UNITED STATES AND KOREA**

The most significant institutional changes to the Korean civil service system were the creation of the CSC in 1999, its elimination in 2008, and the adoption of the SCS.