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Co-governance and the Environmental Movement

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Abstract

The power of social movements depends on their autonomy to formulate agendas free from the control of powerful actors and challenge the status quo through sustained collective action. It was with this power of social movement that political challengers in South Korea were able to force authoritarian rulers to concede democracy and to expand democratic rights in the post-authoritarian period. However, the political relations between challengers and the government have shown significant change since the advent of the new millennium. At the core of this shift has been the institutionalization of co-governance, or hyeopchi, that celebrated cooperative partnership between government and civil society. An abundance of research has been done on co-governance with the intent of promoting this partnership from a public policy point of view. Critical analyses concerning how co-governance may have affected the ability of social movements to challenge existing power relations or the autonomous capacity of civil society have been conspicuous for their absence. This paper fills this lacuna by tracing the trajectory of the environmental movement with a focus on the introduction of co-governance mechanisms in the mid-2000s that significantly altered the political relationship between potential challengers and the powers that be. What emerges out of this analysis is a picture of the South Korean environmental movement that set out as an independent political movement gradually losing its autonomy and becoming part of the status quo. While co-governance may have expanded the scope of citizen participation and animated local communities, it has been inimical to the power of social movements to effect meaningful change.

Keywords: environmental movement, political autonomy, institutionalization, governance, NGOs

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Introduction

In April 2003, less than two months after Roh Moo-hyun's presidential inauguration, major environmental movement organizations in South Korea joined hands to issue a declaration condemning the new administration's lack of concern for the environment. In the declaration signed by a thousand environmental activists and allies, the coalition criticized the Roh administration's announcement of the "Top Ten National Tasks" that lacked consideration for sustainability, a series of deregulatory measures they deemed detrimental to the environment, and not assigning a single environmental specialist to its transition team. Demands that the economic policies prioritizing growth be reexamined and new free economic zones be revoked were also included. The environmental activists cited their "sense of a serious crisis that transcends disappointment" to express the gravity of their intent and vowed to "stop the Roh administration from turning into an anti-environmental government through joint struggle" (KFEM 2003).

The militant tone of the declaration at an early stage of the Roh administration, which many deemed an ally of progressive social movements, may come as a surprise. But it went on. In November 2004, after almost two years of the Roh administration's deregulatory policies that resulted in the construction of industrial facilities in previously green spaces, new plans to construct 230 new golf courses across the country, and the relaxing of emissions standards for diesel cars, more than a hundred environmental movement organizations declared an "environmental emergency" and formed the Environmental Emergency Council (Hwangyeong shigook hoeui). In their inaugural statement, they accused the government of prioritizing development at the expense of the environment and citizen rights and likened the Roh administration to the "the developmental dictatorship of the past," a clear reference to Park Chung-hee's heavy-handed development project in the 1960s and 1970s. The Council's statement ended with a solemn resolution to "fight with all Koreans for our society, the future of our descendants, and the conservation of our land" (Environmental Emergency Council 2004). Still, the government did not take their calls seriously and the Council soon

launched an "indefinite sit-in" in the symbolic Gwanghwamun Square, only to escalate the levels of contention with a hunger strike (Oh 2005).

Fast forward to 2020 when concerns over the impacts of climate change were growing exponentially. The world was up in arms to cut carbon emissions and transition to a new economy based on renewable energy sources. With its economy built on the cornerstone of carbon-dependent industries such as steel and petrochemistry, South Korea was well behind this global trend and the government, like it had been sixteen years earlier, was sluggish to implement real change. South Korea's carbon emissions reduction target had not changed practically for more than a decade and South Korea earned the dishonorable title of a "climate villain" from international observers (Mathiesen 2016). Yet in July 2020 the government announced to great fanfare the Green New Deal as a part of the larger Korean New Deal. The crux of the plan was to inject massive investments into the economy with the goal of reviving South Korea's economy amid the COVID-19 pandemic and help South Korea's economy to adapt to "the new climate regime," a reference to the new standards and barriers in international trade driven by climate concerns (ROK Government 2020). While the government presented the Green New Deal as an active response to climate concerns, economic considerations dominated the plan and there was no mention of a new carbon emissions target that many had expected to be at the foundation of climate policy.

Responses from the environmental movement groups were predictably critical. The Korea Federation for Environmental Movements (KFEM 2020) criticized that the government plan was nothing but "an expanded list of existing projects" that fell short of "carbon neutrality or the restoration of the ecosystem," and accused the government for its "serious lack of environmental awareness, the absence of philosophy, and poverty of policies." Greenpeace Korea (2020) also issued a statement lamenting the plan that "lacks the most basic awareness of the climate crisis, let alone a greenhouse gas reduction plan." The statement by the Climate Crisis Emergency Action (2020) went further and contended that trying to tackle the climate crisis without an aggressive plan to transition to a new socio-economic system would be futile.

Each statement presented a list of defects that made it clear the government's plan to purportedly tackle the climate crisis was fundamentally flawed. Given their show of determination to fight the government from the earlier period, one would expect the environmental groups to condemn the Green New Deal, demand it be replaced by a proper plan, and deliver a threat of collective action in case the government failed to heed their warnings. However, the statements were conspicuous in their lack of a contentious tone. Environmental movement organizations used "disappointment" (*silmang*) and "regret" (*yugam*) to express their opposition; "urge" (*chokgu*) was the strongest word summoned to demand government action. Other than press conferences, no significant action followed the statements. Rather than pressuring the government to do its job right by drawing on the power of social movements to disrupt, as they did in 2004, it was apparent the environmental movement in 2020 was trying to plead with the government to change its course of action. The government, despite its heated national campaign for carbon neutrality, has not updated its emissions reduction plan and continued to construct ten coal power plants in South Korean and abroad as of summer 2021.

What is Going On? Co-governance and Social Movement Autonomy

These episodes separated by less than two decades display a subtle but noticeable shift in how the South Korean environmental movement (EM) responded to policies they disagreed with. In both instances, the EM made clear they saw the government policies as problematic. The difference lay in the discursive tone with which they expressed their disapproval as well as in the action, or inaction, with which they backed up their words. In the early 2000s, environmental activists criticized government policies with assertiveness and followed up with a set of contentious actions with the intention of generating bottom-up pressure to effect change. In 2020, not only was the tone of disapproval subdued, but no serious action was organized to challenge government policy.

This shift was symptomatic of a broader change in South Korean social

movements over the last two decades. Much has been written about the power of civil society and social movements as the drivers of political change in South Korea. The typical narrative has highlighted the antagonistic relationship between civil society and the state and civil society's dogged struggle to overcome the seemingly invincible state (Koo 1994; S. Kim 2000). The defiant nature of social movements continued into the post-authoritarian period (S. Kim 1997; Aleman 2005; S. Kim 2016). The EM was no different, at first. Through building coalitions and organizing mass protests, the EM forced the government to give up on plans to build nuclear waste disposal facilities at multiple sites, and blocked the construction of dams, tunnels, and plenty of development projects that would have harmed the environment. Environmental movement organizations (EMOs) were also never hesitant to join hands with other civil society actors in contentious campaigns to challenge the government and big corporations to expand democracy and human rights.

However, contentious dynamics changed considerably as new channels connecting civil society and the government expanded under the presidencies of Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008), who were both pro-democracy fighters under authoritarian rule in the 1970s and 1980s. Under these two administrations, new ministries and government agencies were created, new projects that involved civil society participation were launched, and a new mode of governance was introduced in ways that promoted partnership between the government and civil society. Leaders of resourceful, well-established citizens movement organizations (CMOs), such as the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD; Chamyeo yeondae), Citizens Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ; Gyeongsillyeon), Korea Women's Associations United (KWAU; Yeoseong yeonhap), and the Korea Federation for Environmental Movement (KFEM; Hwangyeong undong yeonhap), were invited to serve in the government as many CMOs found new roles partnering with the government to promote public goods. Consequently, building grassroots alliances and organizing protests gradually gave way to making use of these new channels. In the process, the government became perceived less as an opponent and more as a partner. The same cannot be said of the liberal

CMOs under the conservative administrations of Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) and Park Geun-hye (2013–2017) when they were pushed aside and conservative civil society groups populated government channels instead. Nevertheless, the connective tissues continued to grow and CMOs were able to find partnerships with local governments under liberal administrations like Seoul.

This paper examines the ways in which this cooperative relationship between the government and civil society manifested itself as well as the consequences it had on the EM. In South Korea, the institutionalized form of this cooperative relationship is simply referred to as "governance" (*geobeoneonseu* or *hyeopchi*), which may be understood as "an alternative system of government operation or cooperative management that seeks to solve common problems by sharing experiences, knowledge, and building trust through participation, cooperation, and communication among actors in government, business, and civil society" (MoE 2004, 2). "Governance" is commonly accepted as a new system of decision-making that transcends the public-private binary in a way that highlights the "consensus-building approach to problem-solving" (Jeong 2002, 43). In this paper, I use co-governance, instead of governance, to make a distinction between the way it is used to highlight *hyeopchi* in South Korea and governance as a concept in political science that encompasses different modes of governing (Treib et al. 2007).

Numerous works have been written about co-governance in South Korea, but most, if not all, have the intent of promoting co-governance by discussing barriers and/or introducing new models from a public policy standpoint (Jeong 2002; Park 2007; H. Kim 2013; S. Lee 2016; Yu 2020). Absent in the discussions of co-governance is the power relations that mediate its processes and outcomes. As Charles Tilly emphasized, the integration of trust networks, e.g., kinship, religious groups, or voluntary associations in the modern era, into public politics constitutes a critical marker of a functioning democracy (Tilly 2007). However, how they are integrated matters. In the European context, the varying degrees to which the coercive power of aspiring state-builders and the power of capital held by merchants and bourgeoisie competed and combined resulted in different

forms of polity and nation-state that ranged from the highly centralized and authoritarian Russian state to city-states like Venice, with democratic nation states like England and France in between (Tilly 1992). Power relations is also of great consequence in the world of social movements. While gaining access to decision-making to bring about preferrable policies is one of the central goals of any social movement, there is always a chance to obtain access without being allowed new advantages, i.e., the actual attainment of political goals (Gamson 1975; Frymer 1999). Unsurprisingly, empirical evidence abounds of social movements going through a sudden decline or falling captive to mainstream political parties when the movement failed to develop its independent power base and agenda (Ho 2005; Maguire 1995; Rochon and Meyer 1997).

This draws our attention to the question of social movement autonomy. By social movement autonomy, I refer to the ability of social movement actors to formulate political agendas and carry out campaigns free from the constraints of powerful political actors, such as the government, political parties, or big corporations (S. Kim 2016, 8). Autonomy is a critical attribute that allows civil society and social movements to represent voices that are marginalized from mainstream politics and affords those voices social power through actions, or the threat thereof, that can disrupt the status quo (Piven and Cloward 1977; Cohen and Arato 1992). Consequently, autonomy stresses the source of power that derives from the degree of independence social movements maintain from powerful actors in mainstream politics. While movement actors may choose to enhance the degree of autonomy for strategic purposes, autonomy is never a static property movement actors can choose to have or not because in essence autonomy is a property that reflects, and emerges out of, political relations that are in constant flux. The degree of autonomy one possesses is bound to increase or diminish, reflecting the changing relationships in which social movements are embedded.

In the remainder of this paper, I investigate the changing political relationships with a focus on the new channels of co-governance that became a dominant paradigm of interaction between the government and civil society by the mid-2000s. The structures of co-governance that

emerged in the context of South Korea's democratic deepening and post-authoritarian institution-building opened ample room for civil society activists to enter government (channels). However, despite the government's claims regarding co-governance as a new, horizontal way of problem-solving, the ways in which co-governance structures were operated followed a top-down model that restricted the influence of EM activists to a minimum. As a result, I contend, the environmental movement that set out as an independent political movement gradually lost its autonomy and became part of the status quo. In this paper, I use EM as an umbrella concept that refers to various groups, both local and national, which tackles a broad range of issues from environmental conservation, safety, energy, and the climate. Different times brought different issues to the fore on which the EM and the broader social movement community would converge, but a shared understanding in South Korea highlights the connections among these issues, thanks to key EMOs such as the KFEM that created bridges among them. In offering my account, I draw on government documents, media reports, and writings of activists as well as scholars.

The Trajectory of South Korea's Environmental Movement: A Background

The environmental movement (EM) in South Korean public politics arose most conspicuously in the 1990s as part of the rising tide of citizens' movements, but its history goes back to the authoritarian time of the early 1980s. Throughout South Korea's process of *compressed modernization*, quantitative aspects of development, e.g., trade volumes or the gross national product, were prioritized while it was simply assumed that the quality of life of ordinary Koreans would improve as a byproduct of numerical growth (Eder 1996; K. Chang 1999; Kang 2011). As the government and businesses were obsessed with hitting target numbers without much concern for safety, human rights, and environmental protection, it was only natural that sufferings caused by toxic industrial waste, exacerbating levels of pollution, and indiscriminate development projects that threatened the livelihoods

of residents would increase. The first instances of environment-related collective action were also immediate reactions to these issues (Han 1995; Ku 1996). They were often vociferous and violent but lacked organizational duration and were confined to certain localities.

However, opening political space in the mid-1980s provided opportunities for the burgeoning environmental movement to connect local issues with national politics. The first environmental movement group that was formed in 1982, the Korean Pollution Research Institute (PRI; Gonghae munje yeonguso), was instrumental in this regard. In 1985, the PRI played a key role in bringing public attention to an environmental disease among residents of Onsan, now part of Ulsan, due to cadmium poisoning from smelting facilities (PRI 1985; Sin 2006). Stimulated by the PRI, the mid-1980s saw the formation of national and regional EMOs. The early environmental activists saw their role in serving the broader pro-democracy movement and focused on publicizing pollution issues and supporting victims as a vehicle for fighting the authoritarian government and chaebols (Ku 1996; 2012). After South Korea's political transition in 1988, the newly formed EMOs merged under the umbrella of the Korea Anti-Pollution Movement Alliance (KAPMA; Gongchuryeon). KAPMA sought to tackle environmental issues while maintaining its anti-authoritarian, anti-chaebol stance in the post-authoritarian era. But it was not immune to change. Two events were important in this regard.

The first was the campaign against what is still referred to as the "phenol incident." In March 1991, South Koreans woke up to the news of a massive spill of phenol, or carbolic acid, from the Gumi Industrial Complex that had contaminated the Naktong River (Eder 1996, chapter 5). The conventional script would have it that politicized, Seoul-centered EMOs would send activists to Daegu and take leadership of a protest campaign. However, it was local civil society groups such as the YMCA, YWCA, and CCEJ, as well as housewife networks that led the grassroots campaign in Daegu from boycotting polluter products to demanding compensation and environmentally friendly policies (Rho and Park 2004). The active role played by these local groups signaled a moderate turn toward an environmental movement seeking practical solutions rather than criticizing

the wrongdoings of the government and businesses (Ku 1996, 169).

The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, or the Rio summit, provided another moment. The Korean delegation was to be formed through collaboration between government, businesses, and civil society. However, tension brewed over who should be included in the Korean delegation as well as the source of funding for the activist delegates. Some KAPMA activists contended pollution victims should form part of the delegation and that activists refuse funds from chaebols, the main culprits of environmental harm. That Doosan, the company responsible for the Naktong River phenol poisoning, was one of the main funders exacerbated tensions (KAPMA 1992). In the end, the delegation was formed as planned and KAPMA members who opposed chaebol funding left the organization. In the aftermath of the tension, in April 1993, KAPMA joined forces with other EMOs and formed the KFEM, the most influential EMO to date with more than fifty local affiliates.

The newly formed KFEM reflected the continuing influence of the contentious pro-democracy movement. Citing the government and corporations as the "main culprits" of the environmental crisis, the KFEM blasted greedy corporations that destroy the environment to maximize profits and took issue with the government for only applying impromptu measures while pursuing growth-first policies, and vowed to "tackle the structural causes of environmental problems systematically." At the same time, the KFEM declared that they would pursue only a citizen-friendly movement that "moves beyond the simple model of resistance and opposition" (KFEM 1993, 4–5). The two directions are not necessarily in contradiction. Yet it became increasingly clear that the KFEM's pursuit of the latter goal came at the expense of the former.

By the mid-1990s, KFEM was joined by Green Korea United and Environmental Justice to form a powerful triad that would define South Korea's EM for years to come. Throughout the 1990s, these EMOs broadened the range of environmental issues and acted as critical nodes in expanding the network connecting local groups with one another as well as creating ties between EMOs and broader civil society. They also

expanded the action repertoires from the conventional press conferences and demonstrations to variegated public performances, investigations and monitoring, public hearings, and litigation. Supported by a favorable political climate in the 1990s, these EMOs contributed greatly to raising the awareness of environmental issues amongst the public and, by the late 1990s, grew to be a force to be reckoned with (Ku 2011). At its height, the EM successfully blocked or at least forced temporary suspension of several environmentally harmful developmental projects (KFEM 2013; 2018; Green Korea United 2011) and played a key role in new legislations that would improve water quality and enhance environmental protection (Ku and Hong 2013, 95–96).

Many of these successes owe themselves to the EM's relatively high degree of autonomy, allowing them to challenge the government with force, which went hand in hand with the increasing political influence of the broader civil society of which the EM was a part. In the winter of 1996, civil society groups coalesced around the Korean Confederation of Trade Union's general strike protesting the passage of regressive labor laws, which resulted in the renegotiation of new laws and an apology from the president (Y. Kim 1998). In 2000, more than a thousand civil society groups came together with a *blacklist* of 86 allegedly corrupt, anti-reform candidates and intervened in the general election. Despite being ruled illegal, public support for the blacklist campaign only increased over time (S. Kim 2016, 79). In the end, the coalition succeeded in blocking nearly 70 percent of the blacklisted candidates, including 19 out of 20 in Seoul (Choi 2000; Horowitz and Kim 2002). In 2003, activists around the country joined Buan residents in a contentious campaign to oppose the construction of a nuclear waste facility, eventually forcing the government to cancel its plans (Kim and Cho 2004).

However, the tide began to change in the mid-2000s as a new debate over the crisis of the environmental movement surfaced. The sense of crisis did not come out of the blue. The EM had already been pestered by a few issues that undermined its public reputation. In 2000, the leader of Green Korea United, Chang Weon, was arrested for sexual harassment and, in August 2004, the Korea Broadcasting System exposed KFEM's practice of selling goods to the companies that it was supposed to monitor. The futile

all-out campaign decrying the *environmental emergency* in late 2004 took place in this context and intensified the crisis debate. The failure to influence either the government or the public raised questions that the crisis of the environment had as much to do with the crisis of the EM as with the failure of the government. A former environmental activist and environmental reporter for the *Hankyoreh* newspaper asked, "'if the reason the government did not budge despite the EMOs' all-out mobilization had something to do with the modus operandi of the EM that made the government take them lightly" (Cho 2004). Debates continued into the following year raising a broad range of issues, from funding sources, activities that centered on experts and activists rather than grassroots members, lack of long-term goals, and the increasing reliance on institutionalized channels (Yi 2005; Jin 2006; C. Ku 2008).

One of the topics that took center stage concerned how the EM should maintain its relationship with the government and businesses. This issue took an acute turn as the government proposed a government-civil society joint forum to discuss energy policies after its failed attempt at building a nuclear waste facility in Buan due to intractable grassroots opposition. Major EMOs decided to join the forum, only to walk out within two months. One critic, an EM insider, took issue with the EM's participation in the forum this way:

> The government wanted to use this channel to find a solution to the location of nuclear waste facilities and other nuclear and energy policy issues. The government threw out some bait half sincerely. The EMOs bit the bait without much consideration and then spit it out when they found it didn't suit their taste. How can environmental organizations be trusted if this is the case? The outcome was predictable. The EMOs should not have accepted the government's offer from the beginning. The government can act out of partial sincerity, but it would be a mistake for the EMOs to play along [in the absence of a serious strategy] since they are bound to be the losers. This is because the government is an organization that acts on behalf of delegated power while EMOs are voluntary organizations whose raison d'être needs to be proven continuously. (Yi 2005, 337)

In April 2005, the *Hankyoreh* published a special conversation between two environmental leaders under the title, "The Environmental Movement Needs to be Reborn" (S. Kim 2005). The special tackled many issues plaguing the EM, from the stagnation of its organizations to accusations of *environmental aristocracy* (*hwangyeong gwijok*), a poignant critique of powerful environmental activists who seek personal advancement rather than grassroots organizing. The conversation eventually led to the relationship between the government and the EM. One of the participants, then secretary-general of KFEM Kim Hye-jeong, emphasized that the essence of the movement is "building power on the ground," adding that seeking solutions through negotiating with the government was "not in line with the movement's spirit." The conversation certainly gave the impression that a new consensus was building up. Unfortunately, it turned out the EM walked the opposite path. Kim Hye-jeong, after serving in various government-related agencies, assumed the position as chief director at the Korea Foundation of Nuclear Safety, a public agency funded by the government. The EM in general also continued to rely on government channels whenever possible instead of seeking a new direction toward building power and autonomy from the bottom up. In the following, I discuss why and how this was the case.

Changes in Government-EM Relations

It is hard to dispute EM's role in raising public awareness of environmental issues and contributing to much needed legislation to protect the environment and the safety of citizens. At the same time, it is equally hard to contend that the EMOs' strategy of placing greater weight on utilizing government channels than on organizing the grassroots was successful. To fully assess why and how the EMOs pursued their strategies and to what effect is a daunting task, especially given the dearth of evidence concerning how EM activists made their decisions concerning strategic and tactical directions. Safe to say is that decisions were made not in a vacuum but under a range of structural constraints. South Korea's democratization and post-

authoritarian institution-building provided one of the most critical contexts in this regard.

Already under the civilian presidency of Kim Young-sam (1993–1998), the government promoted moderate CMOs as they were perceived as an easier counterpart to the more radical minjung organizations (N. Lee 2011; S. Kim 2016). Under the Kim Dae-jung administration (1998–2003), new institutions were established with the goal of expanding the democratic rights of previously marginalized social groups. These include the Tripartite Commission that purported to include organized labor in decision-making as well as the Ministry of Gender Equality, the Human Rights Commission, and the Korea Democracy Foundation (see Table 1). With the conservative opposition standing in the way, these new reform agendas necessitated support from congruent elements in civil society. The support was not limited to arousing public support for reform within civil society, but also involved a large-scale migration of former activists into the government to fill key positions in these new agencies (Shin and Chang 2011). From the activists' point of view, taking part in government positions and channels were perceived as opportunities to push for the reforms they had sought. As part of the process of democratic deepening, these efforts mainstreamed issues that had been marginalized from formal politics and helped the reform government navigate the political waters vis-à-vis a majority opposition. They also kicked off a trend toward co-governance that altered the nature of public politics in South Korea.

Table 1. Institutionalization of Channels Promoting "Public-private cooperation"

Year	New channels or agencies	Content
1991	First local elections since 1960	Election of local council members
1994	Non-governmental Environmental Policy Council	Consultation of environmental policies and joint investigations for major environmental issues
1995	National Council of Local Commissions on Sustainable Development (LCSD), including Green Seoul Citizens Council	In accordance with the 1992 Rio Summit recommendation on sustainable development
	Elections of local government heads	Election of mayors and province heads
1998	Tripartite Commission	Formulate economic policies based on social dialogue involving government, business, and labor
1999	Presidential Committee for Promotion of Local Empowerment	Governmental commitment to decentralization and partial transfer of central governmental affairs to local governments
	Dong river joint investigation team	Government response to grassroots movement to cancel dam construction
2000	Assistance for Non-profit, Non-governmental Organizations Act	Institutionalization of government support of NGOs, including financial subsidies via projects
	Presidential Committee on Sustainable Development	National structure of LCSDs, backed by new legislation
2001	National Human Rights Commission, Ministry of Women, Korea Democracy Foundation	Promotion of human rights and women's rights induces former activists to enter government

2003	Presidential Committee on Government Innovation and Decentralization	Government seeks to establish roadmap to spur decentralization
	Joint Council for the Resolution of Buan Issues	Government response to grassroots movement against nuclear waste facility
2004	Special Act on Balanced National Development Special Law on the Promotion of Decentralization	Promotion of balanced development and decentralization via participation of civil society leaders and local groups.
	Government-civilian Joint Forum on Energy Policy	Failed attempt at institutionalizing dialogue to prevent conflict post-Puan
	Residents' Voting Act	Allowed local residents to hold referenda
2005	Livable Community Building Project (Salgi joeun jiyeok mandeulgi)	Promotion of community participation in small town development projects and creation of community-building centers
2006	National Environmental Policy Committee National Energy Committee	New legislations mandated participation of civil society members in policy-making
2009	Seoul Metropolitan Government Ordinance on the Promotion of Social Enterprises	Social enterprises (*sahoejeok gyeongje*) become important channels of participation for civil society groups
2012	Seoul adopts co-governance (hyeopchi) model	Various projects linking government and civil society expands and the line dividing public and private blurs

Source: Assembled from various sources.

This trend accelerated under the Roh Moo-hyun administration (2003–2008). Self-termed the "participatory government," the Roh administration was often referred to as a "committee government" because of the many government committees it established to assist in designing and implementing reform policies (Bae and Kim 2013, 278). Government committees, that is, temporary bodies established by law or by the discretion of the president, prime minister, ministries, or local government heads, purportedly to promote decision-making through the participation of experts and members of social groups affected by a policy (Kim and Cho 2004), became the central motor of co-governance. Scholars, activists, and other policy experts crowded these government committees and CMOs played the critical role of supplying the government with policy advisors and bureaucrats (Doucette 2010, 33). This was no accident. Roh inherited an increasingly polarizing political climate and he himself was a polarizing figure (H. Lee 2004; Y. Chang 2009). This made him vulnerable to political attack not only from the conservative opposition, but even from his own party. Under these circumstances, Roh had little choice but to rely on allies in civil society to mobilize support. Recruiting civil society leaders to fill government posts and broadening the contact points between the government and civil society were critical mechanisms that helped reinforce his political leadership.

Similar mechanisms were at work under the conservative administrations of Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye, only this time cooperation was strengthened between the government and the conservative segment of civil society. But the alliance between CMOs and the Democratic Party strengthened as they faced a common enemy, eventually turning the tide again through a series of massive candlelight protests in 2016–2017. This led to the impeachment of Park Geun-hye, which brought Moon Jae-in to power in May 2017. Not well prepared to assume government power partly due to the premature presidential election, Moon also had to rely significantly on liberal CMO leaders to fill government posts. As a reporter for the *Kyunghyang shinmun* observed at the time, "The migration of the last remaining activist leaders into the government" was taking place under the Moon administration, with less than a handful left in civil society (Cheong 2017).

While change toward expanded participation increased over time, it is worth noting that new government committees and legislations promoting civil society participation were concentrated in the early 2000s during the Roh Moo-hyun administration. This is consistent with data provided by the Ministry of Interior and Safety, presented in Figure 1 (MoIS 2020, 2). Kim Dae-jung inherited 380 government committees at the time of his inauguration, which decreased to 364 by the time he left office in 2002. Under the Roh administration, the number of government committees increased to 579, a 64 percent increase during his tenure. The number declined during the Lee Myung-bak administration but gradually increased under the Park Geun-hye administration and the Moon Jae-in administration, when it reached 585, the largest number to date. The number of committees fully equipped with a secretariat entrusted with administrative duties and staff also increased from 36 to 43 under the Moon administration (Park 2021).

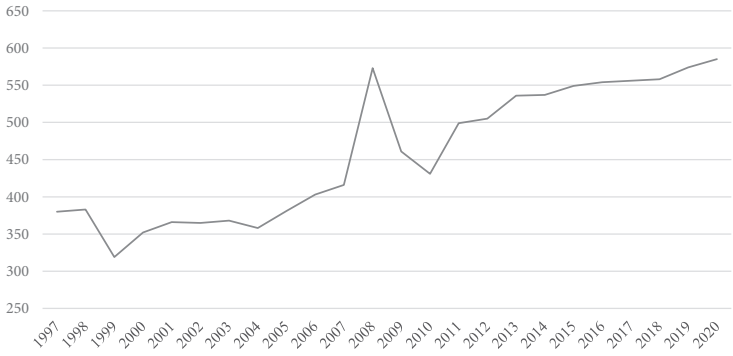

Figure 1. Number of government committees

Source: Reconstructed from MoIS (2020, 2).

The reform governments' efforts to expand democratic participation affected the EM profoundly. On the national level, new channels of co-governance allowed civil society representatives to sit with government officials and

business representatives to discuss environmental matters. In 1994, the Non-governmental Environmental Policy Council was established as a channel for regular meetings between the government and environmental organization "to promote mutual understanding and efficient environmental conservation work" (KLIC 2001). In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil adopted "Agenda 21" with the goal of promoting sustainable development through "[t]he broadest public participation and the active involvement of the non-governmental organizations and other groups" (UNCED 1992, 3). The government organized a national network of Local Commissions on Sustainable Development in 1995 and later set up the Presidential Committee on Sustainable Development in 2000 to show its strong commitment (Ku and Hong 2013, 96). In 2006, the National Environmental Policy Committee and the National Energy Committee were formed in accordance with new legislation that mandated the participation of civil society members in government policy making (Hong and Lee 2014, 20).

The growing trend of co-governance was not limited to the national government. In 1991, the first elections for local councils were implemented, followed by local government elections in 1995, in which local government heads from small town mayors to provincial and metropolitan mayors were elected. Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun displayed strong commitment to the task of decentralization by forming presidential committees such as the Committee for Promotion of Local Empowerment in 1999 and the Committee on Government Innovation and Decentralization in 2003, respectively (PCAD 2018). New laws were also enacted to purportedly empower local governments, institutions, and civil society, including the Assistance for Non-profit, Non-governmental Organizations Act (2000), the Special Act on Balanced National Development (2004), and the Special Law on the Promotion of Decentralization (2004).

The way the government's decentralization policies impacted local EMs had much to do with the UNCED resolution, which took the form of Local Agenda 21 advertised as a "key mechanism to promote sustainable development of local governments" (MoE 2004, 1). Following government recommendations, a wave of local commissions composed of members

representing the local government and the business community were set up to discuss and oversee local environmental issues across municipalities. By the early 2000s, the MoE reported that "about 90% of all local governments had or were promoting the Local 21 Agenda" (MoE 2004, 111). The Roh administration took decentralization further by initiating the Livable Community Building Project (LCBP). The goal of the LCBP was to create vibrant, livable local communities and to enhance the quality of life in small towns and rural areas (N. Lee 2007). Its stated approach was to move away from the top-down initiatives of the past and instead carry out local projects based on "the voluntary participation of members of society in all stages of project planning and execution" (PAK 2007). We shall examine to what extent the attempt at co-governance at the local level was successful, but for now it is sufficient to say that the new institutions created ample room for local politics and resulted in unforeseen levels of interaction between the government and civil society.

These changes represent an important shift in how the South Korean government approached democratic governance. By institutionalizing civil society participation in the policy-making process, the government was able to publicly demonstrate its commitment to a system of open, participatory democracy. The government's invitation for members of civil society to participate in the policy process, regardless of the actual influence of their voices, certainly bolstered the government's democratic legitimacy. More important to our purpose is what the EM gained from participating in the structures of co-governance as well as the profound impacts it may have had on social movements. While access to institutionalized politics is essential for social movements to translate movement demands into concrete policies, access to powerful political actors can be a double-edged sword. A social movement's foothold in government may enhance its presence in public politics but it also carries the danger of being assimilated into the logic of formal politics (Maguire 1995; Sandoval 1998). To maintain the power of movement, activists need to be aware of this dilemma and walk the tightrope as they become involved in the political process. How well the EM managed this task successfully requires further scrutiny.

Co-governance Dynamics and the Environmental Movement

If the influence of a social movement can be measured by the number of former EM activists in government, there is no disputing the South Korean EM was successful. Hundreds of former EM activists likely filled government posts, key positions in public foundations and corporations, and served as members in government committees, advisory councils, and social action programs at both the national and local levels. There is no data on the actual numbers, but information about former activists who served in high office serves as an indicator. When Moon Jae-in became president, the big three environmental positions were all filled by former activists: Kim Eun-gyeong, who began her activist career in the campaign against the 1991 phenol spilling, was appointed minister of the Ministry of Environment (MoE) after serving as the Blue House secretary of sustainable development under Roh. Former secretary general of the KFEM, who had served in various co-governance committees, An Byeong-ok, was appointed MoE vice minister, and Kim Hye-ae, former co-chair of Green Korea United, was assigned the role of Blue House climate and environment secretary (Song 2017). This was no anomaly.

Table 2. Former Activists in MoE High Positions

Name	Position	Tenure	Civil society career
Son Suk	Minister	1999 (May–June)	KFEM
Kim Myeong-ja	Minister	1999–2003	Women, environment
Han Myeong-suk	Minister	2003–2004	Democracy, women
Pak Seon-suk	Vice Minister	2004–2006	Democracy, women
Yi Jae-yong	Minister	2005–2006	Local EM, KFEM
Yi Chi-beom	Minister	2006–2007	KFEM
Kim Eun-gyeong	Minister	2017–2018	Local EM, women
An Byeong-ok	Vice Minister	2017–2018	KFEM, NGO energy network
Cho Myeong-nae	Minister	2018–2021	Environmental justice

Source: "Former MoE Ministers," https://me.go.kr/minister/web/index.do?menuId=366.

As Table 2 outlines, there have been at least nine former activists that served as either minister or vice minister of the MoE since 1999. Table 2 shows that the recruitment of former activists was prevalent during the reform governments of Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, and Moon Jae-in, a sign of a strong connection between liberal administrations and civil society. Moreover, we can observe a shift during the Roh administration, from drawing on friendly civil society activists without much expertise in environmental issues to recruiting activists who had played leadership roles. Many of the former EM activists in high office had developed ties with the government while serving in government committees and consultative bodies. Hundreds of committees are run by the central government alone and it is impossible to count the number of activists who served and are serving in the committees at various levels. Nevertheless, to say there is an army of EM activists that have participated in the structures of co-governance would not be an exaggeration.

In some cases, committees were endowed with significant power in shaping government policies. The National Environmental Policy Committee (NEPC) has its legal basis in the Framework Act on Environmental Policy and the Enforcement Decree of the Framework Act on Environmental Policy, which requires the participation of non-governmental and EM experts as members with a two-year tenure (KLIC 2019). The NEPC is composed of sub-committees responsible for reviewing and advising the government's overall environmental policy as well as specific policies on environmental conservation, resource circulation, environmental economy, climate and air, and water and sewage. The Basic Law on Energy specifies the formation of a twenty-five-member National Energy Committee (NEC), of which at least five members are to be filled by civil society recommendation (Hong and Lee 2014, 20). The NEC is tasked with reviewing the Master Plan for National Energy, the most comprehensive twenty-year government energy plan that includes energy transition plans in accordance with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The law requires the Master Plan be reviewed and renewed every five years at which time months of deliberation take place among NEC working groups.

The powers entrusted in these national committees were far-reaching, but this certainly did not mean activists could successfully inject their agendas into government policies. In 2007 nineteen major EMOs formed the Korea NGOs Energy Network to share ideas before participating in the NEC Committee that would draft the first Master Plan for National Energy. When the Master Plan was announced in August 2008, the government boasted the plan had been formulated "on the basis of unprecedented levels of consultation" (Chang and Han 2011, 203). However, the Energy Network refuted the claim and criticized that the consultation mechanism has been "a mere formality," calling for its nullification (Korea NGOs Energy Network 2008). NEC participation for the second Master Plan in 2013 yielded similar results. The government boasted the plan was a "big step forward," made possible by the cooperation among civil society, businesses, and academics (MoTIE 2013). Clearly, activist participants saw things differently. Six activist members of the NEC working group issued a public statement and criticized the government for ignoring the recommendations of the working group. It was a "violation of the consensus and basic spirit of co-governance," they contended (Working Group Participants 2013).

These were just two examples that give us an idea about how well co-governance worked on the part of the EM. Unfortunately for the EM, they were not rare occasions. Despite the government's exaltation of co-governance as a new way of problem-solving, there were barriers that kept the voices of EM activists marginalized. One of the problems involved how the agendas were set. Even though the government welcomed civil society representatives to take part in decision-making, the invitation came with fixed agendas and, frequently, a foregone conclusion. And never has there been a case of non-governmental actors being involved in the planning of the committee, according to former participants. Not having the opportunity to discuss the agenda left little, if any, room for EM participants to affect the process, let alone the outcome. Instead, activists found themselves in a catch-22, in which invitation to a committee with a fixed agenda precluded the possibility of intervention, yet non-participation would predictably make things worse. Practically all activists were left with was the freedom "to decide whether to take part in the process or not" (Hong 2019, 95).

This pattern had much to do with the inertia of the development state whose modus operandi centered on disciplining social actors in pursuit of the national goal of economic development from the top-down (Amsden 1989; Woo-Cumings 1999). The continuation of the developmentalist mode of operation meant that public administration follows the impenetrable principles of technical rationality and that technocrats have the upper hand when it comes to agenda-setting (Kim et al. 2020). Other considerations could find room only at the rhetorical level. The Ministry of Environment even confessed "the difficulty of realizing cooperation between the government and civil society based on environmental and/or ecological values […] considering the history of a unilaterally top-down government-led economic development" (MoE 2004, 146). Consequently, it was no surprise that the government set up the tables of co-governance to ensure the government agenda—and its preferred conclusion—remained intact. Once inside, EM representatives found themselves a small minority surrounded by technocrats already in sync with whatever the government had in mind. They were allowed to express their views, but they hardly had any impact. The way it was done, according to a participant in the second NEC, was they "let a few opposing voices participate as if co-governance is realized, then push through with the majority and hold a public hearing to cement the plan" (YangYi 2016, 10).

Co-governance at the local level was no better. Despite the rhetoric of decentralization and local autonomy, a highly centralized political system continued and left little room for autonomy outside the power center. While local governments' scope of discretion increased over the years, the power of the central government in making decisions over policies that affect the lives of local communities persisted. Local politics thrived with the routinization of local elections, but power was concentrated overwhelmingly in the hands of local executive heads that controlled a sizable budget (Park 2006). Civil society outside Seoul was relatively underdeveloped, often dominated by personal ties that were easily absorbed into the domain of local powerholders (E. Lee 2006). Local co-governance reflected this greater power asymmetry in local politics. From the early years, local governments

displayed a tendency to use co-governance as a convenient tool to outsource burdensome projects to the private sector and local civil society groups were often bent on taking advantage of co-governance as a vehicle to enhance their political influence in local communities (MoE 2004, 147). This trend has not changed.

Much of how co-governance worked in local communities had to do with money issues. The stated purpose of the Assistance for Non-profit, Non-governmental Organizations Act enacted in 2000 was to "promote public interest activities of non-profit, non-governmental organizations" with the expectation it could contribute to a democratic society. However, its actual policies centered on offering financial support to NGOs "promoting public-interest activities" and setting up a registration and application system as its precondition (KLTC 2017). The Livable Community Building Project (LCBP) offers a telling example. The LCBP was an ambitious program initiated by the Roh administration to promote local development through co-governance (S. Kim 2017). However, the program was predicated on the competition of communities for financial support. The pilot program had the government select thirty "livable communities" that would receive government financial support, with additional incentives given to communities that could fulfill "artistic design, amenities installation, and resident participation" (Son 2006). Its mode of operation was reminiscent of the Saemaul Undong of the 1970s, which sought to mobilize citizens to carry out public projects by having rural villages compete over limited government resources (Abelmann 1996, 210–211).

Public projects should be funded from the public coffer rather than by private corporations. After all, using government funds to promote public goods is not a bad idea. Nevertheless, even the most innocent intent can inadvertently assist in creating hierarchical relations between the funder and those at the receiving end of the funds whenever monetary support is involved. This is especially so when funding involves an application process that requires evaluation before a decision is made. In the case of Seoul, the city includes steps to "share the values of co-governance," a two-day deliberation session, and a session to obtain advice from experts before an application is finalized and decisions are made (Seoul Metropolitan Government 2017, 52).

Seoul advertises this model as "citizen participatory budgeting" and allows citizens in the co-governance structure 50 percent of the say in the final decision, but it is hard to expect the relationship among applicants, officials, and citizens to be on equal grounds. Besides, many of the projects that receive funds are public services that the administration needs to implement anyway, with the addition of some creative, yet benign, projects that can easily win the city's favor (Seoul Metropolitan Government 2017, 44–46).

While these processes may have contributed to animating local communities to a certain extent, the participation of EMOs in the system of co-governance for funds is a different matter. It is no secret that many EMOs, both large and small, rely on government funds for survival. For individual activists, participating in the committees comes with the perk of extra bucks that help sustain their finance. It is not uncommon to find activists, instead of organizing at the grassroots, busy submitting applications and project reports. In many cases, the projects are aimed at enhancing the EMOs' public profile and, naturally, lack continuity because they tend to "focus on short-term projects to yield visible outcomes that can appeal to the media" (S. Kim 2005). To make sure they receive funding, they cannot risk submitting a project that might be perceived as a potential cause of tension. The criticism of "the non-profit industrial complex" that emerged in the United States saw the prevalence of the large-scale foundations as the cause of sapping creative energy out of social movements (INCITE! 2007). In South Korea, it was the government and the seemingly virtuous system of co-governance that has been driving social movements "from protest to collaboration" (S. Kim 2017).

Conclusion

At the time of its formation in 1993, the KFEM made clear the legacy of its radical EM predecessors and saw the government and corporations as the culprits in environmental destruction. Twenty-eight years later, the higher-ups in the KFEM are actively taking part in a wide range of co-governance venues and the Seoul KFEM is soliciting corporations to participate in "social

contribution programs" through which the KFEM offers services to help businesses "enhance [their] environment-friendly image" in exchange for corporate sponsorship (KFEM 2014). In between, the KFEM has managed numerous government projects, countless former activists have entered public service, and numerous activists continue to sit at committee tables facing their counterparts in government, business, and academia. This is not to discredit the leadership role the KFEM has played in the South Korean EM or the extensive contributions the KFEM has made—and continues to make—in promoting environmental and ecological values. It is to underscore the diminishing degrees of autonomy that is undermining the capacity of the KFEM as a social movement. To the extent the KFEM represents the face of the South Korean EM, and to a certain degree South Korean civil society more broadly, it is also to stress the dilemma the EM and civil society face in the era of co-governance.

Civil society is an autonomous sphere of voluntary associations, social movements, and various forms of public communication free from the control of state power and market logics. Autonomy is a critical marker of civil society because autonomy is what affords civil society the ability to preserve "self-constitution and self-mobilization" as its organizational principles (Cohen and Arato 1992, ix). It is by virtue of autonomy that civil society confers social movements a vital source of power capable of influencing state power and corporate dominance. But the consolidation of neoliberalism over the last few decades has undermined the emancipatory spirit of civil society and social movements, as well as their ability to act as the initiator of social change (Alexander and Fernandez 2021). The bottom-up virtues of self-constitution and self-mobilization are being replaced by "top-down models of service and advocacy," which has transformed citizens and activists "into political customers or nonprofit clients" (Ganz and Reyes 2020, 7).

In the South Korean context, it is the system of co-governance that has been at the center of this transformation. Countless EMOs and activists have come to depend on government funds for survival. Yet they are no government contractor or employee with guaranteed security and benefits, but temporary contract partners that have little option but to precariously

cling on to the next project. Carrying out co-governance committee work has become one of the central activities of EMOs yet this has uplifted the role of experts and professionals while diminishing the role of grassroots organizing and the movement's connection to communities they ought to serve. In the process, the South Korean EM, like their counterparts around world, has "foregone a critical source of their power and the capacity to challenge or defend their publics" (Alexander and Fernandez 2021, 372).

What is unfortunate is the dearth of recognition of these problems among activists and scholars alike. Increasingly, activists are coming to realize that seldom has there been a successful case of a social movement that drew on social dialogue or co-governance (H. Yi 2017). Yet they resort to the same mechanisms over and over again like moths flying into a bonfire, a likely effect of the economization of public advocacy. Things are not that different with the academic community. More so than activists, researchers and university professors have been absorbed into the government as well as the system of co-governance. Participating in various government committees is simply taken for granted and there is little incentive to analyze the power dynamics of co-governance from a critical viewpoint as many rely on the government for research funds. Go-governance has not only domesticated activists, it has also domesticated academics.

The status quo is not without signs of resistance though. Aided by the urgency of the global ecological and climate crisis, radical groups that employ nonviolent civil disobedience tactics have since the fall of 2020 surfaced in South Korea and carried out disruptive actions involving police arrests. A campaign to boycott climate-related co-governance structures also took place with dozens of organizations, including the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions and multiple local EMOs, undersigning the call. It is hard to predict the future of the EM or co-governance at this juncture. But it will surely depend on how much EMOs and other activist groups can see autonomy as a source of power and as part of their political identity. Earlier in this paper, I presented social movement autonomy as something movement actors cannot choose to have or not because it is an emergent property emanating from concrete political relations. I stand by this statement but should add now that one of the most important

outcomes of social movement action is the alteration of political relations. And the only way to do this is for the EM to put greater focus on grassroots organizing. For there is no source of political power better than grassroots power for social movements, and only when grassroots power is obtained can the structures of co-governance become an effective vehicle for change.

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