

**Local Governance and National
Development* : A Case of
the Republic of Korea**

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The Brief History of the South Korean Local Governance Since 1948

South Korea's principal local self-government act, Local Autonomy Law, was enacted on July 4, 1949, barely a year after the Government of the Republic of Korea was established in 1948 (Cho Chang-hyun, 2000a). However, the effective date for the implementation of the law was 'temporarily' delayed, due to the fear that the immediate enforcement of the local self-government might disrupt the already overburdened local administration that had neither administrative competence nor a tradition of the self-government in the Korean history.

Then the Korea War came in 1950. Thus, the government was in no mood to start the local self-government in the midst of the war. However, the chain of the strange events in national politics involving the constitutional amendment allowing the popular election of President Syngman Rhee (who was elected by the National Assembly two years earlier) but was now so unpopular that he was very unlikely to be re-elected by the National Assembly, triggered the local election.

The incumbent president and his ruling party needed a third political force which could be mobilized to pressure the opposition-dominated National Assembly to amend the Constitution. In order to mobilize these forces the government decided to hold the local election to form the local councils under the Local Autonomy Law.

So, when the first local election was held on April 25, 1952, the ruling Liberal Party easily swept away the local councilor's seats, producing a new political force outside of the National Assembly (The Ministry of Home Affairs, 1958).

In the process of the campaigning for and against the constitutional amendment in the 'temporary' capital of Pusan in 1952, literally thousands of the local councilors (who were members of the ruling Liberal Party) assembled in front of the National Assembly building chanting, for its dissolution until it agreed with their demand for the constitutional amendment (Hwang Ah-ran, 1996; Cho Chang-hyun, 1998).

Thus, the ruling Liberal Party and President Syngman Rhee obtained their political goal: to re-elect Syngman Rhee for his second term (National Election Commission, 1981).

Thus began the politicization of local self-government in South Korea. In other words, the local self-government was introduced not so much for the purpose of democratization of local government, which had no tradition of citizen's participation and responsibility in the process of the decision-making of the local public matters and concerns, but for national political purpose.

In 1958 when most large urban mayorships were won by the main opposition

Democratic Party or non-partisan candidates, the Local Autonomy Law was again amended to appoint mayors, who were until then popularly elected, at all levels: city, town, and village, out of the fear that the forthcoming presidential election with the opposition party holding so many (if not the majority) of large cities mayorships would negatively affect the result (Cho Chang-hyun, 2000a).

Thus, with the apparatus of the local administrative machinery which was responsible for election administration through the appointed mayors under the Ministry of Home Affairs' tight control, the ruling Liberal Party was once again confident that it had paved the way for a successful presidential election, which indeed allowed Syngman Rhee for an unprecedented fourth term on March 15, 1960. However, only a month later, he was overthrown in a revolution led by student protesters agitated by the unprecedented scale and magnitude of the election fraud.

The Second Republic pushed for full-fledged local autonomy as a part of democratization within a few months after it took power in 1960 following the April Student Revolution. By amending the Constitution, the Chang Myon Administration made the direct elections of provincial governors and mayors of special cities possible, as well as the mayors of cities, towns, and villages (Cho Chang-hyun, 2000a).

It was significant in that it recognized the deficiencies of the 1948 constitution regarding the fundamental principles of local self-government and corrected some of them, notably the absence of a constitutional guaranty of the popular election of the local government chiefs by their inhabitants.

In the gubernatorial elections in 1960, the ruling Democratic Party won only two out of the ten posts (National Election Commission, 1981), thus making the political competitiveness among the political parties once again fierce (Chung Sae-wook, 1999).

However, less than six months after the local election under the Second Republic, a military coup d'état in the dawn hours of May 16, 1961 overthrew the Chang Myon Administration and promulgated the so-called "Extraordinary Measures Law on Local Autonomy", which superseded the Local Autonomy Law and thus abolished the local self-government. Under the new arrangement, the local councils were abolished and their functions were given to the heads of the upper-level government. And the local government chiefs were appointed out of the central Ministry of Home Affairs bureaucracy (Cho Chang-hyun, 2000a).

This highly centralized system of local government had continued for next 34 years from 1961 through 1995, when the election of local government chiefs were allowed for the first time since 1960, after a series of the political upheavals including the assassination of President Park Chung Hee of 1979, the Kwangju Massacre of 1980, and the June 10 Uprising of 1987. During these long and tumultuous years of democratization movements, the idea of local self-government had always come on top of reform agendas.

However, in spite of the fact that the popular election of the local government chiefs and local councils were restored, the system of the local administration in South Korea, which has been so tightly controlled by the central bureaucracy for so long, has yet to be modified to allow the degree of local autonomy that is normally

expected of any nation with the local self-government tradition.

It seems that the crux of the matter is to what extent the central government is willing to transfer the functions which are normally considered to be 'local' to the appropriate levels of the local government, along with the necessary authority with financial resources. Accordingly the local governance has a significant effect on every conceivable aspect of national development.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to discuss how the local governance impacts the national development in the case of South Korea from 1987 through 1997.

Decentralization and National Development

Why Decentralization Now?

The question obviously is why decentralization is needed now in South Korea. There are at least four explanations why the push for decentralization is justified. They are:

- political development,
- administrative reform,
- financial responsibility and equity, and
- a balanced regional development.

a. Political Development

There is a general agreement among the scholars and the general public that one of the most serious political malaises in South Korea today is the undemocratic nature of the political parties. To give an example, the political parties are run most undemocratically, and more often than not the candidates are chosen not by the members, but by the boss of the party. This undemocratic practice goes back to 1945 when Korea was liberated from Japan without having any tradition of political or parliamentary experience. After the Japanese colonial administration ended in August of 1945, more than two hundred political parties sprang up almost overnight to compete for political hegemony (National Election Commission, 1989). They were centering around not political ideologies, but the individuals whose personalities were more distinguishable than their ideologies. Thus, the basic character of the political parties remain intact even though numerous changes have taken place.

However, under the decentralized political system, political parties that provide candidates and local policy platforms are in greater competition for grassroots support among the members and non-members alike, in order to get more votes ultimately, more seats in the local council than no local elections nor local council exist. The political competition at the grassroots level among the political parties would inevitably encourage citizens to join the parties while members would be encouraged to participate in the decision making process of the local political organization. The political party's participation into the local election provides members with an ample opportunity to participate into the party affairs, to help run them more democratically, and ultimately to reform the political parties in order to cultivate and nurture the grassroots support (Cho Chang-hyun, 1995a).

Second, the national parliamentarians who did not go through the local political process and who were rather unskilled in legislative and parliamentary process would benefit greatly from the experience and training in the local political process. The experiences in the local parliament before they run for the national offices are invaluable in terms of not only the procedural familiarities but also for their temperamental maturity.

Third, the public who rarely participate in the public forum or local decision-making process, and usually take a cynical view of the public affairs could have an enough opportunity for a citizenship training under the local self-government system.

b. Administrative Reform

Under the centralized system when the local government chiefs who were appointed and rotated in average, every eighteen months throughout the country from the central pool of the Ministry of Home Affairs civil services ranks did not have a sense of loyalty to the localities they served nor a job security to launch any significant development project (Cho Chang-hyun etc., 1996). Thus, the local administration was traditionally run by the inertia and reaction rather than the sense of direction and vision.

Because the public was excluded from the decision-making process of local importance, they tended to resist any local government decision that may had negatively impacted their well-beings. It is therefore, imperative to include the public in the local public policy-making process if the government wants its policy to be more effective and efficient as well as acceptable to the public.

The local government employees whose promotion and other career opportunities were to be determined by the Ministry of Home Affairs needed to pay no attention to the local residents' need or evaluation. But if their careers are to be decided by the local authority under the expanded local self-government system, it would motivate them enough to change their attitudes toward the public and to improve their performance on the job as well (Cho Chang-hyun, 1995b).

Also under the highly centralized system, the unnecessary organizational positions were kept intact despite the changing work loads and shrunken work demands because the local government did not have the authority nor the will to change the organizational structure and the manpower ceiling without the central approval. In other words, even if the local government found itself with any surplus manpower, due to the reasons described above, it is unwilling or at least very reluctant to volunteer to curtail the manpower because once the manpower ceiling is fixed by central authority, it is very difficult to obtain any new position from the central authority.

c. Financial Responsibility and Equity

The fees and charges in exchanging for the services delivered by the local government should reflect the local economic or financial conditions and user's characteristics (Cho Chang-hyun, 2000b). Even to this day the local government is, however, not free to determine their rates but to get central approval. The problem

is that they usually are set to be too low in order to appease the lower income population. Under this condition, the users of such local government services as the subway or garbage collection would care less about the costs than under the local self-government and local financial responsibility (An Jong-suk • Park Jung-soo, 1996).

Furthermore the local government officials and employees also were less likely cost-conscious in the non-capital spending as long as the Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs, which dictates such spending by requiring the very strict observation of the central guidelines for the local budget formulation.

Likewise, the local government would have very little incentives or authority to increase its revenue for local capital improvement projects if the issuances of the local bonds are prohibitively difficult because of tight central control.

Under the centralized system, the local government has almost no authority to determine the rate, kind and exemption of the local tax. Furthermore, the allocation of the taxes between the central and local governments is heavily tilted toward the central government by giving the local government a few taxes which could be best described as meager, inflexible and difficult to collect (Cho Chang-hyun & Kang Tae-gu, 1998).

However, under the decentralized system, the local governments are inevitably encouraged to be not only more cost-conscious in the spending but more creative in increasing the their own revenue and, thus, become more fiscally prudent.

d. Balanced Regional Development

The population migration which started about 40 years ago made Seoul one of the most densely populated areas in the world. Today 11 million people (a quarter of the entire South Korean population) live in 0.6 percent of the land (605 square kilometers) (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999; Research Center on the Present time Society, 1995). It therefore makes Seoul one of the most expensive real estate of all.

The over-concentration of jobs and population in the Metropolitan Seoul (roughly 46% of the total population) makes the area not only one of the worst traffic situations but also one of the most expensive housing markets in the World (Chung Sae-wook, 1997).

The problem is further aggravated by the huge regional imbalance in economic and social developments (as a result of the uneven SOC investments) decided by the highly centralized bureaucracy that was tilted toward a particular region, against other regions for the past forty years, because the localities had little or almost no political clout to make the central bureaucracy more responsive to their needs and more impartial to their demands. This so-called regionalism resulted from the long practice of the regional discrimination in human and financial resource allocation has now become one of, if not the most, influencing factors in determining the voting behavior in South Korean politics.

The State of the Decentralization Today

a. Legal Authorities

It is said that in order to have a reasonably functioning local autonomy the local government should have at least four kinds of legal authorities. They are the local government's authorities in legislation, administration, organization and finance (Cho Chang-hyun, 2000a).

First, the local legislative authority under the existing system is severely restricted. For instance, the local government has no authority to impose a punishment for a violator of the local ordinance except for a fine. Also the constitutional provision of "within the limit of law and decree" is too narrowly interpreted. Unless there is a specific law authorizing a certain function, the local council is prohibited from legislating a local ordinance that initiates a certain activity or service within a local jurisdiction.

Second, the local administrative authority is also severely limited. The bulk of the local administrative activity are still subjected to central approval or permission, even though the majority of them deemed 'local' in nature. The thousands of laws and presidential decrees concerning the local government functions and activities, which were authorized during the period when the local self-government was denied from 1961 to 1995, are needed to amended to embrace and accommodate the new spirit and letter of local self-government. However, the pace by which this problem is tackled is too slow and too timid (Cho Chang-hyun, 2000a).

Third, local organizational and personnel authorities are still under central control. Not only are the total number of the local employees, but also the classification of the local positions are determined by the Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs.

Fourth, local financial authority is extremely limited. The local budget must be formulated in accordance with the guideline issued by the Ministry of Administration and Home Affairs. The local fees and charges must get prior approval from the central government before they go into effect. The local taxation is exclusively under central control and the local bond issuing authority is also severely restricted (Cho Chang-hyun, 2000b; Cho Chang-hyun & Kang Tae-gu, 1998).

b. The Low Civic Consciousness Level of the Local Citizens

Ever since the local self-government is restored in 1991, the so-called NIMBY phenomenon is widely spread. Little tolerance or sympathy is shown for the neighboring or wider community for the resolution of the issues such as garbage disposal site selection or water resource preservation (Cho Chang-hyun, 1995a; Ji Chung-nam, 2000). The so-called local self-interests casts a long shadow over the prospects of the central government's willingness to permit a greater degree of local autonomy, largely because of the immature local self-interests, under the name of the local self-determination.

c. Reallocation of Functions between the Central and Local Governments

Very little progress is being made in this very important aspect of decentralization, largely due to the reluctance of the central bureaucrats who fear the shifting of the functions would eventually lessen their administrative authority as well as career opportunities (An Sung-ho, 1999). The problem is aggravated further by the genuine concerns of the central policy-makers, who are so negatively affected by the extreme activities of the so-called local self-interests at the expenses of the wider regional or national interests.

d. Reallocation of the Financial Resources between the Central and Local Authorities

The ratio of the central domestic revenue for the local financial equalization has only recently risen to 15%, up from 13.27% for the last twenty years (Korea Research Institute for Local Administration, 1999; Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs, 1998, 1999). No reallocation for the tax resources between the central and local governments is even contemplated at the moment.

e. The Powerless Local Council

The balance of power between the executive and legislative organs of the local government is tilted heavily toward the local executive (mayors and the governors) at the expense of the local council. Thus, the local councils enjoy very little authority in either the initiation or control of local policy.

The so-called large council system together with the non-paying status of the councilmen attracts only those who have either an independent source of income or those who have the business with local government for contract or procurement. Thus there is no proper representation for those who are either elite or rather unfortunate in the local community.

f. The Low Competence of the Local Personnel

The present level of competence by the local personnel in performing the tasks of the ever-increasingly scientific, technical and professional nature of the local government is inadequate, to say the least and therefore, needs to be improved. Thus, the local positions ought to be made more attractive to the young and well-educated by upgrading their positions and with a better-pay. However there is no such plan yet.

g. A Good Functioning Local Press is Wanted

It is very difficult, if not impossible, for the local news media, as a watchdog, could survive as a viable institution in South Korea, largely because the news media industry including the advertisement is highly centralized. The financially unsound local news media would only help breed the inefficiency and corruption in the local government. A very few local papers are financially self-sufficient, and therefore, independent (Cho Chang-hyun, 1995a).

Forces Against the Decentralization?

Presidential Politics

Since the inception of the local self-government, every incumbent president has always believed that the decentralization would weaken the presidential authority; the diffusion of the power would somewhat hamper the presidential mandate and its responsibility (Cho Chang-hyun, 1997a). Under the old system, the centrally-appointed local government heads, together with their employees, had always volunteered to campaign for the ruling party and its candidate, in addition to the faithful implementations of the centrally-initiated policies in their respective localities.

However, under the new decentralized system, the local government chiefs and their employees act independently from the central administration and its ruling party. Particularly, some presidents seemed not at ease or uncomfortable in dealing with any local government chief whose political party is different from his.

Thus, every president is unwilling or at least lukewarm to the idea of the decentralization out of the fear that it might accelerate the early lame duck phenomenon during his tenure of the presidency.

Parliamentary Competition

The members of the parliament do not want any competition for either spotlight or power from any locally-elected government chief or councilmen in the same locality. He or she wants to remain an only elected official in the locality. Thus, the members of the National Assembly are no friends of expansion of the local self-rule (Cho Chang-hyun etc., 1996).

Administrative and Bureaucratic Self-Interests

The Central ministries are unwilling, or at least very reluctant, to transfer their functions of local nature to local governments, although the implementation (execution) of such central functions is always being performed by the local government (Cho Chang-hyun, 1998b, 1997a, 1997b).

No bureaucrat is willing to relinquish his or her power to local authority, because the transfer of functions means lesser work, and the lesser opportunity for promotion to higher positions and subsequently better pay.

The centralized control gives the central bureaucrats a sense of superiority than the local officials, and a greater influence over the local matters. Thus, it would seem to elevate him or her to a higher social strata in the society.

Not the least of all, the transfer of functions and authority means lesser opportunities for extra monetary or psychic incomes.

Moreover, the central bureaucrats, convincing that the local government is less efficient and its employees are less well trained, are therefore, not in hurry to be willing to grant a greater degree of the local self-government.

Media Marketing

Since the territorial limit of Korea news media for its marketing purpose, in general, covers the entire country, the political decentralization would inevitably lead to decentralize the news media industry for its readership (Cho Chang-hyun, 1995b). It, therefore, means that its revenue as well as the influence would shrink eventually. Therefore, it is no surprising to note the majority of either newspaper or TV (or radio) industries has consistently maintained a negative position of the local self-government for the last four decades.

Inadequate Training of Academics

Many of the domestically-trained Korean academics lacked adequate training and education in the discipline of local self-government and democracy, largely due to the measures that eliminated the political science and democracy components out of the local government studies in the university curricula during the Park regime (1961–1979). Thus, only a very few local self-government scholars whose educational background included the discipline in political science and democracy as well as public administration were available when the issue of local self-government was brought up.

The majority still believes that the purpose of local self-government lies not in democracy, but in efficiency (Cho Chang-hyun etc., 1996).

Expensive and Corrupted Election Practices

Traditionally the election was very expensive for the individuals who run for office in South Korea. It was also very costly to the nation's economy. To name a few, man-hours lost in election days (4 in case of separate local elections) and wage hike due to the manpower scouting competition during the election season, and political contribution by business firms and individuals forced upon by the political parties and politicians (Cho Chang-hyun, 1995a).

Not only was election costly but also was corrupt (Hwang Ah-ran, 1996). Highly sophisticated forms of buying and selling votes, particularly in countryside, were not uncommon, even after the latest election reform went into effect.

Business Interests

The business community in South Korea as a whole, was no friend of the politics in general and the local politics in particular (Chung Sae-wook, 1997). The decentralization is looked on as an additional hurdle, which it hates to go through and to deal with for business licensing, permit and other services. It therefore, means additional expenses and more time-consuming.

For them the government is something which they must deal with and eventually overcome, but not something that they must participate with. It seemed to them the local self-government and its accompanying process was highly inefficient and amateurish. It can therefore be dispensed with.

Conclusion: Implications from the South Korean Experience

Looking back the last ten years of the development of local self-government in South Korea one cannot escape from the following tentative conclusion:

First, there is a gradualism: it takes a long time to reach where the South Korean local self-government stands today, and it also has a long way to go to where it should be. For example, even though legally-mandated local election dates were too frequently ignored by the incumbent presidents and their ruling parties, the forces in favor of the local autonomy have never given up hope and kept pushing until today. The local autonomy law has been revised continuously, but its revisions have never satisfied those who advocated a full-pledged local autonomy. But they were more or less the products of political compromise between those who were for, and against a greater decentralization. Just like any other issues, they gave a little and took a little, thus a compromise was the name of the game. Therefore, one shouldn't try to make it perfect at once.

Furthermore, it was plain that the frequency and practice of election, either national or local, have undoubtedly helped make democracy gradually work. In other words, the more elections you have the more likely it would mitigate a fear of the negative image of elections in general and local elections in particular. One might say that democracy grows by drinking water called "the election."

Second, the presence of a strong opposition party in parliament is essential for an expansion of the local autonomy. It was no secret that unless the main opposition party in the National Assembly in 1990 and again in 1992 pressed very hard the ruling parties and their presidents to promise the local election in 1995 in exchange for the safe passages of the 1991 and 1993 budgets, the election of the local government chiefs might have not been held as scheduled.

Third, the role of news media in arousing a public opinion in support of the local autonomy cannot be overstated. The role of the articulate public speakers as well as discussants in TV or radio's public affairs programs cannot be overemphasized. Not to mention prolific writers in the national daily or weekly on a regular basis in advocating the idea of local self-government would expand the grassroots support for local democracy.

Fourth, it always emphasizes political development. In fact, the local autonomy was pushed as a form of political development. As the nation's economic development reached the threshold of the developed country, the political development becomes inevitable. In other words, unless the country is developed politically as well as economically, the nation's economy won't grow any further. There is a linkage between the political and economic development. If a nation wants to continue an economic development, she needs not only domestic peace but also international recognition and respect.

Fifth, one cannot overstate the importance of the political education in the development of local self-government. Numerous seminars, workshops and public hearings were used to spread the idea of local autonomy to the general audience, political

candidates, academicians and journalists. It is needless to say that the inexpensive or even free dissemination of publications of all sorts (monograph, articles, books and pamphlets and newsletters) are useful for that purpose.

Sixth, the usefulness of the expert training and networking shouldn't be forgotten. While the general public was wanted for the local autonomy education, the more urgent task was an expert training and education. A large number of academicians, influential politicians, journalists, even civil servants ought to be trained by either on-site visitation or short-term lecture program such as the following:

- Candidate training,
- Councilmen seminar,
- Information (Benchmarking) visit to foreign countries,
- Numerous domestic local policy seminars,
- Numerous international seminars,
- Local council policy development program,
- Graduate school-level education on local autonomy.

And a nation-wide informal networking was formed amongst these experts for information and communication to push for a greater decentralization.

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* This article is based on research funded by the Hanyang University, Faculty Research Grant for 1999-2000.