

Local Autonomy and Conflicts over State Projects: The Case of the Yeonggwang Nuclear Power Plants

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What impact does change in local autonomy have on locational conflicts over controversial state projects, and what are the effects of extended conflicts on society? This study investigates the relationship between the implementation of local autonomy and an extended conflict over a state project in South Korea, the Yeonggwang Nuclear Power Plant. The study finds that the influence of local civic organizations and the role of local government, both significantly augmented by the degree of local autonomy, were primary causes of the conflict's extension. The study also estimates the effects of the conflict on productivity, stability, and adaptability. The findings show that the extended conflict did not have solely negative effects. The results suggest that in an era of local autonomy, the state should make the implementation of its projects more open to the public.

Introduction

In implementing controversial state projects, there are often locational conflicts between the state and local residents living near the proposed projects. These conflicts are influenced by many factors, including the decentralization of power. Before 1995, local governments in South Korea were not vested with the power to affect decisions made by the central government, even on issues affecting local land use. After 1995, local governments gained the power to influence such issues. How are locational conflicts over state projects affected by changes in local autonomy? It is commonly expected that as local autonomy increases locational conflicts become more severe, and that the extended conflicts have a negative effect on the projects. Is this expectation substantiated? If so, what explains it?

This study investigates the relationship between locational conflicts and local autonomy by focusing on the causes and effects of extended conflict. I use conflicts over proposed nuclear power plants in South Korea as case studies. The power plants are located in an area where local autonomy increased significantly in recent years. As a result of the popular local elections of 1995, South Korea moved towards democratic decentralization and local autonomy increased. Local governors and local councilors, who before 1995 had been ap-

pointed to their positions by the central government, instead came to be elected by local residents. Since then, conflicts between local residents and the state have risen sharply, particularly with regard to controversial state projects such as the construction of dams, power plants and airports.

I examined two cases of locational conflict, both involving phases of the Yeonggwang Nuclear Power Plant (NPP). The first phase, construction of Yeonggwang NPP Units 3-4, was planned in 1987 and executed in 1989. Conflict over these units arose before the full-scale implementation of local autonomy in South Korea. The second phase, construction of Units 5-6, was planned in 1993 and executed in 1996. Comparing these two cases can show changes in the nature of conflict before and after the implementation of local autonomy in 1995.

The methodology of this study included an investigation of national assembly and local council meeting minutes, white papers, statements, pamphlets and newspapers, interviews, and a review of public opinion polls. The interviewees represented opposing parties, such as local civic groups, local civil servants, and staff of the electric power company (Korea Electric Power Corporation, or KEPCO). The two public opinion polls were conducted by Gallup Korea in the years 1989 and 1995.

Conflict between the State and Local Residents

Conflict is often defined as a struggle in which two or more parties perceive and take advantage of

chances to interrupt each other in order to seek incompatible goals. In this article the “state” implies branches of the central government such as the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. It also includes government-financed enterprises that are organized and managed by the central government.¹ “Local residents” refers not only to individuals but also to all civic groups with which these individuals are affiliated. Local civic groups, in turn, include both interest groups and social movement groups (Gurr and King 1987: 57-62). For the purpose of this article, “conflict” is what takes place when central government agencies pursue projects that have intended national benefits, but that local individuals and/or groups see as harmful to their security and existence.

Determinants of the Degree of Conflict

The determinants of the degree of conflict between the state and local residents can be divided into three types: 1) *potential determinants*, 2) *manifest determinants*, and 3) *situational parameters*.

Potential Determinants

Potential determinants are the fundamental causes of conflict. They include both the objective and perceived difference of interests between conflicting parties. In the case of conflict between the state and local residents, this type of determinant may be characterized as follows:

- a) The objective difference (or “gap”) of interests between the state and local residents arises from the unfair distribution of a project’s benefits and costs.

That is, while the benefits are spread over the entire country, the costs are concentrated in a specific locality. In this article, the conflict arises over the distribution of economic, social, and environmental/security costs and benefits.²

b) The perceived gap of interests is connected with how local residents view their interests versus the interests advanced by state projects. In many cases local residents view their interests as being violated by state projects, which deepens conflict.

Manifest Determinants

A conflict's manifest determinants are those of an emotional or behavioral nature, including mutual distrust, insincerity, and perceptions of strength. In the case of conflict between the state and local residents described here, the determinants are:

a) The residents' degree of trust in the state, which can produce and deepen conflict. If local residents are excluded from the decision-making process they are often suspicious of the state.

b) The state's response to local residents' discontent. Conflict between the state and local residents can arise from the state's improper response to local concerns. If the state grasps local residents' discontent in advance and considers it during the decision-making process, the conflict's severity can be reduced and sometimes the conflict can be avoided entirely. Conversely, the state's ignorance or suppression of local discontent can deepen conflict.

c) The strength of local civic groups is an important determinant of the power of local residents. When these groups are well organized and take action, conflict can develop and grow. Conversely, when these groups are uncoordinated and slow to respond, conflict can quickly be reduced.³ Resource mobilization theory suggests that resources, solidarity, strategy and tactics, and leadership of a civic organization determine its power (Institute of Society and Culture 1993: 189-195; Hong 1997: 32-33).

Situational Parameters

While situational parameters are not direct sources of conflict, they can be exacerbating factors. Situational parameters include the internal discord in conflicting parties (Coser 1956; Pondy 1967), the role of the local government and media, and the influence of external social movements (Yoo et al. 1997; Kim 1998). In the case of conflict between the state and local residents, this type of determinant affects the conflict in the following ways:

a) The internal discord of the state can worsen conflict. The presence of opposing groups within the state can make local residents believe they have sympathizers in the rival party. Internal discord among local residents, however, is less important, because whatever their internal differences, local residents tend to take coherent actions when colliding with the state (Park 1996: 271). For this reason studies of locational conflict often focus on the state's internal discord more than that of local residents.

b) The local government's role is an important situational parameter because the local government is a channel through which residents can express their views. The role that the local government plays in conflicts between the state and their residents varies with place and time: i) it may side with its residents against the state; ii) it may mediate or arbitrate between the state and its residents as a third party; or iii) it may not play any role at all. Whereas conflict is inclined to intensify in the first case, it augurs well for settlement in the second case. In the last case, of course, the local government has no influence.

c) External circumstances are also a situational parameter. External circumstances include external social movements (groups and organizations that are not local, such as national environmental groups), which can be important factors in determining the degree

of conflict. Media coverage is similarly an external circumstance, as it can either deepen or reduce tensions.

Effects of Conflict between the State and Local Residents

Pondy (1967) suggested that *productivity*, *stability*, and *adaptability* are the criteria by which a conflict's effect on a society and its organizations can be measured.

Productivity refers to the economic efficiency of the organization affected by conflict. Pondy (1967: 308) emphasized that productivity should be "measured in both quantitative and qualitative terms." This means that both the cost and the innovation derived from conflict should be simultaneously appraised.

Stability is a criterion by which we can measure

Potential Determinants	The objective gap of interests The perceived gap of interests
Manifest Determinants	Local residents' trust in the state The state's response to local residents' discontent The strength of local civic groups
Situational Parameters	The state's internal discord The role of the local government The influence of external circumstances

Table 1: Determinants of the degree of conflict between the state and local residents

changes in the “cohesiveness” and “solvency” of an organization. In other words, organizational stability represents how closely the members of that organization are united. Finally, *adaptability* is a measure of how much an organization “improves performance and adapts to changing internal and environmental pressures.” This is the criterion by which we can measure the flexibility of an organization due to conflict.

These three criteria can be affected in different ways by conflict between the state and local residents. With respect to productivity, while conflict generates additional social cost in the short term, it can also give rise to social innovation,⁴ and increase benefits in the long run. It is true that conflict can bring about a project’s delay and increase costs, but if discontent is sufficiently expressed, conflict in the present can prevent its recurrence in the future, thereby reducing costs overall. In terms of stability, conflict itself means social unsettlement. Conflict can, however, improve an organization’s cohesiveness and solvency by allowing latent discontent to be expressed and openly resolved. With respect to adaptability, conflict generally effects positive changes by expanding communication routes, reducing the exercise of power, and promoting technical development.

Because conflict can cause both positive and negative effects, its outcomes are difficult to measure. Therefore the estimation of conflict’s effects should be based not on a priori judgment, but on contextual situations through detailed case studies.

Brief History of Conflicts over NPPs in South Korea

Conflict over the construction of nuclear power plants (NPPs) in South Korea dates back to 1972, when Kori Unit 1, the first NPP in the country, was built. At that time local residents protested primarily against the state’s appropriation of land (MCIE and KEPCO 1995: 65), and showed little, if any, concern about the safety of NPPs and environmental issues—the safety issue had not attracted public attention in Korea. Consequently, the electric power corporation expediently embarked on the plant’s construction (Lee 1992: 82).

From that time until the mid-1980s, the issue of NPPs received no more attention from the Korean people than did other Korean environmental issues (Lee 1992: 82-84). A significant conflict over NPPs did not arise until 1985, when local residents demanded compensation for damage resulting from the operation of NPPs in Yeonggwang. These local residents’ movements were not part of the anti-nuclear movement, which did not develop until later. The local residents did not object to the NPPs themselves, but rather made claims based on specific damages they alleged the NPPs to have caused (Park 1995: 132).

When the Chernobyl accident occurred in the former Soviet Union in 1986, concern about the safety of NPPs intensified worldwide. Around that same time NPP-related accidents occurred in South Korea as well. A worker at one of the Kori NPPs died of lymph gland cancer. Heavy water (deuterium oxide)

leaked from the Wolsung NPPs, and in 1988 the Ulchin NPPs were shut down. These events sparked violent protests by local residents in the areas affected by the NPPs. Moreover, in 1988 numerous environmental organizations entered the debate, siding with local residents and causing turbulence in all of Korean society (Lee 1992: 92-96).

Conflicts over NPPs continued in 1989 on a national scale. In particular, a movement against the construction of Yeonggwang Units 3-4 gave rise to anti-nuclear organizations nationwide. The rapid organization of this movement reflected the anti-nuclear sentiment that was spreading across the country. Several more accidents cast additional doubts on the safety of NPPs. A few NPP workers claimed they gave birth to deformed children, and local residents near NPPs died of cancer allegedly related to radiation from the power plants. These incidents made Yeonggwang residents oppose the construction of Units 3-4 on safety grounds. The emphasis on safety made Yeonggwang a departure from previous conflicts. Nevertheless, the conflict was relatively peaceful, and its scale was insignificant compared to the conflict over Units 5-6 in 1996.

In the first half of the 1990s conflicts over nuclear power began to get more violent. Initially these conflicts focused less on the construction of NPPs and more on the locations of radioactive waste disposal sites. In 1990, opposition to the selection of Anmyon Island as a radioactive waste disposal site led to organized and violent actions. In 1995, the selection of Goolup Island did the same. These con-

flicts were much more violent than any that had previously arisen over the construction of NPPs.

In 1996, controversy over Yeonggwang Units 5-6 showed that conflict over the construction of NPPs could be very fierce and violent. The residents of Yeonggwang made a collective civil appeal to the local government, and the governor of Yeonggwang County, who had been elected by popular vote, canceled the Yeonggwang Units 5-6's building permit. The local government remained in conflict with the central government for the next eight months. Eventually, in the ninth month of the controversy, the governor withdrew the cancellation of the building permit and the intergovernmental conflict came to an end. The episode, however, left an indelible mark on NPP construction in South Korea.

Case Studies of Conflicts over Building the Yeonggwang NPPs

In this study, I will measure the degree of conflict in terms of three criteria—the number of its participants, its duration, and the frequency and mode of conflict behavior. Comparing the conflict over building Yeonggwang Units 3-4 and the one over the Yeonggwang Units 5-6, I show that the latter was more severe.

The number of participants was much greater in the conflict over Units 5-6 than in the conflict over Units 3-4. In the case of Units 3-4, participants on the state's side included only KEPCO and Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Energy (MCIE). The Unit 5-6 case involved these agencies, but also involved

Conflict Behavior	Units 3-4 Frequency	Mode	Units 5-6 Frequency	Mode
Statement	6	Legal	23	Legal
Press Interview	0	-	2	Legal
Distributed Pamphlets*	11	Legal	17	Legal
Use of Local Autonomy	0	-	1	Partly Illegal**
Demonstration***	2	Legal	22	Legal & Illegal
Signature-Collecting Campaign	2	Legal	3	Legal
Administrative Litigation	0	-	1	Legal
Holding Public Hearing	0	-	1	Legal

Table 2: the frequency and mode of the conflicts over the Yeonggwang NPPs

*The distributed pamphlets do not include statement papers.

**The illegality of the use of local autonomy - the cancellation of the building permit is not judicially concluded, but the Board of Audit and Inspection judged that it was partly illegal.

***If a demonstration endured for longer than one day, I counted its frequency as one. In the case of Units 5-6, the total days of demonstration reached 72.

the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST). On the side of the local residents during the controversy over Units 3-4 case was Yeonggwang's local civic organization, the Yeonggwang Anti-Nuke Association (YANA). The conflict over Units 5-6 involved not just local civic groups but residents of the adjacent region, Kochang County, as well. Moreover, the Ministry of Environment (ME) and the local government also played roles, albeit indirect ones, during the latter conflict. Finally, while about 1,000 people were involved in the Units 3-4 case, about 15,000 were involved in the Units 5-6 case.

With respect to duration, the conflict over Yeonggwang Units 5-6 was more severe than that over Units 3-4. The Units 5-6 conflict lasted about

three years and three months, while the earlier conflict lasted only a year.

In terms of the frequency and mode of conflict behavior, the conflict over Yeonggwang Units 5-6 was much more intense and frequent than it was for Units 3-4. The frequencies and modes of the two cases are shown in Table 2.⁵ The second conflict was also more violent.

Analysis of the Extended Conflict's Causes

Why was the conflict over Yeonggwang Units 5-6 more severe than that over Units 3-4? This section will investigate the possible causes of the extended conflict.

Possible Potential Determinants

There is little difference between the two cases in terms of potential determinants, such as the objective and the perceived gap of interests.

Although the objective interests are the most fundamental cause of conflict over the construction of NPPs, these were basically the same in the two cases. The local economic concerns were rooted in damage that resulted from the spread of warm water being discharged from the NPPs. The marginal damage from building additional NPP units in both cases is comparable. In terms of social interests, regional stigma is the most significant factor, because public perceptions of NPPs are negative. However, as Yeonggwang County was not a new NPP site, the marginal effect, in this regard, is the same for the two cases. Since Units 5-6 were constructed by experienced personnel who had accumulated skill during the construction of Units 3-4, the environmental and security interests could be deemed less problematic for Units 5-6 than for Units 3-4.

Second, the polls conducted by Gallup Korea show the perceived gap of interests to be roughly the same across the two cases. This result swerves from the a priori conjecture that perceptions of damage increase over time as people become more sensitive to their own interests. The lack of difference between the two cases may be explained by the fact that some problematic events⁶ over NPP safety raised the awareness of interests even during the conflict over Units 3-4 in 1989.

Possible Manifest Determinants

Differences in the strength of local civic groups were influential in producing a difference between the two conflicts. Other manifest determinants had little impact.

Yeonggwang residents' trust in the state was similar in both cases. The 1989 poll, conducted when conflict was occurring over Units 3-4, showed that 19 percent of the local residents trusted the state (the central government and KEPCO). The 1995 poll, conducted when conflict was taking place over Units 5-6, showed the degree of trust slightly higher, at 21 percent. This result arose from the fact that residents' trust in the central government had increased much more dramatically than their trust in KEPCO had decreased in the intervening years. This is because while democratization in South Korea gave legitimacy to the government, previous conflicts over the operation of Yeonggwang NPPs between KEPCO and the local residents weakened their trust in the electric power company.

The state's behavior was similar in both cases. The state behaved negatively by showing disregard for local concerns, and by censuring and denouncing its opponents. During the controversy over Units 5-6, the state did respond positively by allowing residents to participate in discussions and by taking some pollution-control measures; at the same time, however, it demonstrated a greater willingness to employ repressive tactics, including physical oppression. Such adverse actions led residents to perceive the state's behavior as substantially the same in both cases.

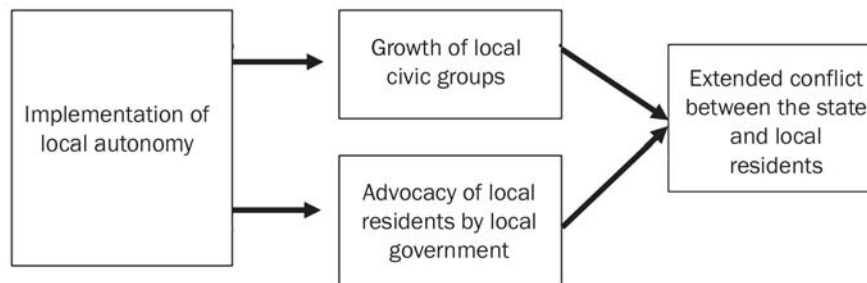


Figure 1: The relationship between local autonomy and extended conflict

The strength of the local civic groups played a significant role in both cases. YANA, which played a leading role in the conflict over Units 3-4, had been troubled by internal discord, a shortage of funds, and absence of leadership. In contrast, the Yeonggwang Anti-Nuke Conference (YANC), which led the anti-nuclear movement during the conflict over Units 5-6, proved superior with respect to resource mobilization, internal cohesiveness, strategy and tactics, and leadership. This expansion of the local civic group's strength helped deepen the conflict over the Yeonggwang NPPs.

Possible Situational Parameters

With respect to situational parameters, only the role of the local government was significant.

The internal discord of the state was essentially the same in both cases, and its influence on the degree of conflict was similar. The internal discord took place between KEPCO and the National Assembly during the controversy over Units 3-4, while it occurred between KEPCO and the Ministry of Environment in the Units 5-6 case. In both cases, however, the effect was the same: the state revealed negative information about the projects to the local residents.

The local government played different roles in the two cases. While it was essentially a bystander in the conflict over Units 3-4, it played an important role as an advocate for local residents in the conflict over Units 5-6. In the latter case, the local council directly led demonstrations and negotiated with KEPCO,

and the local governor cancelled the building permit for Units 5-6. By taking these steps the local government helped extend the conflict over Units 5-6.

The influence of external institutions, such as the media and non-local civic groups, was minimal in the two cases, and did not contribute to the extension of conflict. Although the media did encourage the conflict over units 3-4, and did not do so in the case of Units 5-6, these contrary actions do not explain the increased severity of the latter conflict. The external civic organizations supported the local residents' movements equally in both cases.

Analysis of the Results

The extended conflict between the state and Yeonggwang residents over building the NPPs was caused primarily by a change in the status of local civic groups and local government. This change was in turn caused by a reform of the system of local governance in South Korea. While the power and status of local civic groups and local government had increased since 1991,⁷ the state's attitude toward implementing projects did not change appreciably. Such inconsistency led to a deepened and longer conflict over the building of Yeonggwang NPPs Units 5-6.

When the conflict over Units 3-4 took place in 1989, Yeonggwang County's government lacked autonomy. The local government functioned only as an intermediary between the state and local residents. It had no influence over the construction of NPPs and consequently was passive during the conflict. At the

same time, local civic groups were in an inchoate stage and their strength and influence were limited.

In contrast, when the conflict over Units 5-6 took place in 1995, governors and local councilors were elected by the local populace and this strengthened local autonomy, because it turned local governments into advocates for their residents. The Yeonggwang County government was now answerable to its residents in regard to NPP construction⁸ and more independent from central government control.⁹ Consequently, the local government could oppose the state and side with its residents. The reforms of local government also increased the influence of local civic groups, who could take action through their elevated status in local politics.

Figure 1 illustrates the above discussions. The implementation of local autonomy did not directly contribute to extending the conflict over building NPPs. However, it did bring about changes in the position of both local civic groups and local governments, and so created favorable conditions for the extension of conflict.

By analyzing the effects of the extended conflict over the construction of the Yeonggwang NPPs in terms of the three aforementioned criteria—productivity, stability, and adaptability—we recognize that the effects were not entirely negative.

The conflict over Units 5-6 delayed their construction for nine months and accordingly escalated costs. But the conflict also prevented the probable recurrence of similar conflicts by leading to some level of agree-

ment. Comparing the benefits with the costs, however, the extended conflict over the construction of Yeonggwang NPPs negatively affected productivity.

The conflict over Units 5-6 also certainly caused more social disturbance than the conflict over Units 3-4. However, the earlier conflict also led to similar conflicts after it was completed. Ultimately, then, it was no less unsettling than the later case. The conflict over Units 5-6 did not appear to aggravate social stability more than the previous conflict did.

In terms of adaptability, the conflict over Units 5-6 brought about better overall effects than did the conflict over Units 3-4. While the earlier case did not contribute to social adaptability, the latter case did, because it ended with an agreement to authorize the Nongovernmental Environment Watching Organization (NEWO), and to prepare measures for the reduction of discharged warm water.

In conclusion, the effects of the extended conflict over the construction of the Yeonggwang NPPs were negative in terms of productivity but positive in terms of stability and adaptability. In particular, with respect to adaptability, which is connected to democratization, the conflict led to noticeable positive results.

Conclusion

This article examined the determinants and the effects of the extended conflict over the construction of the Yeonggwang NPPs, a typical state project in South Korea, by comparing two cases—one before

and one after the implementation of local autonomy in 1995.

The results of the case studies show that the decisive factors in the extended conflict were the influence of local civic groups and the role of local government. The other factors showed little change before and after the implementation of local autonomy, which suggests they did not appreciably contribute to the extension of conflict over the project.

The findings suggest that the potential determinants are not significantly influenced by the degree of local autonomy. This may be because the gap of interests between local residents and the state is maintained regardless of the local polity. Thus, these factors do not explain the extended conflict, although the manifest determinants and the situational parameters are susceptible to the political situation in two ways. First, local autonomy has favorably impacted local civic groups. As these groups have grown so too has their influence. Second, as the responsibility of local governments to their residents has increased, their role has changed. No longer intermediaries appointed by the central government, local governments are instead beholden to, and advocates of, their residents. They are more susceptible to the pressures of residents and civic groups. This new role contributes to the extension of conflict over state projects.

The effects of local autonomy have been both positive and negative. This study compared the effects of two conflicts in terms of productivity, stability and

adaptability. In so doing, its results showed that the extended conflict brought positive effects in terms of stability and adaptability, and negative effects in terms of productivity.

From these results, one may draw several policy implications. If the extension of local autonomy is both natural and desirable, then both the growth of local civic groups and the change in the role of local government are inevitable. As such, the state should change the existing implementation process for state projects accordingly. If it recognizes the new power of local governments, the state can devise procedures that will avoid or minimize conflict with local residents. In the past the Korean government has forcibly executed its policies without any agreement from local residents. This practice is no longer appropriate for today's situation of local autonomy. In the future the state should build a cooperative relationship with local residents and local governments.

As the effects of conflict are not always negative, the state should neither deny nor evade it. Conflict may, of course, give rise to additional social cost, but in the long run it is also likely to contribute to social stability and adaptability. Therefore, once conflict takes place, the state should cope with it actively and openly.

This conclusion can also be applied to other countries that are experiencing the extension of local autonomy and severe locational conflicts over state projects. Local autonomy means the decentralization of power from the central government to local gov-

ernments and local residents. As local power grows, the possibility of colliding with the state also increases if the state does not acknowledge this changed reality. If the trend toward decentralization is natural, the state should reform its policy implementation process. This is particularly important for controversial projects that affect local land use. These projects should be more open-minded and transparent.

Notes

¹ In this study, the concept of the state includes KEPCO, a national enterprise, as well as the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Energy (MCIE).

² Economic interests are those interests that are connected with "the use and distribution of material goods and resources" (Duke 1976: 269). Social interests are those that deal with "the promotion of status, reputation, and personality." Environmental and security interests are those that address human health and life.

³ According to the resource mobilization theory, all of society experiences discontent or tension that can lead to social movements, but the movements can be aroused only when there are organizations that can concentrate individuals into collective protest (Institute of Society and Culture 1993: 191).

⁴ Innovation is "an unprecedented intellectual constitution to achieve the purpose of an organization with a new method or to achieve quite new a purpose" (Yang 1992: 589).

⁵ The results of Table 2 are totaled on the basis of various kinds of pamphlets, statements and newspapers I collected. Therefore, they may be different from the results of official statistics.

⁶ Refer to pages 9-10.

⁷ At that time, the local council system, which had been abrogated by the military dictatorship since 1961, was restored in South Korea.

⁸ Bong-yeol Kim, the governor of Yeonggwang County at that time, said at the parliamentary inspection of government offices on October 4, 1996, "As the long-awaited local autonomy is being implemented, I think that rejecting the residents' opinion would fade the essence of local autonomy. Such an urgent idea made me accept residents' opinion and cancel the building permit" (National Assembly of the Republic of Korea 1996).

⁹ Concerning the construction of Yeonggwang NPPs, a kind of state project, the local government had restricted autonomy only. Bong-yeol Kim, the governor of Yeonggwang County, said at the parliamentary inspection of government offices on September 10, 1996, "I felt responsible for helping this project, which the central government was implementing as a state policy, since I am a government employee." However, in comparison to the governor during the previous period, he must have had relatively more autonomy from the central government (National Assembly of the Republic of Korea 1996).

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