

The Study of Local Politics in Asia: A Comparative Perspective*

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1. Introduction

Politics at local-level has not, in the past, been considered a proper subject for comparative analysis in Asia. With the exception of studies done in Japan and India, Asian scholarship using local political systems as units of analysis is meager. There are a number of reasons for this neglect. For one, the history of the state tradition of Asia is mostly one of a system of unitary government with centralized control by the state bureaucracy. Many Asian countries, furthermore, experienced extended periods of colonial rule. In these countries the colonial powers, in the course of setting up new means of control to replace the traditional system, further restrained the limited local autonomy that existed under the monarchical system. Finally, leadership during the nation-building and modernization periods was largely of authoritarian type, the aim of which was to maximize the power, authority and function of central government.

Asian scholars have recently begun to recognize the importance and benefits of studying local political institutions from comparative perspectives. It is, after all, at the local level that national policies are implemented and various government services are delivered. Local communities are, furthermore, important arenas in which a nation's political processes are actually experienced. Citizen demands and popular participation are mainly aggregated in and articulated through local channels. The study of local units of governance therefore provides the basis for analyzing and comparing national political systems in more concrete terms.

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For those seeking an understanding of politics at national level, there is a strategic advantage in studying politics at the subnational level. Politics at the subnational level is usually less complex than national-level politics. Empirical data and research materials are, moreover, easier to collect and less restricted at the local level than at the national level. For example, it is far easier to gain access to subnational leaders than to national leaders.

Another reason for the increasing interest in local politics in Asia is that the public and policymakers have shown in recent years a growing appetite for more systematic knowledge about the political and administrative affairs of the subnational communities and local governments. In many instances the local community is the proving ground for development programs. The dilemma of centralization and concentration of power in the central government, imbalanced economic growth among regions and unequal distribution of resources among different local communities have become acute problems of social and economic development commonly shared by developing countries. The reform of local government organizations is viewed today as a key to the solution of these problems and has become an important agenda for political development in many Asian countries.

The purpose of this paper is to look into the problem of comparative research on the subnational political institutions in Asia. In addressing the issues, we face the problems of both methodology and substance of the scientific knowledge. The ideas for this paper are not to answer various questions attendant upon these problems. Instead, I will highlight some of my personal observations that I have come across while I initiated and coordinated a multi-nation comparative study project on local governments in Asia. I will also try to reveal some tentative conclusions that I feel worthwhile to share with someone who wants to conduct similar comparative research on subnational political institutions. How we have coped with a complex set of issues that we had come across while conducting a cross-national comparative project using the local political systems as units of analysis in Asia may benefit those who want to do similar studies in other regions. It may also be worthwhile to see whether the problems we came across are common to other parts of the world or unique to the Asian context.

2. Conceptual and Definitional Problems

Local political institutions, like other national political organizations, are product of the complex forces originating from the historical, social, cultural, and political traditions of nations. Just as the traditions of nations differ from each other, the characteristics and workings of local political systems will show great variation according to the political settings and economic conditions in which they exist and the social changes that take place around them. One should therefore approach the study of local politics, first of all, with the assumption that the peculiarities would be more prominent than the commonalities across nations. For this reason, it is advisable to adopt a methodology of case studies so that the unique nature of a nation's political experience can be fully explained. When both the differences and the similarities are effectively unraveled, a more meaningful and parsimonious comparative perspective can be established. At the same time, the comparative study of subnational politics in Asia is at such a rudimentary stage that we need, if we want to make a meaningful comparison, to start with the basic structural information and devote our attention to comparing the structural aspects of the local political system.

It would be a mistake to isolate the study of local political institutions from the study of national political processes. Many of the problems facing the local community, especially in rapidly modernizing developing countries, stem primarily from policies made by national governments. Likewise, solutions to these problems are not subject to remedy through local choices alone and might be more effectively confronted with national measures. For this reason, it is very important to look carefully into the relationship between the central/federal governments and the state/local communities.

National-local relations and the autonomy granted by a state to its local units can be analyzed in terms of four dimensions of linkage—structural, functional, personnel and fiscal relations. Discretionary powers of subnational political institutions vary according to the kind of roles the central state plays in each of these factors. It is, however, difficult to examine these four factors systematically, because the national-local relations in almost every country is not based upon a systematic design. Rather they are the product of historical evolution, with adjustments being made piecemeal to

meet changing conditions and evolving problems. Nevertheless, it is important to look into the nature of such forces to ascertain what implications they might have for the performance of local political institutions in meeting the need of the community and increasing the well-being of the residents.

Whether a country's government system is unitary or not further distinguishes the type and structure of the local governance. For example, many countries in Asia are "unitary" governments in the sense that all the political-administrative subunits are legally "created" by the authority of the central governments. All political institutions below the national level are subordinate to the central governments and subject to stringent control by the regimes in the center. Local governments possess only those powers and discretionary authority specifically given to them by the central governments.

Nation-building, industrialization and urbanization seem to be additional macro variables explaining variation of the center-local relations. These are factors which have been proven so far as hindering the balance of the national-local relations in most of the developing Asian countries. Korea provides a convincing example in this respect. Faced with the problem of national unity and the need for establishing a viable political system, Korea gave first priority to political integration. Less pressing in these circumstances was the issue of providing citizens with democratic participation at the local level political institutions and grass-roots organizations. Industrialization, moreover, required a centralized system of government based on urban centers. Therefore, the question of developing a proper balance between the central authority and local communities was seldom posed as an important issue until recent times.

The dominance of central government over local political and administrative institutions makes it difficult for local government and grass-roots organizations to maximize citizen participation as well as government responsiveness to the needs and demands of citizens. Such a system certainly facilitates nationwide uniformity, but at the same time impedes the solving of local problems and the efficient and economical delivery of services to the local residents.

As many countries in Asia recorded rapid economic growth and industrialization, and especially as the people achieve higher levels of education, citizens have begun to want local solutions to local problems and increa-

singly advocate broader discretionary power and authority over their community affairs. Local officials also express unhappiness with stringent state control of local affairs. Movement to restore long-suspended local self-governance and/or to increase the scope of local autonomy have, thus, arisen in many countries in Asia.

Reviewing the current state of affairs, one comes to a conclusion that the political factors pose the most serious challenge to the development of more balanced national-local relations and to the restoration of democracy at the grass-roots level. However, academic attention to local affairs until now has been predominantly legalistic, formal, and most of all administrative. As Lockard said, "power is at the heart of state and local politics" and the manner of deployment and employment of that power has "potentially grave consequences as well as high promises" (Lockard, p. 38.). The devolution-of-power approach therefore appears to be the most satisfactory of the various methods for ensuring local choice in local matters.

A note on the definition seems to be in order at this point. I have used local politics as a more inclusive concept than the terms "local government" and "local administration" usually imply. The study of "local government" normally focuses on the governing units and organizational features of the local political system. "Local administration" commonly refers to the functional and organizational effectiveness of the local political system or the implementation of decisions made by national or local political institutions. The study of "local politics" requires analysis of all the forces operating in such processes, including citizen participation and popular involvement in all aspects of community political activities.

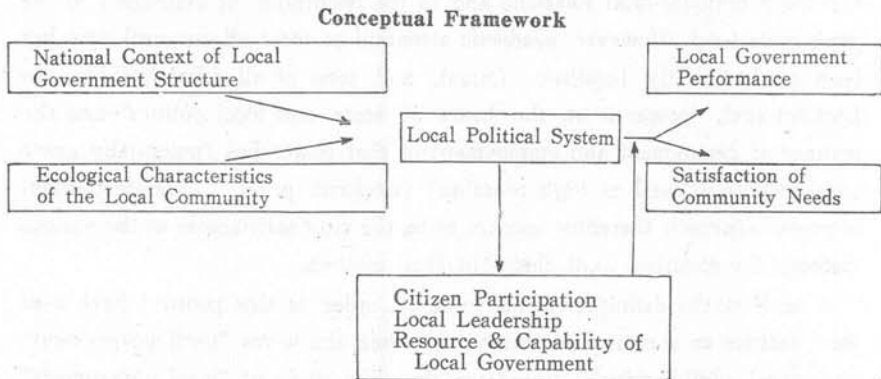
Politics also involves the behavioral as well as the structural component of these processes. The structural aspect of local politics include analyses of;

1. the place of local institutions in the national political system (role, position in the ladder of power, functions, extent of centralization etc.),
2. linkages of local government to higher levels of government,
3. ecological attributes of the localities,
4. demographic and social characteristics,
5. political cleavages, and,
6. impacts of the national and international political events on local community.

Behavioral dimensions require analyses of the following aspects of the leaders and citizens of the local community;

1. political dispositions and attributes,
2. values and attitudes,
3. roles and behaviors.

The following diagram shows a key to the conceptual guide to generate major comparative variables and to organize the data.



In the following sections, I will discuss the problems of and agenda for the comparative study of local governments mainly from a political perspective and power approach, using as an example the project that I have been involved for the last several years.

3. The Project: "Local Governments and Community Development in Asia"

There are a number of expressions that might be used to denote a study of the above topic by a group of scholars representing not only different countries but also diverse disciplinary backgrounds. Expressions such as "interdisciplinary crossnational comparative study," "multidisciplinary cross-cultural collaborative research," or some combination of parts thereof suggest themselves. In the case of the project, to which this paper is addressed, perhaps the closest one could come to accurately describing the activity would be to call it "multidisciplinary, multinational, collaborative research" on the characteristics of subnational political institutions and performance of local governments, and their efficacy relative to local community develo-

pment in Asia.

The collaborators in this project represent from six to eleven countries, the number varying depending on the phase of the study. They are political scientists, specialists in public administration and sociology, each one of them with an interest in some aspects of local politics and community development. Therefore, one can easily see that each of these disciplines has left its theoretical and methodological imprint on the design and implementation of the research. We have worked both as a team and as individual researchers according to our work plan.

The idea of organizing a project to tackle the issue of local politics, government and community development was first conceived by the Institute of Social Sciences of Seoul National University (to be more specific, the present author and Professor Kyong-Dong Kim, a sociologist and then the director of the institute) in early 1983. As the ones living in a country where the craving for overall democratization of sociopolitical life has yet to be satisfied, we found the subject especially timely and important in a long-term perspective. Furthermore, as we were fully aware of the problem of cultural and, sometimes, academic dependency in developing societies, the notion that researchers in Asia would be the ones to initiate and carry out such a project struck us as completely novel and worth pursuing.

It took almost a year of preparation before we first met for a research planning workshop; collecting relevant materials, locating possible collaborators, establishing contacts and exchanging ideas, and setting up the teams, coordinating other necessary procedures, and so on. Funding was another and most difficult problem.

In considering how to actually implement the project on a multinational basis, we did not expect financial support from an intraregional body. Although we planned to seek out whatever sources were available in each country, we knew that the resources required to carry out a project of this nature and scope promised to be substantial and beyond the means of regional bodies. Our strategy, therefore, was to resort to an international organization based in Asia as our main source of support. A natural choice was the Asia Foundation. Not only has the foundation had regional and national representatives in most of the major Asian countries, it also has a long-standing record of making significant contributions with respect to the affairs of local-level development in the region. The response from the

foundation was positive, and the project got underway in 1983.

In October of 1983 the Institute of Social Sciences sponsored a research planning and coordination workshop. Coordinators from eight countries attended.⁽¹⁾ Country coordinators were asked to bring and present their proposals. At the end of the two-day workshop, participants agreed to conduct a comparative study using a common frame of analysis and a set of comparative variables.⁽²⁾ At this gathering we also came to set some loose common ground rules for the overall project and defined the work each country team was expected to carry out in respective country.

The central aim of the project, in the eyes of the participants, was, first, to analyze the following features of the local political system in Asia;

1. the effectiveness of the local political system in achieving the developmental goals and meeting the social and community needs of the people;
2. the satisfaction of citizens regarding the various dimensions of local government performance; and
3. the extent and provisions of civic participation by the local populace in various activities of the local political system;

Secondly, the participants hoped to generate, out of their research, a description, and prediction of and prescriptions for change in both local leadership and government structure in their respective areas as well as an assessment of the prospects and potentialities for decentralization in accordance with democratic values.

It was also agreed that the research team for each country would consist primarily of indigenous scholars who could be expected to have a rapport with the problems and settings of the local community under study. They must be local scholars who are knowledgeable about the political situation

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- (1) The participants in the workshop were: Philip E. Jacob, consultant (University of Hawaii); Chung-Si Ahn, international coordinator (Seoul National University); Kyong-Dong Kim, project director (Seoul National University); Jon S. T. Quah (National University of Singapore); G. Shabbir Cheema (Pakistan, UN Center for Regional Development, stationed in Nagoya, Japan); Likhit Dhiravegin (Thammasat University, Thailand); Zakaria Haji Ahmad (then deputy director-general of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, Malaysia); G. R. Tressie Leitan (University of Colombo, Sri Lanka); and Romeo B. Ocampo and Elena M. Panganiban (University of the Philippines).
 - (2) The list of common "comparative variables" and questionnaires constructed to measure them are available upon request to Chung-Si Ahn, Department of Political science, Seoul National University, Seoul, Korea.

and sensitive to the issues of the communities under investigation. At the same time, it was noted that, prior to or in conjunction with this comparative study, we would first have to understand the way in which local government institutions of different countries actually work. Hence, a plan was set for each national team to first undertake a descriptive analysis of the operations of the local political and administrative institutions.

The main thrust of the national chapters analyzing the structures and functions of the local political institutions is to address the following aspects of local government system:

1. the historical, legal and political background of the evolution of the local political system
2. the main features and characteristics of the organizational structure of the local government units
3. the linkage and relationship of the local political institutions to the central government, on the one hand, and to the citizens, on the other
4. the arrangements and possibilities for citizen control and participation in the activities of local government
5. the effectiveness of local government in the delivery of social services and the extent of the people's satisfaction with the existing local political system
6. the specific areas and concerns that require further analysis in national and cross-national studies.

Six months after the Seoul workshop, at the 1984 annual convention of the International Studies Association held at Atlanta, Georgia, we had the opportunity to meet again and bring draft papers for mutual consultation and revision. The major portion of *The Local Political System in Asia* consists of these revised papers. Additional papers were solicited from several other scholars from Asian countries not represented at our two gatherings. Chapters of eleven country studies are included in the book: Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan. The book following this will carry more detailed research results of country studies involving survey analyses of local leaders and citizens of the following countries: Korea, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka.

Although the primary goal of our collective endeavor is to give a detailed

description and analyses of institutions, structures, and functions of local government in various Asian countries, each of the researchers is also committed to providing a deeper understanding of the problems facing community life in a rapidly changing society. By doing so, we hope that we can better grasp the complex political and administrative characteristics of the local government of different countries and draw meaningful comparative perspectives on the structure and functions of different political systems in Asia.

With the publication of the first volume, many of the participants in the project are now turning their attention to closely related issues of local government performance. They are giving first priority to analyses of the effectiveness of local government performances, the obstacles to and opportunities for upgrading the performance of local political institutions to meet community needs, and those relations that might be most desirable between central authority and local government institutions. We plan to compile these studies into a second volume that will report more systematic empirical results along these lines. It is hoped that these volumes will provide a wider base for comparisons and for making valid inferences about the variables that determine the level of quality of life in different countries as well as at different levels of communities.

Coordinating a multinational project and editing books that require widespread international collaboration inevitably involves problems of search, difficulty in coordination, omission, delay, uncertainty and so on. However, the experience has been most challenging and rewarding personally as well as academically. I have been fortunate to have been involved with an unusually cooperative group of scholars in this endeavor.

4. Findings of Korean Study

The major portion of Korean study of the project was completed in 1984. The study involved, in addition to a massive compilation of the aggregate data concerning the various aspects of local governments of the country, a national survey analysis of a sample of 1200 citizens and 700 leaders of the various types of local community in Korea. The result of the study was published in a book entitled *The Local Politics and Community Development in Korea* (in Korean, by Seoul National University Press, 1985). The book

represented one of the very few and initial efforts to systematically tap on the attitudes and behavioral orientations of the citizens and leaders in the local communities regarding the governance and effectiveness of various local governments and their effects on community development. Findings of the study are significant also in the light of the current national plan to restore the local self-government system (which has been suspended since 1961) from next year and provide a first and most up-to-date scientific material on this important issue of national policy debate. The major findings of the Korean study are summarized below.

A. The Central-Local Relations in General

The structure and governance of the local governments in Korea are highly centralized and not likely to move smoothly toward decentralization and enhanced popular participation. National drive for rapid economic development and industrialization since the 1960s did not contribute to a creation of the political, administrative and institutional conditions that would vitalize local communities and provide sufficient bases for popular participation and economic resources at the local level to carry out the local functions.

Major problems of the central-local relations facing the country are the following:

1. "Politics" at the local level have increasingly given in to the levers of the "administration" at the national level during the past two decades;
2. Bureaucratic rule and administrative consideration dominate machinery for community decision-making, while the legislative functions have been suspended since the 1961 military coup;
3. Allocation of resources, planning and execution of community development projects have been largely dictated by the criteria and principles of nationwide uniformity rather than by the needs of the local communities;
4. Local authorities lack adequate source of revenue and investment, and become highly dependent on grants and subsidies coming from the central government;
5. As the local institutions become more subservient to the central government, they are less accountable to the local populace;
6. Incentives and mechanisms to encourage more active involvement and participation of the local constituent are badly in need.

B. The Character of the Local Elite Structure

The major characteristics of the elite structure in the local communities in Korea, which have been identified by the interview data of 700 local elites, are as following:

1. Political and administrative (or institutional) elite are most dominant in almost every measure of the power and influence in the community decision-making.
2. Linkages (both formal and informal, and direct as well as indirect) to the "center" in terms of power, influence or prestige is the key for the local elite to be successful, effective and influential in local decision-making.
3. Power resources in the local communities is "cumulative"—that is, power, wealth, status, organization, skill, and so on are largely overlapping among core elite.
4. Power in the local communities is severely concentrated and smaller and/or non-urban communities tend to show a severer concentration of power and influence in the hands of a smaller number of core elite.

C. Attitudes, Values and Behavioral Orientations

1. Satisfaction on Community Needs
 - a. Assessments on the quality of life in local communities vary in accordance with;
 - (i) type of community (rural, urban, metropolitan etc.)
 - (ii) type of respondents' status (age, education, income, job etc.)
 - (iii) elite vs. citizens
 - b. Educated, middle class in income and status, young and urban/metropolitan citizens are more dissatisfied with life in their home community than those who are less educated, lower in income, older, rural respondents. At the same, citizen evaluation on the satisfaction of their community life is less positive than the elite.
 - c. Problems and conflicts typically concomitant with rapid urbanization and industrialization are perceived as the most serious issues for the enhancement of better life in local communities.
2. Participatory Commitment and Action.

- a. In general, participatory commitment and propensity for action are relatively weak among Koreans. No significant differences are found in this respect between elite and citizens, or urban and non-urban residents.
 - b. More educated, higher income, male citizens tend to show higher commitment for participation. But they do not appear to perceive that enough channels for effective participation are open and available and, therefore, the higher participatory commitment among them does not necessarily linked to the actual behavioral manifestation.
3. The Character of the Local Leadership
- a. The cognitive level on the relevance and importance of the local leadership in local problem-solving is, in general, very low, compared to that of the national level.
 - b. Desirable traits for effective local leadership, in a rough order of preference, are;
 - (i) knowledgeable, attentive to local conditions, and dedicated to the needs of the local constituent,
 - (ii) democratic as well as effective,
 - (iii) good personality combined with leadership, capability and responsibility,
 - (iv) open, honest and public-minded leader.
 - c. Social and Political Networks of the Leadership;
 - (i) Effective local leadership is highly dependent on the leader's linkage to and support from the national "center."
 - (ii) Leaders in public sectors are dominant over the economic and sociocultural elite in the community decision-making.
 - (iii) Informal and ascriptive networks constitute considerably important sources of power and influence.
 - (iv) With limited citizen participation and inability to control the community affairs on the part of the local constituents, the local leadership is neither accountable nor much responsible to citizens affected.
4. The Restoration of Local Self-Governance
- a. Perceived needs for reestablishing the local legislative bodies (assemblies) are very high among both elites and citizens. Citizen sample's demand to restore the local self-government system is higher than

the elite. Urban, younger, more educated, middle class syndromes are more positively associated with a higher commitment on the principle of local self-government.

- b. Gradual reintroduction of local self-government system, starting from metropolitan and provincial government levels in the beginning and then onto the other urban and rural areas, is considered more desirable and realistic method of restoring self-governance than a comprehensive and, thus, potentially radical method.
- c. The current system of appointing the heads of all local governments by the central government authorities needs to be reconsidered. Both the citizens and elite prefer to change the recruitment system into an elective method, be it direct popular election or indirect methods of election.

5. Concluding Remarks

How are we to assess the implication drawn from the preceding discussion? In other words, how does the performance of local governments in Asia rate in meeting the needs of the community and well-being of the citizens? And to what extent is citizen participation in running local public affairs being enhanced?

The political implications of the facts and analyses that we have discussed can be further clarified only after more careful and systematic analyses than is possible here. This paper and the book previewed herein are intended only as the starting point for a fuller understanding of this complex problem.

For now, we are inclined to conclude, tentatively, that the structures and modes of governance of the local governments in Asia are not likely to evolve smoothly and inevitably toward decentralization and enhanced popular participation. Strong traditions and tendencies of the centralized control are very much alive in the operational codes of the political and administrative machineries. The need to accelerate economic development, overcome political instability and to consolidate power and leadership to achieve national integrity have hindered the stable operations and growth of local self-government in Asia. The experiments of local self-government in several countries in the region have been either short-lived or largely regarded as ineffective to the eyes of the power holders in the central governments and,

thus, have failed to bear fruit. Policies and programs intended to promote local capacity for development did not effectively increase the ability of local governments to institutionalize decentralization programs and enhance citizen participation in running local governments.

The process of change in the last two decades has indeed been characterized by the "nationalization of local politics and government." Politics at the local level has so far been given in to the levers of national administration. As a result, the local political institutions become less accountable to the local populace, and the encouragement of more active involvement and participation of local constituents is neglected.

And yet, development at the local level is a primary goal of most schemes and programs of national planning and development agencies. Local communities provide the most immediate political framework within which people can be encouraged to make decisions and undertake participatory tasks. Local communities also provide the most appropriate social and institutional framework for mobilizing people to achieve the objectives of increased economic development and improved social welfare.

In order to achieve these goals, it is vital to create those mechanisms of local governance most appropriate for motivating popular participation. Clearly, the most effective means of accomplishing this is through facilitating the emergence of a local leadership that can ensure effective communication and activate popular participation, not through the manipulation of bureaucratic control. Strengthening the capacity of local governments and community leadership requires political, administrative and financial support by the central government. But it is important that the role of central government be to "facilitate" and "assist" rather than to "control" and "dictate."

There is no scarcity of arguments about what administrative measures are necessary to increase the local capacity for development in developing countries. Little is known, however, about the political processes of central-local relations. What seems clear is that, if local government is to take its proper place in the national political process, political power must first be decentralized. Local governments is the best possible instrument for distributing power widely along democratic lines and for satisfying community needs. To meet the needs of its constituents, local government requires local power. Establishing a sound and healthy system of local self-government is essential to democracy and, thus, is one of the most challenging tasks for

comparative political analysis.

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