Decentralization and Transformation of Central State in South Korea: The Role of Local and Civil Society

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ABSTRACT
It has been considered as the key to democratic transition and consolidation, yet the ideal of local democracy was by and large overlooked, limited, or delayed by the dominant state power and central political world in Korea. Even when the wave of decentralization proliferated around the world since the 1970s, the hegemonic central power controlled localities and even dominated the process of decentralization. However, despite the prevailing strong centralism, the rise of residents and civic organizations at the local level vis-à-vis the state is viewed as one of the most striking trends in Korean democracy today. Through various forms of feedback channels including direct participation in policy processes, civil society contributed to the construction of decentralized democratic governance in 1990s-2000s. In addition, the practice of full-fledged local democracy since the mid-1990s has created local political arena which is unexpectedly vibrant. In this paper, by analyzing the case of decentralization movements in this period, I argue that civil society at the local level was surprisingly well-mobilized and institutionalized especially at the agenda-setting stage, although its insufficient capacity at implementation and monitoring process faced serious challenge from the central stakeholders.

1. INTRODUCTION
A number of scholars from a variety of perspectives in recent years have pointed to local government and civil society as integral parts of democratic politics. Robert Dahl (1967, 960), for example, portrayed the political and social life of a locality (small community), which permits a wider range of participation and promotes sense of belongings, as an essential part of democracy.¹ In this sense, the concept of ‘decentralization’ is most frequently employed to describe the changing relationship between the state and society as well as the center and periphery. Diamond and Tsalik (1999, 130) put, “local power can figure prominently in an overall system of checks and balances over the exercise of power.”

Countries in Europe and North America since the 1970s have faced strong pressure for political and administrative decentralization, and many developing countries emerging from authoritarian rule are now carrying out an extensive range of decentralization reform in order to dilute the dominant central power (Treisman 2007). Countries in Asian region are no exceptions to this world-wide trend. Newly democratized countries of varying sizes, economic levels, and political systems are moving centralized power down this path, and even the communist country China and some of Islamic countries have introduced certain forms of local democracy (White and Smoke 2005).

The case of Korea is particularly interesting, because decentralization means the end of over fifty years of dominance of centralism and separation from the prototypical ‘strong state’ for her superiority of state and central power over market, society, and

¹ A lot of political thinkers have praised the value of local politics and democracy. See selective examples such as Diamond Tsalik (1999), Ostrom (1990), Putnam (1993), and Tocqueville (1969).
localities. Prior to the 1990s, the structure of central-local relations in Korea remained vertical so that central agencies and ministries could control and command localities without much consideration of local and civic preferences. In the process of strong state-led industrialization, dominance of the center was a necessary evil in the Korean context. For this reason, although the first Constitution (1948) mandated certain forms of local autonomy such as executive election at subnational level, the authoritarian regime (1961-1987) abolished it and introduced a ‘command and control’ system of intergovernmental relations (Seong 2000, 130-1). Through various institutions such as the Ministry of Home Affairs, local subdivisions of central ministries, and appointed mayors, the central government effectively mobilized scarce resources to rehabilitate national economy after the Korean War, and controlled democratic development from below. Thus political, financial, and administrative activities of localities were completely under the supervision of central government. The legacy of strong centralism even created a path dependency in the process of reintroducing local autonomy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the newly launched local autonomy was the product of package deal among political elites at the center (Lee 1996, 64).

### Table 1: Flashpoints in Decentralization Reform Packages

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<th>Administration</th>
<th>Major Laws and Plans</th>
<th>Highlights</th>
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Source: Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs (MOGAHA, 2003)

However, under the Kim Dae-Jung and Roh Moo-Hyun governments, more comprehensive plans for decentralization such as *Special Law on Decentralization Promotion* (hereafter SLDP, 2004) were enacted, as Table 1 indicates. Those laws, although still faced with a lot of limitations as Rozman (2002) pointed out, contained somewhat radical changes, which could be a threat to the status of existing central organizations and political stakeholders. For example, transferring central decision making authority and functions to localities and the abolition of special administrative agencies literally means shrinkage of ministerial power. Indeed, as a consequence of decentralization reform that was intertwined with broader administrative reform programs, some of ministries were at risk of reorganization in the late 1990s. For the central government, the process of distribution of functions between levels of governments, in fact, included bargaining over the jurisdictions with local governments that were subservient to central authority in the past. Through the aforementioned laws, the territorial structure of the state was reorganized in the sense of giving more decision-making power and control over resources, and more responsibilities to the non-central

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2 The regime’s rationale was that it was still far too early to embrace local elections and autonomous administrative system given the confrontational relationship with North Korea (Kim, 2006: 64).
tiers of government. Therefore, despite the existing flaws in those legislations, there is no doubt that those attempts were more than marginal adjustments.

In this changing central-local relationship, the puzzle is why central politicians and bureaucrats whose resistance was the main hindrance in past reform efforts agreed — or compromised — to decentralization reform agendas. Even with the most recent reforms, some politicians and National Assemblymen proposed the abolition of local elections and return to central appointment of mayors and governors by pointing out the superiority of a centralized system (Joong-Ang Daily December 17th, 2000). Conventional understanding on the development of central-local relations may argue that decentralization in Korea is conditioned by negotiation among strong interests at the center, and as it is, the explanation is to some extent true in the history of past series of decentralization reforms (Kim 2006; Park 2006; Seong 2000). Under this prevailing centralism, is the political meaning of the latest decentralization reforms really to move away from the former statist tradition?

Unlike the conventional wisdom stated above, I argue that the laws for decentralization that have materialized in the legislative branch in the early 2000s would not exist if it were not for the input from local and civil society. Even if we cannot expect complete change or massive migration of state power to localities, the consistent and institutionalized support from below for local democracy can contribute to framing relevant policy debates and possible range of changes (Moon and Ingraham, 1998; Campbell, 2004). Top-down decisions for national policies without serious consideration of local and social preferences are no longer taken for granted. Governors and mayors publicly criticizing central political power on mass media or citizen demonstrations as an attempt to change central policies are no longer unusual (Bae and Sellers 2007). Building on efforts to emphasize the growing voices from local governments and civil society over decentralization issues, I demonstrate how local governments (associations) and civic organizations made an impact on the passage of decentralization bills through a) various types of civic movements, and b) direct participation in the legislative processes as outside experts, representatives of civic groups, or governmental appointees. I argue that local and civil societies were surprisingly well-mobilized, institutionalized, and influential especially at the agenda-setting stage, though their incapacity at implementation and monitoring process resulted in somewhat skewed decentralization laws in the final form.

2. INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF LOCAL POLITICS IN SOUTH KOREA

Korea experienced a remarkable development in democracy in the last two decades since its democratic transition in 1987, before which time the authoritarian regime had forcefully suspended the practice of local democracy for thirty years. Even in the 1990s when political elites endeavored to reorganize local governments, the practice of full-fledged local democracy was a relatively new phenomenon. Therefore, local autonomy in Korea is often described as ‘delayed decentralization,’ ‘local democratic lag,’ or ‘late adoption of local democracy’ (Kim 2006; Seong 2000). These descriptions drew attention to weak local civil society, weak local capacity, nationalized political systems, or weak democratic culture among the general public as backdrops for prolonged delay of local democracy in contemporary Korea. In the postwar period, in particular, the ruling authoritarian regimes intentionally avoided empowering localities for various reasons.

The series of decentralization under authoritarian regime, therefore, were incomplete. All politics of decentralization were national, and the bills for reform were mainly products of package deal among political elites. Voices and preferences from below were ignored in the processes of reform (Kim 2006). Even under civilian
governments, the logic of national politics was deeply rooted in curving the direction of reform bills in a way that central government maintained a considerable level of leverage over localities and civil society (Seong 2000, 145). Overall, the political power of localities remained functionally and financially limited and politically passive up until late 1990s (Park, 2006).

However, compared to the earlier phase of local democracy during the age of authoritarian regime, the central-local relationship in Korea took a big leap toward local democracy, and this development provided two important circumstances to pursue more advanced decentralization reform in the 2000s. First of all, despite existing limitations and controls from the center, the practice of local elections since 1995 has created “local political arena” that opened up public sphere for local citizens. As Figure 1 indicates, intellectuals as well as local citizens assessed the local elections and autonomy for the preceding 10 years to be a substantial development in terms of political participation, and policy channels from local society to the central government diversified through various new institutions and procedures (Bae and Sellers 2007, 546-7). For example, local citizens can request their governments to disclose public information (from 1996), present a petition for revising or abolishing local ordinances or bylaws (from 2000), participate in local budgeting process (from 2004), and even oust incompetent local executives (from 2006). In addition, several systems such as neighborhood council were introduced in order to encourage citizen participation. It is hard to say that the rates of citizen participation through these institutions and systems increased substantially, yet at least citizens have “formal” channels to vent their views on everyday issues at the local level. In spite of the existing control of central government and given new opportunity of citizen participation, the influence of citizens and civic organizations on the local politics have become increasingly vocal (Bae and Sellers 2007; Moon 2003), and this growth of local and civil society played crucial roles as buttresses for Roh Moo-Hyun government’s strong drive for decentralization reform.

Second, changes in domestic and global political-economic environments in the 1990-2000s have promoted a favorable circumstance for advancing decentralization. Up until the mid-1990s, the strength of highly centralized and efficient Korean economy received high marks internationally by maintaining the lowest level of unemployment rates and national account deficit, as well as the highest level of prosperity. Yet economic downturn led to the questioning of centralized policymaking and geographical concentration, and general public lost confidence in the central government (Kim 2003).

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3 In addition to these systems and institutions, civic organizations have been funded from the government based on Non-Profit Organization Aid Law since 2000.
Under these favorable conditions for pursuing political, administrative, and economic reform, the election of a ‘decentralization-minded’ President Roh Moo-Hyun and the growth of local and civil society were more than just gathering some brushwood to make a fire of reform. The following case analysis of decentralization politics around the legislation of SLDP in 2003-2004 will show how local and civil society played a crucial role in materializing the law under these circumstances.

2.1. The Process of Decentralization under the Roh Government

Since Korea’s democratization in 1987, decentralization reform has long been proposed as an integral part of ‘grass-root’ democracy, which was the most recurring (or rhetoric) topic in the political world. In particular, the former President Roh Moo-Hyun employed unprecedented decentralization reform programs as one of the top priorities of his reform agendas. The main goal of decentralization reform in this period was to foster mutually cooperative and equal relations between the center and localities through various types of decentralization strategies such as the transfer of authorities; de-concentration of population, public agencies, and businesses; and the division of labor between them (PCNBD 2004, 20). Unlike those past reforms, decentralization programs in this phase (2003 – present) were carried out under strong political leadership – in particular, a reform-minded president – and decentralists in the governmental reform agencies and committees.

The Roh government claimed that the illness of Korean politics and economy was a result of the inefficient distribution of resources between the center and periphery, and suggested five directions for major reform – what is so called ‘roadmaps’ – such as administrative reform, public personnel reform, e-government, financial and tax reform, and decentralization. Among them, the decentralization roadmap was designed to realign the structure of central-local relations within a given time period. In order to prevent wasteful political debates or delay at the central political arena as did in the past, the roadmap containing somewhat concrete guidelines included “first delegate then

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4 President Roh (2003-2008) declared himself as a decentralist. He showed strong intent to carry out decentralization, de-concentration, and balanced development policies during his term in office. Surprisingly, even when he was a maverick politician and National Assemblyman, he expressed his great interests in decentralization and de-concentration, had a connection with prominent scholars, and established a private research institute by himself, namely, the Center for Local Autonomy in 1993.
complement,” “local affairs should belong to resident’s hands,” and “must delegate both functions and authority” (PCGID 2003). With these guidelines in the roadmap, ministries and agencies at the center were mandated to draw out a somewhat detailed list of decentralization tasks to be transferred to localities.

In the process of making the roadmap, the central political actors could not take unilateral action anymore. Instead, the roadmap was a product of political deliberation among various stakeholders including local governments and civil society. Since December 2002 when President Roh was elected, the Presidential Transition Committee (PTC), which became the Presidential Committee on Government Innovation and Decentralization (PCGID) after the Roh’s inauguration, organized several meetings, conferences, and hearings to express their opinions regarding the decentralization project from non-political and non-bureaucratic actors. For example, the PTC held conferences with the Civic Movement for Decentralization (CMD), the biggest civic organization devoted to decentralization to settle the different opinions between them (January 21st and February 5th of 2003). Based on the claims from non-governmental actors and local governments, the PTC’s series of surveys, and the experiences of the Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs (MOGAHA), the Roh administration could map out a big picture for decentralization in 2003 (PCGID 2003). In doing so, politicians became less motivated and took on a wait-and-see attitude, while there were lively debates and tension between civil society/local government groups and bureaucrats in central ministries, because civic groups and local governments favored more radical promotion of local autonomy. Powerful ministries at the center – such as the Ministry of Finance and Economy (MOFE) which had to delegate a lot of power and budget to local governments – were clearly reluctant to accelerate the promotion of decentralization. Under these circumstances, the possibility of the passage of the law was not so optimistic by the early December 2003, yet the PCGID and MOGAHA endeavored to reconcile their different interests. As a consequence, the SLDP which was the most important legislation in the history of Korean decentralization was passed in the National Assembly in 2003 (PCGID 2003). This law is meaningful in that central agencies and politicians forcefully and legally mandated the pursuit of decentralization, as Japan did with its Decentralization Promotion Law (1995). Though the SLDP was a somewhat procedural rather than a substantive law, it addressed several important points of decentralization reform.5

To summarize, the decentralization roadmap and the legislation of the SLDP as well as other de-concentration projects under the Roh government reflect the reconciliation of diverse opinions and the debate among vested interests. Due to the long tradition of state-led development and centralism, the role of subnational bodies and civic communities was not noticeable in the past series of decentralization reform, as stated above (Kim 2000). Yet, as time passed and the practice of local democracy consolidated, the concern of local residents, civic associations, and democratically elected local politicians became stronger, and they gradually expressed their views on many local affairs. The growing concerns for decentralized governance from below became strong political resources for decentralists in promoting the reform. The 2000s decentralization reform in Korea, therefore, can be labeled as ‘collaborative decentralization.’

5 The SLDP raised the following issues in the central-local relationship: a) unbalanced distribution of national and local affairs (75%: 25%), b) imbalance of financial resources between the center and localities, c) restricted legislative and executive power of local governments, d) lack of institutions for conflict resolution, and etc.
2.2 Rise of Civic Organizations and Policy Competition over Decentralization

After the 1990s, civil society successfully transformed their focus of movements from democratization to democratic consolidation and new social movements, and it has created an atmosphere for citizen participation in various policy areas and reform processes (Kihl 2005; Lee and Arrington 2008). Since then, more than 50% of currently active civic organizations were established and some of big civic coalitions have started to enjoy their power over national, regional, and even international affairs (Kim and Moon 2003).

In the 1990-2000s, the most distinctive strategy of advocacy non-government organizations (NGOs) as well as other civic movements was to mobilize at the center in order to influence policymaking process (Lee and Arrington 2007, 81-2). Because their main target and the public’s desire were to transform highly centralized state power and business conglomerates, it was easier to get public support and escape from their parochial position by showing their visibility in central policymaking. In addition, nationalized NGO politics provided geographical advantage in networking with important political figures or making allies.

In this light, Citizen’s Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ) and People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD), which have played a crucial role in promotion of democracy and political-economic-social reform in Korea, expressed their interests in decentralization reform. CCEJ was originally focused on issues of economic justice such as economic inequality, education problems, business-labor relations, urban poverty, consumer rights and so forth, yet since 1993, it has extended its interests to various governance issues (Namkoong, 2007). CCEJ established the Committee of Local Autonomy as one of its specialized policy community and hired several intellectuals in order to advance asymmetrical central-local relationship. By organizing conferences called “Exhibition for Local Government Reform” since October 2000, CCEJ has contributed to national dynamization of the debates on decentralization nationally. Because of its ideologically midway position, CCEJ was more interested in bettering central-local system, while PSPD tended to lean toward “left emphasized” democracy and citizen participation issue. Therefore, CCEJ’s major concern was to upgrade intergovernmental relationship through institutional reforms such as efficient distribution of national affairs between central and local governments, granting educational autonomy, introduction of local police system, and so forth.⁶

PSPD also organized a coalition for local autonomy (Regional Solidarity for Participatory Local Autonomy) by bonding 18 civic organizations and actively expressed their views on decentralization movement. The direction of PSPD’s decentralization movements reflected its progressive color and thus was mainly interested in checking state power, democratization of local community power structure, and electoral movements.

In addition, some civic groups composed of private experts in administrative reform were concerned with decentralization. For instance, the Citizen’s Coalition for Better Government (CCBG) led by professionals and scholarly groups deeply engaged in issues related to reinventing governments. Unlike somewhat radical groups such as PSPD, this professional group chose to reflect its opinion on decentralization bills through legal, non-confrontational, and midway strategies. CCBG organized monthly policy forum and published many reports on governmental reform issues. Their professional perspectives were taken seriously and considerably incorporated in Roh Moo-Hyun government’s overall reform programs and roadmaps (Namkoong, 2007). As such, nationalized civic

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⁶ I. Kim, interview on October 26th, 2005.
organizations gradually became professionalized and played as the role of umbrella organizations.

Rather than these national organizations at the central level, however, a local-based civic organization, Civic Movement for Decentralization (CMD) was the most active single-issue civic group for decentralization since November of 2000. Unlike the ‘general-purpose’ civic organizations like CCEJ, PSPD, and CCBG at the national level, the CMD started decentralization movements as a local-based civic group in regional cities by mobilizing local elites as well as residents. By bringing decentralization and regional disparity issues to the fore, it could mobilize local citizens in big cities such as Taechŏn and Taegu which were suffering from devastating economic difficulties. In particular, at the initial stage of the SLDP legislation, the activities and concerns of the CMD influenced governmental bills for decentralization and nationally balanced development. Its activities for the promotion of decentralization progressed in two directions: a) mobilization of NGOs at the grass-root level and b) direct participation in politics.

First, ‘decentralization-minded’ local intellectuals such as local university faculty, local journalists, and local businessmen joined their forces to the CMD and were involved deeply in the movements. In 2001, about 3,000 intellectuals and the CMD members held a mass meeting, namely ‘the National Intellectuals’ Declaration for Decentralization’ in front of the National Assembly (Yŏnhap News, September 3rd, 2001), and declared the ‘local charters’ on March 22nd of the same year. In addition, to prompt at the grass-root level on the issue of decentralization, the CMD organized several academic meetings, workshops, and conferences in cooperation with local governments and their associations. Professor groups in the organization also presented several scholarly works on the effect of decentralization and drew up their own ‘Decentralization Promotion Bill’ and ‘National Balanced Development Bill’ which improved upon earlier versions of the governmental bills in July 2003.

Second, the CMD attempted to influence politicians and central bureaucrats by directly and indirectly participating in real political world. In particular, as one of electoral politics strategies, it invited three major presidential candidates – Lee Hoe-Chang, Roh Moo-Hyun, and Kwon Yong-Gil – right before the 2002 election, and prompted them to publicly make an agreement to actively pursue decentralization policies if they were elected (Chibang Pukwŏn Kukmin Hyŏpyak Sŏyaksik). This electoral strategy was somewhat successful in attracting politicians’ attention to the issues of decentralization. Additionally, the members of CMD personally lobbied for solid support from National Assemblymen to propose the decentralization promotion bills.

As a result of these activities and events to gain public attention and influence governmental bills of decentralization and balanced development, the vague concept of decentralization solidified into a firm request to the central government and political world. The dramatic rise of civic power around the issue of decentralization since 2000s have become critical in setting governmental agendas and the strong request from below was by and large reflected in the final version of the SLDP. Indeed, the opinion of civic organizations was seriously considered and adopted by the PCGID and MOGAHA bureaucrats in the early stage of agenda-setting for decentralization. This is because these pro-decentralization actors at the center wanted to gather specific information and proposals that were closer to the real situation of localities, and did not want to be blamed

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7 S. Ahn, interview on October 12th, 2005. He mentioned that the ultimate goal of the CMD was to put decentralization agendas on each presidential candidate’s campaign pledges.
8 Yoon, ibid; S. Ahn, ibid.
for ‘closed decision-making processes’ of decentralization reform. Empowered status of civic organizations in politics was reflected in this changed attitude of central actors in the politics of decentralization in the 2000s. In fact, the final form of SLDP was the product of dynamic discussion and debates among central actors, local governments, and civil society through various types of conferences and public hearings. Therefore, unlike conventional understanding, there have been vibrant and stronger politics at the grass-root level around decentralization reform.

### 2.3 Partnership with Local Government Associations

Before the 1990s, Korean local governments contributed to national politics by doing a minimal work on local agendas, and local residents were supposed to devote all of their attention to issues of national importance – not to their own community issues (Park 2006). Yet as localities rapidly urbanized and local democracy gradually consolidated after the 1990s, the political actors of localities were expected to play a crucial role with its efforts going to the construction of decent and competitive local communities by promoting decentralization. In addition, the growth of local governments and local political figures has become crucial in national politics as well as that of local communities, and there has been growing criticism on the central government’s excessive control over local governments. Local governments’ pressure for decentralization has been mainly expressed through the activities of four local government associations which were established in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In particular, collaboration with civic organizations was the key to moving the central government toward decentralization.

Through various lobbying activities, local government associations called for a holistic approach to the division of power within the nation by refusing the central government’s incremental strategy. To achieve the goal, “decentralize first and make up later” principle, the four associations organized an executive committee for negotiation with the central government, and prepared their own bill for the promotion of decentralization by cooperating with civic activist groups such as the CMD and CCEJ. For example, four local government associations and the CMD invited some National Assemblymen who were interested in decentralization and held a forum in order to discuss the future direction of the decentralization bills (September 3rd 2003). In addition, the CMD, CCEJ, and PSPD organized several intellectual meetings, workshops, and conferences on an ad hoc or regular basis, whenever there were issues requiring collaborative actions with local governments and their associations. In doing so, civic organizations and local government associations could make alternative decentralization proposals containing more comprehensive and radical decentralization plan against central government’s bills. Therefore, for civic organizations, networking with local governments through four associations was invaluable addition to their empowered position as policy competitor vis-à-vis the state.

### 2.4 Direct Participation through Governmental Positions

Decentralization reform (broadly political-administrative reform) requires more professional knowledge and a deeper understanding of the nature of governmental affairs, financial system, and policy implementation process than other social issues. In this respect, the trend is professionalization of civil society, and a considerable number of scholarly groups as a part of civil society have been deeply engaged in decentralization

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9 Yoon, ibid.
10 S. Ahn, ibid; I. Kim, ibid.
movement since the 1990s. On the one hand, the scholarly groups as special advisors of civic organizations contributed to facilitating decentralization by shaping public debates and advising political and administrative leaders through professional writings, discussions, media appearances, and scholarly researches on problems and promises of decentralization. Although the role of scholarly groups in the process of democratization movement was limited, they have become crucial groups of civic organization since 1990s. Even civic groups such as CCBG, which is a specialized civic organization for administrative reform, was created by intellectuals in 1997, and about 60% of the standing operation committee are professor groups in the public administration field (Namkoong, 2007). They served as presenters or discussants as representatives of civil society such as CCEJ, CCBG, and PSPD in public discussions, conferences, and hearings with regard to decentralization, and also contributed to various publications and policy reports containing highly technical and specialized issues. Consequently, scholarly groups armed with specialized knowledge provided important discursive background for civic organization activities, and contributed to the formation and direction of reform programs in the earlier stages.

In addition a more direct mode of intellectual groups’ participation in policymaking has been accelerated in Roh Moo-Hyun government. Firstly, a number of scholarly groups that were recommended by civil society became members of governmental advisory committees. The prototypical role of advisory committees is to advice president or governmental ministries and to deliberate policies at a relatively earlier stage of the policymaking process (Schwartz 1998). For instance, the PCGID is an advisory committee dealing with government innovation, reform, and decentralization issues. Yet because it was established by the pledge of President Roh in 2003, it was powerful enough to take initiative in the decentralization and administrative reform. The empowerment strategy for President Roh was placing people who were familiar with decentralization ideas and affiliated with him closely. Many of the chairmen and members of the PCGID had worked closely in civic organizations in the past and received strong support from the president. About 50% of the PCGID members came from university-level institutions and most of them were directly or indirectly related to civic organizations. Under this favorable circumstance, the PCGID could develop a diverse set of decentralization strategies, tasks, and rules, and mandated central ministries to carry out those affairs. The ‘Trojan horses’ left in the committee, as a consequence, made a great impact on the formulation of decentralization bills by diffusing decentralization ideas throughout governmental organizations and putting various interests together.

Second, some scholars directly held higher positions in governmental organizations and orchestrated the overall process of decentralization reform. For example, Professor Byung-Joon Kim who had taught urban public administration and local autonomy at a university in Korea was originally a core member of the Presidential Transition Committee (PTC) from December 2002 to February 2003 for President Roh and had strong academic background and practical experiences in government innovation and decentralization. Kim served in numerous governmental institutions, especially decentralization reform related positions such as the Chairman of PCGID (2003-2004), the Head of Policy Office of the Blue House (2004-2005), and the Vice Prime Minister of

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11 For example, PSPD which aimed to contribute to governmental innovation through monitoring governmental institutions were mostly composed of professionals such as lawyers, professor groups, and so forth (Namkoong, 2007).

12 This is because scholarly groups generally have a tendency to avoid confrontational and illegal “movements on streets.” Namkoong (2007).
Education and Human Resources (2006-2006). The positions were not just nominal. He took the leadership in the whole process of decentralization reform and exercised his authority in the loop of the power circle. In addition, Min-won Lee, a professor of Kwang-Ju University and a specialist in decentralization, was appointed as the leader of the PCNBD. He had worked with the Kwang-Ju branch of CCEJ and Coalition for Innovating Local Governments in the past, and engaged in the issues of local affairs and decentralization. With this substantial political power, it would be a clear mistake to downplay the expertise of qualified outside specialists in comparison with tenured technocrats in central ministries in the politics of decentralization. The political appointees held explanatory seminars and meetings for the National Assemblymen – in particular, members of the Subcommittee on Administrative Autonomy and Subcommittee on Legislation and Judiciary, who were in charge of the passage of the decentralization law, and in doing so, they provided their professional knowledge and ideas which were important for the assemblymen to be familiar with.

As a result, the activities of the political appointees from scholarly and civil society were noteworthy in pushing reform measures in the Roh administration. The Roh administration was often called “committee government” because many governmental committees were established and many core governmental agendas and reform policies were mushroomed in the deliberative process of the committees. Under these circumstances, the participation of civil society in various modes was essential in integrating various groups of social forces and governmental actors. Well-educated and reform-minded specialists in the committees provided innovative ideas to governmental reform projects, and contributed to developing blueprints for decentralization and innovation. Because decentralization, local autonomy, and innovation of government were relatively well-known subjects for civic activists from the academic world, their direct influence over the decentralization produced somewhat ‘feasible alternatives’ (Namkoong, 2007). Scholarly groups under the authoritarian regime were considered as mere outside advisors that legitimized excessive control over localities and civil society, yet scholar groups belonged to civic groups played a role as think tanks widening intellectual spectrum of public debates and providing practical knowledge for current decentralization reform drive.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS: DECLINING STATE POWER?

Even in the era of local democracy, the political debates and legislative politics for decentralization in Korea were mainly held in the central political arena. Conventional understanding on the politics of decentralization may argue that for countries like Korea where domestic political structure is highly centralized and the state has presented obstacles to the promotion of decentralization, vested interests at the center dominate the whole process of reform. Indeed, met with strong resistance from powerful central ministries and non-supportive national politicians, some urgent reform issues were delayed. Up until the late 1990s, the voices from below were largely rejected or ignored by those central stakeholders, because decentralization literally meant sharing powers with local and civil society and shrinkage of central organizations and state power. Even bureaucrats in certain ministries organized mid and street level civil servants and made an opposition group namely “A Team for Keeping MOGAHA” in order to systematically respond to governmental reorganization or massive civil servant dismissal (August, 2003). Under this strong centralism and state power, the series of decentralization reform were not successful.
However, the politics of decentralization under Roh Moo-Hyun government shows a somewhat different pattern from the past. The growing concerns from civil society and localities contributed to framing political discourses over decentralization issues at the center. The practice of local elections and autonomy for ten years under strong state ironically nurtured the political capacity of local and civil society actors, and broadly shared values and perceptions on the necessity of decentralized governance among them mobilized local elites, intellectuals, civil society actors as well as local politicians for the pursuit of decentralization reform. Therefore, the input and pressure from local and civil society were reflected to a large extent in the final version of decentralization legislation.

Nevertheless, it is hard to say that the strong state is dwindling or collapsed for several reasons: First, the position of local and civil society has become ‘passive’ after they successfully passed the SLDP in December 2003, because the responsibility of implementation of the law belonged to central ministries. The lack of monitoring power could not ensure the faithful implementation of transfer of power to localities, and the opposition from ministries reemerged in this process.

Second, the rise of civil society and localities was dependent upon the top political leader, and thus civic activists could not produce stable influence over the reform. Indeed, in the later part of his tenure in the office, President Roh focused more on relocation of the capital and North Korean issues, and his political allies and advisors faced serious criticism for mismanagement of national affairs and for scandals. Therefore, the discussion about decentralization gradually faded away from the priority of national agendas. Thus, the civil society’s development of policy channels to the center of power is still loosely institutionalized.

Finally, the mobilization for decentralization in Roh administration was quite an elite-centered movement. Local politicians, professors at local universities, businessmen, and local journalists who participated in civic organizations were well aware of the problems stemming from the asymmetric power relations between the state and society. Yet in terms of mobilization of grass-root basis for achieving local autonomy was need to be empowered beyond the level of just formal participation of elections.

Again, despite above limitations, it is still noteworthy to unravel the hidden role of civil society and localities in the politics of decentralization. The theories of pork-barrel politics or political gridlock cannot provide sufficient explanation on recent development of decentralization without the consideration of surprisingly vibrant local and civil society. Even bureaucrats and central politicians recognize the power of civil society and prefer to maintain the status quo under the pressure of reform and loosen connection of political gridlock.

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