

Heike Hermanns

Democratization of political and civil society at the local level: The anti-nuclear movement in Samch'ôk City, South Korea*

Abstract

This paper explores the effects of democratization on local decision-making and local civil groups using anti-nuclear activists in Samch'ôk City and their appropriation of new means of political participation as an example. Local democracy was introduced with democratization in 1988, increasing citizens' influence on local decision-making through elected representatives as well as petitions, recalls and referenda. Feeling empowered by such new channels of direct participation, civil activists are using such means as part of their protest repertoire. In 2014, for example, opponents of the construction of a nuclear power station in Samch'ôk City organized a local referendum to express their resistance. This move started at the local level in cooperation with regional and national civil groups. Authorities rejected the referendum as they considered the construction a matter of national interest. This paper outlines how the movement has appropriated an administrative measure introduced to increase the participation of local people in local decision-making to oppose a local project as well as national policies. It also highlights the continuing de-centralization of civil activities from the dominance of Seoul-based advocacy groups. The Samch'ôk referendum serves as an example of the continuing struggle for democratization at the local level, to overcome the dominance of national agencies, narratives and activism.

* This work was supported by the Development Fund Foundation, Gyeongsang National University, 2015.

Keywords: local democracy, anti-nuclear protests, local civil society, Samch'ok City

Introduction

In the literature on Korean politics and democracy, the local level is often overlooked. This is largely due to Korea's long history of centralization as well as the lack of powers that hampers contemporary local politics. While the Republic of Korea (hereinafter Korea or South Korea) is generally regarded as a successful case of democratization, the process is slow to permeate all levels of administration, both in terms of administrative priorities as well as civic activism. The contest over control of local issues between national agencies, local authorities and local citizens continues. Since the balance of power is tilted in favour of politicians and bureaucrats, local democracy with broad citizen participation remains underdeveloped. The interests of local citizens, in particular outside the capital region, are often underrepresented in the public debate and the academic literature alike. This situation affects two different spheres of democratization: administrative autonomy and the representation of local citizens' interests. In practice, these concerns are intertwined, as the example of the anti-nuclear referendum in Samch'ok City shows. Using the legal means provided by the new local autonomy laws, activists based in the city seek to increase their influence on the decision-making process on the construction of a new nuclear power station in their city. This challenges not only local authorities but also the national agencies promoting the project on grounds of national energy security. In contrast to past local protests against nuclear facilities, which were often driven by parochial interests, many activists in Samch'ok City are embedded in a broader anti-nuclear stance and a progressive narrative. While cooperation with civil groups in Seoul is sought, local activists remain their own agents. Civil movement activities are thus also de-centralizing. The changing nature of Korean civil society has been highlighted by the increasing role of online mobilization and ad-hoc candlelight vigils over the last decade. The paper places the events in Samch'ok City in the wider context of the decentralization of both administration as well as civil society. Moreover, it shows the widening repertoire of protest activities as well as the pool of participants, placing it in the literature on the broader changes in Korean civil society over the last decade.

This shift in civic activities in terms of participants, location and organization since the 2000s deserves a much deeper discussion than is possible here, but a few trends are worth noting. Following the intro-

duction of democracy in 1988, activists in the pro-democracy movement shifted their interests to more specific issues, such as women's rights or the environment.¹ The shift is reflected in the change in terminology from *minjung* (people) to *simin* (citizens) and from violent protests to more peaceful activities and even cooperation with the government.² Only a few groups sought a broad membership while many remained as small advocacy groups, mostly based in Seoul.³ During the Kim Dae-jung-administration (1998-2003) and, even more so, under Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008), civil activists joined the government and relied on government funding for their projects, blurring the line between political and civil society. Around the same time, mobile phones and the Internet opened new opportunities for direct citizen mobilization. Candlelight vigils and other demonstrations were organized on an ad-hoc basis by citizens themselves using new communication technologies, without the need for organized civil groups.⁴ Such new avenues of participation increased the number of participants substantially. This trend can be seen as the democratization of civil society, which, this paper contends, also extends to the decentralization of civil activities.

The protests are embedded in the wider progressive and pro-democracy discourse and feed into the narrative of unfinished democratization promoted by civil groups. Broadly simplifying, conservatives favour economic policies of national development, while progressives highlight the rights of the people and distribution inequalities.⁵ Although this conflict is played out primarily at the national level, local actors also expand their own agency and use means offered by the local democratization process to promote their interests, pushing the issue from below. Residents of

¹ E.g. Shin, Gi-Wook, and Paul Y. Chang, editors. *South Korean Social Movements, From Democracy to Civil Society*. Abdington: Routledge, 2011.

² E.g. Lee, Nam-hee. 'From Minjung to the Simin: The Discursive Shift in Korean Social Movements'. In *South Korean Social Movements, From Democracy to Civil Society*, edited by Shin Gi-Wook, and Paul Y. Chang, 41-57. Abdington: Routledge, 2011. Levine, Amy L. *South Korean Civil Movement Organisations: Hope, Crisis and Pragmatism in Democratic Transition*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016.

³ Kim, Pan Suk. 'Advocacy Coalitions and Policy Change: The Case of South Korea's Saemangeum Project,' *Administration & Society* 44 (2012): suppl 85S-103S.

⁴ Shin, Jin-Wook. 'Entwicklung und Ausdifferenzierung der Zivilgesellschaft in Südkorea'. In *Länderbericht Korea*, edited by Lee Eun-Jeung and Hannes B. Mosler, 302-313. Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2015.

⁵ Chae, Haesook. 'The Fluid Middle in South Korean Politics'. *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 50 (2015): 497-519. Lee, Hwa-Yeon and Yun Sun-Jin. 'Miryang koam songjōnsōllo kōnsōl kaltūnge taehan ilganji podo punsōng - hwan'gyōngjōngūi kwanjōmesō'. *Economy and Society* 98 (2013): 40-76.

Miryang County, for instance, staged a long-running protest against the construction of a high-voltage power line crossing their land, while the residents of Samch'ok City opposed the construction of a new nuclear complex.⁶ Against this political backdrop, this paper explores the referendum against a nuclear power complex in Samch'ok City, held in October 2014. First, a brief overview of the connection between democracy and local government is presented, followed by an introduction to local democracy in South Korea. The paper then turns to the role of nuclear power and anti-nuclear protests in Korea. The history of nuclear plans for Samch'ok City is explored and connected with the wider discussion on democratization in the conclusion.

Local democracy

A mature democracy is characterized by democratic institutions at all levels of government, from the national government down to the lowest level of district administration. While often overlooked in the study of democratization, decentralization is an important component of this process, in particular in new democracies with a history of a strong central administration and a focus on output and efficiency.⁷ Local democracy has been praised as early as the 19th century by scholars like Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill for the immediate impact on local people on the policies that affect them directly, as well as a training ground for democratic habits.⁸ Local democracy serves as a 'school of democracy' by opening opportunities for civic participation in local politics and empowering local residents in the democratic process.⁹ Local democracy carries aspects of direct as well as representative democracy. Participation comes in many forms with varying degrees of engagement and organization, including town hall meetings and debates, formation of civil groups and political parties, elections for representative posts and institutions and referenda. Moreover, elections allow citizens to hold representatives accountable. Ideally, civil society groups and political parties develop a dense network of local offices, which serve as transmission channels to

⁶ E.g. Lee and Yun, op. cit.

⁷ Grindle, Merilee. *Going Local: Decentralization, Democratization, and the Promise of Good Governance*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

⁸ de Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America*. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000 (1835). Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism, Liberty and Representative Government*. London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1910 (1861).

⁹ Ibid.

the central office, connecting local citizens with leaders and national representatives.

These arguments focus on the input by citizens to local politics, emphasizing 'government *by* the people'. Another line of argument focuses on the output of local government. Proponents of local autonomy stress the importance of local knowledge and localized solutions that make local government more flexible and responsive. Local areas may pilot new policy approaches before they are applied across the whole country. Focusing on output, expert knowledge is transferred from the centre to local governments, keeping quality at an even level. This output perspective focuses on local government as an efficient service provider, representing 'government *for* the people'. Opponents of local government fear that parochialism could undermine the uniformity of a country.¹⁰ Centralized government guarantees equal and uniform treatment across the country while also taking national interests into account. For these reasons, authorities aiming for a rapid economic development often favour centralized administration. Non-democratic governments also prefer centralized administration, as it is easier to control.

Local administration in South Korea

Korea has a long history of centralized administration going back to the royal dynasties. The Republic of Korea was established as a unitary state in 1948 with a three-tiered administrative system, comprising the national, provincial and local level. In the 1950s and in 1960, local mayors and councillors were elected, but after the 1961-coup d'état, local elections were suspended and the Ministry of Home Affairs appointed the heads of local administrations, who then merely implemented the policies of the central administration. During the authoritarian regimes of Park Chung-hee (1961-1979) and Chun Doo-hwan (1980-1988), the pro-democracy movement criticized the centralized control of local government and demanded the return of local autonomy.¹¹ The opposition hoped to form alternative centres of power outside the capital to challenge the power of the central government from such local bases.¹²

¹⁰ Langrod, Georges. 'Local Government and Democracy'. *Public Administration*. 31 (1953): 26-31.

¹¹ Pae, Sung Moon. 'Institutionalized Local Self-Government in South Korea'. In *Political Change in South Korea*, edited by Kim Ilpyong J. and Kihl Young Whan, 113-138. New York, NY: Paragon House, 1988.

¹² Kim, Ilpyong J. and Sung Chung Eun. 'Establishing Democratic Rule in South Korea: Local Autonomy and Democracy'. In *Establishing Democratic Rule: The Reemergence of*

In the 1990s, a new democratic layer was attached to the South Korean administration with the addition of local and regional councils. The positions of mayor, governor, and county and district head also became subject to elections. This added over four thousand electoral positions to the political arena, increasing administrative accountability as well as citizens' opportunities for political participation. After introductory rounds of mayoral elections in 1991 and council elections in 1995, local elections are now held in four-year intervals, two years after elections for the National Assembly. Local electoral politics is struggling due to a general lack of interest, as indicated by the falling voter turnout in local elections. Politicians and voters alike treat local elections as an extension of national politics and a judgment on the work of the president and the National Assembly.¹³ Beyond the key elections for the mayor of Seoul and some provincial governors, interest in the election campaigns is low. Local autonomy is often criticized over the (perceived) high cost and irrelevance of local politicians.¹⁴ This is, at least partially, a consequence of the limited powers of local and regional governments. The devolution of power progresses slowly as central institutions are reluctant to pass power to lower level institutions, fearing for decreased quality of services and increasing inequality.¹⁵ With the balance of power in favour of the central administration, local democracy remains merely a 'democratic façade'.¹⁶

Beyond administrative processes and elected representatives, local democracy also holds the promise of greater citizen participation. Local branches of civil organizations based in Seoul as well as indigenous groups thus found another arena for voicing their concerns, de-centralizing civil activity. The changing political opportunity structure allowed national and local activists to exert greater influence on the public agenda and

Local Government in Post-Authoritarian Systems, edited by Kim Ilpyong J. and Jane Shapiro Zacek, 263-284. Washington: The Washington Institute Press, 1993.

¹³ Hwang, A-Ran. '2014nyōn chibangsōn'gōūi t'ūkchinggwa pyōnhwa'. *21st Century Political Science Association Journal* 24 (2014): 319-341.

¹⁴ Park, Chong-Min. 'Quality of Local Government and Democratic Citizenship'. In *Quality of Life in Korea: Comparative and Dynamic Perspectives*, edited by Doh Chull Shin, Conrad P. Rutkowski and Chong-Min Park, 291-319. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publisher, 2003.

¹⁵ Bae, Yooil, and Kim Sunhyuk. 'Civil society and Local Activism in South Korea's Local Democratization'. *Democratization* 20 (2013): 260-286.

¹⁶ Seong, Kyoung-Ryung. 'Delayed Decentralization and Incomplete Democratic Consolidation'. In *Institutional Reform and Democratic Consolidation in Korea*, edited by Larry J. Diamond and Shin Doh-Chull, 127-148. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2000, p. 129.

decision-making processes. De-centralization has brought more leeway to local government across low-impact policy areas, including environmental concerns. Administrations seek the active input of citizens on decisions, be it free school lunches or environmental programmes like the 'Local Agenda 21' that many cities initiated with citizen input in the 1990s.¹⁷ At the lower administrative levels, several measures to formalize popular participation were introduced over the course of the last decade, in the hope of revitalizing citizenship as well as opening local administrations to public scrutiny, leading to improved services and greater responsiveness.¹⁸ Article 14 of the Local Autonomy Act states that

'The heads of local governments may put to residents' voting major matters, etc. to be decided by the local governments which impose an excessive burden or have a significant effect on the residents'.¹⁹

Already proposed in 1994, the Local Referendum Act languished in the National Assembly until it was enacted in December 2003.²⁰ Referenda have been held on such diverse issues like the re-organization of boundaries, possible construction and location of public facilities, and regional development plans. A referendum is generally called and administered by the concerned administration, and supervised by the provincial or local electoral commission. At least one-third of the population needs to participate and out of these, more than half need to vote in favour for a referendum to pass. Citizens can petition the authorities to call a referendum if they manage to collect the signatures of at least one-fourth of the local population in support of such a motion. The administration retains the right to reject such proposals. Recently, referenda have been conducted despite the rejection of such an application, as is explored below.

¹⁷ Jeong, Hoi Seong, and W.J. Seo. 'Democratization, Decentralization and Environmental Governance in Korea'. In *Democratization, Decentralization, and Environmental Governance in Asia*, edited by Akihisa Mori, 52-71. Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2012.

¹⁸ Bae and Kim, op. cit.

¹⁹ See the National Law Information Center. *Local Autonomy Act*. At <http://www.law.go.kr/eng/>.

²⁰ The National Law Information Center. *Local Referendum Act*. At <http://www.law.go.kr/lsEfInfoP.do?lsiSeq=183583#>.

Nuclear power and its opponents

In order to understand the disputes related to energy-related projects, a few comments on the main actors and the role of nuclear power for the Korean economy are presented in the following. Nuclear power provides about 29% of the energy consumption of South Korea, a share that is expected to rise in the future. Currently, 25 nuclear power plants (NPP) in four locations are producing electricity, operated by the *Korea Hydro and Nuclear Power Company* (KHNP), a subsidiary of *Korea Electric Power Corporation* (KEPCO), in which the Korean state holds 51% of shares. A further three plants are under construction, coordinated by KEPCO. The first generation of nuclear reactors is reaching the end of their thirty-year lifespan, requiring the construction of additional plants. Current Korean energy plans foresee 29 NPP active by 2029, including the construction of around eleven new nuclear plants.²¹ The addition of reactors to existing locations (two each in Uljin County and Gori on the border of Ulsan and Busan) and the expansion of the older reactors' lifespan are less controversial than the dedication of one or two new areas for nuclear complexes.

Since the 1950s, government sources and scientists have promoted nuclear power as a safe and cheap source of energy.²² In light of South Korea's lack of natural energy resources, the supply of affordable energy independent from imports continues to be an interest of national concern. The development of a domestic nuclear power industry has been supported since the days of Park Chung-hee as a key element of South Korea's modernization process.²³ The positive narrative on nuclear power resulted in high levels of support for nuclear power; throughout the first decade of the new millennium, over eighty per cent of Koreans had a favourable impression.²⁴ Following the 2011 Fukushima nuclear meltdown, a feeling of general unease has spread, yet many see no alternative to nuclear power.²⁵ This is partially due to NPPs location in peripheral

²¹ MOTIE. 'The 7th Basic Plan for Long-term Electricity Supply and Demand, MOTIE notice #2015-403', 24 July 2015. Accessed 29 August 2016. <https://www.kpx.or.kr/eng/>.

²² Jasanoff, Sheila, and Kim Sang-Hyun. 'Containing the Atom: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and Nuclear Power in the United States and South Korea'. *Minerva* 47 (2009): 119-146.

²³ Hermanns, Heike. 'South Korean Nuclear Energy Policies and the Public Agenda in the 21st Century'. *Asian Policies and Politics* 7 (2015): 265-282.

²⁴ Kim, Kyung Shin, and Yun Sun-Jin. 'T'ül chikki hyokwa-e ttarûn kihu pyônhwa taeûngch'aeg-ûro-sô wônjaryôk palchôn-e taehan suyongdo pyônhwa-wa chôngch'aekchôk hamûi-e taehan t'amsaekchôk yôn'gu'. *Environmental Policy* 19 (2010): 91-129.

²⁵ In February 2015, only 26.8% of Koreans favoured an increase in nuclear power, while

rural areas, away from major population centres. The construction of nuclear power stations has been resisted by local residents in the past, but their activities were suppressed by authoritarian rulers, as local concerns over health and (financial) wellbeing stood in opposition to established national interests of rapid economic development fuelled by cheap energy. Moreover, residents in proximity to nuclear power stations were and continue to be pacified with economic benefits, such as additional investment and employment opportunities.²⁶ The contemporary opposition against nuclear power is informed by both principled stands against nuclear power as well as localized resistance, also known as NIMBY ('not in my backyard'). The goals of civil society groups working on the national level coincide with local interests in their rejection of nuclear power plant construction in this particular area, but may well diverge over the overall goal of a nuclear-free Korea.

Democratization opened the space for the formation of generalized environmental groups, such as the Korean Federation of Environmental Movements (KFEM).²⁷ Like other civil society groups, they identify themselves as an advocacy group, rather than focusing on specific topics.²⁸ Green activism often takes a top-down approach, led by a few, well-connected activists based in Seoul who take a stance on principled grounds.²⁹ Given the generalizing nature of environmental groups, nuclear

29.7% wanted a reduction and 37.7% were satisfied with the current situation (data from Realmeter. 'Kungmin 67% t'ewōnjōn ch'uga kōnsōl pandae'. Accessed 2 September 2016, <http://www.realmeter.net/2015/02/국민-67-원전-추가-건설-반대>

(kungmin-67-wōnjōn-ch'uga-kōnsōl-pandae).

²⁶ Chung, Ji Bum, et al. 'Analysis of Local Acceptance of a Radioactive Waste Disposal Facility'. *Risk Analysis* 28 (2008): 1021-1032. Park, Sung Yoon. 'Constrained Cooperation in South Korea's Nuclear Power Policy and Its Side Effects'. *EPIK Journals Online* 4 (2013). Accessed 3 July 2013, http://www.eai.or.kr/data/bbs/kor_report/epik2013_j2.pdf.

²⁷ For the development of the environmental movement in South Korea see Ku, Do-Wan. 'The Korean Environmental Movement: Green Politics through Social Movement'. In *East Asian Social Movements: Power, Protest, and Change in a Dynamic Region*, edited by Jeffrey Broadbent and Vicky Brockman, 205-29. New York: Springer, 2011.

²⁸ Kim, Sunhyuk. 'Civil Society and Democracy in Korea'. In *Governmental Changes and Party Political Dynamics in Korea and Japan*, edited by Japanese Political Science Association and Korean Political Science Association, 213-233. Tokyo: Bokutakusha, 2012.

²⁹ Interview with activist 2016; see also Lee, Sook-Jong, and Celeste Arrington. 'The Politics of NGOs and Democratic Governance in South Korea and Japan'. *Pacific Focus* 23 (2008): 75-96. Ju, Chang Bum, and Shui-Yan Tang. 'External Legitimacy, Goal

power is only one of the issues they rally around, with no dedicated organization to the anti-nuclear protests that could compare to those in European countries. After the 2011 Fukushima incident, public concerns and civil society protests were framed around the safety of domestic plants and protection from negative influences of the Japanese accident, but the overall need for nuclear power plants in South Korea was not challenged.³⁰ Survey results, however, indicate that the support for the construction of more NPP is declining but, ultimately, worries about energy supply rank higher.³¹ A key activity of environmental groups are thus efforts to raise awareness of the dangers of nuclear energy production, whether it is Greenpeace using power boats to attract media attention or the regular 'nuclear pilgrimages' to hand out informational leaflets that are organized by several groups in rotation every Saturday in Seoul.³²

Since the Roh Moo-hyun-administration, the dominance of national activists in the agenda-setting process on environmental issues is declining.³³ Consequently, the distinction between local protests based on NIMBY and national protests on principles is also weakening, as local activists are gaining agency and combining local concerns with a more principled stand. The anti-nuclear protests in Samch'ok City are thus an indication of the changing patterns of protest and their localization. Local activism plays a greater role in protests in reaction to the new political opportunities that the introduction of local democracy opens.³⁴ Opposition against Gori NPP near Busan is organized by local anti-nuclear activists working for a safer environment and future of their children. They are supported by activists from other parts of the country on special occasions. This includes a growing number of 'hope buses', filled with supporters from other cities who lend their assistance to a protest event in another city. The nascent anti-nuclear activism in Yeongdeok County, for instance, benefited substantially from such support, including activists

Con-gruence and Collective Resistance: Environmental NGOs and Land Use Politics in South Korea'. *Urban Studies* 48 (2011): 811-825.

³⁰ Hermanns, Heike. 'Health Risks and Protest in South Korea; A Comparison of the Protests Against Imported Beef in 2008 and Nuclear Energy in 2011'. *Korean Political Science Review* 48 (2014): 31-49.

³¹ Realmeter, op. cit.

³² Author's observations.

³³ Levine (op. cit.) discusses the changes in civil society organizations since the Roh administration, while Bae and Kim (op. cit.) focus more on local activities.

³⁴ See also Park, Chong-Min. 'Local Governance and Community Power in Korea'. *Korea Journal* 46 (2006): 9-32.

from Seoul, Incheon and Daegu visiting over a weekend to spread the word about the upcoming referendum in November 2015.³⁵ Yeongdeok activists also join activities in Seoul and Busan, leading to growing personal networks and inter-regional engagement, as well as proliferation of protest tactics.

The referendum in Samch'ök City

Samch'ök City has a complicated history with regard to its applications to host a nuclear complex. The city is located on the East Coast in southern Kangwŏn-do, bordering Uljin County (Kyŏngsang-bukdo). The Hanul (Uljin) NPP is just across the provincial border. Samch'ök City already hosts a thermal power plant and a LNG production facility. In light of its limited industrial development, the city has been discussed as a potential host for a new nuclear complex for several decades. Proposals for a NPP in the area were first made by the central government in the 1980s. The introduction of local democracy complicated the plans of the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy, the Ministry of Construction and KNHP, as the number of actors and their accountability by citizens increased. In the early 2000s, the pro-development mayor of Samch'ök City submitted an application to host the nuclear waste storage facility, which was unsuccessful. When a new tender for a NPP was opened in 2010 by the central government, another application was submitted. According to one survey, 97% of the population were in support of the application in 2009, but, although this is quoted in various reports, the high level of support remains disputed.³⁶ Opposition forces claim the application contained only 400 signatures as a sign of support for the project.³⁷ The application revived opposition against construction projects connected to nuclear power and led to vocal protests. After the 2011 Fukushima nuclear meltdown, the April 2012 parliamentary elections served as a first indicator of growing resistance in the area. Several politicians expressed their opposition against the plans and signed an agreement to demand a referendum on the issue following the election.³⁸ Later in 2012, a coalition

³⁵ Author's observation.

³⁶ An, Soon Cheol. 'Kukch'aeksaöbŭi chölich'ajöng chöngŭiwa chumint'up'yor samch'öng wönjön könsöl punjaeng saryerül chungshimŭro'. *Dispute Resolution Studies Review* 13 (2015): 65-95

³⁷ Park, Soo-hyuk. [Interview] The Mayor who's Leading Samcheok's Anti-nuclear Movement'. *Hangyoreh*, 9 October 2014.

³⁸ Choi Sung-hyon. 'Tonghae samch'öng ch'ongsön hubodül t'ewönjön yuch'i pandae'. *KyungHyang Sinmun* 2 April 2012.

to push for a referendum was formed, comprising local politicians, and local and national civil and religious groups from a broad spectrum, including trade unions, religious groups as well as middle and high school students. While there was interaction between local and national activists, the impetus came from the local area. Despite their efforts, they failed to reach the necessary amount of votes to submit an application, since only 25% of eligible citizens supported the referendum bid.

In June 2014, the construction of the NPP dominated the elections for Samch'ok council and mayor-ship.³⁹ The incumbent mayor of Samch'ok City ran his campaign on his support for the application, while his opponent promised a revision. The latter won with 63% of the votes, a margin of over 10,000 votes. The candidates for governor of Kangwôn-do also expressed their opposition against the proposed construction project, in contrast to their counterparts in the southern neighbour Kyôngsangbuk-do who mostly remained pro-nuclear. Reflecting the changing mood among Samch'ok citizens, signatures for another referendum were collected by a coalition of mostly local activists. This time, the number of signatures satisfied the quorum regulation. The local electoral commission, however, rejected the application for the referendum, as it was 'related to an issue of national interest' and not a local matter.⁴⁰ The referendum initiators, including the mayor of Samch'ok City, decided to hold the referendum anyway, under the supervision of an independent agency. A quorum of one-third of eligible voters was reached comfortably, as more than two-thirds of citizens voted in the referendum (68%). The vast majority was against the construction project (85%). Authorities in Seoul, however, declared the referendum to be illegal and the outcome thus as being irrelevant. In the aftermath of the referendum, a petition was submitted to clarify if government officials had illegally mobilized voters for the referendum, resulting in a police inspection of several officials. The use of legal means to challenge government officials and their decisions by both sides can be seen as a sign of growing maturity of protest activities and acceptance of the legal processes of local democracy.

The rejection of the referendum by the authorities exemplifies the different interpretations of article 8 in the Local Autonomy Law, in particular, the meaning of 'an excessive burden' and 'a significant effect'. The supporters of the nuclear expansion prioritized national energy security

³⁹ Author's observations.

⁴⁰ For more detailed discussion of the legal aspects, refer to Park (2015).

that overrides local interests.⁴¹ KHNP CEO Cho Seok refers to the project as “a state duty”.⁴² To alleviate fears, KHNP works on improving trust in nuclear power by promoting its safety record in public campaigns. Supporters of the referendum, in contrast, prioritize citizen interests and the wellbeing of local residents. The anti-nuclear mayor of Samch’ôk City emphasizes the need to expand renewable energy projects as an alternative to nuclear power, but the coal thermal power station, which is already located in the city is also under expansion.⁴³ Solving the conundrum of the national energy supply is obviously beyond the means of this movement. The future of the Samch’ôk nuclear complex is unclear: KNHP continues to buy land in the area, although the project is not listed under future construction plans.⁴⁴ Local opposition activities continue, with, for example, a demonstration on the anniversary of the referendum with over 5,000 participants. The use of citizen-initiated referenda is now copied in other areas. In 2015, an application for a referendum on the construction of two NPPs in Yôngdôk County was also rejected. Following the example of Samch’ôk City, activists held a referendum under their own auspices but failed to raise the required number of participants in the vote.

Anti-nuclear protest activities continue to this day, taking a variety of forms, including banners, candlelight vigils, and demonstrations but also regular information sessions as well as activities in social media. Most days, a lone demonstrator stands outside Samch’ôk Post Office to highlight the continued resistance.⁴⁵ One goal is to gain the attention of local and national media, both in traditional media such as newspapers as well as new media, including blogs and online newspapers.⁴⁶ Interaction with international actors is actively sought, for instance, with activists in Japan and Germany and the visiting Greenpeace flagship *Rainbow Warrior*. Local protesters cite concerns over the environment and the resistance of local people, focusing on cultural and emotional motivations, while

⁴¹ An, op. cit.

⁴² Park, op. cit.

⁴³ Once energy production has started, nuclear power stations emit fewer greenhouse gas emissions than thermal power stations, so have less impact on global climate change.

⁴⁴ Eonl Öllonhongbot'im. 'Hansuwön, ulchin 8 kaesaöm ch'oejonghabüi, yôngdökün chiyöksaöm palgul'. Accessed 21 November 2014. <https://cms.khnp.co.kr/news/presscenter141121/>.

⁴⁵ Under South Korea's strict laws on public assemblies, any political assembly of more than one person needs permission from the local police force, so lone protesters are a frequent feature in Korea.

⁴⁶ Author's interviews.

supporters of the NPP focus on national energy supply security.⁴⁷ The protest is embedded in the broader anti-nuclear narrative as well as other progressive concerns, in particular, the distribution of environmental risks within the country. This contrast places the conflict in the wider context of the fault lines in Korean society: on the one side, the pro-development conservatives and neo-liberals and on the other, the progressives, orientated towards citizens' interests. Activists are aware of this alliance, as they also participate and link with protests on related topics, such as the commemorations on the Sewol ferry sinking. In contrast to the 1990s, local activists are working on similar goals and on the same level with national activists, establishing permanent networks based on a more equal footing.⁴⁸ The old hierarchy and division into local and national interests are no longer visible. The case study thus also exemplifies the de-centralization of civil activities. Local civil activists have been empowered, not the least through means of local democracy and political participation, elections and referenda.

Conclusion

This paper explores the effects of democratization on local politics and local civil activism with the anti-nuclear movement in Samch'ôk City as an example. Democratization has affected administrative processes, as citizen participation is now promoted. While the devolution of power to local administrations may be slowly progressing, central government agencies no longer hold the power over all local authority decisions. Local electoral politics and other means of citizen participation have increased local influence on the decision-making process and thus democratized local politics. Legal provisions including referenda were intended to give administrative agencies the means to consult with citizens, yet, in the case here, citizens added local referenda to their protest repertoire to challenge local and national decisions. Using these, activists attract attention and promote discussion about the topic in the local communities and beyond, even if the results are declared irrelevant.

This growing activism in peripheral regions challenges the dominance of national agencies but also national priorities. A substantial number of Samch'ôk citizens used the local elections in 2014 to show their anti-nuclear position, and they were also willing to use other legitimate democratic measures to this end. Their success was declined by local

⁴⁷ An, op. cit.

⁴⁸ Author's interviews with activists.

authorities on legal grounds, highlighting the tension between local and national goals, and between technical and emotional approaches to the topic. Local resistance opposes the risk-benefit allocation inherent in the economic development model of Korea; urban areas reap the benefits such as cheap energy, while the rural peripheral areas carry the risks. Local campaigners are well aware of this tension, as they engage with activists from across the country in the progressive camp. The activities are therefore embedded in the wider political cleavage structure of conservatives and progressives. The effects of de-centralization can be felt here, too. These processes empowered local activists among civil society groups, breaking the dominance of established civil groups originating in the pro-democracy movement of the 1980s. New communication technologies as well as the deepening of local democracy open a window of opportunity for other actors, with different backgrounds and priorities. The growing agency of local activists changes the dynamics of the relationship of local and national activists in favour of a more balanced connection. Despite these positive observations, the struggle for democratization at the local level to overcome the dominance of national agencies, narratives and activism continues.

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