

# Review of Structural and Performance Changes after the Restoration of Local Autonomy in Korea

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**Abstract:** Ten years have passed since the revival of the local autonomy system in Korea. After a 30-year pause, people began to elect their local council members in 1991, and the head of local government in 1995. This paper attempts to look at the structural changes and performance difference since restoration of local autonomy. The new system has produced several positive structural changes and beneficial performances. These include nationally decentralized power distribution, restructuring of local power structure, institutionalization of citizen participations. In each municipality, local council represents citizens' demand and takes parts in a burgeoning system of local checks and balances. Customer-oriented administrative services, innovative administrative reform measures, and diverse new management techniques have also been undertaken. The local autonomy also resulted in several problems that include corruption and irregularities, concentration of power in a single figure, lack of leadership in council, internal conflict, projects and events that were mere window dressing and misallocation of budgets. In the policy areas, there are some indications of policy change. There is more emphasis on local economic development. In addition, there are indications of positive welfare and community service in several metropolitan areas. In some municipalities, environmental concern has increased and environmental protection measures put into place. However, poorly planned development in suburban areas and an overemphasis on commercial land development raises serious problems.

## INTRODUCTION

Ten years have been passed since the revival of the local autonomy system in Korea. After a 30-year pause, people began to elect their local council members in 1991, and the head of local government in 1995. Council members have been elected three times and the chief executive has been elected twice. The revival of the local autonomy system itself has had a considerable effect on Korean politics as well as governance.

The local autonomy system was reintroduced as a part of the democratization process that began in the mid 1980s. Thereafter, Korean society experienced a rapid democratization, informatization and globalization, and underwent a bitter economic

crisis in 1997. The socio-economic change definitely affected the restoration decision and many aspects of newly burgeoning local government system.

In addition, within each municipality, many diverse new developments occurred after the change in the system. There are more than 240 local governments, which include seven metropolitan and nine provincial governments that comprise the upper level local governments, and 232 local governments that comprise the lower level local governments. The conditions within each municipality are different, and recent developments show many different aspects of changes. Consequently, any conclusive statement for new development may lead to an erroneous judgment with respect to the performance of the system over the past 10 years.

Generalizations based on first-hand observations and study reports should be viewed with skepticism. In this paper, the performance changes made

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through the transition toward local autonomous governance would be examined at the macro level. Changes at the upper and lower level local governments will be treated separately. In addition, any effects and/or performance changes from general socio-political variables and the reintroduction of the new local autonomous system would be differentiated.

First, this paper will assess the structural change caused by the reintroduction of local autonomy as a socio-political institution. Although social structural change is accompanied by broader social trends, such as globalization, democratization, informatization, the reintroduction of the local autonomy system, on its own, contributed social structural change nationwide. It also affected the power structure within a local community. Major aspects of social change involve the relationship between national power elites and local elites, the relationship between local populace and their leaders, and the relationship among leader groups. These will evidently lead to community power structural change again.

Second, this paper looks into the policy changes made after the reintroduction of local self-government system. In addition, some modification and improvement of the internal arrangements of the local government system (which is pre-requirement for better services) will be reviewed. The council, whose authority comes by representing the populace, is in the initial stages of institutionalization and its status and role are still evolving.

The executive, which has traditionally been strong and centralized, has faced a challenge: namely, how to respond to the increasing demands from vocal citizen's groups. For the last ten years, there seems to have been changes in meeting the service needs of local populace which has affected the quality of life in urban and rural communities. Two basic categories of evaluative criteria are used: efficiency of service delivery, and responsiveness to the requests from the ordinary citizens.

Third, any changes in policy output are examined within a framework developed here. The analysis categorized local policies into four groups: (1) economic development-oriented policy; (2) facility-oriented welfare policy; (3) people-oriented welfare policy; and (4) environmentally sound and sustainable development policy (ESSD). The paper looks at any change in policy emphasis or priority after the restoration of the local autonomy. Changes in the overall quality of life should be assessed to see the outcome of policy and system changes. It is, however, almost impossible to find any evidence related to the quality of life, so this task is deferred to a future study.

Local government has been justified in terms of wider political values. Among the foremost of these is the promotion of liberty by the dispersal of power from the center to municipalities (de Tocqueville, 1945). Expansion of local democracy in modern time is still important in a society, such as Korea, that has undergone democratization processes. Two additional values are often mentioned involving the administration of the local government: participation and efficiency. The widening of the opportunities for participation in public life was one of the strongest reasons why John Stuart Mill celebrated local government. In addition, provision for the welfare of the population in an efficient manner remains, for many public administration scholars and financial specialists, the major justification for local government.

With these values in mind, we look into the performance of the 10-year-old Korean local autonomy system and local governments in the following chapters. Positive as well as negative aspects of the new system will be presented. Based on these analyses, some policy recommendations are sought.

## SCOPE AND METHOD

There are many dimensions to review the performance of a new governance system. In this case,

the net effects of the reintroduction of a local autonomous governance can be viewed both from national and local perspectives. The reintroduction of the local autonomy system has induced a certain societal change and municipality-specific change.

The strict meaning of performance refers to the responsiveness of a local government's services to the needs of the community and to the community's ability to pay. In a narrower sense, local government performance is closely related to the effectiveness of the local government and the efficiency and productivity of a system (Epstein, 1984: 2-25). Efficiency or productivity of a certain service or a function is the traditional concern of public administration schools. In this paper, however, the term performance is used rather in a wider connotation: it includes changes and new developments after the reintroduction of the local autonomy system.

For the national changes, we need a macro analysis. For the changes within individual local government, however, we need a microanalysis. In addition, a meso-level analysis, which involves all levels of local government, can be conducted. In this paper, however, we adopted a macro perspective in order to obtain a general view of the changes and effects after the reintroduction of local self-government. Additionally, information based on the personal observation of many individual local governments is integrated to indicate a general trend. Some meso-level data and empirical research are also utilized in this paper.

To see the pure effects of a system change, a general socio-economic trend should be controlled. It is not an easy task, however, to control the general trend of social progress when we adopt a wider view of performance change with the reintroduction of a new governance mechanism. Effects of the new system are inevitably related to the general social trend and, to a certain extent, the total effects come from the general societal evolution. Therefore, awareness is essential for sorting out the net

effects of the system change.

The local autonomy system was reintroduced as a way of democratization. The society had experienced major changes during the 1980s. The democratization process began in the mid-1980s and a consolidation of democracy required extended local democracy and active self-initiated participation. In addition, globalization was experienced locally after the Seoul Olympic Games in 1988. Korean society has also been rapidly transformed into an information society. These trends evidently influenced society, and the effects of these general movements tended to mingle with the effects of reintroducing the local autonomy system. Therefore, it is not easy to single out the net effects of institutional change. In addition, we should not ignore the impact of the economic crisis in 1997 and 1998, which might have affected the new governing system and distorted the prearranged process of the decentralization.

Therefore, to find the effects, we should focus on several fundamental and long-lasting changes that are closely related to decentralization and local government. Any social structural changes that are closely related to decentralization are a core target for examination. In addition, theory on community power structure tells us that the extension of local democracy will affect the composition of the power elites and their configuration; community power structure is in point for examination.

We should also pay attention to the internal management of the local government. Many innovative attempts that were introduced for responsive and efficient local administration have been reported, so any changes in decision-making capacity, and bureaucratic practices and processes should be examined more carefully. There seems to be diverse horizontal policy diffusion among municipalities. Therefore, the local council, which is the representative body, and the executive, which is the body responsible for execution of policies, draw our attention. With the observation of the internal

management change after the shift of the system toward more autonomous one, it seems reasonable to relate the internal innovation to government output.

It is argued that the local governments are supposed to provide any alternative public services that cannot be provided by the market (Sharpe, 1970: 171). The scope of public services that are provided and produced by the local government is extensive and open. Therefore, this paper categorizes policy areas and tries to find a pattern of policy direction change after the autonomous administration. Policies are grouped into four areas, and the general trend, if any, among more than 240 municipalities is examined.

## **STRUCTURAL CHANGE**

### **Decentralized Governance**

Reintroduction of the local autonomy system was justified for democratic consolidation and decentralization (Lee, 1997). During the period of system transition, conservative groups in Korea, which may have included industrialists, businessmen, central bureaucrats, and the military, showed patience. They did not oppose decentralization of political power and cautiously watched the emergence of local politics. Strong animus against centralized big government became a tendency.

It is well known that Korean politics is vertical and authoritative. Administratively, it is highly centralized and control oriented. Korean bureaucrats are notoriously authoritative and patriarchic. They have been known to be very unfriendly and heartless. Centrality and uniformity are the essence of the government operation.

As democratic institutions were activated, the market and civil society gained more strength. Although the government had been the center of society, it is evident that the balance shifted more favorably toward the market and civil society. As

associational enthusiasm of civil society went up, the democratic ethos and spirit of citizens became apparent (Elstain, 2000: 103).

The economic crisis provided an especially good reason for consolidating market-related institutions. Market mechanism had been shackled due to the government centered-economic growth strategy and the control-oriented bureaucrats. Although it was true that the economic crisis, once again for a brief period, strengthened the arm of government, the government tended to withdraw its interventionist policies from the market. With globalization, business was faced with intensified international competition and under this tendency the decentralization of government power was accelerated.

It may be argued that Korean society was characterized as contestation-prone society, and even before liberalization, there was strong evidence that civil society was changing (Goo, 1993: 231-249). Nevertheless, it is evident that the modern civil society was formed, and a large number of NGOs had been established in every field of the society since late 1980s. As ordinary citizens began to have a voice and the prospects for the effective use of voice brightened, people increased their capacity for making their voice heard (Hirschman, 1970: 33-43). Even in remote areas, many community-based organizations (CBOs) were formed and spoke out on their views on local issues and created effective new channels through which citizens could communicate their dissatisfaction.

To this point, it was clear that the level of decentralization proceeded more slowly than many decentralists had expected and that many progressive scholars were dissatisfied with the measures taken by the central government and the ruling party. Even the Kim Administration, which promised expanded local democracy and decentralized governance, postponed major decentralization measures. These included an autonomous policing system, and the institutionalization of local council among other measures (Lee, 2001).

**Local Power Structure**

1) Structural Changes

During the last ten years, local politicians have been brought out in bold relief. Metropolitan mayors and provincial governors have earned an especially high level of political and social reputation. Former prime ministers, ministers, and senior politicians have all sought these local positions. As these national figures compete for the local positions, the power balance between the central and local government has shifted toward the localities. Compared to the previous centralized administrative system, the local autonomous system shook up the power relationship and initiated the decentralization of political and administrative power. Because of the long-standing traditions of strong central government, it will take time for local political figures to be independent from the influence of the national power elites.

As people began to elect their heads of municipalities and council members, local politics became active. Many elites showed interest in running for the executive head positions and local council members. It was somewhat competitive. Elected politicians and prospective elites were attentive to the demands and wishes of the local populace. As local citizens exercised their rights and elected their leaders, the characteristics of the local power structure underwent changes. Here, community power structure refers to selected aspects of political leadership patterns observed at a given time, that is, those patterns of power and influence that determine the scope of local government activity. In order to examine the pattern of the

power structural changes done for the last 10 years, the following typology will be employed.

In the above figure, (I) Simple Democracy Model is an elite-centered power structure. However, the elite group, which is homogeneous, represents the wishes of the citizens. This type could be found in rural areas where interests are not extensively divergent. There seems to be high level of sense of political efficacy, but there is no participatory activities and democratic governance.

(II) The Stable Power Elite Model depicts the traditional authoritative power elites' domination in a community. In this type, the elites disregard the wishes of the citizens, and the elite group is homogeneous and united. Furthermore, there is no mechanism for citizens' input and representation, such as, voting, referendum, or a local council. There is no debate or dispute regarding any issues of the community. The priority of the local government may be law and order, and national uniformity is emphasized for efficient control of the populace. The upper echelon of the community is filled with people from elite families as Mills describes (Mills, 2000).

(III) The Unstable Power Elite Model depicts an unstable and compulsive power relationship in a community. The divided elite groups pay no attention to the wishes and demands of the ordinary citizens. The level of conflict, within the decision making circle is high and the relationship between the elites and the populace is animus. The turnover rate of leaders is high, and the leadership recruitment process is unstable and irregular. This system is, in a sense, transitional, and less predictable.

**Table 1.** Type Community Power Structure

Representation composition of leaders	Fit between attitudes of leaders and citizens	
	Representation	Non-Representation
Homogeneous (Consensus)	(I) Simple Democracy	(II) Stable Power Elite
Heterogeneous (Conflict)	(IV) Pluralistic Democracy	(III) Unstable Power Elite

(IV) The Pluralistic Democracy Model represents extended local democracy. Elites are elected by the citizens and they represent the diverse interests of the people. Input activities are very open and active. Policy issues are intensively discussed among NGOs, interest groups, and an attentive public. Civil society is reborn, one block, one neighborhood at a time.

Based on the four types of local power structure, we can assess the impact of restoring local autonomy at each community level as well as national level. It seems true that the power landscape of local community underwent change. As the power structure of the 248 municipalities changes, the popular movement for democracy seems accelerated.

Before the restoration of local autonomy, under the authoritative military regime, there were many (II) Stable Power Elite and/or (III) Unstable Power Elite types of local communities. All municipalities were operated as administrative arms of the central government, and the leaders were assigned by the ruling groups and central government agencies. Although there were several indigenous local leaders who resided locally and accumulated reputations, their status was lower than that of the formal leaders dispatched from the central government. Local chapters of the political party was closely controlled by the national headquarter of each party. Therefore, local politicians composed of lowest echelon of national political structure.

In some rural areas, there might have existed the (I) Simple Democracy model before 1991, when the local populace first elected their representatives. However, it is very hard to argue that the opinions of the social have-nots were heard, or that there were effective mechanism for addressing their dissatisfaction and wants. The local leaders dispatched from the central government, who were concerned about law and order, did not comprehend the value of citizen participation and civic diversity. The system might correctly be described as a

pseudo-democracy for the few, and it had the tendency of reverting to the power elite model at any time (Parenti, 1974). That system, it was argued, was good for efficient mobilization of the people. That also contributed to the building up monolithic centralism in Korea.

As local direct election was held regularly, the campaign provided an opportunity for creating a community-wide dialogue on many local and national issues. The dialogue provided an opportunity for the potential local power elites to change their indifferent, unsympathetic attitudes to ones that were more positive. They understood that their job was community service, although some could not change their traditional view of holding public office. In any case, the local election triggered an opportunity to shuffle the power structure in a community.

With the help of social movements and struggle for democratization, the local election appeared to observers as an effort to project grassroots interests and desires. The local democracy movement revived and fostered new civic activities that resulted in the transformation of the political system (Castells, 1983: 298-263). After the authoritative rule, the citizen movement transformed the social concept of the city and community. People voiced different views on many issues, such as, traffic congestion, pollution and citizen participation. Many NGOs even tried to monitor and control the activities of local governments. Beginning with the large metropolitan areas, the power structure changed towards (IV) the Pluralistic Democracy Model.

While it is true that formally almost all municipalities belong to Model IV, in reality the situation differs among municipalities. Some municipalities still have difficulties transforming the citizens demands into effective policy. Many local politicians are indifferent to the true meaning of local democracy, and some are not responsive to citizens after they are elected. Local political entities and bureaucrats are even less responsive to the socially

unempowered and have-nots. Few council members champion the weak against the establishment.

Only some council members effectively represented the complaints from their ward residents when they faced problems, such as, the NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) conflicts and personal difficulties. There are but a few local government chiefs who can be labeled progressives. Generally speaking, the local political culture is more conservative than the national one. Therefore, it is safely argued that the effects of political power localization will materialize very slowly, even if the formal representation systems are built in. This is the initial stage for the local citizens to feel the true meaning of local democracy.

## 2) Citizen Control

It is evident that the new system has provided favorable conditions for more active and wider citizen participation. Because the head and council members are popularly elected, they pay keen attention to the satisfaction level of citizens. Customer satisfaction became an important issue in the public sector. The system shift happened slowly as the power relationship between the elected and constituency changed (Cohen and Arato, 1994: 48-58). Diverse ways of participation were invented. The scope of direct participation has enlarged and many coordinating bodies have been established for indirect participation. Public hearings, a citizen audit system, civil monitoring system and neighborhood meetings are but some of the ways. Many advisory committees have been established in relation to policy-making and service delivery.

Many observers who are involved with those activities, however, cooled toward such participation, which they considered mere window dressing. Even though there are diverse and sometimes irksome ways of participation, the majority of them are offered by bureaucrats. These participatory activities are often empty rituals. At present, such participatory activities are far from either citizen

empowerment or citizen control. Those rituals and tokenism, however, might be a necessary stage for citizens to have the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process.

Concerned people began to form a network for more stable ways of promoting their common causes. In local areas, many CBOs had been formed, and these CBOs have begun to pay attention to diverse local issues. Non-profit organizations (NPOs) have proliferated in Korea since the democratization period after the 1980s. At the national level, NPOs activities cover a wide range of concerns that include corruption, economic justice, environment, education, and safety. Their local chapters, as well as CBOs, are very deeply involved in local issues, which results in the possibility of an emergent new democratic governance in Korea.

Influential NPOs challenged the traditional practices of the local heads and raised the issue of expediency funds that had been used by the high-ranking officials of local government. Those expenses were out of taxpayers scrutiny. The size and use were allotted by relevant law enforcement ordinances and have not been public for a long time. It has been conventional not to ask specific questions about its use, and no record has been kept. NPOs were concerned about the proper use of the money. They presumed that a large share of the money was spent to consolidate the mass media, vocal community groups, and his supporters, to attend favorable atmosphere. Almost all heads of local governments expanded such fund and their use, but not all the details that the NPOs requested were made public.

Public support for direct democracy is strong. The public is asking for a greater voice in local government. Although they understand the difficulties associated with direct democracy, many concerned people are talking about introducing initiative, referendum, and recall. Of course, there are concerns about how well citizens perform their

part in the direct democracy process. During the process of consolidation, undertaken early in 1990 under the banner of national competitiveness, citizens showed strong discontent with a particular proposal and asked for a referendum; but only a bureaucratically led opinion survey was conducted.

Recall is under discussion because a majority of people are disappointed with corruption scandals and inefficiencies in local governments. They believe that the representative institutions often failed to respond to the demands of the local communities. When these direct democratic devices are introduced, the Korean local autonomy system will undergo the next step of local democracy. It is evident that real power will be put in the hands of the citizens. Participation has real meaning only when it guarantees the access of the weak to and the input of the poor in the decision-making process (Sherry, 1969). At present, however, many observers agree that participation is still window dressing that is far below than the stage of empowerment or citizen control.

## **PERFORMANCE OF THE COUNCIL AND THE EXECUTIVE**

### **The Council**

The local council is based on the system of representative democracy. That is to say, councilors are elected to make policy on behalf of the citizenry. When local council was formed after a one-generation hiatus, expectation was high in all quarters. At the initial stage, elected local council members were not familiar with the roles they were to perform. As they became familiar with the changed environment and operational rules, they assumed their duties and carried out a variety of activities from the passing of ordinances to the receiving citizen petitions and from environmental protection movement to conflict resolution. As the top decision-making body, local council enacts

ordinances, but there are constitutional and legal restrictions on local legislative activities. In many local councils, however, the number of ordinances enacted increased (Kim, 2001). Although the majority of ordinances that cover substantive policy are prepared by the bureaucrats, ordinances initiated by councilors continue to increase. It is, however, dubious whether the local ordinances were crucial to local governance or improving the citizens' quality of life. In municipalities where heads of the executive and the majority of councilors belong to the same party, the activities of the council are minimal because of the harmonious relationship and uniformity. Some confrontational relationship between the executive and the council seems prerequisite for productive discussion and fruitful results. With competitive atmosphere among councilors surrounding policy issues, a council can represent and satisfy their constituency better and better (Dawson & Robinson, 1963: 265-289).

Many active councilors attempted to control budget process. They deliberate and determine the annual budget, which is submitted by the chief executive. Often they were disappointed when they found numerous strings attached by the central government. In addition, they found that they did not have the authority to control the revenue side of the local finance. Local tax systems are designed almost entirely by the central government, and the room for local discretion is very limited. On the expenditure side, they found that their power was actually limited because of the rigid nature of the local budget structure and the limited knowledge and experience of service provision.

Local council has authority for the audit and inspection of administrative affairs, which is often called direct control power, in order to ensure that the executive branch democratically and efficiently carries out its administrative responsibilities. Local council can occasionally investigate special cases involving administrative mishandling. Many observers agree that the frequency and depth of audits



and inspections are increasing.

Formally, as a representative decision-making body, local councils can exercise control over the executive branch through the power of decision-making, agreement, approval, audit and inspection, and investigation. Under the system of 'strong-executive, weak-council type' of local government, however, local councils face many limitations to carrying out their mandate. The chief executive of local government has the power to request council decisions to be reconsidered, to act independently in emergencies, and to execute a quasi-budget when the regular budget has not been duly passed by the council by the beginning of the new fiscal year. Although the councilors raise questions regarding the transparency and efficiency of government operation, they lament lack of legal power and political authority when the executive does not take their questions seriously.

Tension between the two bodies is almost constant. The tension should be utilized to produce a more fruitful performance. However, in many instances, the tension is the result of troublesome relations, especially when the chief executive and the majority of the councilors belong to different political groups. Under the framework of 'strong-executive, weak-council,' the council usually faces two limitations: one coming from the strong executive power, and the other from the restricted legal authority stipulated in the related laws. The mere existence of local council, however, makes a difference. The head of a municipality and the bureaucrats are aware of the checks and critique made by the councilors.

Institutionally, the councilor is not well supported in terms of staff and payment. The Korean local council is essentially a 'citizen council'. In this type of local council, a councilor's job is considered honorary, and they are not fully paid for their duties. Some of their activities are partially paid within central government budgetary guidelines. There were many arguments for more staffing and

payment coverage, but the progress has been slow.

Recently, many surveys found that the concerns of citizens had waned when compared to the early stages of the local council. The responses can be explained in two ways. First, the local council has been institutionalized, and their activities went toward the daily concerns of citizens. Second, the foundation of local council has weakened and needs to be reinvigorated. The fact that public officials are the only group of people who attend the council meetings, it means that the base of local democracy is eroding. Only a small group of mobilized ward residents appear on the visitor's bench. The responses from the citizens are negative, or at least indifferent, and not a small portion of citizens say they are disillusioned with local autonomy and democracy. It is universally known that the institutionalization of a local council system is still in its infancy even after one or two decade (Hedge, 1998). It is fair to say that the Korean local council still has a long way to go.

### **The Executives**

#### **1) Changes in the Bureaucracy**

Many surveys conducted after the introduction of the autonomy system agreed that the most noticeable change that occurred was friendly attitudes of the local bureaucrats. A small group of observers argued that attitudes had not fundamentally changed, but the observed change resulted from monitoring systems established by the local chief executive. Korean bureaucrats were notoriously authoritative and patriarchic. They have been known to be very unfriendly and heartless. Although the reasons for the behavioral change are unclear, it is obvious that the bureaucrats are trying to change their attitude to a more client-friendly manner.

During the economic crisis, government restructuring was imposed. Local governments were asked by the ruling party and the central government to reduce employment by about 20%. Almost every

municipality faced downsizing and restructuring. Because three stages of consolidations had been carried out during 1994 and 1995, some of the municipalities had redundant workforces (Lee, 1997: 8-11). Computerization and contracting out also helped reduce employee rolls in many localities. There has been tension between the Ministry of General Administration and Home Affairs (MOGAHA) and municipalities in reducing the size of the labor force and number of organizations in a local government. It is true that privatization and contract out weaken local government capacity (Pickvance and Preteceille, 1991: 70-72).

Several studies on community power structure found that the mayor or the head of district is the most influential person in the community. Their power may be legitimatized through popular election and they play very prominent roles under the mayoralty system. Legally they are empowered with diverse decision-making and executive power, and their power is realized through the administrative process and financial handling. They exert unconditioned power in personnel management and enjoy a wide discretion in resource allocations. In the process of issuing approvals, licenses and permits, they are in a position to exercise their influence over the bureaucrats.

Many public officials particularly complain about the executive's real power of personnel management. The chief executive, as a personnel manager, exerts an exclusive power and can neutralize the activities of the local personnel committee, which was supposed to administer personnel policy and administration fairly, based on merit and performance. The personnel management practice, in many municipalities, is deteriorating as the chief executive favors employees who had connection with his camp during the election process. In certain municipalities, one or two major high school alumni form a strong coalition in a local government, and they are treated favorably in personnel management. While these reports some-

times overexaggerate, it is true that the morale of the local public employee has declined partly due to downsizing and personnel administration malpractice.

## 2) Prominence of the Executive Head

The popular election made the chief of the local government the focal point of authority and power. Within a local government, the executive head enjoys an advantage vis-a-vis the council because the system is designed along the principle of "weak council, strong executive." The head exerts monopolistic power for internal management, including personnel administration, as mentioned above, resource allocation, and information handling. Therefore, it is urgent to decentralize the power of the chief in managing internal matters of a local government.

In addition, the prominence of the position in a municipality makes the head of the executive the most powerful elite in the local community power structure. A study found that the mayors were the sole power elites in the cities surveyed (Park, et al. 2000). The chief of local government can mobilize diverse administrative, financial and political resources that can be utilized to enhance the citizen welfare. In mobilizing these resources, the head also exploits the opportunity to increase the power of the office and personal influence.

The political networks that were built during the campaign for office and nurtured during the tenure in office are especially effective 'machines' for political maneuvering. The heads of upper-level local governments, such as governors and metropolitan mayors, however, have not enjoyed personal influence because their jurisdiction is large and they do not have frequent personal contacts with constituents. Often upper-level local governments are more open to the mass media and operate in a comparatively transparent manner. The heads of lower level government, however, can build an enduring machine through diverse contacts and

activities.

In reality, there is no effective control mechanism once the elected local officials take office. Legally, the system has strong chief and weaker council, and the bureaucrats are tight controlled. In the community, a durable local iron triangle has been formed between the executive, local interest groups, and related politicians, and has not allowed any effective challenge to the chief's leadership. Often criticism arises, but it cannot materialize into effective opposition.

There are arguments regarding the introduction of recall, the procedural democracy device that allows voters to discharge and replace a public official mid-term. The process requires a signed petition signatures and usually requires a special election. Recall seems necessary when we consider the absence of effective check and balance in local governance. Recall provides for continuous accountability, so that voters need not wait until the next election to rid themselves of an incompetent, dishonest, or irresponsible municipal head, and it helps check undue influence by special interests (Cronin, 1998; 133-139).

In Korea, many people, including the central government, are concerned about the costs of a recall, the confusing nature of the recall process and competence of the voters. Progressive groups claim that citizens are sufficiently intelligent and discerning to govern themselves. Issue voting and recall, would enhance civic awareness and education (Mansbridge, 1999: 291-326). But many conservatives believe the very opposite: the level of citizens' capacity is still low, so recall will raise unnecessary confusion, not to mention issue vote.

Instead, the central government agency, MOGAHA, which supervises local governments, is attempting to introduce several administrative control mechanisms. One idea is to introduce "an execution by proxy or vicarious execution system" when the head of local government is in a conflict of interest or other precarious position. There is

also a proposal, which is specified in Article 157-2 of the Local Autonomy Act, amended on April 6, 1998, to extend the scope of the order.

In these cases, although there are specific conditions for suspending a head's executive rights, the domain of the autonomous administration will be significantly reduced, and the central government can intervene whenever they need to do. Diverse disciplinary sanctions are proposed to curb what the central government administrators and national politicians may perceive as "abnormal activities" by the municipal head. Also, the Board of Audit and Inspection has established local branches to monitor local government more closely and tighten audit and inspection activities.

MOGAHA once attempted to switch the legal position of the deputy head of local government from being a local government official to being a national public official under the National Public Service Law. If this happens, the local administration can be controlled by the central government because the deputy head works from the perspective of national bureaucracy and will eventually return to the central government. The burgeoning local autonomy cannot be protected by the heads of national bureaucrats. These attempts have so far been unsuccessful because of strong arguments against these proposals from decentralists and local politicians.

### 3) Irregularities

Local elections, like any elections in Korea, are overheated and plagued with high campaign expenses, a rock'em and pock'em campaign, and the mobilization of a large network of canvassers. Consequently, the election expenses often reach levels higher than a candidate normally can bear. It is legally prohibited for local politicians to establish a "political supporters' association" to mobilize contributions as are national politicians. After candidates assume office, they are obliged to report the funds or other benefits that they received during

the election campaign. No one trusts in the report. High campaign expenses explain why many local politicians are involved in scandals, irregularities and corruption.

Local politicians who must visit various ceremonial meetings and funerals that traditionally require monetary gifts are pinched for such money. As the election candidates spend more money on campaigns, the frequency of alleged irregularity is increasing. Election campaign regulations have been improved in order to reduce campaign expenses, but it is not easy task to reduce total monetary burden of politician.

Local government handles a number of permits and regulations as well as contracting for regional development and public works projects with private companies. There continues to be protracted problems of corruption and irregularities. Although the problem is ameliorating, it is still serious. During their second term (1998. 7. 1~2002. 6. 30), 62 local government heads, or about 20%, have been charged of taking bribes and committing irregularities. (That is, five out of 16 upper-level local government heads, or 31%, and 46 out of 232, or 20% of lower-level local government heads) When the election is more competitive, that rate tends to increase. This means election expenses are the number one source of irregularities. The most recent figures are higher than the 10% recorded during the first term, and the percentage before the resurrection of local autonomy.

## CHANGES IN POLICY DIRECTION

### System Change and Policy Orientation

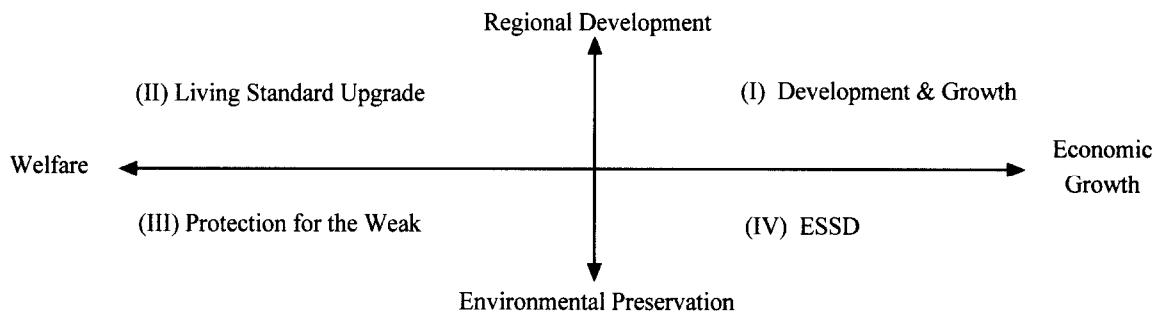
A number of other countries that experience democratization after long authoritarian military rule also underwent similar problems of economic slowdown, social disintegration, and political strife. Korea is not an exception as it faced economic crisis, social fragmentation, several major policy failures, political bottleneck, and industry-labor conflict on the road to democratic consolidation.

The serious economic contraction resulted in the shortage of the local financial sources. Therefore, it is hard to pinpoint any changes in the areas of local policies as a net effect of restoring local autonomy system. Other variables may have affected local government outputs together with the change of local governance. Nevertheless, we can find several meaningful changes which can be reasonably ascribed to the governing system change.

The municipalities have 'obligatory tasks' to fulfill. They can also take on 'voluntary tasks' of their own accord. As the governing system changed, many concerned observers predict there would be changes in policy orientation. In order to see the change more systematically, the following framework will be employed.

The above framework provides some ideas regarding local government policy orientation. Some policies cannot be classified into only one

**Table 2.** Policy Orientation.



quadrant; some policies can be located in more than one quadrant.

(I) Development and Growth refers to policies that focus on regional economic growth and improvements of the social infrastructure. Developing a local enterprise zone (industrial estate), building freeways and bridges, encouraging Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and supporting small and medium sized firms are examples of the first category of local policy.

(II) Living Standard Upgrade policy includes public works projects, such as, stadium, museums, public health clinics, libraries, rental housing, and sewage and water treatment facilities. Public works are one of the main functions of the local government. In a rapidly growing country particularly, the need for such public works is intense. Local politicians are eager to approve budgets for projects that upgrading community infrastructure. Budget maximization hypothesis seems relevant to both the central and local governments, especially in this area (Niskanen, 1971: 21-43).

(III) Protection for the Weak policy is oriented towards human service for the socially disadvantaged and diverse welfare services. Programs for children and the elderly and services for the homeless are the typical examples of these services. Such programs help the weak to improve their quality of life. Projects such as preserving natural heritages, improving family parks and recreation centers belong to this type of policy when these projects especially help the disadvantaged.

(IV) ESSD (Environmentally Sound and Sustainable Development) policy includes floriculture, advanced agricultural techniques, local level technology development, science parks, innovative clustering, and diverse environmentally projects. In certain areas, growth management policy has similar characteristics. Without the management of growth in residential areas surrounding a large metropolis, it is impossible to protect the natural environment. Local Agenda 21 once had wider

repercussions though the implementation did not meet high expectation.

### **Indications for Policy Changes**

#### 1) Development and Growth

Even after a ten-year lapse, it is difficult to prove that solely the restoration of local autonomy was responsible for the changed course of policy orientation. However, many scholars who have observed local government service and policy output agree that the majority of municipalities have emphasized regional economic development and the social overhead capital. This kind of policy shift has been observed in the U.S. and the U.K. for a long time (Logan & Harvey, 1987; Peterson, 1981; Savage and Robins, 1990). In U.S. municipalities, competition for new plants or businesses is high and there are debates regarding the merits of such inducement incentives and over competition (Bartik, 1991). In the U.K. for more than 20 years after 1945, the role of local authorities in local economic development was a non-issue (Young: 1983, 105-109).

Before reintroducing the autonomy system, the local economy was concern of the central government. A large portion of the public sector budget, which can be used for the areas of economic-social development, was allocated for local governments. As system changed, elected leaders were pressured to do something substantive: Infrastructure for local industrial activities was the first target. Many local industrial estates are under construction, and several enterprise zones are suggested (Papke, 1993). Recently "special economic zones", which aims for foreign investments, is proposed.

In many regional governments, there are large-scale economic assistance funds to help local industries and businesses. Aids to family business and small sized enterprise have also become popularity. These local industrial promotion policies have become more visible: The range of local govern-

ment tasks includes facilitation and promotion, the provision of physical support, financial assistance, deregulation of economic activities, and tax incentives. Several public-private partnerships were formed, which included some types of so called the third sector. Many local governments even directly invested to establish local public enterprises.

Their performances, however, are mixed. Several provincial governments tried to induce any new foreign investment with diverse incentives and procedural reforms. However, economists have difficulty in proving that the new investment was the result of the local government's policies. The business climate is similar among the regions. But the Seoul Metropolitan Area is the exception that can produce agglomeration economies. After the economic crisis, several municipalities began to establish job-centers to serve job seekers. Local government's concern for the employment issue, however, is rather low.

## 2) Living Standards

After the restoration of local self-government, many public works to upgrade the local social overhead capitals were carried out. Some public works belong to the second quadrant, and some belong to the third one. The projects that belong to the second quadrant include public housing, public libraries, clinic, museums and citizen's welfare centers as mentioned before.

In some areas surrounding large metropolises, where the population is rapidly increasing, a large number of building permits were issued, and this resulted in a 'leap frog' effect and reckless development. Local governments built international convention centers, airports and large shopping malls, so that almost every major city now has new city hall buildings, museums, art centers, and cultural halls. These facilities have been criticized as being mere window dressing public works and for being an inefficient use of public fund.

Secondary cities surrounding metropolitan area

were particularly guilty of issuing an excessive number of building permits. This resulted in disorderly development of the land, traffic congestion, and a shortage of public schools among other urban problems. Unplanned land development and facility building are notorious among citizens as one of the landmarks of Korean local autonomy. The budgetary process was highly politicized and the requests from councilors were seldom refused, so that, projects were carried out almost in every ward.

Even during the economic crisis, financial resources used by the municipalities increased in terms of absolute size and proportion of total public sector budget. Many metropolitan governments, however, experienced fiscal instability due to gaps between revenues and expenditures. Usually fiscal stress is linked with a city's economic condition and the mismanagement of resources (Fuchs, 1992: 17-39). Large public works during an economic decline suck up a huge amount financial resources, and inadequate project and budget management weakened fiscal stability. As revenues were limited, foreign debt increased, and the high foreign exchange rates was catalyst for fiscal problems. A huge amount of revenue was paid to service the foreign debt.

Critics point out that local fiscal management has become inefficient and inadequate. Large public works projects, especially for public facilities, have been undertaken without due consideration of the municipality's long-term fiscal plan. The window dressing projects that were afoot in almost every municipality dissipated the budget. Cultural activities and international events were fashionable in the local arena, however many international cultural events, due to the incompetence of the hosting municipality, wound up with few foreign participants. The positive side is that municipalities tried to revive their traditional local cultures and attempted to adapt their heritage to the changed social setting. These events, however, should have

been better planned and properly managed.

### 3) Protection for the Weak

According to the theory of fiscal federalism, welfare functions are implemented by the national government (Lee et al., 1998). In order to maintain minimum national standards, the national government develops and implements welfare policies. However, some areas of welfare service delivery can only be performed by local governments. Some typical examples are health service and public hospitals, self-help facilities for the poor, subsidies for public utilities and public education.

Some relatively significant in welfare policy seem to have occurred after the restoration of local autonomy system. It is known that several metropolitan governments began to spend relatively more in welfare-related areas (Kang, 2000), but this should not be interpreted as a general trend: Not a small number of rural districts and small cities have reduced the share of the welfare expenditures. Part of the explanation is that many less affluent people live in metropolitan areas, and their voices grew louder as democracy consolidated. Their presence might be transfused into local democratic process. When we examine the election promises of the urban political candidates, public assistance for the handicapped, elderly, distressed women, and the poor is a high priority. This is different from the U.S. tradition of local politics. In the U.S. redistribution is seldom a significant aspect of local government operations, and therefore, the issue is largely excluded from the local political agenda (Peterson, 1981; 167-171).

However, in reality, it is very hard to ascertain if the living condition of the socially impoverished weak was enhanced after restoration of local autonomy. Participation from the weak is often not very effective. Only a small number of working class people were represented on local council or advisory committees. Recently the Democratic Labor Party was formed to make representation in

national and local political forum, but their policy impact has yet to be realized.

During the economic crisis, the central government and local governments introduced several measures to protect the severely hit households who had suddenly lost jobs and were unable to meet living expenses. Programs, such as, public interns and the daily public works program were introduced. During the Kim Daejung administration, the central government has introduced some new welfare policies, including the Basic Life Security Law, and encouraged local governments to enlarge the scope of welfare protection. Therefore, the adverse effects of welfare expenses in the rural and small municipal governments can be explained by the fiscal stress they faced during the financial crisis. While these municipalities, in accordance with the central government, did seek more favorable measures for the needy, the negative effects of the financial crisis seemed larger and overrode their efforts for welfare protection.

### 4) ESSD

Environmental protection has been a salient issue in local politics in Korea. Citizen's concern for environmental protection and ESSD has increased significantly as living standard rises. Nationally, a number of more stringent environmental regulations have been enacted and more investment has materialized. Deregulation of economic activities has been the general trend of the time, but in the environmental regulation area, the signal is a bit confused. The national government found itself in a conflict between development and environmental protection. In some cases, the national government emphasized protection, such as in the case of Dong-River for example, but in other cases, such as the Saemangum project, it sided with the developers.

Environmental regulations are social regulations that should be strictly enforced or rewritten. Regulatory power has slowly devolved from the

Ministry of Environment to the two levels of local governments. In some metropolitan areas, the quality of the environment has improved. Creative, environmentally friendly projects were completed and welcomed by all citizens. Many small parks were built in the corners of urban spaces and small streams with high level of water quality were restored.

In a few local areas and secondary cities, however, some streams are heavily polluted and even the underground water contamination level is serious. The desire of the citizens and the local government for economic development placed more policy emphasis on economic growth and industrial activities. At a stage in the mid 1990s, the delegated environmental regulatory power was redeemed by the Ministry of Environment because of loose implementation and monitoring by the municipalities. Simple devolution of environmental regulatory authority did not improve environmental conditions.

In this sense, scholars are conjecturing the formulation of a strong growth coalition in the new system of local governance. Development orientation in the municipalities is strong enough to override the conservation orientation. Although the majority of citizens and many environmental NGOs are concerned about the environmental impact of certain projects, and the NIMBY syndrome is strong in local areas, often the resulting choice is pro-development. This reflects the deeply embedded Korean passion for development. With the deregulation of land use, commercial development, leisure hotels, and apartments are booming in almost every corner of the country.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The local representation system, which has been in place since early 1990s, has changed local governance. While many new developments can legitimately claim to have originated from the

restoration of local autonomy, it is difficult to capture the net effects of the system change. General social changes in Korean history might explain larger parts of the new developments that appear to be closely related to the restoration of the local autonomy.

Beginning in the 1980s, the highly centralized government initiated devolution. Although most of the governing authority remains in the hands of the president, the central government ministries, and the national assembly, their positions have been challenged. Nowadays, while the legitimacy of the local institutions is recognized by ordinary citizen, the power of the local institutions is still weak, and as Hunter and Bowman suggest, the power of the civic organization is dramatically less powerful (Hunter and Bowman, 1996; 25-28).

Nevertheless, the restoration of local autonomy has also resulted in several positive outcomes. The new system has begun to produce several positive structural changes and beneficial performances from the more responsive local governance. The former includes: nationally decentralized power distribution and governance, restructuring of local power structure, institutionalization of citizen participations. In each municipality, the local council represents citizens, albeit with limited power, and there is a burgeoning system of checks and balances. The head of the local government is the prominent position in the community. Under their leadership, more customer-oriented administrative services, diverse new management techniques and innovative administrative reform measures that include the extensive use of information technology have been undertaken.

In policy areas, there are some indications of changes in policy orientation, but the results are not conclusive. It is true that there is a greater emphasis on local economic development and industrial activities. In addition, there are signs of more positive welfare programs and community service in several metropolitan areas. In certain municipa-



lities, environmental concern has increased and environmental protection measures have been taken. However, unplanned development in suburban areas and an overemphasis on commercial development raise serious problems in transportation, public schools, and sewage treatment. Not all these new development, however, can be solely attributed to the resurrection of local autonomy, since other macro socio-political variables directly or indirectly affect local affairs.

Citizens are demanding more responsiveness of local government and more quality services at less cost. Although there are many new ventures to fulfill the wishes of the populace, productivity has not increased significantly. There should be more innovative measures to renovate the old system of government coinciding with peculiar local conditions. Diversity and creativity are the guidelines for reinventing local governance and for increasing productivity and direct participation.

When the issue of malfunctioning or mismanagement of the local government is raised, local decentralists complain of the lack of power, authority, and resources. They ask for rapid devolution and transfer of revenue sources from the central government. Conservative groups, however, criticize the slow progress of the local government management, the clumsy handling of new businesses and the politicization of local affairs, which includes internal mismanagement, inefficiency, scandals and irregularities.

Recently, more than 40 national assembly members (more than 12%) initiated a return to the old centralized system by attempting to amend the related local autonomy laws. According to their proposal, the head of lower-level local government would again be appointed by the national government. For national assembly members, whose reelection depends on their popularity with citizens, chiefs of local governments are their immediate and strong competitors in coming elections. Chiefs of local governments have diverse administrative,

financial, and political resources, and those resources can be mobilized for personal ambition. This is especially true of the political network that was constructed for their campaigns and has been nurtured and been an effective machine during their term of office.

Therefore, local governments should now prove that their performance, in terms of productivity and opportunity for participation, is improving. Consolidating democracy and true citizen participation can be realized with the help of increased government productivity. The local government should show that their administration has become more efficient and the real outcome of their efforts contributes toward improving citizens' well-being.

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