The government enforces regulations to keep people safe, as effective regulations can ensure social order and safety. However, as C. Northcote Parkinson, the author of “Parkinson’s Law” and a public administration / management scholar, argued, the introduction of regulations could lead to an increase in the number of public servants or reinforcement of the government’s power. Some regulations overlap or fail to consider and reflect the reality of situations. As part of its effort to boost convenience, achieve industrial development and promote economic recovery, the Korean government prioritizes the improvement of regulations that could cause public inconvenience. This commitment by the government has, in fact, improved regulations. But the public has barely felt the impact of such reform.

When it comes to elevators, which are a daily necessity for countless people, safety is key, which means a host of regulations have been implemented in the industry. To further strengthen elevator safety, the government introduced a regulation that aims to limit the number of elevators one maintenance mechanic can service to 100 units a month. But the elevator industry asked for regulatory improvements, as the regulation did not sufficiently take into account the development of maintenance technology, high elevator density and outdated machines. Technological developments have significantly enhanced elevator maintenance systems and mechanics have not faced any safety issues related to workload excess, according to the elevator industry. And, if one mechanic were to service a maximum of only 100 units, some elevators would inevitably remain un-serviced due to a shortage of technicians, which could pose a safety risk to elevator users.

The Office of the Foreign Investment Ombudsman listened to the opinions of the elevator industry, mostly those of foreign-invested companies, and delivered their message to the government. Realizing that the regulation did not consider or reflect industry realities, the government decided to revise the regulation. However, the sinking of the Sewol ferry in April of 2014 – a tragedy that took the lives of about 300 people – drove the government to reinforce safety-related policies and regulations. Our office, fully aware that public safety cannot be overstressed, continued suggesting that the government improve the elevator-maintenance regulation, pointing out that regulations that fail to reflect reality cannot be adhered to and may even put people in danger.

In September of 2014, the government held a joint meeting to discuss regulatory reform regarding elevator safety with relevant agencies, companies and stakeholders. The regulation regarding elevator maintenance service was also on the table. In November of 2014, the government made a preliminary announcement that it would revise the Enforcement Rule of the Elevators Safety Management Act. Under the revised bill, the number of elevators per mechanic was increased from 100 to 120 units. Also, the number of years of experience a maintenance mechanic needs to get a certificate was shortened to two to three years, and a mechanic with more than 15 years of work experience can now be considered a senior mechanic. By easing the requirements related to hands-on experience, the government helped resolve the problem of a shortage of skilled workers.

Regulations and systems for protecting lives must be consistently improved. But unreasonable and ineffective regulations that could cause public inconvenience should also be drastically reformed. By revising and streamlining regulations, Korea will offer a more business-friendly environment for foreign investment.

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