

# Local Governance and Community Power in Korea

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## Abstract

*This paper examines local governance and community power in Korea. It clarifies the following characteristics of local governance: the local government has remained functionally and financially limited despite its constitutional autonomy; the structure of local governance turns out to be largely fragmented and dispersed; local decisions are subject to tight central control; local electoral politics is increasingly nationalized; the local chief executive does not share local governmental power with other local political actors; economic interests and social identities at the local level are poorly organized and barely active; and local residents remain politically passive and hardly empowered. On the basis of these findings, it concludes that community power remains in the hands of the local government, especially the local chief executive, subject to central control and proposes that further local empowerment and civic involvement is essential for improving the quality of democratic local governance in South Korea.*

**Keywords:** local governance, community power, local autonomy, local democracy

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## Introduction

South Korea (hereafter "Korea") is widely known as one of the successful third-wave democracies in East Asia. The transition from authoritarian rule in 1987 has ultimately brought about electoral democracy at all levels of government. In 1995, for the first time in 35 years, the Korean people had an opportunity to directly elect their mayors and governors.<sup>1</sup> This historic event signified the beginning of local autonomy in Korea. Since then, three more local elections have been held and on all such occasions, voters were free to choose who would govern their cities and provinces. Yet despite the apparent decentralization of the past decade, local empowerment for democratic governance still remains considerably limited. Local governance in Korea appears to lack meaningful local autonomy, which is regarded as a minimum condition for democratic local governance.

This paper examines local governance and community power in Korea and addresses the following questions: Who governs in local Korea? How independent of external constraints is the local government outside the city limits? Who plays a key role in the local decision-making process? Where is community power located? These and other related questions will be explored on the basis of the past ten-year experience of local governance.

This paper has seven sections. The first examines central-local relations in order to determine the extent of external local autonomy. The second explores the nationalization of local electoral politics to gauge the degree of local accountability. The third analyzes the institutions and practices of local government to evaluate the influence of key local political actors. The fourth examines the role of economic and social groups in the local decision-making process. The fifth

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1. The Local Autonomy Act was first legislated in 1949, but it was not until 1960 that the first local elections in Korean history were held. However, since the military coup in 1961 local autonomy had been suspended. In the wake of democratization in 1987 the Local Autonomy Act was revised in 1988, which ultimately led to the gradual restoration of local autonomy.

explores the beliefs, attitudes and behavior of local citizens as a way to understand the extent of citizen empowerment. The sixth discusses community power structure on the basis of the key findings presented in the preceding sections. The final concluding section emphasizes local empowerment and civic involvement as a key to a pluralist local democracy in Korea.

## Central-Local Relations

In Korea central political institutions and processes appear to substantially constrain the local power and autonomy necessary for meaningful local governance. Korea is a unitary state, where governmental power is delegated by the central government to sub-national governments. The Korean sub-national governmental system is a two-tier system. Regional governments consist of the higher tier, while local governments, the lower.<sup>2</sup> Currently, there are 16 regional governments and 234 local governments. Regional governments include 7 metropolitan governments and 9 provincial ones, while local governments include 77 city governments, 89 county governments and 68 district governments.<sup>3</sup> As found in other unitary states, sub-national governments in Korea do not possess governmental power comparable to those in federal states. In fact, governmental power is highly centralized on both the formal as well as the informal level.

The Korean local government appears to enjoy constitutional

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2. Local governments generally refer to sub-national governments. In this paper, however, lower-tier sub-national governments are called local governments while high-tier ones regional governments. Regional governments refer to sub-national governments of metropolitan cities and provinces while local governments, sub-national governments of cities and counties of the provinces and districts of the metropolitan cities.
  3. The population size of local governments varies greatly from less than 50,000 to over 1 million. About two fifths of local governments have less than 100,000 and about one tenth has more than 500,000.

autonomy. The constitution contains a section for local government. According to Article 117 of the constitution, "local governments shall deal with administrative matters pertaining to the welfare of local residents, manage properties, and may enact their own provisions relating to local autonomy, within the limits of laws and regulations." The constitution apparently allows the local government to have a degree of general autonomy. Hence, the local government can engage in any activities unless laws and regulations specify otherwise.

The constitutional status of local government in Korea embodies no formal principle of *ultra vires*, meaning that the local government has the ability to engage in any activities not expressly prohibited by national laws. However, the formal institutions conceal the actual workings of intergovernmental relations. The constitution permits the central government to control the local government through executive and ministerial regulations. More importantly, the central government narrowly interprets a power of general competence for local government and controls local decisions on spending and taxing. The local government is subject to the de facto *ultra vires* rule and lacks meaningful autonomy and discretion in the management of local affairs.

The functional base of Korean local government is substantially limited. A government study shows that in 1994, only one-fourth (25%) of state functions was classified as local. Another government study shows that in 2002 a little more than one-fourth (27%) of state functions were still classified as local (MOGAHA 2006). The functional base of local government has changed little since the beginning of local autonomy in 1995. Notable is that although the constitution gives the local government a general grant of authority, the law excludes police functions from its purview. The local government also has no direct control over the provision of educational services within its geographic boundaries.

The Korean local government performs both autonomous and assigned functions. For the latter the central government provides fiscal support. The assigned functions can be divided into two types. The first type is entity-assigned functions, which are delegated to the

local government as a whole and are not distinguishable from others. Their existence indicates the restricted functional base of local government. The second type is agency-assigned functions, which are delegated to the local chief executive. In implementing these functions, the local chief executive is regarded as a local administrative agency or proxy of the central government. As far as the execution of these functions is concerned, the local chief executive is subject to the tight control of the central government. The existence of agency-assigned functions also illustrates the limited extent of local autonomy and accountability.

Another notable feature is the presence of special local administrative agencies not subject to local electoral control but central administrative control. These special agencies, which operate independently of the local government, embody functional lines of authority rather than areal ones (Reed 1986). The existence of these agencies, whose work parallels that of local government, greatly narrows the scope of local government. Hence, the proliferation of special local administrative agencies fragments the structure of local governance and undermines the existence of any meaningful local autonomy.

The Korean local government is not free to make decisions on local needs and priorities. According to Article 15 of the Local Autonomy Act, local ordinances should be consistent not only with legislative laws but also executive regulations. The central government possesses a variety of formal and informal means to control local decisions. In particular, administrative guidance is the most controversial tool the central government uses to control the local government's key decisions. The central government's intervention in the businesses of local government is often not explicitly based on laws made by the National Assembly. Hence, the local government is vulnerable to politically motivated control of the central government.

The central government exercises a great deal of influence over the local government's taxing and spending. The taxes the local government can impose are determined by laws, with the rates of local taxes varying only within a limited range. Central control of local

taxes is exceedingly tight, while local discretion to shape spending priorities is slight.<sup>4</sup> The local government is also limited in its ability to increase local revenues through borrowing. The central government can enforce the local government's fiscal responsibility through a multitude of rules and regulations.

As shown in Table 1, a majority of Korean local governments register low levels of financial autonomy (Kwon 2004). As of 2004, more than half of them depended on the central government for more than 70 percent of their budgets. Over the last decade, levels of financial local autonomy have declined rather than risen. For instance, levels of financial autonomy for city governments sharply fell from 53 percent in 1996 to 39 percent in 2004. For county governments they decreased from 23 percent in 1996 to 17 percent in 2004. For district governments they also dropped from 53 percent in 1996 to 43 percent in 2004. As these figures evidently show, most local governments in Korea tend to spend far more than what they collect in tax revenues. Consequently, they have to rely heavily on the central government

Table 1. *Financial Autonomy of Local Governments*

Levels of Financial Autonomy (%)	Number of Local Governments (%)
90 and higher	1.3
70-90	1.3
50-70	7.3
30-50	35.0
10-30	50.9
Lower than 10	4.3
Total	(234)

Source: Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs (<http://login.moga-ha.go.kr>)

4. The central government's use of allocation tax in favor of local governments with low levels of financial autonomy discourages local governments to expand the tax base.

for supplementing their ordinary expenditures as well as financing their local projects. The Korean local government has yet to achieve financial autonomy.

As local autonomy was restored in 1995, the system of local administration was transformed into the system of local government. However, the power of local government has increased little and remains substantially circumscribed for the last decade. Despite its constitutional autonomy, the Korean local government has yet to achieve enough autonomy for meaningful democratic governance. The intergovernmental distribution of authority and resources indicates the limited general competence for local government. The functional and financial bases of local government evidently show disproportionately unequal power distribution between the center and localities, which hinders the enhancement of the democratic foundations of local government. In the highly centralized system of intergovernmental relations, it is no wonder that local governance is largely determined by central governmental institutions and processes.

## Local Elections

Popular authorization of local government is a minimum condition for democratic local governance. As mentioned earlier, such a condition came into being in Korea in 1995, when mayors and governors as well as councilors were directly elected by local residents. Before 1995, the chief executive of the local government was appointed by the central government. Since 1995, the local government has been subject to popular elections rather than central appointment. Mayors, governors, and councilors are currently chosen in partisan elections. Until the last local election in May 2006, local councilors had been chosen in non-partisan elections. Despite increasing popular opposition to the politicization of local governance, the influence of national political parties in local elections appears to have increased rather than decreased.

For the past decade, local electoral turnout has gradually de-

clined. More than two thirds (68%) of the electorate cast their ballots in the 1995 local election. However, in the subsequent local elections only barely a half (53% in 1998, 49% in 2002 and 51% in 2006) went to the poll. Popular enthusiasm for a grassroots democracy, which was strong in the aftermath of political democratization in 1987, has been apparently subdued. One notable feature of Korean local politics has been the increasing nationalization of local elections. Local issues and personalities rarely dominate local elections, which are often regarded as referenda on the central government. Local elections appear to be a sideshow of, or an appendage to, national politics. The nationalization of local elections greatly restricts the degree of local accountability essential for democratic local governance.

As a result, regional cleavages in local elections become as deep as those in national ones. In all local elections held since 1995, a majority of the electorate voted for parties that were identified with their regions of residence, namely their hometown parties. As shown in Table 2, for instance, in the Yeongnam region, which has been a stronghold of the Grand National Party (GNP), the percentage of elected GNP mayoral candidates was 50 percent in 1995, 68 percent in 1998, 87 percent in 2002, and 86 percent in 2006. In the Honam region, which has been a stronghold of the Democratic Party (DP) or the Uri Party (UP),<sup>5</sup> the percentage of elected DP or UP mayoral candidates was 93 percent in 1995 and 71 percent in all of the subsequent elections of 1998, 2002, and 2006. In contrast, the electoral performances of these parties in rival regions appear to have been miserable. In the Honam region, no GNP mayoral candidates have been elected in the last four local elections. In the Yeongnam region, only one DP mayoral candidate was elected in 1995 and 1998, none in 2002 and two UP mayoral candidates in 2006.

5. The UP, which was separated from the DP in 2004, is the ruling party.

Table 2. Party Affiliations of Elected Heads of Local Governments

Year	Grand National Party				Democratic Party (Uri Party)			
	1995	1998	2002	2006	1995	1998	2002	2006
Yeongnam*	34(68)	49(72)	61(70)	60(70)	1(68)	1(72)	0(70)	2(70)
Honam**	0(43)	0(41)	0(41)	0(41)	40(43)	29(41)	29(41)	29(41)

Entries are the number elected, with the total number of contested mayoral positions in parenthesis.

\* Includes Busan, Daegu, Ulsan, Gyeongsangnam-do, and Gyeongsangbuk-do.

\*\* Includes Gwangju, Jeollanam-do, and Jeollabuk-do.

Source: National Election Commission (<http://www.nec.go.kr>)

These voting patterns amply illustrate a great deal of influence major national parties have over local elections. To a large extent, local electoral accountability appears to be substantially limited. Since party labels are generally important for mobilizing votes, independent candidates cannot compete effectively with party candidates. It is a great advantage to run for local offices under the hegemonic party flag. In localities where hegemonic parties exist, party nomination is regarded as a sufficient condition for winning elections. In those localities, the local government tends to be monopolized by a single party.

Still, this does not mean that local issues and personalities are never relevant in local elections. Rather it underlines the fact that being a candidate of a regional hegemonic party greatly affects the chance of his winning the election (Hwang 2002). As local elections are used to pass judgment on the central government, electoral outcomes rarely reflect the performance of a party in local power. The nationalization and regionalism of electoral choice greatly reduces local accountability, which further undermines the basis of democratic local governance.

Until the last local election in May 2006, the local council election had been a single-member ward system (first past the post) without any form of proportional representation. Currently, it is a

multi-member ward system with some form of proportional representation. Whether this electoral system change would lower the chances of a single party being able to have majority control of the local government and thereby a weakening of regionalism in local politics remains to be seen.

### Local Government

The form of local government in Korea reflects democratic institutional principles such as separation of powers and checks and balances. Executive power belongs to the mayor while legislative power, to the local council.<sup>6</sup> According to Article 118 of the Constitution, “the local government shall have a council” and “the organization and powers of local councils, and the election of their members; election procedures for chief executives of local governments; and other matters pertaining to the organization and operation of local governments shall be determined by laws.” Every local government in Korea maintains the same form of government and there is no exception.

The mayor and the councilors are popularly elected through partisan ballots. Thus, the structure of local government primarily embodies the principle of political accountability. In contrast, the rest of local officials are not elected but appointed based on merit. The local bureaucracy, which has long developed professional norms of administration, is the core of local government. Hence, we can say that the structure of local government embodies the principle of administrative efficiency as well.

The Korean local government maintains a strong mayor/weak council form of government. The mayor and the local council officially share budgeting, legislation of ordinances, and other policy-making

6. In this paper the mayor refers to the chief executive of local government while the governor, that of regional government. Similarly, the local council refers to the council of local government while the regional council, that of regional government.

functions. However, the power of local government is organized in favor of the mayor over the local council. For instance, the mayor has the authority to appoint local bureaucrats, to submit a budget of expenditures and revenues, and to veto ordinances passed by the local council.

Reflecting the internal structure of local government, the mayor dominates local political processes (Park C. 2000b). The mayor plays a leading role in both policy-making and administration. He dominates budgeting processes and makes key administrative appointments. His formal authority and monopoly of information, assisted by the professional local bureaucracy, makes him prevail over other local political actors. He holds a much wider base of geographic political representation than any other locally based politicians. The mayor is able to engage in distributive politics based on a particularistic exchange of benefits. By financing their pet projects, the mayor can induce councilors to side with him in the local policy process.

The local council is officially responsible for making all ordinances and performing representative and oversight functions. Yet, because of the local council's low expertise and resources, policy initiatives are likely to come from the local bureaucracy headed by the mayor. Rather than seeing the local council as a representative political institution, individual councilors develop particularistic exchange relationships with the mayor who can dispense local public resources. The mayor can offer councilors spending favors in return for their general support. The mayor's informal coalition of local clients may perform a role similar to that of local political machines (Guterbock 1980).

The mayor commands the professional local bureaucracy by exercising his formal authority. However, the mayor's control over local bureaucrats is by no means complete. Local bureaucrats tend to develop functional loyalties based on professional expertise defined by the central bureaucracy. They used to be regarded as public servants belonging to the MOGAHA (Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs). Therefore, local bureaucrats tend to be susceptible to central regulations and standards. They would be

reluctant to support the mayor's local decisions, if they are not compatible with central guidelines. Professional norms of efficiency and neutrality help local bureaucrats resist strong pressures from the mayor. It does not mean, however, that local bureaucrats do not fall under the influence of the mayor. Individual local bureaucrats develop particularistic exchange relationships with the mayor, who makes personnel decisions.

In short, the institutions and processes of local government have made it possible for the mayor to dominate local politics over the last decade (Park C. 2000b). The mayor does not share local governmental power significantly with other local political actors. He appears to control local political processes through various clientelist strategies (Piattoni 2001). The practices of local government appear to fall short of the ideal of democratic governance.

### Local Economic and Social Groups

Democratic governance requires a vibrant local society, which encompasses a diversity of market and civil society actors (Putnam 1993). Yet, Korean local society is hardly vibrant. First, economic interests in local Korea are poorly organized. Local chambers of commerce fail to play a key role in representing local business interests. Since there are industry-by-industry national associations, individual local businesses rarely find local chambers of commerce effective in representing their interests. As a result, local chambers of commerce fail to render themselves a major force in the local political process. Local business interests in Korea enjoy hardly any "systemic power" (Stone 1980).

In a sense, the poor organization of economic interests attests the limited scope or authority of local government. As noted earlier, Korean local governments, unlike those in federal states, have not much discretion to pursue development policies by using tax abatement, land grants, subsidies, and so forth (Peterson 1981). The range of policy instruments and options the local government can choose is

substantially restricted. Therefore, economic interests have few incentives to organize themselves locally.

Second, there are some local branches of government-sponsored associations, professional organizations and civic groups. Perhaps because of the limited scope of local government, however, local politics hardly is the locus of civic engagement or the arena of group activities. A few individual members make use of their associational memberships to advance personal ambitions for local offices or to get local benefits for themselves. These groups rarely serve to represent and promote the common interests of their members.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, the influence of civic groups on the local political process appears to be increasingly visible. New social movements such as environment protection, consumer rights and feminist movements have spawned various local civic or issue groups. These voluntary groups become increasingly significant forces in local governance. Whether these changes would empower local society and bring about significant changes in the distribution of local power remains to be seen.

Third, neighborhoods remain atomized rather than organized. As discussed in the following section, popular involvement in local politics is largely passive and particularized. Yet, local residents sometimes organize themselves when their own real property interests are at stake. In this regard, local political conflict, if any, has more to do with residence than to occupation. To some extent, local politics in Korea reflects the politics of landed interests (Logan and Molotch 1987). Local people tend to be mobilized, if not organized, as residents of particular neighborhoods, not as members of economic classes. Class conflict is hardly a feature of Korean local politics.

Overall, Korean local society is largely unorganized. There are only a few, if any, organized groups. Furthermore, they tend to serve a few members' particularistic self-interests rather than the categori-

7. A notable feature of Korean local politics is that alumni associations of local elite high schools serve as the most important source of political, economic and social community leaders (Park C. 2000b).

cal collective interests of the group. A large segment of local society remains marginalized in the local political process. There is yet to be a socio-economic order contributing to either elitist or pluralist rule.

### Local Citizens

Democratic local governance requires an active local citizenry with allegiant and participant political orientations. Despite declining electoral turnout, electoral local democracy is widely supported. In a five cities sample survey in 1999, an average of 86 percent was supportive of the popular election of the mayor (Park C. 2003).<sup>8</sup> A 2001 national sample survey of the electorate shows that 85 percent of respondents were supportive of a system in which the mayor would be elected directly by local residents (MOGAHA 2002). These findings suggest that a belief in the legitimacy of electoral local democracy is widely held among Korean people.

However, local residents hardly feel the presence of local government. In the 1999 five cities sample survey, only an average of 8 percent saw the local government as having much impact on their daily lives. Moreover, an average of 62 percent believed that local government made little or no difference in improving local conditions (Park C. 2003).

Despite broad support for electoral local democracy, there is also widespread opposition to the party politicization of local governance. In a 1999 five cities sample survey, an average of 56 percent showed opposition to the party nomination of mayoral candidates (Park C. 2003). In a 2001 national sample survey of the electorate, 60 percent of respondents were opposed to an election system in which mayoral candidates run under the banner of political parties (MOGAHA 2002). In the most recent national sample survey in 2005, more than half (52%) of the respondents were still opposed to the party nomination of mayoral candidates (MOGAHA 2005). An anti-party politics vision

8. The five cities include Bucheon, Cheongju, Jinju, Pyeongtaek and Seongnam.

of local governance can also be found in the broad opposition to the party nomination of council candidates. In the 1999 five cities sample survey, an average of 57 percent exhibited opposition to the party nomination of council candidates (Park C. 2003). In a national sample survey in 2000, more than a half (55%) of respondents expressed opposition to the party nomination of council candidates (MOGAHA 2002). All of these findings evidently illustrate not only popular cynicism toward party politics at the local level but also discontent with the current local election system.

Democratic governance requires citizen involvement and activism. Yet the 1999 five cities sample survey indicates that local people's level of knowledge about local politics was considerably low (Park C. 2003). A majority of local residents did not know who their mayors or councilors were. They did not know whether the party nomination of candidates for local offices was allowed or not. These findings illustrate a lack of popular interest in local politics. Since local people have little motivation and few incentives to acquire local political information, their understanding of local politics appears to be unclear or ambiguous.

The 1999 five cities sample survey shows that an average of 65 percent said they had little or no interest in local politics and that an average of 76 percent said they seldom or never talked about local affairs with neighbors (Park C. 2003). In the 2000 national sample survey, only 30 percent of respondents exhibited some degree of interest in local government (MOGAHA 2002). These findings show that a majority of local people prefer to be bystanders, not active participants in local political processes. For them, local politics was not a major concern.

Citizen empowerment is essential for democratic governance. However, a nine cities sample survey in 2003 shows that an average of only 30 percent felt politically competent (Park and Kang 2005).<sup>9</sup>

9. The nine cities include five metropolitan cities such as Busan, Daegu, Daejeon, Gwangju, and Incheon and four mid-sized cities such as Cheongju, Chuncheon, Jeonju, and Suwon.



Local people seemed to feel cognitively impotent when confronted by a complexity of local politics close to their ordinary lives. The 1999 five cities sample survey shows that there is a sense of powerlessness among local people when dealing with control within democratic government (Park C. 2003). All of these findings suggest that an empowered local citizenry has yet to develop.

It is widely argued that the social capital of associational membership and social trust contributes to the performance of democratic political institutions (Putnam 1993). Yet, the 1999 five cities sample survey shows the extent of membership in voluntary associations to have been extremely limited. Nearly four in five people were not affiliated with any social organizations (Park C. 2003). A 2003 national sample survey reports that a majority of ordinary Koreans rarely joined them (Park and Shin 2005). These findings show that a vast majority of local people are not effectively linked to social networks that tend to infuse them with civic virtues. They remain socially disconnected. It is evident that associational life in local Korea falls far short of the ideal of civic democracy.

Social trust is the cultural aspect of social capital. It is widely believed that trust, especially generalized sense of trust, contributes to facilitating civic cooperation for the common good, which enhances the quality of democratic governance (Putnam 1993). Yet, the 1999 five cities sample survey shows that only an average of 38 percent agreed that "most people can be trusted" (Park C. 2003). The 2003 national sample survey shows that less than two-fifths (39%) expressed trust in other people (Park and Shin 2005). These findings evidently attest to the low levels of social capital.

Democratic governance requires a competent citizenry that is well informed about local political issues, socially interactive, as well as participatory (Almond and Verba 1963). The lack of an active citizenry may make the enhancement of the quality of local democracy difficult. As presented above, Korean local citizenship reflects a great deal of democratic deficit. In fact, mass political life at the local level may be characterized, not by the participant culture of involvement and activism, but by the parochial or subject culture of alienation

and passivity. A self-confident, empowered local citizenry for democratic governance still remains to be developed.

### Community Power

After having examined intergovernmental relations, local political institutions and processes, market and civil society actors, and mass political life, we may argue that the Korean local government is considerably low on Type II autonomy, which means that the local government is less able to pursue local interests "independently of central government restrictions and preferences or professional groups capable of nationalizing policy options irrespective of a locality's distinctive character" (King and Pierre 1990, 2). To the extent that local autonomy is highly constrained by the central government, the bulk of community power rests in the hands of the central government. Given the key role that is attributed to the central government, we may wonder where the remaining community power is located. Who governs within the city limits?

Basically, there are two competing theories of community power structure, namely elitism and pluralism (Waste 1986). Elitists argue that community power is monopolized by a power elite committed to the social and economic status quo. They contend that the socioeconomic elite who possess wealth and social status control all the key governmental decisions and the local political agenda (Hunter 1953; Bachrach and Baratz 1970). Elitists describe the elected officials as their proxies, who merely execute the decisions made by the ruling class or the power elite.

In contrast, pluralists claim that community power is widely dispersed. They reject the view that inequalities of power are cumulative (Dahl 1961; Polsby 1980). Instead political influence is dispersed to the extent that individuals and groups who are influential in one issue area may not be influential in others. Pluralists consider public policy as an outcome of fair competition among a diversity of groups in an open political process.

As discussed in the preceding sections, community power in Korea appears to be concentrated in the hands of the local government, especially the mayor, rather than dispersed among a large number of competing interests or monopolized by the socioeconomic elite. Local governance is hardly dominated by business interests, which are poorly organized and thus relatively powerless. There is no evidence that economic interests control all key local decisions. At most, individual businessmen may make an effort to establish connections with those running the city hall in order to protect or benefit their own businesses. Social interests or identities at the local level are also poorly organized and thus relatively powerless. Hence, it is hardly surprising that the mayor who controls the local government plays a predominant role in the local decision-making process. A study of the political power structure in Busan through an analysis of controversial policy issues found that the mayor was most powerful in the policy process given the influence of central government (Kim 1998). Research on the local political process in Incheon revealed that the local government, especially as embodied in the mayor, remained powerful despite an increasing influence of local civil associations (Jeong 1998). By using the decisional method, a study of community power in the five cities mentioned above showed that the mayor controlled the local policy process on important local issues (Yoo 2000; Bae 2000; Park C. 2000a). By using the reputational method, a recent 2003 elite survey on community power in the nine cities mentioned above also confirmed that, regardless of policy decisions, the mayor was ranked as the most influential among those presumed to exercise influence in local government, business, civic or social circles (Park D. 2004).

In this regard, community power in Korea is largely monopolized by the local government. Since the local government is controlled by the mayor, Korean local governance can be described as mayor-dominant governance (Park C. 2000b). The mayor exercises a great deal of influence over local public resources and controls the outcome of key decisions within the community. The mayor maintains community power by developing personal networks through material exchanges

or identity-sharing with councilors, bureaucrats, businessmen and social notables as well as national politicians.<sup>10</sup> The performance of mayor-dominant governance depends upon the stability of these networks, in which the mayor serves as the key nexus. Without stable local and trans-local networks, the mayor would face political immobilism or even ungovernability within the community (Choi 1999).

As democratization gradually empowers civil society and global competition increasingly strengthens market actors, it would be hard for the mayor to continue to control the local decision-making process in the near future. However, for the past decade the poor organization and relative powerlessness of the market and civil society at the local level has permitted the mayor-led local government to characterize local governance. Local democratization has transformed the nature of interest representation from the administrative to political spheres. Yet, since interests are poorly organized and ideological political parties are underdeveloped, self-representation rather than group representation dominates the local political process (Lande 1973). In this regard, Korean community power structure may be characterized as state clientelism rather than elitism or pluralism.

To the extent that intergovernmental power structure is highly centralized and local electoral politics nationalized, it is no wonder that community power remains in the hands of trans-local political forces not bound by the city limits. Within the realm of a given local autonomy, residual community power appears to be monopolized by the local government, especially the mayor. As noted earlier, the mayor develops local networks of clientelism by manipulating the allocation of public resources (Piattoni 2001; Fox 1994). As national politics influences local governance, these networks may extend to include powerful national politicians as the mayor's patron(s). The

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10. The 2003 study of local elites in the nine Korean cities shows that mayors and other community leaders share the same localities where they grew up, or the same high schools or colleges from which they graduated. This finding suggests that a mayor's local networks may be developed through identity-sharing based on school and hometown ties (Park D. 2004).

national politicians may use the mayor's local networks of clientelism to secure and expand their political power at the national level. The strength of these local and trans-local networks determines the political fortunes of the mayor. By using networks of clientelism, the mayor has been able to dominate local governance for the past decade. In this regard, the Korean local government can be said to be high in Type I autonomy, which means that the local government is more able to pursue local interests "independently of local economic and social interests and organizations, be they private, voluntary or statutory" (King and Pierre 1990, 2).

Overall, the Korean local government for the last decade has been considerably independent of local economic and social interest even though it has been subject to trans-local political constraints. In this regard, it can be argued that community power largely remains in the hands of the local government, albeit subject to central control. The Korean local government, far from being an epiphenomenon of the dynamics of local social forces, is a semi-autonomous actor with its own preferences.

### Conclusion

There are two competing views on the impact of local autonomy on the redistribution of community power. The first holds that although local autonomy is expected to increase opportunities for popular political involvement, it would bring about a more unequal redistribution of community power. In particular, business interests, including landed ones, would become more influential in the local decision-making process because the local government tends to rely heavily on their wealth. The second view contends that local autonomy would bring about more political equality and democratic pluralism because it increases popular control and includes marginal actors into the local political process. Hence community power would be widely dispersed. Has local autonomy in Korea increased the dominance of a few economic elite or dispersed local power among plural local

forces? My answer to both questions is not, as of yet, in the affirmative. The local autonomy of the last decade has not increased the dominance of business interests, as the elitism model may predict. Nor has it dispersed local power among plural local forces, as pluralism may expect. Rather it has greatly increased the power of local government, especially the local chief executive.

For the past decade, local governance in Korea has been dominated by national politics largely due to a highly centralized system of intergovernmental relations. Furthermore, the party politicization of local elections renders local politics national rather than local. Unlike in the United States, all politics in Korea remains hardly local. In many respects, local governance appears to resemble national governance. As the president dominates the legislature and the national bureaucracy at the national level, the mayor dominates the council and the local bureaucracy at the local level. The national government is relatively independent of national economic and social interests. Similarly, the local government is relatively independent of local economic and social interests. With no powerful rivals in the local political process, the mayor appears to be able to hold community power, under a certain amount of central control.

For democratic local governance, governmental power needs to be further decentralized in order to ensure meaningful local autonomy. Decentralization would inevitably further augment the power of local government, which is already powerful. At the same time, however, decentralization would make more visible the transformation of local government into a function of the local policy process (Pratchett and Wilson 1996). As the local government became the site for local decision-making, local civil society would become organized and vibrant while a local citizenry, self-confident and active. Local empowerment for meaningful local autonomy, indeed, is a key step toward a pluralist grassroots democracy in Korea.

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