Civil Society and Local Democracy

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Abstract

While politics in Seoul has made great strides in democratization over the past two decades, scholars continue to deplore that local politics and local governance in South Korea remain a far cry from democracy. This paper addresses the intriguing question of "democratic lag" in South Korea. It argues that one of the main sources/causes of slow democratization at the local level lies in the underdevelopment and lack of empowerment of local civil society. The paper first introduces the concept of "democratic lag" to conceptualize asymmetric democratization in South Korea. Next, it describes and assesses various theoretical accounts explaining the absence of local democracy and highlights an underdeveloped civil society as a cause. The paper then submits several "vignettes" of the reality of local politics. After explaining why such underdevelopment of civil society has resulted, the paper concludes with a set of policy prescriptions for empowering local civil society and thereby resolving the problem of "democratic lag" in South Korea.

Keywords: local civil society, local democracy, "democratic lag," democratization, democratic transition, democratic consolidation, decentralization, civic empowerment

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Introduction: A "Democratic Lag" in Korea

Beyond doubt, South Korea (hereafter Korea) today stands as a democracy. According to Yale political scientist Robert Dahl's "Polyarchy Scores," Korea decisively makes the ranking of "Score 1," which denotes a political system in which "[m]eaningful fair elections are held, there is full freedom for political organization and expression, and there is some preferential presentation of official views in the media" (Dahl 2006, 121). As a matter of fact, one might even assert that Korea is not only democratic but also *overly* so, as it has arguably been a while since there existed "some preferential presentation of official views in the media." Both the current Roh Moo-hyun administration and its immediate predecessor Kim Dae-jung government have repeatedly complained about the "hostile" coverage of their policies by "major" newspapers in the nation.

The Dahlian criteria succinctly stipulate such institutional and procedural requirements as the free elections, civil liberties, and free press that a political system must acquire and provide for in order to be called a "democracy." By focusing on these "minimal" conditions, they serve as a useful tool for distinguishing democracies from non-democracies. As a minimalist conception of democracy, however, it leaves a lot of other important elements and issues of democracy unaddressed. One salient area the Dahlian definition of democracy overlooks is what the relations among state institutions must be like under democracy.

There are two separate dimensions of intrastate institutional relations. One is the *horizontal* relations between the three branches of the government, i.e., the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary. The relationships between the three main branches of the government are significantly reconfigured after a democratic transition. Korea is no exception. The chronic problem of "imperial presidency," which had been far more pronounced during the authoritarian period but was mistakenly overused to depict and assail the democratic regimes in the immediate aftermath of the transition, has considerably abated.

The power of the National Assembly, particularly vis-à-vis the executive branch, has been sizably augmented, and now renders the "gridlock" between the executive and the legislature a routine feature of Korean democracy. The power of the judiciary has also grown visibly. In 2004, in handling the presidential impeachment case (in favor of the ruling government) and the proposed plan to relocate the administrative capital (unfavorably to the ruling government), the Constitutional Court figured prominently in Korean politics. This even prompted some Korean political scientists to caution against the increasing "judicialization of politics" (Choi 2004), obviously alarmed by similar trends in American democracy, in which the outcome of the 2000 presidential elections was ultimately determined by Supreme Court judges. All in all, in a democratized Korea, the presidency is not as potent as it used to be, while on the other hand, the ascendance of the legislature and the judiciary is unmistakable.

The other dimension of intrastate institutional relations, which is the subject of this paper, is *vertical* in nature. It is defined via the so-called intergovernmental relations (IGRs) between the central and local governments. This dimension has had singular significance in Korea. When a number of Korean activists risked their lives to protest against authoritarian regimes and fight for the attainment of democracy in the 1970s and 1980s, "democracy" was epitomized primarily by two things—precisely those two things that were neither tolerated nor permitted by the military and the semi-military regimes of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan: one was the direct popular election of the president, and the other was local self-governance. Both were prohibited and were "postponed," because, authoritarian leaders rationalized, Korea had no leeway to embrace such thing due to the grave security threats from North Korea. Naturally, therefore, when the local autonomy system (*jibang jachije*) was officially restored in 1991 and the first local elections held in 1995, Koreans had high hopes for local self-governance in their nation.

After about ten years since the local autonomy system resumed in earnest in Korea, however, the initial euphoria has completely vanished. Both experts and citizens are profoundly disillusioned and

embittered about decentralization and local self-governance. One might retort that popular disillusionment is not just about local politics but about democracy *in toto*. This is partially true, as amply illustrated by the plummeting approval rating of the current Roh Moo-hyun administration[1] and the anachronistic nostalgia for the "good old days" under dictator Park Chung-hee. However, sarcasm about local politics is much more pungent and insidious than that about national politics. Academics and ordinary citizens, who may still be reasonably proud of Korea's overall achievements in democratic development, i.e., *national* democratization, shake their heads when it comes to *local* democratization. Public sentiment is best encapsulated in the following statement announced by the Citizens' Solidarity for the 2006 Local Elections (CSLE), a movement group created by 250 or so civil society organizations on March 21, 2006.

> Expectations about citizen participation in policymaking and increased quality of life for local residents are far from being met. Local politics and policymaking are completely dominated by corrupt, inept, anti-democratic, environment-unfriendly, anti-cultural forces and personalities that deride voters with arrogance and self-righteousness and falsely pretend to be the representatives of the residents (CSLE 2006).

According to the final official report released by the Board of Audit and Inspection (BAI), which inspected 250 local governments during June-September 2005, there were numerous cases of budget waste on unjustifiable business projects, illegal expansion of government buildings, *ad libitum* contracts with local businesspeople, abuse of authority, misuse of internal information for personal speculation, and so on. Of 248 local government heads, 31.5% were prosecuted, some of them for serious charges of bribery, embezzlement, etc. (Hong 2006, 28). Another report by the BAI in 2001 observed that out of 876 investment projects planned and pursued by local govern-

1. It was 11.0% as of November 14, 2006. *The Seoul Daily*, November 17, 2006.

ments during 1995-2001, only 258 (29%) were in progress. The other projects were either suspended or abandoned. This report suggests that many local governments, without carefully considering their needs and capacities, vie for projects and distribute for political purposes (Chun 2003a, 90).

In sum, while democratization on the national level has made strides over the past two decades, democratization on the local level has not. As a result, a large discrepancy exists between the degree to which national politics has been democratized and the degree to which local politics has been. This phenomenon of local democratization seriously lagging behind national democratization may be termed a "democratic lag." Alternatively, it may be called "two-speed" democratization (high speed for national democratization and low speed for local) or described as an "absence of democratic trickle-down" (national democratization failing to reach and penetrate local areas). Whatever it may be called, Korea is currently witnessing a puzzling incongruence between national and local politics in terms of the degree of democratization.

This paper provides a diagnosis of and prescriptions for the "democratic lag" in Korea. I develop an argument that the underdevelopment of local civil society is one of the underlying causes of the slow progress of local democratization. In the following section, I survey the existing literature on the failure of local democracy to establish that the atrophy of local civil society is one of its main causes. The next section provides several "vignettes" into the reality of local civil society in different parts of Korea. In the penultimate section, I probe the causes of the underdevelopment of local civil society in Korea. In the last section, I reflect on the current debate on the proper pace of decentralization and submit a set of policy prescriptions for empowering local civil society in Korea.

The Failure of Local Democracy: Competing Explanations

As is the case with most social phenomena, the "democratic lag" in Korea has multiple and complex causes. Identifying its causes is not an easy task, but the trick is this: what exists in politics at the national level but does not exist in politics at the local level? Whatever differences exist between national politics and local politics are likely to constitute the key variables in explaining "democratic lag."

One explanation that can be eliminated relatively easily is the unwillingness of the central government to decentralize. There have been ups and downs in the level of the national government's eagerness and enthusiasm about decentralization. Nevertheless, all governments since 1987 have been keenly aware that decentralization and the promotion of local self-governance is one of the most critical articles in the democratization package, meriting high priority on the national agenda. Of all the governments since 1987, experts also agree that the current Roh Moo-hyeon administration is the most serious about decentralization. The Roh government, immediately after its inauguration, set up two presidential committees devoted to the issue of decentralization—the Presidential Committee on Governmental Innovation and Decentralization and the Presidential Committee on Balanced National Development. Governments in the past were not equipped with similar institutional entities powerful enough to design and implement decentralization policies, which partially explains why "decentralization" easily degenerated into hollow rhetoric.

On July 4, 2003, a few months after its inauguration, the Roh government announced an implementation roadmap for decentralization, based on Roh's campaign pledges, the works of the Transition Committee, citizens' suggestions, and the proposals of civil society groups. The Roh government made clear from the very beginning that it would adhere to the principle of "decentralize first, fix problems later" (*seon bun-gwon hu bowan*), which clearly sets it apart from its predecessors that used to put off decentralization with the excuse that local conditions were not being made ready enough to

handle decentralization (Kang et al. 2005). In December 2003, a special law on decentralization was legislated to stipulate the mechanisms and procedures for implementing decentralization. This law spelled out the objectives of decentralization, such as self-governance through voluntary participation, implementation of self-accountability, respect for local creativity and diversity; rules as to making and revising other legal stipulations that might affect decentralization; the government's responsibilities for carrying out decentralization; and the principles of subsidiarity and citizen participation (Ha 2005).

The Roh government has put special emphasis on several outstanding tasks of decentralization, including: 1) delegating central authority to local units and improving the division of duties between central and local authorities; 2) promoting educational decentralization and introducing the local police; 3) streamlining special local administrative units that work as branches of central government ministries; 4) strengthening local self-governance and ensuring the accountability of local governments; 5) reinforcing the basis of local legislative activities; 6) augmenting the cooperative relationship between central and local governments and between local governments themselves; and 7) increasing the budgetary autonomy of local governments (Kang et al. 2005). Of the 47 main tasks of decentralization, 13 tasks have been completed with the help of relevant legislation, 8 have been submitted to the legislature or are pending, 7 have been planned, and 19 tasks are being handled by relevant task force teams (Ha 2005).

In sum, as compared with previous administrations, the current approach to decentralization has been both serious and impressive. This is why the central government's unwillingness or inability to decentralize cannot be identified as a central cause behind the delayed realization of local democracy. Instead, we are obligated to explain why local democracy does not take shape *despite* the national government's unparalleled earnestness about decentralization.

Most scholars and activists in Korea concur that the failure of local democratization in Korea is chiefly due to two factors. The first is the local power structure characterized by clientilism and patronage networks, reinforced in large part by a national political party system based on regionalism. The second is the weakness and underdevelopment of local civil society. A public poll taken by *Simin-ui sinmun* (NGO Times) on July 20-21, 2004, asked what the most decisive factor explaining the lack of progress in local self-governance and decentralization was. Out of 203 citizens' movement activists, 46.3% pointed to the obstruction and sabotage by vested interests and local elites (*toho*), and 28.1% cited the "lack of civil society activism and participation" (Lee J. 2004).

As a matter of fact, these two factors, i.e., the dominance of local elites and the weakness of civil society, are inseparably entwined with each other. The anti-democratic, oligarchic power structure in local politics hampers the rise of a powerful civil society, and a stunted civil society continues to reinforce the dominance of the local oligarchy. To chart a better course for local democracy in Korea, therefore, it is imperative to analyze the interactive—and rather destructive—dynamics between local oligarchy and weak local civil society.

A number of scholars have ably examined the local power structure in Korea (Park C. 1999b, 2000b, 2001a, 2001b; Lee G. 2004; Cho 2006). They commonly report that local politics in most of the cities and towns in Korea is dominated by strong officeholders—governors, mayors, county chiefs, et al. Nobody expresses this more succinctly than Park Chong-min: "local power resides nowhere else but city hall" (Park C. 1999a, 181).

There are no effective challenges to the dominance of local officeholders in policymaking: it is not found in local businesspeople, interest groups, nor movement organizations. Rather, these other potentially challenging actors are constrained by an elaborate web of patronage/clientilist networks. The local patronage/clientilist networks are composed of manifold dyadic alliances between two persons of unequal status, power, or resources. The superior member of such an alliance is called a "patron," and the inferior member is called his/her "client" (Landé 1977, xx).

In most local cities and towns in Korea, networks are formed between powerful officeholders on the one hand ("patrons") and

local bureaucrats, legislators, businesspeople, and other local elites on the other ("clients"). Patronage/clientilist networks, thus formed, are very diffuse, particularistic, and emphasize face-to-face interaction and mutual benefit (Lemarchand 1981, 15). In other words, the patronage/clientilist networks are based not only on cold-headed calculation of material interests but also on affectual—and thus primal—bonds/solidarity derived from blood, school, and regional ties (Park C. 2000b, 200).

In Korean-style local patronage/clientilist politics, the "patrons" usually provide favors in the form of prejudiced policies and projects, while the "clients" offer electoral mobilization and support (Park C. 2000b). Such patronage/clientilist networks and their intra-network exchanges inevitably result in an unequal distribution of resources and benefits in the community involved, but the costs are nevertheless equally shared by all local taxpayers (Chun 2003b).

The local patronage/clientilist networks are buttressed by the peculiar political party system in Korea. Jang (2006) cogently demonstrates that local democracy in Korea is not yet on the horizon because local politics is too much "colluded" with national politics at the center. Specifically, under the current system in which local candidates must get nominations from national political parties in order to run for elections, local politicians ineluctably become dependent on national parties. They use all possible means, including bribes, to influence central party politicians who are in charge of the nomination process.

Ordinarily, nomination *per se* should not mean much, since it is not the same as actually winning an election. However, what makes "getting a nomination at all costs and against all odds" extraordinarily sensible in some local electoral districts is closely related to the development and solidification of region-based political parties in post-transitional Korea. Major political parties since 1987 have more or less been based on certain regions, and obtaining a nomination from the political party favored by a region virtually guarantees one's election: getting nominated is almost synonymous with getting elected. Since the nomination process does not incorporate much bottom-up input from local residents, this practically means that the central party leaders have tremendous authority to literally "appoint" local legislators, who, if elected, feel more obliged to their central party officers than to their local constituency (Jang 2006, 50).

The patronage/clientilist networks paradigm, supplemented by the national political party system built on regionalism, is certainly a powerful explanation for the absence of local democracy in Korea. However, this explanation is incomplete and partial at best without a look into what really makes such local patronage/clientilist networks continue to operate unchallenged, unchecked, and unscathed. This is where the underdevelopment of local civil society must be weighed in.

What is prominently lacking in local politics in Korea is a viable civil society-based opposition to existing patronage/clientilist networks. This becomes evident if we compare national and local politics. In national politics, patronage/clientilist networks and their pernicious effects on policymaking would easily and quickly raise the eyebrows of major newspapers, and civil society organizations and activists would take to the streets to complain and protest. This does not take place in local politics, because local civil society in Korea is in general bleak—sparse in terms of the organizational density of civil society associations and problematic in terms of their capacity to play critical democracy-promoting functions.

Local civil society, were it densely populated and properly constituted, would perform crucial roles in enhancing the quality of local democracy. For example, local civil society can serve as a Tocquevillian big school of civic education inculcating citizens with democratic values and leadership skills; heighten the quality of public services by pressuring local administrations to enhance transparency and efficiency; complement the highly limited representative functions of existing political parties based on regionalism; and supplement the limits of representative democracy at large through direct democracy mechanisms such as initiatives, referenda, and recalls.[2] Additionally,

2. For the crucial roles of national civil society in democratic consolidation, see Diamond (1994) and Schmitter (1997).

civil society organizations could function as alternative, impartial sources of information, particularly when the local mass media is biased or itself coopted into existing patronage/clientilist networks. All these essential democracy-promoting functions are not being adequately performed by Korea's local civil society. Instead, local civil society is still haunted by the legacies of past authoritarian political regimes, in which society was composed of various government-controlled "neighborhood" organizations that were in effect loudspeakers and executive apparatuses for central authorities.

Local Civil Society: "Vignettes"

An exhaustive study of local civil society in Korea is beyond the scope of this paper. In this section, I instead try to provide several "vignettes" of the reality of local politics in different parts of Korea. The cases are neither representative nor randomly selected. The evidence is largely illustrative, anecdotal, and thus incomplete. The descriptions of local civil society found in the existing literature vary. But there is one glaring commonality—the existence of strong existing networks of local elites and the dearth of an oppositional civil society to check them.

According to Kim Ju-wan's (2006) account of Masan, those who collaborated with the Japanese colonial government not only survived the immediate post-liberation period intact but even thrived under Syngman Rhee's Liberal Party, Park Chung-hee's Democratic Republican Party, and Chun Doo-hwan's Fifth Republic. In sum, the ruling elite in the locality has never undergone any cataclysmic changes. What has enabled and ensured the continued prosperity of local elites was the vast existence of pro-government groups (*gwanbyeon danche*).[3] Ultra-right, anticommunist personalities have occupied the upper echelons of these pro-government associations. These groups basically serve as conduits through which local businesspeople and politicians communicate with and influence the local government. Surveying Masan's local politics, Kim argues that it is imperative to terminate state support for these pro-government groups and concludes that decentralization without local democratization will only strengthen the power of existing local elites.

Heo's (2006) narrative of Daegu shows how a city that had once been known for its progressiveness could dramatically change into a "conservative" city. When Syngman Rhee competed with Jo Bong-am, the Progressive Party leader who was later executed by Rhee on espionage charges, for the presidency in the 1950s, Daegu was the city in which the number of votes for Jo greatly surpassed that for Rhee. But the city rapidly turned conservative since Park Chung-hee, who was from the region, came to power in 1961 through a successful military coup. The "conservatization" of the city, according to Heo, was largely due to the collusion between the local government and the local media. This still prevails under the current Roh Moo-hyun government. Daegu's mass media and residents were consistently tepid about investigating into the "murder by the court" case of the People's Revolutionary Party (Inmin Hyeongmyeongdang) incident in 1974. The investigation was instead demanded and carried out by outside actors, which stands in stark contrast with Jeju residents' attitude toward the April 3 Massacre or Gwangju residents' attitude toward the Gwangju Democracy Movement in 1980. Heo concludes that the creation and development of a reform-minded, progressive local media is a critical condition for local democracy.

Choe and Sa (2004), based on their "social network analysis" of 15 civil society organizations in major Gangwon cities such as Chun-

3. It is grossly misleading (and indefensibly generous) to characterize these groups as "conservative." They are by no means "conservative." The common denominator binding these groups together is not a common ideological orientation—although they do share strong anticommunism—but a strong desire to access and benefit from whatever government is in power. This is the only way to make sense of their "unwavering" allegiance to both the autocratic governments of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan and the democratic governments of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun.

cheon, Gangneung, Wonju, and Sokcho, raise alarm at the fact that the groups they studied are not very active and do not explore active cooperation with one another. Similarly, Jin (2002) lists the numerous limitations of the Chuncheon Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice (Chuncheon CCEJ), one of the most representative civil society groups in Gangwon-do province. He submits that Chuncheon CCEJ duplicates the well-known problem of the national CCEJ headquarters, i.e., "a citizens' movement without citizens." He wonders whether the main reason for this should be found in the way Chuncheon CCEJ was created. The founders of the association were not really rooted in the Chuncheon area. Rather, the organization was "hastily manufactured" from above and from outside by the central CCEJ in Seoul. Furthermore, the founders were not ordinary citizens—they were religious and educational elites. Pastors, priests, and professors accounted for 71.4% of the founding members (Jin 2002, 40). In this respect, the result of "a citizens' movement without citizens" was nothing surprising.

A very interesting case in Gangwon-do province is Won's (2006) study of Taebaek. Taebaek had a rich tradition of labor movement before the democratic transition during the 1970s and the 1980s, as well as a history of activity in progressive party movements in the 1990s. When the national government implemented the "coal industry rationalization policy" during the 1990s, pro-government pseudo-civil society groups and *bona fide* civil society groups in the area constructed a united front to wage a campaign to revive the local economy and to call for a special law to promote local development. Eventually, a special law was legislated to the satisfaction of all those who participated in the campaign. However, once the special law was passed, the region plunged into bitter struggles among different towns and interest groups over the profits generated from the gambling industry newly introduced as part of the local economic resuscitation program. Although civil society groups in the area should be lauded for "reviving" the local economy, they, in so doing, concurrently contributed to the generation and escalation of local conflicts. Won (2006) ruefully recounts that the civil society movement in the Taebaek area is now completely delegitimated and demoralized, and has been relegated to a peripheral and weak position.

Civil society groups in Jeju are not very active either, according to Lee and Kim (1999). Based on surveys of 12 major civil society groups in the region in October 1998, they report that voluntary participation in the civil society organizations is very low, particularly due to the persecution complex engendered by the April 3 Massacre and its aftermath during 1948-1954, in which scores of thousands were killed. The civil society groups in Jeju share many serious problems with those in other regions, such as an inadequate budget, an elite-centered decision-making process, too many activity areas, low member participation, and a lack of professionalism and expertise on the part of the permanent staff.

Apparently, the weakness of local civil society has little to do with the locality's geographic position. Not only the cities remote from Seoul but also the cities adjacent to Seoul and even Seoul itself betray similar problems. The most penetrating analysis of urban politics to date is provided by Park Chong-Min (1999a, 2000a). Based on a 1999 interview with 350 residents in Seongnam, a satellite city of Seoul, Park provides a lucid portrait of local civil society in the city. Local civil society in Seongnam is characterized by a lack of activism, political apathy and ignorance, low participation, and unconventional (and thus uninstitutionalized) citizen action via protest or personal contacts. A powerless civil society in Seongnam is especially puzzling, because the area boasts a well-known history of vigorous movements for laborers and the urban poor in the 1980s.

Seongnam citizens are very atomized, not belonging to any voluntary associations. The public sphere in general is dominated by pro-government groups and other "neighborhood" organizations, which are nothing but a one-way communication channel to inform the residents of government decisions and propaganda. Local media do not receive any significant public attention, usually dwarfed by residents' interest in national politics and national media. All these pathologies of local civil society in Seongnam conspire to enable the mayor's peremptory handling of municipal affairs and his collusion

with local lawmakers, public servants, and local businesspeople. Park's works demonstrate that what lies at the heart of the office-holder-dominant power structure in many local cities and towns in Korea is a fragile local civil society.

The local politics of Korea's capital, Seoul, is not markedly more democratic either, according to Cho (2006). Characterizing the complex relationships and interactions among the mayor, public servants, municipal legislators, businesspeople, construction contractors, et al., as "pandemonium" (*bongmajeon*), he provides a piercing analysis of the mechanisms and dynamics underlying "neo-developmentalist" projects eagerly pursued by former Seoul mayor Lee Myeong-bak. Cho claims that Lee, as a potential candidate for the 2007 presidential elections, utilized his patronage/clientilist networks and pro-mayor "epistemic community" to maximize the demonstration effects of all those development and construction projects. What is completely deficient in this entire "pandemonic" craze about mega projects is citizen participation.[4]

Additionally, Park Sangpeel's (2001) study of Dongdaemun-gu in Seoul reveals that in most of the ward's collaborative projects with civil society, "partnership" was limited to pro-government groups and "neighborhood groups" that tended to be conservative. Collaborative projects included detecting illegal sales of liquor and cigarettes to minors, reporting the illegal operation of liquor bars, etc. Because "real" civil society groups that are independent of government influence and subsidy are either unwilling or unable to participate in these government-initiated partnership projects, the overall landscape of local civil society in Dongdaemun-gu is predominantly shaped by conservative, pro-government, pseudo-civil society organizations. Cho's analysis of Seoul municipal administration and Park's study of Dongdaemun-gu reveal that "democratic lag" is not really a geographic (i.e., center vs. periphery) issue. Rather, the lack of civil society is quite a pervasive problem in Korean local politics.

4. In response to Cho's analyses, one of the former public officers under Lee Myung-bak filed a libel lawsuit.

The last vignette is that of Buan's. Ko's (2006) account of the city's reaction to the nuclear waste site controversy and the subsequent turmoil during 2003-2005, which the author labels "the Buan Uprising," suggests a fascinating possibility of how an apathetic, indifferent local community engrossed in their daily economic survival could transcend their differences to forge solidarity against the authoritarian policymaking of a local government. In reaction to the county head's unilaterally decided proposal to establish a nuclear waste site in Buan, local residents rapidly mobilized themselves, creating a community informed about nuclear issues, overcoming political apathy and differences, communicating with one another, and struggling for the greater good. They actively explored and developed new movement strategies and repertoires. The Buan residents' campaign combined anti-nuclear, local, and environmental movements together to protest, resist, and eventually arrest the one-sided, top-down decision-making practice of local authorities.

Accounting for the Underdevelopment of Local Civil Society

Now, what explains the underdevelopment of local civil society in Korea? Examining the causes of underdeveloped local civil society has crucial prescriptive implications. Depending on the result of the examination, we will be able to determine whether the weakness of local civil society and the resultant "democratic lag" is but a fleeting phenomenon in Korean democracy, destined to disappear within a few years, for example, or a more enduring problem that will likely to frustrate Korean democracy for a long time. It is essential, in this regard, to locate the root causes for the underdevelopment.

What sets apart the national democratization of Korea from those cases in Southern Europe and Latin America, those first generation democratizers of what Huntington termed "The Third Wave" of global democratization (Huntington 1991), is the prominent role of civil society and social movements in promoting democratization. Civil society in Korea, primarily composed of student groups, labor

unions, religious organizations, and other movement assemblages, played momentous roles in ousting authoritarian regimes and restoring democracy (Kim S. 2000). What is therefore singularly intriguing in the Korean case is why we do not witness a similarly prominent role of civil society in promoting *local* democracy.

To solve this puzzle, it is important to take one step back and carefully examine the overall trajectory of Korea's socioeconomic and political transformation during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Korea's industrialization since the early 1960s entailed rapid urbanization and uneven development in different regions—uneven between urban and rural areas and uneven between Seoul and the other local cities. Seoul, which held the nation's political and economic engines, best institutions of higher education, and other cultural amenities, attracted elites from the other areas *en masse*, which resulted in an extreme concentration of the educated in Seoul. The bright young students from rural areas went to high schools and universities, landed jobs, raised families, and were engaged in professional activities in Seoul. These intellectuals, either as part of the authoritarian establishment or as part of the dissident movement camp against the authoritarian order, were fully engaged in the game of national democratization. Meanwhile, the localities these young elites left at home were depopulated. Local civil society, as such, simply could not perform any of the presumed democracy-promoting functions.

With the cream of the crop all migrated to Seoul, local civil society remained relatively easy to control. While the national government had to agonize over how to cope with dissident civil society groups and their evolving alliance with opposition politicians in Seoul, it effectively regimented and disciplined local civil society according to the dogmas of "national security at all costs" and "economic growth at all costs." As a result, the local society during the authoritarian period was dominated by pro-government and "neighborhood" organizations with no autonomy from the state and were not even deserving of the nomenclature of "civil society" groups. These groups were mobilized liberally by the authoritarian metropolis for modernization and "electoral support"—those horribly

flawed and problematic "elections" during the authoritarian era.

The post-transitional "reorganization" of local civil society in the 1990s did not change much either. Many "new" local civil society organizations were created. But most of them were created from above and by outsiders, effectively copying and benchmarking the governance structures, operational procedures, and decision-making processes of their national headquarters. As such they were in serious lack of local roots. As compared with the 1980s, civil society groups in local areas have significantly increased in their number. However, because they were in large part extrapolated by national—and thus outside of the locality—civil society organizations, they have been not as powerful and effective as the pseudo-civil society groups of the authoritarian era.

On the national level, the malfunctioning political party system and public distrust of the political establishment at large served as a useful "pull factor" for the emergence of a vibrant civil society. Civil society organizations were in effect perceived by the public as an alternative route to articulate and represent popular interests, partially replacing political parties. Why do not similar dynamics work to promote local civil society? To answer this question, we need to understand that "representation" is a variable concept, different at national and local levels. At the national level, the most important public interest worthy of representation is that of compelling the government to design and implement democratic reforms and socioeconomic programs. Civil society groups at the national level fulfill precisely such a representative function.

At the local level, however, public interest is more direct and palpable. Abstract ideas (or ideals) and principles are not as important as concrete construction projects or infrastructural improvement. When it comes to meeting these specific material interests of the local populace on a practical level, those fancy and noble "citizens' groups," with no intimate local roots and with structures and orientations too similar to those of national civil society groups, are unable to match the performance of seasoned pro-government groups and local party chapters, deeply embedded and strategically located in the

complex patronage/clientilist networks in town.

The crux of an account to explain the underdevelopment of local civil society in Korea is, therefore, to explicate the degree to which local civil society was and still is centralized. The extreme centralization of the Korean state is only beginning to thaw, in part owing to the vigorous decentralization initiatives of the current Roh government. Political parties are still extremely centralized, and local party chapters remain peripheral and marginal, being dormant and almost meaningless between elections (Park C. 2001a, 165). The development of local civil society has not been immune to such powerful centripetal influences inherent in Korean politics either. The civil society that emerged anew at the local level in the post-transitional period have been too dependent on national civil society organizations, criticized for its rootless, impractical, and elitist nature (Kim T. 2003, 16). As has been the case all along since the inauguration of the Republic of Korea in 1948, overcoming this centripetality—or the "politics of the vortex" (Henderson 1968)—is a tall order for Korean democracy, requiring Herculean efforts and applicable not only to the state and political parties but to civil society as well.

Conclusion: How to Empower Local Civil Society

Empowering civil society is essential for the future of Korean democracy. For local civil society to be empowered and to play roles similar to those played by national civil society in promoting and consolidating democracy, several tasks must be completed, both by the state and by civil society groups themselves.

First, the central government's initiatives at decentralization must continue, without flagging or losing intensity. Some supporters of decentralization, understandably frustrated by the tenacity of local patronage/clientilist networks, have recently suggested that the central government should decelerate decentralization. Speedy decentralization, they argue, would only strengthen the power and influence of already mighty local elites (Chun 2003a). These prescriptions,

albeit well-intended, do not seem to be conducive to the empowerment of local civil society. "Tentatively suspending or slowing down decentralization until local civil society is mature enough to accept democracy" sounds reasonable—but in fact is not. How do you know whether and when local civil society is "mature"? Who decides whether it is appropriate to resume the drive to decentralization? This approach is simply too reminiscent of the authoritarian argument that insisted on "holding off decentralization until Korean people are ready to take it." Yes, there certainly exists a "democratic lag" in Korea, symbolized by the serious gap between national civil society and local civil society. However, this can never justify a top-down decision to slow down or hold off decentralization.

If we look at closely the dynamics of *national* democratization, it is clear that we did not have a perfect civil society prior to the democratic transition. Nor did we expect such a meteoritic rise of civil society in the politics of democratic consolidation. It was only after the country was democratized that public administration structures and policymaking processes were put under the close scrutiny of civil society actors. Local democratization should not be different. Decentralization, which is intended to make local governments meaningful, must continue. Only after they become significant actors, genuinely in charge of the budget, personnel, organization, and decision-making at the local level, would local civil society have something substantive to check and balance. The empowerment of civil society should not be postulated as a precondition for further decentralization. Rather, further decentralization is likely to heighten the stakes involved in local governance and local politics and local citizens' sense of political efficacy, which in turn would help local civil society groups mobilize themselves to monitor and assess the performance of local governments.

A number of tasks for local civil society to carry out are in order. Most of all, local civil society groups must be reorganized and run by local residents and ordinary citizens themselves, rather than elites inside or outside of the region. And these retooled voluntary bottom-up groups must first lead a movement for assailing and dismantling

the existing patronage/clientilist networks in local politics. They also need to upset and eventually crack the long dominance of pro-government and "neighborhood" organizations. These pseudo-civil society groups are an embarrassing relic of our authoritarian past in which the autocratic regimes used these demographically unrepresentative, ideologically biased, and professionally incompetent organizations to propagate and implement its official policy lines. In furthering and expanding such a movement, local civil society groups should create and develop networks and solidarity with groups in other regions and take advantage of technology to promote the cyber participation of local residents.

In the long haul, local civil society must gradually decrease its dependence on national civil society. However, for the time being at least, assistance and support from national civil society groups will prove essential. National civil society groups must put local democracy very high on their agenda and make concerted efforts at pressuring national and local politicians to implement necessary institutional and legal steps to make policymaking process more open, transparent, and accessible (Hong 2006, 44).

Korean democracy, after nearly two decades since the transition from authoritarian rule in 1987, stands at best crippled. There have been significant strides in national politics owing to the active contribution of civil society groups, but no similar progress has taken place at the local level. As long as local politics stays clientilistic and local civil society is dominated by anti-democratic forces, Korean democracy has to bear the ignominy of being called a "two-tier" or "two-speed" democracy. As long as "real" politics is out there at the national level (Kolesas 1998, 142) and as long as local politics is considered to be an epiphenomenon of national politics, Korean democracy is far from having been fully consolidated or deepened.

In this respect, Korean civil society's pro-democracy uprising in 1987 is still unfinished. Until local democracy is established and local civil society performs various democracy-promoting functions, Korean democracy will remain vulnerable. Only when we bring about numerous micro-level changes at the local level, will the macro-level transformation at the national level we accomplished in 1987 hold together, remaining substantive and meaningful. Persistent decentralization, the national government's constant efforts at institutionalizing citizen participation, national civil society's support for the empowerment of local civil society, and most of all local civil society's own struggle to restructure local reality are all integral to realizing our unfinished, permanent democratic revolution.

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