

# The Higher Civil Service Examination System and Economic Prosperity in Korea

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**Abstract:** The Higher Civil Service Examination System started in 1950 by South Korea Government has been continuing until now. All the talents of Korean society have been selected through the fair test. Due to the system sustainable economic growth has been possible. However, the side effects of the system have begun to appear in recent years. The abolition or reform of the system is actively under discussion. In this presentation I will speak of the role of this system, problems, and alternatives.

**Key Words:** Higher Civil Service Examination System; Economic Prosperity; Problems; Alternatives

## 1. The Higher Civil Service Examination System

After liberation from the Japanese colonial rule in 1945, Korea implemented the civil servant recruitment system since 1949. This system under the name ‘Higher Civil Service Examination’ (called ‘Civil Service Exams’ henceforth) has lasted till today with about 400 recruits each year. The written exams consists mainly on the knowledge based on law and social sciences. Along with the Higher Judicial Examination and the Higher Diplomatic Service Examination, The Higher Civil Service Examination has been some of the key criteria for the development of the Republic of Korea.

The Park Chung—Hee administration, which came into power after the coup on May 16th 1961, formed a military authoritarianism and strived for economic development. This system was supported on one side by the elite class of civil servants who were selected through the civil service exam. They

were the crucial members at the stage of national development led by the government during the 1960s and 1970s. They also contributed to a stable political society in developing the economy during military regime of Chun Doo-Hwan followed by Roh Tae-Woo after the collapse of Park's regime. However with the progress of democracy in Korea, it was exposed to the limits of nation-led development. The exposure was further elaborated during the financial crisis in 1997 that led to near national bankruptcy under the irresponsibility of the economic bureau. After restoration from the crisis that led to liberalization and globalization of the Korean economy, it magnified the drawbacks of the civil service exams to a greater level.

## 2. System Reformation

The civil service exam system, which had been the basic foundation of the Korean bureaucratic society for the past 60 years, was eventually announced of a reform plan by the government on 12th August 2010. This reform plan under the title 'Advancement Plan for Civil Servant Recruiting System' can be seen as a policy under the current president Lee Myung-Bak's catch-phrase 'advancement'.

The Lee Myung-Bak regime proposes the advancement of the Korean society.

The examinations may have been the driving force for economic development in the previous generation, however, it seems that it is losing impetus in the era of democracy and globalization. The current government has realized that there is need to initiate reform on this system. Nevertheless a similar reform has begun since the previous government on the reformation of the higher judicial examination. The passing of the law-school legislation in 2007 will lead to the first batch of law-school graduates in 2011. There will be gradual reductions in judicial exams and complete abolishment from 2017 that makes only law-school graduates to be able to pass through as lawyers, trial specialists and attorneys to become judges or prosecutors. During May, the government announced the abolishment of the Diplomatic Service Examination from 2013 to be replaced by a one-year specialized graduate school called Diplomatic Academy to fill out its new 50 diplomatic recruits. Thereby the

civil servant recruiting system has done its job since the establishment of Korea and the time has come for a new institution to further develop the system.

### 3. Contents of the Reform Plan

Main contents of the reform plan by the government on August 12th was the drastic improvements upon the current competitive large scale public recruiting system to a public service recruit system based upon openness and competitive measures. Along with the current grade 5 public recruit, a ‘grade 5 professional examination for service’ will be introduced to employ civil experts with various degrees and certificates or those with experiences on research. Preferential selection will be given to specialists with diverse backgrounds and experiences including voluntary service activities, written research records, patent applications and so forth. Method of selection will exclude any written assessments but will be done through personal documents and interviews to understand the applicant’s professionalism and appropriateness in the field as a public official.

Up to 30% of new grade 5 recruits in 2011 immediately will consist of professionals and this number will increase step by step till it reaches 50% of new grade 5 recruitments. The word ‘national examination’, which used to represent grade 5 selective examination unlike grades 7 and 9, will be abolished and thus similar to the grade 7 and 9 open recruitment; it will be called ‘grade 5 open recruitment’.

To expand the entry of civil professionals to the public middle management class, the open type office will expand to section chief. Each government department will be required to designate up to 5% for open type office targeting the 1, 483 chiefs of staff in each department headquarters and plans to further expand up to 10% by 2013.

### 4. Pros and Cons Argument

Soon after the announcement of the civil service exam reform, politicians, experts and even the general public began an argument for and against this issue. First let’s have a look at the reasons behind the consents.

First, high rank officials, who made entrance through national examinations, make up most of the inner part of public service sectors. They are criticized of having inadequate capabilities to deal with social problems with their narrow sight of view and lack of experience with insufficient competitiveness. According to the last year's standards, up to 71% out of 1,500 high ranking public officials come from a background of civil service examinations. Although the newly recruited grade 5 public officials will be promoted from a lower level than those who passed the national examinations, they will gradually attain ranks similar to those of the others where there are proportionally more of those who are passers of national exams. The final say is upon those from civil service exams. The public demands have greatly changed than those in the past so that now demand has increased in new sectors such as health, environment, leisure and welfare. Also by living in a world of globalization, with more interactions between international administrations, has shown that public officials selected from those who have simply memorized textbooks lack much behind than civil institutions in dealing with pending issues. Instead of having creative administrative ideas from similar people who have passed the same national exams show evasion of responsibility when facing unexpected pending issues.

Second, there has been an uncomfortable atmosphere of forming factions within the public office society. Unlike the grade 7 and 9 public official recruitment test, the phrase 'civil service exam' has been used separately only on grade 5 recruitment tests making people recognize it as an authoritative meaning to form a certain group. A faction is formed even within those who originate from national exams under the slogan of 'which round of national exam' creating an invisible but powerful link of personal connections.

Third, the problem within the system of nearly imprisoning oneself for several years in the Gosi-Won for the sole purpose of passing the written tests in the national exam that will lead to a lifetime employment as a public official. Unlike people who build up knowledge on other areas rather than studying for national exams, people who are in search of lifetime employment do not seek self-improvements. This shows the weakness of the national exam system.

Fourth, large number of students preparing for national exams in a long-time period cause much desolation for university education and thus wasting

national human resources. There were 14, 695 applicants for civil service exams with competition rates up to 45 to 1. By looking at the waste of young intellectuals, there is absolute need for reform within the examination system when there could be better ways to serve the society. With the increasing number of students being preoccupied by national examinations will not only destabilize university courses but also waste precious time of young persons. The reform will not only normalize university education but also reduce the waste made by the national examinations.

On the other hand, the opposition is indeed very challenging. Their argument is as follows.

First, the most structured argument is that this will close doors for those students without any form of connections to back them as it was the only road to a better social status. The civil service exam reform is criticized for it may reinstate a modern form of negative spur by eliminating the only ladder to success.

Second, recruiting external experts show the problem of inequality. Jung Doo—Un, member of the supreme council of the Grand National Party, states that there a might be possible abuse of the system as they make considerations upon licenses, degrees and professionalism on some of the privileged classes unlike their aim at enhancing professionalism. A case might be the Foreign Ministry which implemented this system a long time ago, however, it is blamed for having new comers who were mostly off-springs of diplomats or former superior overseas employees.

Third, the claim that it is impossible to actually identify who is suitable for the job by only interviews and surveying documents. The national examination system that prevailed for nearly sixty years had the equality and fairness for all applicants which is a rule that should also be applied to the newly reformed institution. Without securing specific capable interview committees and screening systems problems would arise as the panel of judges may collude with selecting only specific people to fill in spaces according to department demands.

Fourth, the number is yet unknown for how many intellectuals from the private sector will apply for a public service that is treated less than where they come from. There is an additional problem of the public service being used as a

simple ‘bus stop’ for career management. A professor retorts “would a forty year old department head from Samsung electronics want to work as a public official with such low income?” and further states that the competition for employment maybe considerably tough however the human resource may not be up to standard. Thereby criticisms that imply that there is inevitably recruits with insufficient standards to smash through the 50% of pure breed public officials.

## 5. Affair on favor for the Daughter of the Foreign Secretary, Yu Myung—Hwan

During the argument of the government’s reform plan of August 12th, an absurd affair happened on September 2nd. The daughter of the Foreign Secretary was found to have been favored of being taken on as a grade 5 official alone through a special open recruitment process which led to the resignation of the secretary. The Foreign Ministry came forth with new plan right after the happening. Weight was shifted to the people who criticized the civil service examination reform , which in the end led to rescind the reform plan since its announcement a month ago. The credibility of government policy was lost and the civil service exam reform plan was back in the depths.

However, this does not imply the complete abolishment of the exam reform plan. There have been statements on a haste return to origin of the reform act. In the current status, it is true that the privileged few may have higher probabilities of being recruited with the lower number of civil service exam qualifiers. Be that as it may, the need for reform has not yet decreased. By finding equality and fairness in the selection process, there is need to look over the institutional strategy and start over once again.

The civil service examination has served well in maintaining stable development in the newly-independent nation of Korea. However, Korea with its high status in the global society, with chairing of the G20 summit, undoubted cannot allow the civil service exam to be an obstacle for development. Now is the appropriate time for the government to communicate with the people and strive to reform the civil service exam system.

## 韩国公务员考试系统和经济繁荣

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**内容摘要：**韩国政府自 1950 年开始设立公务员考试系统并一直延续至今。所有韩国的社会精英都通过公平、公正的考试进入到国家公务员队伍中去。正是由于有了这样一套考试系统，韩国的经济得以持续发展。然而，近些年来，此系统的负面作用开始显现。韩国国内也在积极、热烈地讨论这套系统的留存与改革问题。在本文中，我将陈述韩国公务员考试系统所起的作用、目前面临的问题及其对策。

**关键词：**韩国公务员考试 经济繁荣 问题 对策