The Implementation of the OPEN System by Seoul Metropolitan Government

-the experience and lessons of the OPEN System-

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Introduction:

In recent years, Korea had to confront and cope with repercussions of having achieved a remarkably rapid pace of modernization. One particular case in point is the excessive wielding of power unduly delegated to the bureaucrats. On top of this, politics and business circles often grew close, triggering widespread corruption. Social Scientists have labeled this phenomenon in Korean politics as "Chungkyung Yuchak", which refers to an unsavory collaboration between the business community and the nation's political circles. Previous administrations, including those of Roh Tae Woo and Chun Doo Hwan, had to endure the unlikely prospect of having their cabinet members and even their presidents being indicted for violations of unethical practices and campaign slush funds.

Being response to the steadily increasing support for decentralization, democracy and the market economy among the people, Korea is vigorously combating corruption, at the cost of severing the once close ties between politics and business, along with deregulation, privatization, limiting the discretion of government officials, eliminating the sources of corruption and imposing severe penal sanctions against corrupt officials.

Among the various levels of governments in Korea, Seoul Metropolitan Government stands as an outstanding example of government-led reforms. Under the leadership of ex-Mayor Goh Kun, who was elected as a mayor of Seoul back in 1998, new innovative reform measures were devised and implemented.

It should be duly noted, however, that Gallup Korea. a private research company, conducted an opinion survey in late 1999. In this survey, 8,789 citizens who had contacted the Seoul city government officials for approvals of permits and applications for services were questioned about their views on political corruption. On this survey, over fifty-five percent of the respondents believed that there was a substantial decrease in corruption compared to just a year earlier. In a somewhat larger survey conducted in November 20 to December 13, 2000, more than half of the respondents, in a survey pool made of 11,525 subjects, again expressed their sentiments that they believed there were significant reductions in corruption as compared to the previous year.

Over the years, the Seoul Metropolitan Government has designated the campaign against corruption as one of its prime objectives, thus waging a war against corruption in 1998, which coincided with the first year of Goh Kun's tenure as the Mayor of Seoul.

One particular anti-corruption program which was closely scrutinized and developed under the special supervision of Mayor Goh Kun is the OPEN system. Under his leadership, Seoul municipal governments services which had a history of corruption scandals, complicated services that inconvenienced the citizens, and services predisposed to receiving solicitation for special favors were selected for making processing information available to applicants over the internet via the OPEN system.

However, it should be duly noted that there were problems that had to be overcome before a successful implementation of the OPEN system could take place. One was the uncooperative attitude of employees in the municipal clerical offices and their objections against office computerization. Another typical response was that an attempt to implement the OPEN system was not enthusiastically welcomed by municipal officials since they felt that it would greatly reduce their discretionary power and significantly increase their workload because of the necessity of having to input data into the OPEN system.

The Case of the OPEN System :

The Seoul Metropolitan Government's (SMG) Online Procedures Enhancement for Civil Applications (referred to as OPEN system) is a system in which the whole processes of civil affairs administration from acceptance to the final processing is made public on the Internet. Introduced in 1999, the OPEN system was designed to minimize the occurrence of corruption and irregularities related to processing of civil applications.

However, the actual development of OPEN system was well thought-out and made with precision planning. For example, on February 1, 1999, a review team was composed of well-seasoned staff with considerable experiences in audit and inspection to determine which cases must be made open to the public. Through discussions with the relevant city departments the team analyzed the entire civil applications for permits or approvals by title, processing procedures, corruption-prone factors, and types of irregularities. After some adjustment period, finally, initial 26 different fields of civil applications were selected and published on the Web. These categories were chosen because the mayor and his review team felt that these were the categories which most frequently cause corruption and irregularities, those that cause inconvenience to citizens due to the complexity of the processing requirements, and those whose publication is expected to simplify the civil application procedures.

Basically, the SMG's OPEN system is designed for local residents to ascertain the civil applications anytime and anywhere through the Internet, without personally visiting government offices. At the present, 10 fields and 54 categories of principal civil applications are accessible through the OPEN system. Each department processes civil applications from acceptance of applications to final approval while applicants can monitor the progress being made on their applications through the Internet. The OPEN system appears on the homepage of the Seoul Metropolitan Government (http://open.seoul.go.kr).

Prominent Features of OPEN System which Guarantees its Success :

In part, the OPEN system's major features guarantee its success. First, the OPEN system makes public the whole process of civil applications. Quite simply, the OPEN system maximizes the effect of releasing administrative information by making public the entire handling process of civil applications..

Second, a natural corollary to the first feature is that the OPEN system discloses information to the public the entire handling process of civil applications by stages. It makes public the processing procedure of civil applications by stages from acceptance to final results. The OPEN system also provides the flowchart of application process to civil applicants who may lack information on the processing procedures of each administrative department. One thinks that this will simplify their application efforts and help each applicant to estimate the amount of time needed for processing of their civil applications. But perhaps more importantly, aforementioned features of the OPEN system will significantly reduce the probability of any corruption and irregularities. This is mainly due to the fact that any citizen can access the OPEN system and see the processed contents of civil applications. Also, the OPEN system will no doubt enhance the effectiveness of internal monitoring and Internet on-line inspection by the audit department.

The third outstanding feature of the OPEN system can be found in the contents open to the public. There is a wide variety of information that citizens can retrieve from the OPEN system. Not only the date of acceptance, the review result of particular cases, processed results and information on the future course of action are made public, but also the OPEN system will outline the specific department and its staff in charge of a particular civil application as well as their telephone numbers and e-mail addresses.
On top of this, other vital information related to each civil application including required documents, processing procedures, as well as municipal regulations and laws are provided to enhance an individual understanding of each civil application.

Fourth and finally, one can argue that perhaps the most appealing feature of the OPEN system is that the system takes a full use of the Internet technology. Due to the wonders of Internet technology, a prospective applicant has a 24- hour, day and night access to vital information concerning his/her civil application at his/her discretion. Simply stated, the OPEN system is an excellent example of the strategic application of information technology that enables a better access to information related to civil applications while significantly reducing the probability of corruption at the level of municipal governance.

Accomplishments of the OPEN System :

OPEN system has brought about successful reaction since it was first introduced. Particularly, the accomplishments during the first year were very encouraging. During the first 7 months, approximately 240,000 people visited the OPEN system site and the numbers of fields and documents registered were calibrated at the figures of 10,000 and 45,000, respectively.

In addition, since its inception on April 15 1999, citizens who have visited the OPEN System site number approximately 3.5 million. This figure does not include over 63.000 business registrations, 343,000 document registrations, and 1938 million searches on the OPEN System as of February 2003. Another way of looking at this is to say that a total of 8,2000 officials in 770 departments are busy with data input on the OPEN system at this very hour as we speak. One is inclined to say this is an exceptional display of transparent governance demonstrated by the SMG.

The Central government also showed deep interest in the success of the OPEN system. It was reported in a meeting of vice ministers (October 28, 1999) and a Cabinet meeting (November 2, 1999). The central government designated the OPEN system as an advanced innovative case in the field of public management and decided to introduce the system to the entire central organizations and local self-governing bodies. The Board of Audit and Inspection also designated the OPEN system as an excellent example in ensuring transparency in civic administration.

For example, the OPEN system requires all the concerned officials to input the date and time when they process each application. This being the case, no official can delay or unduly interfere in any case, let alone make any improper decision. The universal access to the OPEN system also frees applicants from the burden of contacting officials or to give gratuity fees, just to complete the civic application process.

The citizens of Seoul also confirmed the utility of OPEN system and its effectiveness in ensuring transparency in municipal administrations. Findings from a survey of 1,245 citizens conducted in year 2000 showed that 84.3% of the respondents expressed their view that OPEN system contributed to achieving transparency and 72.3% of the respondents again expressed their satisfaction with the OPEN system.

Furthermore, according to a set of research surveys carried out in March and April 2001, out of 48,000 people who had submitted their civil applications to the Seoul Metropolitan Government and Ku (district) offices in the previous year, over 86% of the respondents said that the process of civil application became more simple and efficient. As for the estimation of the OPEN system's anti-corruption effects, the respondents expressed their views that the OPEN system appeared to be very effective in controlling corruption in the field of housing, construction work and city planning while ineffective in areas of general administration, culture and tourism, and public hygiene.

In addition, the OPEN system is also well known in foreign countries. Transparency International (TI) duly recognized the excellence of the OPEN system as an innovative tool for curbing corruption in metropolitan cities worldwide. Thus, in October of 1999, TI invited the Mayor of Seoul as a participant to the 9th International Anti-Corruption Conference held in Durban, South Africa. On this occasion, The OPEN system received a wide recognition and support from over 1,600 participants representing some 135 countries and international

organizations and was heralded as an advanced tool for controlling corruption in metropolitan cities worldwide.   Furthermore, the OPEN site was rated as one of the 10 Best Sites in Korea by Netscape, a world famous web browser company.

Perhaps one of the most memorable events in presenting the OPEN system was the introduction of the OPEN system, at the OECD High-Level Policy Seminar where OECD member and nonmember states participated, by the invitation of OECD Secretary-General in May 1999.   It also was introduced as a system that contributed to the enhancement of administrative transparency and the reduction in corruption on web sites of World Bank, OECD, as well as TI.

More importantly, in 2001, Seoul co-hosted the Seoul Anti-corruption Symposium with UN, making the OPEN system as an internationally approved anti-corruption system.   In the symposium, the effectiveness of OPEN was recognized as the system was found to have enhanced transparency and restored public trust in the civic administrations.   It was also suggested that the manual be provided for any countries that wish to introduce the system by mutual agreement with the United Nations.   As of this writing, the manual for the OPEN system has been printed in 6 different official languages of the United Nations.

Furthermore, the city of Seoul is planning to apply for domestic and international patents on the <Online posting method of civil affairs administration through the link of the OPEN system with the Electronic Approval System> which is currently being developed.

Conclusion : Closing Remarks on Evaluation of Seoul Metropolitan Government's OPEN System

The Seoul Metropolitan Government was able to successfully design and implement an innovative policy in a relatively short period of time by combining up-to-date information technology with the existing systematic approach in eradicating corruption.   In order to eradicate corruption from becoming entrenched in the working environment, the Seoul Metropolitan Government has made efforts to enhance transparency by rooting out the source of corruption and through measures such as Anti-Corruption Index, the city government also encourages healthy competition among its employees by introducing a numerical system that quantifies the integrity of the offices and bureaus of the City Hall and Ku (district) offices. Such efforts are the result of taking full advantage of information technology with the general objective of deriving at unbiased and open assessments.

Finally, one should not overlook different factors that contributed to such a staggering successful implementation of the anti-corruption program by the Seoul Metropolitan Government. First and foremost, this success stems largely from the devotion and commitment of the leadership to expel corruption from the municipal government.   Mayor Goh Kun, with an impeccable reputation not only for his administrative expertise but also for his integrity, was allowed to concentrate on the task of promoting more open and transparent system of municipal government.   Secondly, overwhelming and positive support of citizens who have expressed their support for the municipal government's reform measures were crucial to its success.   With the grassroots support coming through various venues, The Seoul Metropolitan Government was also able to actively enlist the support and cooperation of NGOs in its anti-corruption drive.   Third, active communication between the citizens and the city government, largely due to the spread of the information technology, is another important element.   As of late 2001, more than half of the Korean population reported using the Internet. The number of Internet users is expected to grow even more in 2002. One thinks that utilizing the Internet to stimulate communication between the citizens and the city government is emerging perhaps as the most innovative tool in curbing corruption.

Based on this conviction, the Seoul Metropolitan Government is trying its best to implement office automation in order to ensure efficiency and transparency of administrative procedures. All of these factors, including an unequivocal commitment from the top, enhanced citizens' power, the expansion and efficient use of information technology, combined to generate an

unparalleled success in the Seoul municipal government's anti-corruption drive. Global Corruption Report 2001, published by Transparency International, also affirms the positive steps taken by Korea as its report asserts that, in many countries in East Asia and the Pacific, innovative reforms have led to a number of new institutions and processes to fight it (corruption).

However, there are some critical lessons learned so far from the Seoul Metropolitan Government's (SMG) experimentation with the OPEN system. First and foremost, SMG should sustain its original enthusiasm for
the OPEN system as first envisioned by the former mayor, now His Excellency, Prime Minister Goh Kun. A change of mayor should not undermine the enthusiasm and allocation of resources, including previous budgetary commitments to the OPEN system.

Secondly, as a corollary to the first argument, some of the earlier agreements and joint-project inquiries received from other municipalities during the former mayor's term of office should be carried out and enforced more vigorously. For instance, other municipalities like Ho Chi Minh City and Manila have expressed their desires to invite SMG's OPEN System Task Team to their municipal governments to become more familiar with the operational as well as the implementational phase of the OPEN system. Yet, one is left with an impression that the current leadership of SMG did not exactly follow through on such requests.

Third and lastly, it is my humble opinion that a full potentiality of the OPEN system has yet to be realized. For instance, as mentioned previously, Mayor Goh Kun has signed an agreement involving the Seoul Metropolitan Government and the United Nations to concurrently disseminate the OPEN system and its manual to other member nations of the United Nations. I believe this agreement is still binding and, once it is properly enforced, should serve as a catalyst in expediting the implementation of the eGovernment, along with the OPEN system, to other municipalities and governments throughout the world.

In retrospect, a timely introduction of the OPEN system, in conjunction with other anti-corruption programs, has greatly enhanced public trust and transparency in the daily administration of the Seoul Metropolitan Government. Astute observers of municipal governance remain confident about the long-term utility and built-in merits of the OPEN system. One also remains hopeful about the prospect of disseminating and implementing the OPEN system to other municipalities with the help of international organizations such as Transparency International and the United Nations. All in all, the Seoul Metropolitan Government is determined to combat the problems of administrative and institutional corruption as it is equally committed to make SMG one of the most reputable and corruption-free municipal administrative systems in the world.

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