

DECENTRALIZATION AND LOCAL POLITICS

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Summary

The decentralization of power is a prerequisite of local autonomy. Though the modern nation state established the local autonomy system, it has limited the authority of local government. However, since mid-twentieth century, every country has begun to promote decentralization reform, because local government might be substituted for “big government” of the welfare state. In this article, local politics and decentralization trend are explained. First, the model of local politics and central-local relation in politics and administration is presented, and then the local government system and its function are explained. Finally, the present condition of local politics and decentralization reform is analyzed.

1. Introduction

Local government is the political organization in a local community. It engages in decision and governance for the purpose of promoting public interest in the local area. Generally speaking, the function of local government is the managing of a local community by the residents themselves who live in the area, and it is a vehicle of public service for satisfying daily needs such as social service, housing, education, roads, water supply and sewage.

Local government can be examined from the viewpoint of democracy in the local community (see *Democracy*). Thus, analyzing local political process and structure has become one of the important themes of contemporary political science. Local politics and local government are important from the standpoint not only of governance involving local civic life, but also from that of national politics. There are various relations between the central government and the local government in the political process. The relation between the central government and the local government is called central–local government relationship or intergovernmental relationship, and it is a critical field in the study of government.

In this section, first of all, the theory of central–local government relationship will be clarified. What will be examined next is the model that has been proposed in the studies of the political, administrative and financial relations between the central government and the local government. Then, the reason why central–local relationship draws attention now and why the sub-national government has an important role to play in the context of globalization and regionalization will be investigated. Based on an analytical framework of the political science, the section discusses research models focusing on decentralization and centralization in the study of central–local government relations.

Secondly, the local autonomy system will be examined and the basic institutions of local government will be discussed. In the development of the local government institutions after the formation of the modern nation state, the goal of creating a stable domestic regime has been shared by a lot of countries. In the contemporary state, local autonomy is indispensable. In this section, the representative organ, the executive agency, the authority of local government, political participation, and citizens' rights in the local autonomy system will be examined.

Thirdly, local politics will be discussed. Local government is a political institution in the local community, and is a focal point of the political system. Local politics usually operates under the principle of democracy. Like at the national level, various aspects of the political process appear at the local level. Models of the local politics will be presented, and then local political structure and political behavior will be investigated. In particular, aspects of political process of local government such as local election and party activity, and the relation with national politics will be focused on. In addition, rise of and change in political participation by local population will be analyzed.

Fourthly, decentralization reform, a contemporary and controversial issue all over the world will be examined. In making local autonomy “closer” to the residents and their daily lives, decentralization reform in every government is a very important and

political problem involving administrative reform and government reorganization.

Finally, reform of local government and local policies, which are needed to complete decentralization, will be discussed.

2. Local Government and Central–Local Relationship

2.1 Local Autonomy and Local Politics

Generally, it is possible to say that the modern state has local autonomy system as a mechanism for governance. Local autonomy is a main component of and issues point in contemporary politics at the same time it is a product of the history of modernization process and nation state building.

Local autonomy means that the local community to which a part of sovereignty of the state is allocated governs an area through the institution of self-government. In modern democratic states, local autonomy system often takes the form of democratic local government by local population.

Local community that has the right of self-government is partially independent of the state and performs a unique political function. There are important political phenomena concerning local autonomy: it is noteworthy that the local politics within the local community, the relationship between national politics and local politics, and conflict and cooperation between central government and local governments have all been studied.

Certainly, a local community can be meaningfully analyzed as an isolated political space. However, it is necessary to pay attention to the aspect in which local politics is guided to a certain degree by the intervention of the central government. It is the central-local relationship theory or the inter-governmental relationship theory that has developed such a viewpoint theoretically. In concrete terms, it tries to analyze phenomena involving politics, public administration, finance, and so on from a viewpoint that focuses on relation between central government–national politics and local government–local politics.

2.2 Sub-national Government

As for present-day politics, local autonomy has attracted a lot of attention. Both its classic and contemporary aspects need to be noted. In terms of the classical aspect, local autonomy is “the school of the democracy” and it provides chances for the political participation and recruiting of politicians. It also can be a training place of democracy, yielding democratic climate and democratic public opinion.

However, it has been pointed out that local government is changing its role in order to respond to the changes in the modern nation state. Parallel to the building of welfare state in the second half of the twentieth century, the scope of the activity of local government has been significantly extended. It may be said that local government has begun to perform the function of the welfare state. It has been the so-called “local state”

(see: *Welfare State*).

In addition, what one must pay attention to now be that the role of the state is decreasing to some extent. The decrease seems to be caused by two factors. The first is that the framework of the nation state, which used to be thought of as stable appears now to be uncertain and ambiguous because of the coming of the so-called “border-less” or “globalization” age. The second is the reconsideration of the division of labor between the public sector and the private sector; note, e.g. regulatory reform, privatization, outsourcing, and so on (see: *Administrative reform, New public management*).

To a certain extent, these reforms have turned attention away from the state, and have made sub-national government the main bearer of public interest. Sub-national government refers to all of local governments in local communities that are parts of the national community. Let us call the trend localization or a regionalization. Incidentally, another side of this phenomenon that regional integration of nation states (e.g. EU) and the activism of the international organization are preceding is becoming politically important, while citizen-based non-government and not-for-profit organization such as NGOs and NPOs are proliferating (see: NGO, NPO).

Where it is easy for the political opposition to occur, penetration by globalization (or internationalization) and localization may cause the rise of regionalism or separatism that demands an extension of political rights for independence. Even where that does not happen, the identity of local community politics tends to be strengthened and the uncertainty of the nation state increased (see *Nationalism*).

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Biographical Sketch

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