

## Restructured Executive Branch Under President Lee

by James H. Alvis (jha@keia.org)

As reported in the previous issue of Korea Insight (“The Bulldozer Moves In: Lee Myung-bak is Inaugurated as the Republic of Korea’s President”), President Lee moved to streamline the government through a process of downsizing, decentralizing, decreasing deficiencies, and deregulating. A key element of the plan was to restructure and consolidate a number of ministries and other executive agencies.

### Key Changes to Executive Branch Agencies

As previously reported, then President-elect Lee’s proposal to incorporate the functions of the Ministry of Unification into those of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade did not make it past the opposition in the United Democratic Party. The eventual compromise did, however, see the emergence of significantly revamped agencies such as the Ministry of Strategy and Finance, the Ministry of Knowledge Economy (MKE), and the Financial Services Commission.

In March, a Korea Times article announced that the Blue House had launched a new executive body dealing with foreign and security affairs, replacing the previous Standing Committee of the National Security Council (NSC). The change was cited as being strategically important, as it marked a shift by the Lee Administration from an emphasis on inter-Korean relations to one featuring greater international cooperation.

Those following the process of the restructuring may have been confused by a progression of different names cited in the press prior to the names in the current line-up (see following table). However, there is no guarantee that there will not be further refinements to the names. Anyone familiar with popular music of the 1980’s may recall the confusing evolution of the artist who brought us the album *American Fool*. It took about 10 years of transitioning from the stage-name of “John Cougar” to “John Cougar Mellencamp,” before finally settling with his given name of “John Mellencamp.”

### Other Elements of Downsizing

To promote a “small, efficient and pragmatic administration,” other proposed overhauls included:

- Eliminating 7,000 civil servant jobs
- Downsizing the Blue House (Cheong Wa Dae) staff by 20%
- Cutting approximately half of the Presidential Committees
- Downgrading the office of Prime Minister
- Eliminating the posts of Deputy Prime Minister

As reported in the Korea Times, President Lee’s transition team criticized the Roh Moo-hyun administration for maintaining bloated government bureaucracies, arguing that “the number of public servants had increased by 56,000 and that of government committees by 52 to reach 416 during the last five years.” The Vice Chairman of the transition team, Kim Hyong-o, asserted that “decentralization of power has not been achieved properly and the government failed to get the public’s opinion on state projects.” He challenged the Ministry of Public Administration and Security, which oversees the management of civil servants, to “show an active and sincere attitude” over the next five years, in order to decrease deficiencies and improve the government efficiency of the Lee Administration.

Confucianism dictates that the servant rise to work before his master, and retire only after his master has left for the day. Pursuant to his goal of decreasing government deficiencies, President Lee has applied this philosophy to public service by asserting that "Government workers are supposed to be servants" to the people of Korea, and that "when you have servants getting up later than the masters, you're not doing your job right." A Reuters article reported that the playing of golf is being discouraged, at least within the ranks of the presidential staff, with President Lee explaining that "you're working hard and there's never enough time. It would be a feat to be playing golf."

### Deregulation

The Lee Myung-bak administration has also announced plans to pursue widespread deregulation, citing excessive regulations as a "hindrance to social development." In a meeting with governors and mayors, then-President-Elect Lee explained in January that "Unless the government comes up with strong deregulation measures, it will be impossible for companies to increase their investments." The Korea Herald cited some examples of the government's plans to deregulate, with President Lee explaining that the government will act according to market principles, while refraining from direct intervention, and promising to cut red tape for building industrial complexes.