

## Weaving Through Paradoxes: Democratization, Globalization, and Environment Politics in South Korea

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### INTRODUCTION

South Korea has undergone profound economic transformation over the past five decades. From a dirt poor country with a per capita income of \$89 in 1961, it has emerged as one of the most powerful economies in the world. Per capita income had risen to almost \$10,000 by the year 2000, and its economic size is now the thirteenth largest in the world. Beneath economic transformation lie the workings of a developmentalist coalition that crafted the political and institutional foundation for rapid economic growth.<sup>1)</sup> It is

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1) Lee Chung, "The Government, Financial System and Large Private Enterprises in the Economic Development of South Korea," *World Development*, Vol. 20 (1992), pp. 187-197; Peter Evans, *Embedded Autonomy: States and Industrial Transformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Linda Weiss, and John Hobson, *States and Economic Development: A Comparative Historical Analysis* (Cambridge,

through such a coalition that the South Korean government was able to implement the policies of “growth first, distribution later” and “growth first, environmental integrity later.”

While it may have been inevitable in order to overcome the vicious circle of poverty and underdevelopment, to mobilize resources, and to expedite the process of industrialization, the developmentalist paradigm that governed the Korean society and economy since the mid-1960s, began to reveal new limits and contradictions. Worsening social and economic inequalities, repressive political regimes, resource scarcity and environmental degradation, all by-products of the paradigm, severely undercut gains from rapid industrialization and economic growth. Facing formidable internal and external challenges and constraints, the developmentalist paradigm and underlying dominant political coalition were also subject to the law of diminishing return. They no longer represented the *deus ex machina*.

Liberty, equality, and environmental integrity emerged as new social values just as critical as growth and security. These major trends have made an important contribution to precipitating the paradigm shift. While democratic transition in 1987 opened and expanded new space for popular political maneuvering of these alternative values,<sup>2)</sup> the grand process of globalization has also fostered such transition.<sup>3)</sup> Of these transitions, the politics of

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UK: Polity Press, 1995); Sylvia Maxfield, and Ben Ross Schneider, *Business and the State in Developing Countries* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Moon Chung-in, “Democratization and Globalization and Government-Business Relations in Korea,” in Moon Chung-in (ed.), *Government and Business in the Democratic Era* (in Korean), (Seoul: Oreum, 1998).

2) Lee Su-hoon, “Transitional Politics of Korea, 1987-1992: Activation of Civil Society,” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (1993), pp. 351-367; Kim Sun-hyuk, “Civil Society in South Korea: From Grand Democracy Movements to Petty Interest Groups?” *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1996), pp. 81-97; Yoo Pal-moo, “The Development of Civil Society and Civil Movement” (in Korean), in Yoo Pal-moo, and Kim Ho-gi (eds.), *Civil Society and Civil Movement* (Seoul: Hanul, 1995).

democratic transition and distributive justice have drawn extensive scholarly and policy attention. But very little attention has been paid to the rise of new environmental politics in South Korea.

Against this backdrop, this paper is designed to explore the dynamics of environmental politics in the context of democratization and globalization. First, the paper makes an overall assessment of development and environmental performance in South Korea. Second, the paper elucidates impacts of democratization on environmental politics through case studies of non-governmental organizations (NGO) activities. Third, the paper looks into how new forces of globalization have affected the changing nature of environmental politics and policies. Finally, the paper analyzes the dynamic interplay of democratization, globalization, and environmental politics in South Korea, and derives several theoretical and comparative implications.

#### DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT IN SOUTH KOREA: AN EMPIRICAL OVERVIEW

South Korea once presented a classical example of trade-off between development and environment. Obsessed with hasty economic development, it virtually ignored the environmental consequences. The trajectory of economic development in South Korea illustrates the fallacy of the “Faustian bargain” in an eloquent manner. South Korea was traditionally an agrarian society. To cope with poverty and the underdevelopment associated with it, the South Korean government initiated an ambitious development strategy. Starting with an aggressive labor-intensive export-led growth strategy, it rapidly moved into the heavy-chemical sectors. In

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3) Jackie Smith, “Global Civil Society?” *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (1998), pp. 93-107; Steven Yearley, *Sociology, Environmentalism, Globalization: Reinventing the Globe* (London: Sage, 1996).

particular, its transition to the heavy-chemical industrialization in 1973 is noteworthy. Disregarding inflationary consequences, the Park Chung-hee government undertook an ambitious heavy industrialization plan not only to adjust to a shifting comparative advantage, but also to create forward and backward linkages to the defense industry. Along with the drive to export, the South Korean government attracted foreign direct investment by creating “pollutant havens” in free-trade zones such as Masan, Changwon, and Goomi.<sup>4)</sup>

Consequently, the South Korean economy demonstrated phenomenal growth by maintaining an annual average growth rate of ten percent for the next four decades. Per capita income rose from \$80 to \$10,307 in 1997. Exports grew from \$33 million in 1960 to \$130 billion in 1996, and structure of exports radically shifted toward the manufacturing sector.<sup>5)</sup> Such rapid industrialization accompanied concurrent galloping urbanization and exponential growth in consumption. Given South Korea’s small geographic size, relatively large population, and poor resource endowment, rapid industrialization, urbanization, and a sharp surge in consumption brought about an almost unbearable load on its ecosystem as well as severe environmental degradation. Authoritarian rule backed up by the developmentalist coalition virtually deprived South Korea of any other viable alternatives but growth at the expense of environment.

In fact, South Korea underwent serious environmental degradation throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Air pollution posed a new social problem, and it was closely related to the pattern of energy consumption. Coal consumption doubled from 10 million

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4) Jung Jin-seung, “Economic Development and Environment,” in Korea Environmental Technology Research Institute (ed.), *The Fifty Years of the Environment in Korea* (Seoul: KETRI, 1997).

5) Byung-Nak Song, *The Korean Economy*, 3rd ed. (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 60-61; The Bank of Korea, *Economic Statistics Yearbook 1997* [<http://www.bok.or.kr>].

tons in the mid-1960s to 20 million tons by the mid-1970s. Consumption of all sorts of petroleum products increased seven-fold during the same period from 14,737 barrels in 1966 to 105,119 barrels in 1975.<sup>6)</sup> A sharp rise in energy consumption resulted in severe air pollution. Emission of air pollutants increased by 2.7 times from an annual average of 5.4 ton/km<sup>2</sup> 1965 to 14.5 ton/km<sup>2</sup> in 1974.<sup>7)</sup> In addition, widespread use of automobiles created new environmental problems of smog and emissions of sulfur dioxide, nitro dioxide, and carbon dioxide. Large metropolitan cities such as Seoul, Busan, and Taegu were the prime victims of air pollution.

Water pollution also became serious. Construction of large industrial complexes along major rivers such as the Han, Nakdong, Geum and Yeongsan, severely damaged the quality of water with the large-scale release of industrial sewage. The high population density of these river basins further complicated the situation. Upstream areas, the sources of tap water for residents of metropolitan areas, could not meet the standards for fresh potable water. Along with air and water, disposal of solid wastes emerged as a major problem throughout the 1970s. While increased consumption led to a sharp rise in solid wastes, rapid industrialization entailed enormous amounts of industrial wastes. Yet, South Korea lacked the technology and facilities to process them. Moreover, collective actions by residents further prevented the government from finding suitable sites for disposal, further aggravating the pollution problem.<sup>8)</sup>

What is really amazing is the reversal of trends since the mid-1980s. According to the 1998 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report of environmental indicators, South

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6) Korea National Statistics Office [<http://www.nso.go.kr>].

7) Jang Jae-hyun, "The Study on Environmental Pollution," Unpublished M.A. dissertation, Graduate School of Management and Administration, Seongkyunkwan University, 1980.

8) Moon Chung-in, and O Kyeong-taek, "The Crisis of the Northeast Asian Ecosystem and the Korean Peninsula," *Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1999), pp. 179-219.

Korea has performed quite well in improving its environmental quality. The most remarkable improvement has been made in air quality. For example, carbon dioxide emissions per capita in South Korea improved from 8.3 tons in 1995 to 7.8 tons in 1997, lower than the OECD average of 10.9 tons. The United States (19.9 tons), Germany (10.8 tons), and Japan (9.2 tons) emitted more carbon dioxide than South Korea in the same year. Of major industrialized countries, France (6.2 tons) was better than South Korea. South Korea has also performed better in sulfur dioxide emissions, which is another important indicator of air quality. The per capita emission of sulfur dioxide was 34 kg, which was lower than OECD average of 40 kg in 1997. In the case of nitro dioxide, South Korea has also improved. The emission of nitrogen oxide (NOx) per capita was 26 kg, lower than the OCED average of 40 kg.

The OECD report provides other interesting data on the improvement of water quality in South Korea. When measured in terms of oxygen demand and amount of nitrates, the water quality of the Han River, the primary source of tap water for the Seoul metropolitan area, was better than the Donau and Rhine Rivers in Germany, the Mississippi River in the United States, and the Seine River in France. South Korea also scored high in the area of solid wastes. Disposal of solid wastes per capita in the South Korea's urban area was 390 kg in 1997, lower than the OECD average of 530 kg. The figure is far better than major OECD countries such as the United States (720 kg), France (560 kg), Great Britain (490 kg), and Japan (400 kg).<sup>9)</sup>

As Table 1 demonstrates, data from the Fraser Institute give a more precise picture of environmental improvement in South Korea during 1985-1997. In four categories of environmental integrity (air quality, water quality, solid wastes, and conservation of natural

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9) Statistical data are used here from the summary of OECD Environmental Indicators in 1998 provided by the Ministry of Environment in Korea [<http://www.me.go.kr/html/98oecd.html>].

**Table 1. Environmental Indicators: Relative Severity of Environmental Problems in South Korea (Base year 1985=100)**

	Air Quality	Water Quality	Solid Waste	Natural Resources	Overall Average
1985	100	100	100	100	100
1986	92	99	84	100	94
1987	94	91	95	101	96
1988	92	96	79	106	93
1989	87	101	74	110	93
1990	85	83	74	114	89
1991	82	76	78	124	90
1992	78	69	65	109	80
1993	71	76	71	101	80
1994	67	93	70	101	83
1995	65	95	70	96	82
1996	65	99	68	113	86
1997	59	119	67	119	91
Net change	-41	19	-33	19	-9

\*Annual values greater than 100 represent an increase in environmental degradation; annual values less than 100 represent a decrease.

Source: The Fraser Institute [[http://www.fraserinstitute.ca/publications/critical\\_issues/2000/env-indic/section\\_18.html](http://www.fraserinstitute.ca/publications/critical_issues/2000/env-indic/section_18.html)].

resources), South Korea has shown remarkable improvement in air quality and solid wastes. Using 1985 as the base year (benchmark index=100), the Fraser Institute calculated that South Korea has decreased its environmental degradation to 85 in 1990 and to 59 in 1997. Net change between 1985 and 1997 was -41. This is quite a significant improvement. Overall degradation in solid wastes was also reversed from 100 in 1985 to 74 in 1990 and to 67 in 1997. However, water quality and conservation of natural resources continue to be major sources of degradation. Water quality degraded from 100 in 1985 to 114 in 1990 and to 119 in 1997. The profile of

natural resource conservation has not improved either. This might be attributed to a sharp rise in water and energy consumption. The changing lifestyle, from traditional housing to apartment living and increased water consumption has precipitated an acute fresh water shortage. Also, an exponential growth in privately owned cars would have aggravated conservation of natural resources. For example, South Korea's daily oil consumption was the sixth largest in the world in 1999, and import of crude oil accounted for 66 percent of all energy imports in 1999.<sup>10)</sup>

Despite sagging performance in water quality and conservation of natural resources, South Korea has demonstrated a gradual amelioration of environmental integrity. As Table 1 reveals, overall average of environmental quality has improved over time since 1985. What accounts for such improvement? We argue that the changing social paradigm has improved people's awareness of environmental issues. Moreover, democratic changes, expansion of civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), have gained increased the political bargaining power of environmental NGOs, thus, facilitating overall changes in South Korea's environmental policy.

#### DEMOCRATIC CHANGES AND ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS

South Korea underwent a dramatic democratic transition in 1987 after twenty-five years of iron-fisted authoritarian rule by Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan.<sup>11)</sup> The transition underscored several profound changes in Korean society and politics, which

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10) *Chosun Ilbo*, July 23, 2000

11) See Lee Man-woo, *The Odyssey of Korean Democracy: Korean Politics, 1987-1990* (New York: Praeger, 1990); James Cotton, "From Authoritarianism to Democracy in South Korea," *Political Studies*, Vol. 37 (1998), pp. 244-259; and Lee Su-hoon, *op. cit.*

accompanied far-reaching implications for environmental politics and policies.

First is an overall realignment of the dominant social paradigm. To borrow Inglehart's<sup>12)</sup> terminology, South Korea underwent a major paradigm shift from materialism to post-materialism. The developmental era in the 1960s and 1970s emphasized materialist values framed around growth, productivity, exports, and national security. Throughout the 1980s, however, South Koreans began to show pronounced fatigue effects stemming from these values. While the advent of the post-Cold War order undercut traditional emphasis on national security, relative material affluence attained through two decades of successive economic growth induced the public, especially the middle class, to eschew their former materialist values. Instead, new social issues such as economic justice, environmental conservation, women's rights, and anti-corruption began to dominate public discourse.<sup>13)</sup> They eventually emerged as major political issues, fueling public discontent with the Chun regime as well as fostering the democratic transition. It is through overall change in the social *milieu* that environmental issues were able to attract social and political attention.

Second, democratic opening not only precipitated the proliferation of civil society, but also contributed to NGOs' political activism. As Table 2 illustrates, prior to the 1980s, NGO activities were virtually nonexistent. Of total 3,643 existing NGOs, only 765 (22.5 percent) were established prior to the 1980s. A great majority of Korean NGOs (2,878 cases, 77.5 percent) were established in the 1980s, especially after the democratic opening in 1987. The expansion and empowerment of NGOs fundamentally undercut the power and

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12) Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

13) On new social issues, see Donatella Della Porta, and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999); and Alan Scott, *Ideology and the New Social Movement* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 19.

**Table 2. Establishment of NGOs over time in South Korea**

	Number (cases)	Pre-1940s (%)	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	Total (%)
Civil society	908	4.9	1.7	5.4	7.6	18.4	62.0	100.0
Local	192	-	-	-	7.7	27.4	52.8	100.0
Social service	686	1.6	4.1	6.4	7.7	27.4	52.8	100.0
Environment	259	0.4	-	0.8	2.7	8.5	87.6	100.0
Culture	563	5.3	2.5	7.6	10.5	23.8	50.3	100.0
Education/Academic	208	2.4	1.9	3.8	7.7	28.8	55.3	100.0
Religion	97	5.2	-	9.3	21.6	27.8	36.1	100.0
Labor/Agriculture	1997	3.6	4.1	10.7	9.6	25.4	46.7	100.0
Economy	473	2.7	2.7	15.6	15.2	22.2	41.4	100.0
International	42	2.4	4.8	21.4	21.4	19.0	31.0	100.0
Others	18	-	16.7	16.7	-	22.2	44.4	100.0
Total	3643	3.2	2.4	7.2	9.0	21.0	56.5	100.0

Source: Compiled from the Directory of Korean NGOs by the Citizens' Movement Communication Center [<http://www.kngo.net/new/pds/pds-cmcc.htm>].

influence of the developmentalist coalition. In fact, it was on the wane not only because of diminishing state intervention in markets and ruptured relationships between the state and business, but also because of new political governance that undermined the organic ties between the two.<sup>14</sup> Such changing political terrain opened a new space for intensified political maneuvering by NGOs, facilitating social movements for environmental issues. Environmental NGOs are relatively small (259 NGOs), compared with other NGOs, but

14) Moon Chung-in, "Democratization and Globalization and Government-Business Relations in Korea," in Moon Chung-in (ed.), *Government and Business in the Democratic Era* (in Korean), (Seoul: Oreum, 1998); Karl Fields, "Strong States and Business Organization in Korea and Taiwan," in S. Maxfield, and B. Schneider (eds), *Business and the State in Developing Countries* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

their political activism has been most evident.

Third, expansion of environmental NGOs and their political activism have made a significant contribution to fostering changes in environmental policy. As early as the 1980s, environmental NGOs numbered less than seven. But that number has grown at a phenomenal rate since 1988.<sup>15)</sup> According to the Ministry of Environment (MOE), environmental NGOs are classified into three major categories: officially approved NGOs, non-official voluntary NGOs, and comprehensive NGOs.<sup>16)</sup> The number of officially approved NGOs, devoted solely to environmental activities with a high degree of professional competence and accountability, had increased from 63 in 1992 to 119 by 1999. Non-official voluntary environmental organizations, which are geared toward social and political activism at the grass-roots level, have grown the most in terms of size and social impact. Their number stood at 30 in 1992, but had risen to 271 by 1999. Comprehensive NGOs refer to those NGOs which include environmental issues as a part of their catch-all agenda. Before the rise of specialized environmental NGOs, these comprehensive NGOs played an important role in attracting public attention to environmental causes.<sup>17)</sup> Likewise, the quantitative expansion of environmental NGOs emerged as a new social and political deterrent to the dominance of the developmentalist coalition, leading to major changes in environmental policies and people's attitude towards development and environment.

Finally, the most significant impact of democratization on environmental politics was the qualitative change in environmental NGOs. They were no longer passive public interest groups, but were larger, relatively rich in human and financial resources, and

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15) Goo Do-wan, *Sociology of Korean Environmental Movements* (in Korean), (Seoul: Munhakgwa Jiseong, 1996), pp. 163-164.

16) Ministry of Environment, *Environment White Paper* (in Korean), (Seoul: MOE, 1999), pp. 169.

17) *Ibid*; Idem, *Environment White Paper* (in Korean), (Seoul: MOE, 1998).

innovative in crafting new strategies and tactics for environmental movements. Table 3. presents a comparative overview of the evolutionary dynamics of environmental politics in South Korea.

The evolution of South Korea's environmental politics can be separated into four major stages.<sup>18)</sup> The first stage (1960-1970s) is the Park Chung-hee period during which environment movements were very much passive and primitive, paying primary attention to compensation of victims. While the government was preoccupied with growth and exports, it was less attentive to environmental issues and even trying to conceal environmental disasters and repress all kinds of environment movements through authoritarian rule. The public was also tolerant of environmental degradation since activism was focused mainly on termination of authoritarian rule and the creation of democratic opening. The environmental movements was confined largely to self-help movements organized by victims. They engaged in sporadic protests but the overall impact of their efforts was minimal during this period.

The second stage (1980-1987) involves an interesting convergence of democratic movements and environmental ones. Although the political system was still under the authoritarian rule of Chun Doo-hwan, environmental NGOs began to emerge. They considered environmental movements to be part of the democratic struggle to topple the Chun regime. Thus, by forming an alliance with victims of environmental pollution, these NGOs became more assertive in pushing for governmental policy change and securing compensation for the victims. Encountering this new challenge, the Chun

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18) Jung Hoi-sung, and Lee Sung-woo, "A Study on the Development of Green Movement and Its Policy Impact in Korea" (in Korean), *Journal of Environmental Policy and Administration*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1994), pp. 85-101; Goo Do-wan, *op. cit.*; Son Byeong-seon, "Environmental Organizations in Korea" (in Korean), in Kim Jae-yeong, et al. (eds.) *Environmental Politics and Environmental Policy* (Seoul: Samusa, 1996); Lee Si-jae, "Civil Society and Environmental Movements in Korea," in Im Hui-seop, and Yang Jong-seop (eds.), *Civil Society and New Social Movements in Korea* (in Korean), (Seoul: Nanam, 1998).

government tried to quell protests in part through cooption and also by attempting to separate the issues of politics and environment. Despite government repression, however, specialized environmental activist organizations came into existence, and public attention, including mass media, became much more attentive to environmental issues during this period.

What occurred in Onsan, reminiscent of the tragic Minamata Bay incident in Japan, is a case in point. In the 1970s, as part of the heavy-chemical industrialization plan, the Park Chung-hee government created a special industrial complex in the Onsan area where a large number of refinery, non-metallic, chemical industry plants were concentrated. In the early 1980s, the Onsan coastal area had been hit hard by pollution as accumulated lag time effects of previous pollution affected the area. Emission of heavy metal waste water and industrial fumes began to pollute both the air and the coastal area. Fish catches were drastically reduced, while residents began to show collective symptoms of neuralgia and skin disease, known as the "Onsan disease." For two years between 1983 and 1985, more than five hundred local residents suffered from the disease. In 1985 the Korea Pollution Research Institute diagnosed it as "*itai-itai* disease," a bone and joint disease caused by cadmium poisoning, which was endemic to chemical industry areas in Japan.<sup>19)</sup>

Local residents appealed to the government for relocation of polluting industries and suitable compensation for the damages, but the initial response by the government was lukewarm at best, and negative at worst. As the "Onsan disease" attracted extensive media attention, however, environmental NGOs began to assist local residents to formulate strategies of protest, elucidate the causes of the disease, and even join street protests with them. Facing this new

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19) See Goo Do-wan, *op. cit.*, pp. 247; and Gang Moon-gyu, "Nongovernmental Environmental Movement" (in Korean), in Korea Environmental Technology Research Institute (ed.), *The Fifty Years of the Environment in Korea* (Seoul: KETRI, 1997), p. 450.

Table 3. A Comparative Overview of Environmental Movements in South Korea

Issues	1st Stage 1960s-70s	2nd Stage 1980-87	3rd Stage 1987-1992	4th Stage After 1992
Characteristics	Damage compensation	Onsan Disease Damage compensation	Anmyeon Island NIMBY	Nakdong River Phenol Damage compensation
democratization (political system)	Pre (closed)	Pre (closed)	Post (open)	Post (open)
Main activists	Victims	Victims and environmental NGOs	Victims and environmental NGOs	Victims and environmental NGOs
Result	Minimum compensation	Relocation/ construction	No construction	No construction
Goals	Damage compensation	Damage compensation	Damage prevention	Damage prevention
Government role	Tolerance of pollution	Damage compensation	Dual: preservation and development	Dual: preservation and development
Government response	Concealment, suppression	Pacification	Reactive	Policy change
Policy change	Sanitation law, Prevention of Pollution Law(1963), Environment Conservation Law (1977, comprehensive measure)	Environmental rights included in the Constitution (1980)	Environmental measures on specific pollution medium (1990)	Environmental measures on specific pollution medium(1990)
Organizational development of government*	From pollution section (1967) to pollution bureau (1973)	Environment Administration established (1980)	Upgraded to the Environmental Agency (1990)	Upgraded to the Ministry of Environment (1994)
International NGOs' help	No	No	No	Yes

\* For details, see Yoon Seo-sung, "The Meaning of Environmental Policy and Decision-making Structure," in Korean Environmental Policy Academic Association (ed.), *Theory of Environmental Policy* (in Korean), (Seoul: Singwangmonhwasa, 1999); and Heo Jang, "Politics of Policy-Making: Environmental Policy Changes in Korea," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1997.

development, the government took quick action to control the damage and to prevent its spillover into the political arena. It announced plans to relocate local residents to safer areas as well as to provide financial compensation. These announcements were instrumental in breaking the bonds between local residents and environmental NGOs. While the former was preoccupied with negotiating with the government over the acceptable level of financial compensation, the latter wished to prolong the struggle until the government came up with structural remedies. In the end, lack of unity between the two made the government a winner. It was not forced into fundamental policy changes, nor did it have to offer a satisfactory compensation package. Nevertheless, the alliance between local victims and environmental NGOs opened a new chapter in environmental politics in South Korea.<sup>20)</sup>

The third stage (1987-1992) was the take-off period of South Korean environmental movements. Two events greatly reshaped the political terrain of environmental movements during this period. While the democratic transition in 1987 demolished political and institutional barriers to activation of environmental movements, the Rio Earth Summit enhanced public awareness of environmental issues. During this period, environmental politics underwent four major structural changes. First was the proliferation of professional, competent, and specialized environmental NGOs. The government could no longer monopolize or manipulate knowledge and information on environmental issues. In addition, these organizations were well organized and funded, enabling their reach to a wide range of civil society. Second was the changing attitude of victims of environmental hazards. In the past, they were preoccupied primarily with relocation and financial compensation. During this period, however, they began to show a greater degree of analytical savvy to environmental issues, and called for structural remedies and preventive measures on environmental hazards. Furthermore,

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20) Goo Do-wan, *op. cit.*, pp. 264-265; and Gang Moon-gyu, *op. cit.*, p. 451.

they began forming equal partnerships with environmental NGOs. Third, defying the inertia of the developmentalist paradigm, mass media became much more attentive to environmental issues. Some media organizations began to lead public opinion by engaging in environmental campaigns themselves. Finally, the government also became much more receptive to public pressure, partly because of democratic opening, and partly because of much more sophisticated strategies by environmental NGOs.<sup>21)</sup>

Such structural changes enhanced the bargaining edge of both victims and environmental NGOs in dealing with the government. During this period, in fact, environmental NGOs and local citizens became quite successful in championing their causes over a wide range of issues involving nuclear waste disposal sites, waste incinerator sites, human-waste incineration, and environmental degradation associated with the construction of golf courses. In this regard, two cases deserve special attention: Public rejection of the Anmyon Island nuclear waste disposal site construction, and Nakdong River phenol pollution (see Table 3).

In order to cope with the chronic energy shortage, the South Korean government had pursued an assertive nuclear energy program since the early 1970s. Consequently, nuclear waste disposal emerged as a new public policy problem. On November 3, 1990, the government's plan to build nuclear waste disposal facilities on Anmyon Island, located off Korea's west coast, was leaked to the mass media. Hearing the news, over 20,000 local residents staged violent street protests, and destroyed police stations and government buildings. The government could not control the chaos. On November 8, environmental NGOs under the leadership of the National Movement to Expel Nuclear Power Plant and college students joined local residents in opposing the government plan.<sup>22)</sup>

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21) Goo Do-wan, *op. cit.*; Gang Moon-gyu, *op. cit.*; Jung Hoi-sung, "The Location of Environmentally Hazardous Waste Facility and its Solution" (in Korean), *Environment Report*, Vol. 11 (1994), pp. 5-6.

Throughout the protests, they not only called for transparency and more democratic procedures in site selection, but also requested the government to reconsider its nuclear energy program. Finally, the Roh Tae-woo government announced the scrapping of the plan, and the Minister of Science and Technology who was in charge of the project was dismissed. Local residents and NGOs had won, and the government had lost the battle.

Obviously, the incident epitomized a newly emerging “not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY)” syndrome. Nonetheless, it offered new momentum in the history of environmental movements in South Korea. The triumph of local residents and NGOs over the Korean government critically undermined its governability, producing bandwagon effects on other pending issues. Moreover, it was the first preventive and proactive action. Most importantly, the success of Anmyon Island strengthened ties between environmental NGOs and local residents. The Korean government, which was known for its strength and autonomy, had been defeated by the newly emerging environmental movements and the collective egoism of local areas.<sup>23)</sup>

The issue of Nakdong River phenol emissions also presented a changing social and political ambience during this period. In March 1991, residents in Daegu, the third largest city in Korea, noticed a foul smell in their tap water. Water supply authorities traced the origin of the smell, and found it to be caused by a chemical reaction between chloroform and phenol. Chloroform was routinely used in purifying tap water, so the problem was phenol. It was discovered that the Doosan Electronic Company had released over 30 tons of phenol liquid into the Nakdong River without treating it first. The

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22) *Choun Ilbo*, November 9, 1990.

23) There were many instances of NIMBY phenomena. They include Kunsan Dongyang's Chemical TDI Corporation in 1989; Busan industrial waste landfill, Osan, Youngduk and Anmyon Island nuclear waste disposal facility in 1990; and Kimpo solid waste disposal facility in 1991. Jung Hoi-sung, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6.

phenol release victimized all the residents, farmers, and fishermen along the Nakdong River, and the entire nation was outraged. Environmental NGOs and consumer groups instantly organized the Doosan phenol investigation team, and staged a nation-wide boycott of Doosan Group products, ranging from beer, milk, and ginseng tea to electronic goods. The company's sales fell by almost half in less than a month.<sup>24)</sup> Mounting public outrage forced both the Doosan Group and the government to come up with remedial measures. While the Doosan Group pledged to contribute 20 billion won for cleanup along with an official apology from its chairman, the government also announced a comprehensive policy package to ensure clean water. The organizational power of environment NGOs and public responses demonstrated during the phenol incident bore eloquent witness to the changing makeup of environmental movements in South Korea. Indeed, the phenol incident was a watershed in the history of environmental politics in South Korea, not only because of its magnitude, but also because of its educational impact on environmental hazards.<sup>25)</sup>

The fourth stage (since 1992) can be characterized as the period of maturation. Since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, environmental NGOs have proliferated. And they began to form national alliances by creating organizational networks between those NGOs in Seoul and local areas. Even more interesting is the formation of international alliances.<sup>26)</sup> While domestic environmental NGOs began to extend their interests in global environmental agenda by going beyond national boundaries, international environmental NGOs also became interested in working with Korean counterparts. Along with this, the operational mode of South Korean NGOs underwent

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24) *Chosun Ilbo*, March 26, 1991.

25) According to a survey by the Green Korea United's (one of the most activist environmental NGOs in Korea), the Nakdong River phenol issue was ranked as the most serious environmental hazard in South Korea [[www.greenkorea.org/news/release/0907.htm](http://www.greenkorea.org/news/release/0907.htm)].

structural changes, moving from protest and opposition to policy consultation with the government. The proactive change was closely tied to their increasing policy competence and a shifting emphasis from damage control and compensation to preventive policy measures. South Korea's environmental politics gradually evolved from the politics of confrontation to one of compromise through exchange of ideas and knowledge, which revealed a maturity comparable to advanced industrialized countries.<sup>27)</sup>

As in Table 3, a movement against the construction of a multi-purpose dam on the Dong River represents the hallmark of environmental politics. Seoul Metropolitan City, with more than 12 million population, suffers from a chronic fresh water shortage. In order to resolve the water shortage as well as to manage flooding, the Ministry of Construction and Transportation and the Korea Water Resources Corporation decided to construct a multi-purpose dam on the Dong River in 1996, with completion set for 2001. But the plan faced problems from the beginning because it failed to satisfy environmental impact assessments required by the Ministry of Environment. A coalition of environmental NGOs, various civic groups, and local residents formed the National Citizens' Solidarity to Preserve the Dong River, launching a nationwide campaign to boycott the government plan in the name of conservation. Mass media sided with the citizen's movement, and the general public were also critical of the government plan. In addition, on April 20, 1999, international environmental NGOs such as Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, and the Worldwatch Institute issued a special resolution supporting the national campaign,

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26) Barbara J. Bramble, and Gareth Porter, "Non-Governmental Organizations and the Making of US International Environmental Policy," in A. Hurrell, and B. Kingsbury (eds), *The International Politics of the Environment: Actors, Interests, and Institutions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 314.

27) Goo Do-wan, *op. cit.*; Son Byeong-seon, "Environmental Organizations in Korea," in Kim Jae-yeong, et al. (eds.), *Environmental Politics and Environmental Policy* (in Korean), (Seoul: Samusa, 1996).

dubbed "Save the Dong River."<sup>28)</sup> The Kim Dae-jung government faced a serious dilemma: resolving the fresh water problem and protecting Seoul residential property from floods on the one hand, and saving the Dong River on the other.<sup>29)</sup> Extensive public debate took place between government officials and NGOs' representatives. NGOs also sent their own technical expert teams to conduct impact studies. In the end, President Kim Dae-jung announced the cancellation of the plan. Civil society had won over the government without even engaging in violent demonstrations. Public opinion, knowledge and information, along with international pressure made it happen.

Thus, democratic changes have brought about profound changes in South Korea's environmental politics. Vertical decision and command, exclusion of the popular sector, and unilateral imposition of government policies, which were defining characteristics of the developmentalist state, are no longer possible. Well-informed logic and thoughtful persuasion now win over public opinion. Domestic and international public interest groups have mobilized as determinants of environmental politics in South Korea. Indeed, democratization has fostered the demise of the developmental coalition, while enhancing the power and influence of environmental NGOs.

#### PARADOXES OF GLOBALIZATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS IN SOUTH KOREA

In as much as democratization has influenced the dynamics of environmental politics, globalization has also affected its nature and direction. While globalization has several meanings,<sup>30)</sup> for practical purposes it can be defined follows: The first type is spontaneous

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28) [<http://www.kfem.or/krem/donggang/course.htm>].

29) *Chosun Ilbo*, April 8, 1999.

globalization, which refers to a growing interdependence evolved through expanding market networks and a revolution in transportation and communication. It can be characterized as natural evolutionary dynamics resulting from progress in human history. The second type is governed globalization, which denotes international efforts to foster or regulate the process of spontaneous globalization through multilateral coordination and cooperation. Governed globalization usually entails international regulatory regimes. The last type is managerial globalization which can be defined in terms of government's conscious efforts to cope with opportunities and constraints emanating from the first two types of globalization. In other words, managerial globalization can be seen as the state's strategic responses to external stimuli.

With regard to environment, these three types of globalization produce a structure of paradoxes. While spontaneous globalization compels countries to loosen environmental regulations in order to attract more foreign capital and enhance international competitiveness,<sup>30)</sup> governed globalization urges countries to comply

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30) A. Prakash and J. Hart (eds.), *Responding to Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Samuel S. Kim, *Korea's Globalization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Moon Chung-in, "In Shadow of Broken Cheers: South Korea's Globalization Strategy," in A. Prakash and J. Hart, *op. cit.*; Moon Chung-in, "Workers and Globalization," in Sam S. Kim, *op. cit.*

31) Gareth Porter, "Trade Competition and Pollution Standards: 'Race to the Bottom' or 'Stuck at the Bottom,'" *Journal of Environment & Development*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (1999), p. 136. On contrasting views on pollutant havens, refer to Jan Adams, "Environmental Policy and Competitiveness in a Globalized Economy: Conceptual Issues and a Review of the Empirical Evidence," *Globalisation and Environment: Preliminary Perspectives* (OECD, 1997); Tom Jones, "Globalisation and Environment: Main Issues," OECD Proceedings, *Globalisation and Environment: Preliminary Perspectives*, (OECD, 1997); UN Conference on Trade and Development, *World Investment Report 1999* (New York: UNCTD, 1999); Mani Muthukumara, and David Wheeler, "In Search of a Pollution Haven? Dirty Industry in the World Economy, 1960 to 1995," *Journal of Environment and Development*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (1998), p. 244.

with a set of norms, principles, and rules regarding environmental regulations. State authorities have mandates to balance the two. Such balancing acts are usually shaped by dynamic interplay of international and domestic forces. In the case of the environment, transnational alliances factor in too; while developmentalist coalitions, comprised of national and international capital, push for lowered environmental regulations in favor of creating pollutant havens, domestic and transnational environmental NGOs as well as international organizations become counter-balancing forces. In many cases, state choice of environmental policy is, by and large, a reflection of this coalitional politics.

South Korea is no exception to this general observation. It experienced a severe economic crisis in 1997, which was a very much a product of spontaneous globalization<sup>32)</sup> In the process of overcoming the financial crisis, the South Korean government and firms were forced to compromise on some of the environmental regulations. As a matter of fact, since the crisis, government spending on environmental improvement has decreased. The relative share of the Ministry of Environment (MOE) budget in total government expenditure declined from 1.51 percent in 1997 to 1.3 percent in 1998 and 1.36 percent in 1999.<sup>33)</sup> Although the reduction has been minimal, the trend seems problematic, precisely because both President Kim Dae-jung and his predecessor Kim Yong-sam pledged to pay utmost policy attention to environmental issues during their presidential election campaigns. But their pledges have not been kept.

The private sector has been particularly vocal about loosening of environmental regulations. Immediately after the economic crisis, the Federation of Korean Industries, the umbrella organization

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32) Moon Chung-in, "In the Shadow of Broken Cheers," *op. cit.*; Moon Chung-in, and Mo Jong-ryn, *Economic Crisis and Structural Reforms in South Korea: Assessments and Implications* (Washington D.C.: The Economic Strategy Institute, 2000).

33) Samuel S. Kim, *op. cit.*

representing interests of big business, called for relaxation of rigid environmental regulations in order to correct economic structure based on high cost and low efficiency.<sup>34)</sup> The MOE responded favorably to the demands of the private sector by pledging to remove 193 regulations (30 percent of total regulations) and loosen 185 regulations (28.8 percent). The MOE decision was motivated by the mandate to promote economic recovery through the relaxation of environmental regulations.<sup>35)</sup> The primacy of economic recovery over environmental preservation is also well reflected in investment behavior of private firms. In 1996, a year before the economic crisis, thirty top leading manufacturing firms in the areas of petrochemical, steel, cement, pharmaceutical, electronics, computer, automobiles, and telecommunication industries invested 1.66 trillion won in environmental facilities. But in 1998, they invested only 424 billion won in environment-related facilities, which accounted for a mere 25 percent of the 1996 figure.

Likewise, economic disaster triggered by spontaneous globalization has compromised democratic and even global mandates of environmental protection to a great extent. But governed globalization has emerged as the primary deterrent to this trend. The first source of international pressure is the World Trade Organization (WTO). Since the Stockholm Declaration on Human Environment in 1972, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and later the WTO began to pay serious attention to relationships between trade and environment. In particular, the Rio Summit played an instrumental role in establishing the Committee on Trade and Environment (CTE) within WTO, which is designed to harmonize trade liberalization and environmental conservation. In December 1996, at a WTO ministerial meeting held in Singapore, members began deliberations on ten major agenda,<sup>36)</sup> but failed to

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34) *Donga Ilbo*, November 25, 1997.

35) *Hankyoreh Shinmun*, December 15, 1998.

36) [[http://www.wto.org/english/tratop\\_e/envir\\_e/cte00\\_e.htm](http://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/envir_e/cte00_e.htm)].

produce substantive agreements. Depending on the issue areas, WTO members took conflicting positions. The third WTO ministerial meeting held in Seattle in November, 1999, also failed to produce a major consensus on the agenda partly due to protests by environmental NGOs and partly due to conflicting interests among its members. Since the WTO/CTE failed to produce enforceable codes of conduct on harmony between trade liberalization and environmental conservation, South Korea has not so far encountered any visible pressures. However, once the Green Round is launched, and pressure increases, the South Korean government might have to undergo serious structural changes.

Even since South Korea joined the OECD in 1996, that organization became a more credible source of international pressure for environmental conservation and integrity. In order to be eligible for an OECD membership, South Korea had to comply with 171 rules, of which 71 are related to environmental conservation. The OECD rules on environment are quite comprehensive, covering a broad range of environmental issues such as chemical materials, solid waste disposal, environmental policy, environmental impact statement, air quality, and water quality. And the OECD codes of conduct on the environment are composed of decisions which oblige its members to comply with environmental recommendations and declaration. Out of 65 codes, South Korea agreed to accept 53 codes upon the admission to the OECD. South Korea accepted the remaining 12 codes with observation. In tandem with admission to the OECD, South Korea overhauled the environment-related legal system which incorporated the "polluter pays" principle, utilization of economic instruments in environmental policy, prohibition on environmental countervailing duties and export rebates, and implementation of environmental impact assessments. According to an OECD evaluation, South Korea still lags behind standards in the areas of air quality, water quality, management of solid wastes disposal, and transportation. But the OECD has become a major driving force of changes in environmental policies in South Korea.<sup>37)</sup>

The final source of international pressure is from various kinds of multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs). South Korea has joined 49 out of 210 international conventions on the environment. They include the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change; the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer and the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer; the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES); the Convention on Biological Diversity; the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal; and the Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter.<sup>38)</sup> These MEAs have influenced the South Korean government to enhance its environmental standards in one way or another. Of course, many of these conventions are rather weak in terms of enforcement. Recommendations, rather than obligations, characterize the governance structure of these conventions. Nevertheless, they have been effective in altering South Korea's compliance behavior.

What has been problematic with South Korea is its changing status in the international economy. With admission to the OECD, South Korea can no longer enjoy the status of a developing country, and as a developed country, is expected to meet much higher environmental standards. For example, in accordance to the Kyoto Protocol, 38 advanced industrial countries have agreed to reduce emission of greenhouse gases by an average of 5.2 percent during 2008-2012 by using 1990 as the benchmark year. South Korea, as an OECD member, is also obliged to comply with it. However, meeting such a standard could be extremely expensive. If South Korea has to freeze emission of greenhouse gases at the 1995 level, its economic losses are estimated to increase from 1.3 percent of GDP (about 15

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37) Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Report on Earth Environment Conference* (in Korean), (Seoul: MOFA, April 1997).

38) *Environment White Paper* (1999), *op. cit.*, pp. 581.

trillion won) in 2020 to 3.6 percent of GDP (about 62 trillion) in 2030.<sup>39)</sup> Aware of the high costs, South Korea has been reluctant to comply with the decision. Apart from the case of greenhouse gases, South Korea ratified the Vienna Convention and the Montreal Protocol on the ozone layer in May 1992; this identified 95 types of substances including chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and halon that deplete the ozone layer, and obligated South Korea to make a gradual reduction of their production and consumption. By 2040, South Korea is expected to enforce a complete ban on both production and consumption of these materials. Such regulations are also likely to constrain its economic activities.

In sum, globalization has brought about mixed impacts on development and environment in South Korea. While elements of spontaneous globalization have favored development and international competitiveness, a set of norms, principles, and rules defined by governed globalization have fostered the adoption of global environmental standards. The South Korean government has so far been sandwiched between the two. Although it has accommodated a large number of international conventions, their enforcement has essentially lagged behind because of its institutional and mental inertia as a developing country. Unless the mismatch of domain between the two is structurally resolved, South Korea's policy on enforcement of global environmental standards is likely to be erratic.

## CONCLUSION

In view of the above discussion, South Korea has undergone a dramatic change in the area of environmental politics. Defying the

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39) Hong Sang-u, "Convention on Climate Change and Kyoto Protocol" (in Korean), Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (May 30, 2000), [<http://www.mofat.go.kr/main/top.html>].

previous dominance of the developmentalist coalition, democratic opening and consolidation has not only expanded civil society, but also proliferated environmental NGOs. NGOs have, in turn, become significant political actors in terms of size, resources, expertise, and political activism. Meanwhile, globalization has resulted in a paradoxical outcome in which forces of both developmentalist and conservationist coalitions are inextricably intertwined. The future terrain of environmental politics in South Korea is dependent on how the state can weave through these paradoxes and underlying dynamics of coalitional politics. In our opinion, however, resurgence of the developmentalist ethos is temporal, being associated with the acute economic crisis in 1977. As South Korea normalizes its economic scene, alliance between domestic and international NGOs, both of which are inspired and supported by new emerging global environmental regimes, is likely to prevail over the developmental one in shaping environmental politics in South Korea.

This is a positive development. But several caveats are in order. First, South Korea is still on the cusp of two competing dominant social paradigms, developmental versus conservationist. And its environmental politics might encounter difficulties unless it realigns the dominant social paradigm. The dissemination of post-materialist values has been confined mostly to intellectuals. New efforts should be made to spread the messages of post-materialist values to a wide segment of Korean society. Second, environmental NGOs in South Korea need to restructure their goals, strategies and tactics, action programs, and organizational structure. Despite their remarkable contribution in the past, they have often been criticized as organizations which engage in “civil movements without grassroots.”<sup>40)</sup> And they have also been occasionally accused of being detached from reality: too militant and politicized to be a reservoir of

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40) Kim Hyeok-rae, and Kim Young-rae, “The Present Situation and Task of Korean NGOs,” Paper presented at a National Assembly conference, Korean Political Science Association (1999).

policy ideas and alternatives. Their restructuring should be framed around inducing more grassroots organizations to get involved and generating more innovative policy ideas. Third, South Korea NGOs should be more active in forming transnational alliances with international NGOs. Events-oriented alliances aimed at generating short-term demonstration effects cannot produce long-lasting impacts on environmental policy and politics. Emphasis should be on exchanges of ideas and information on policy, organization and education. Finally, the Korean state should overcome the bureaucratic inertia anchored in the developmentalist template. It should be more proactive than reactive in enforcing international environmental conventions. Otherwise, real changes in environment policy cannot be anticipated.