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**Efficient fluoride recovery from poly(vinylidene fluoride), poly(vinylidene fluoride-co-hexafluoropropylene) copolymer and poly(ethylene-co-tetrafluoroethylene) copolymer using superheated water with alkaline reagent**

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## ABSTRACT

Mineralization of poly(vinylidene fluoride) (PVDF), poly(vinylidene fluoride-co-hexafluoropropylene) [poly(VDF-co-HFP)] copolymer, and poly(ethylene-co-tetrafluoroethylene) copolymer (ETFE) in superheated water in the presence of an alkaline reagent was investigated with the aim of developing a technique to recycle the fluorine element. These polymers underwent almost complete defluorination to form fluoride ions ( $F^-$ ) in the reaction solution at a relatively low temperature (250 °C) under Ar atmosphere. When PVDF was reacted with aqueous KOH (1.0 M) for 6 h, the amount of which corresponds to 10 times the molar amount of fluorine content (as atoms) in PVDF, the yield of  $F^-$  released into the reaction solution reached 95%. This transformation was accompanied by the formation of carbon rich residue, which consists of amorphous carbon. **In contrast, for a treatment performed** with  $O_2$  instead of Ar, significant differences were observed in the products: while  $F^-$  ions efficiently produced in the reaction solution, carbon rich residue did not form and the major species that composed the total organic carbon content in the reaction solution was oxalate. Four consecutive runs (that is, after one reaction at 250 °C under Ar was complete, new PVDF was charged to the reaction mixture and then reacted again) caused no decrease of the  $F^-$  yield. **When treated with** aqueous KOH (1.0 M) under Ar at 250 °C for 6 h, **poly(VDF-co-HFP)** and ETFE copolymers also completely mineralized to form  $F^-$  ions with 100 and 98% yields, respectively. Introducing  $Ca(OH)_2$  to the resulting reaction solutions of these (co)polymers after superheated water treatment produced pure  $CaF_2$ , i.e., artificial fluorspar.

*Keywords:* Decomposition; Fluoropolymer; Mineralization; Recovery; Superheated water

## 1. Introduction

Fluoropolymers have been used in many industrial equipment because of their high stability against temperature, chemicals, ignition, UV-light irradiation, and other unique characteristics [1–6]. Among fluoropolymers, partially fluorinated polymers such as poly(vinylidene fluoride) (PVDF,  $-(CF_2CH_2)_n-$ ) and vinylidene fluoride (VDF) copolymers have combined characteristics of high stability of fluorochemicals with the melt processability of thermoplastic polyolefins. In contrast, poly(tetrafluoroethylene) (PTFE,  $-(CF_2CF_2)_n-$ ), the typical perfluorinated polymer, cannot be processed by melt molding [1,6]. Therefore, PVDF has been used for chemical- and electrical devices and energy-related applications such as lithium ion battery electrode binders and separators [3,5,7]. According to this trend, the production of PVDF reached the largest volume of fluoropolymer after PTFE [7]. Poly(ethylene-co-tetrafluoroethylene) copolymer (ETFE,  $-(CH_2CH_2CF_2CF_2)_n-$ ) is also a commercially available, melt-processable fluoropolymer used in harsh conditions as piping, wire insulation, protective films, fuel tubing, and other purposes [1,3].

While usages of the fluoropolymers have widely spread, waste treatment techniques do not catch up with their increasing demand. Incineration is an option to treat these polymer wastes [8]. However, hydrogen fluoride (HF) gas generated during the treatment seriously damages refractory bricks of incinerators. Therefore, most of the fluoropolymer wastes are disposed of in landfill, although some unfilled PTFE wastes from manufactures are reused in ram extrusion applications after cleaning and milling or they are degraded into low molar mass-PTFE by heating, and reused as micro powder, which was mixed with other materials [4].

If fluorine atoms in fluoropolymer wastes are transformed into fluoride ions ( $F^-$ ) by means of environmentally benign methodologies, the  $F^-$  ions can react with calcium hydroxide [ $Ca(OH)_2$ ] to form calcium fluoride ( $CaF_2$ ), which mineral is fluorspar. Nowadays, the mine production of high-purity fluorspar, suitable for hydrofluoric acid (i.e., aqueous HF)

production, is limited in a few countries [9]. Because hydrofluoric acid is a raw material for all fluorochemicals (C–F bond is built by halogen exchange using HF) [10], the development of an efficient decomposition technique of fluoropolymers to F<sup>-</sup> ions would contribute toward closing the loop of fluorine element [11].

Superheated water (it is also mentioned as ‘subcritical water’ or ‘pressurized hot water’) is liquid water under high pressure at temperatures ranging from 100 °C to 374 °C, i.e., critical temperature. This water is recognized as environmentally benign in waste management because it enables to transform hazardous chemicals into harmless or to generate value-added compounds [12–17]. As a matter of fact, in the recycling of non-metallic component from electronic waste (E-waste), the superheated water reaction is analyzed to have a smaller environmental impact than that of pyrolysis [18]. Of course, lowering the reaction temperature is desirable in view of saving energy.

We previously reported that PVDF [19] and VDF-based copolymers [19,20] efficiently mineralized in superheated water at a relatively low temperature (250 °C) by use of potassium permanganate as an oxidizing agent, and this methodology was extended to treat ETFE [21]. In these systems, the fluorine content of the polymer was decomposed into F<sup>-</sup> ions in the reaction solution, and the carbon content was decomposed to CO<sub>2</sub> in the gas phase and HCO<sub>3</sub><sup>-</sup> in the reaction solution. For industrial processes, a technique that can achieve under simpler conditions is preferable. Regarding carbon content, conversion to carbon rich solid (e.g., amorphous carbon) instead of CO<sub>2</sub> would be also an option.

Herein, we report an effective method for complete defluorination of PVDF, poly(vinylidene fluoride-*co*-hexafluoropropylene) copolymer, poly(VDF-*co*-HFP),  $-\text{[(CH}_2\text{CF}_2)_m(\text{CF}_2\text{CFCF}_3)]_p-$ , and ETFE to F<sup>-</sup> ions, by means of superheated water in the presence of an alkali reagent (KOH or NaOH) at relatively low concentration (up to 1.0 M).

Effect of coexisting gas on the reactivity of the polymers and the formation of ‘artificial fluorspar’ upon addition of  $\text{Ca}(\text{OH})_2$  to the resulting reaction solution are also described.

So far, several studies on the alkaline-reagent induced degradation of PVDF [22–31] and a VDF-based copolymer [32] were reported. However, these previous studies aimed at the surface modification of the polymer, for example, to increase the adhesion of polymer surface [23]. The level of degradation that changes the bonding nature of PVDF surface is substantially lower than that required for waste treatment, because the latter requires whole degradation of the PVDF bulk. The present study is the first report on the decomposition of PVDF and related copolymers in superheated water combined with an alkaline reagent.

## 2. Experimental Section

### 2.1. Materials and reagents

Ar (99.99%),  $\text{O}_2$  (99.999%), and a standard gas mixture  $\text{CO}_2$  (1.00%)/ $\text{N}_2$  were purchased from Nissan Tanaka (Saitama, Japan). PVDF powder was from SynQuest Laboratories (Alachua, FL). Size exclusion chromatography (SEC) showed that the weight-average molecular weight ( $M_w$ ) was  $6.5 \times 10^5$  and the polydispersity ( $M_w/M_n$ ) was 2.5, relative to polystyrene standard. Poly(VDF-co-HFP) copolymer was the same as that used in our previous report [33]: the VDF/HFP molar ratio was 95.3/4.7 and the  $M_w$  determined by SEC in dimethylformamide was  $4.5 \times 10^5$ , relative to poly(methyl methacrylate), with the  $M_w/M_n$  of 3.2. Combustion ion chromatography demonstrated that the fluorine percentages in PVDF and poly(VDF-co-HFP) copolymer were 60.7 and 59.4 wt%, respectively. The  $\text{F}^-$  yields of the reactions were calculated according to these analytical values of the fluorine contents in the polymers. Granulated ETFE was obtained from Millipore Sigma (St. Louis, MO, USA). ETFE is essentially an alternating copolymer [1]. Consistently, the fluorine percentage in the ETFE was determined to be 58.6 wt% by combustion ion chromatography, which value was

only slightly lower than that for complete alternating copolymer (59.3 wt %). As well as PVDF and poly(VDF-co-HFP) copolymer, the F<sup>-</sup> yields of the reactions for ETFE were calculated based on this analytical value. 1,3,5-Trifluorobenzene (C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>3</sub>F<sub>3</sub>, >98%) and other reagents were supplied from Fujifilm Wako Pure Chemical Industries (Osaka, Japan).

## 2.2. Superheated water treatment

An autoclave, in which the internal volume was 31 mL, was mainly used. Some reactions for ETFE were also performed in a bigger autoclave (96 mL) attached with an impeller that can stir the reaction mixture. Each autoclave was fitted with a gold vessel to prevent contamination from the autoclave material (stainless steel, Japanese Industrial Standards SUS 316). In a typical run using 31 mL-autoclave, to the gold vessel in the autoclave was added the polymer powder (30 mg), followed by an aqueous solution of KOH or NaOH (10 mL, 0.25–1.00 M). Then, the autoclave was pressurized up to 0.60 MPa with Ar and sealed. Next, the autoclave was placed in an electric furnace and heated to the desired reaction temperature with a rate of ca. 10 °C min<sup>-1</sup>. After holding a specified time, the autoclave was quickly cooled to 25 °C by an electric fan. The gas in the autoclave headspace was recovered into a sampling bag and subjected to gas chromatography/mass spectrometry (GC/MS). After sampling the gas, the cap of the autoclave was opened in air. The liquid-solid mixture in the vessel was transferred into a polypropylene tube, which was subjected to centrifugation. The collected liquid phase was characterized by ion chromatography, total organic carbon (TOC) measurement, and attenuated total reflection infrared (ATR-IR) spectrometry. The solid residue was dried under vacuum and subjected to Raman spectroscopy, combustion-ion chromatography, and carbon analysis.

Control reactions using O<sub>2</sub> instead of Ar were also performed. Consecutive runs were also carried out. That is, after a charge of PVDF had been reacted in superheated water, an

additional PVDF amount was charged to the resulting reaction mixture, and then the mixture was reacted again in superheated water. Such procedures were repeated.

### 2.3. Synthesis of artificial fluorspar

The formation of  $\text{CaF}_2$  was investigated from the reaction solution generated from the superheated water treatment by adding  $\text{Ca}(\text{OH})_2$ . After PVDF (30 mg) was treated with 1.0 M of  $[\text{KOH}]$  under Ar at 250 °C for 6 h, the resulting reaction mixture was centrifugated. The collected liquid was diluted to 25 mL with pure (Milli-Q) water. To the solution was added  $\text{Ca}(\text{OH})_2$ , which molar amount was the same as that of the  $\text{F}^-$  molar amount contained in the solution. Shaking this mixture generated a white powder. The powder was collected and washed with 1.0 M of  $[\text{HCl}]$ , followed by pure water. The purified powder was dried under vacuum for overnight, and then subjected to X-ray diffractometry (XRD).

### 2.4. Instrumental analysis

The fluorine weight percentages in the initial polymers and the solid residues formed from the reactions were determined by combustion ion chromatography at Nissan Arc (Yokosuka, Japan). The instrument consisted of a combustion unit (AQF-100, Nittoseiko Analytech, Yamato, Japan; matrix combustion temperature, 1100 °C) and an ion chromatograph (Dionex ICS-3000, Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA). The  $\text{F}^-$  concentrations in the reaction solutions were determined by an ion-chromatograph (IC-2001, Tosoh, Tokyo, Japan) attached with an analytical column (TSKgel Super IC-Anion, Tosoh). The mobile phase was an aqueous solution consisting of 6 mM sodium tetraborate, 15 mM boric acid, and 0.2 mM sodium hydrogen carbonate, and the flow rate was  $0.8 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ . Another ion-chromatograph with an analytical column (TSKgel Super IC-AP) was also used to quantify organic acid anions in the reaction solutions. The mobile phase was an aqueous solution consisting of 1.7 mM sodium hydrogen carbonate, 1.8 mM sodium carbonate, and acetonitrile (23 vol %).



The total organic carbon (TOC) concentrations in the reaction solutions were determined by a TOC instrument (N/C 3100 BU, Analytik Jena, Jena, Germany). In this instrument, a halogen removal column was employed to avoid corrosion of the non-dispersive IR detector. Raman spectra of solid residues and PVDF before the treatment were measured at 532 nm excitation using a Raman imaging microscope (WITec  $\alpha$  300, Oxford Instruments, Harpenden, UK). A FTIR spectrometer (Spectrum 100, Perkin Elmer, Waltham, MA, USA) attached with a diamond ATR cell was used for observing ATR-IR spectra of the reaction solutions. The sample droplets were placed into the ATR cell, evaporated to dryness with a stream of N<sub>2</sub> gas, and the IR spectra were recorded.

Carbon contents in the residues were determined by a carbon/sulfur analyzer (EMIA-Expert, Horiba, Kyoto, Japan) or a total carbon analyzer (N/C 3100 BU with HT 1300, Analytik Jena, Jena, Germany).

The collected gas after the superheated water reactions was analyzed by means of a GC/MS instrument (QP2010 SE, Shimadzu, Kyoto, Japan) attached with a fused-silica capillary column (Rt-Q-BOND, Restek, Bellefonte, PA). The carrier gas was helium, and the sample injection temperature was maintained at 120 °C. The sample gas was injected into the GC/MS system in split mode (20/1 ratio) while the analyses were conducted in full-scan mode ( $m/z$  2.0–200). The temperature program of the column oven was as follows: keeping at 30 °C for 5 min, raising to 200 °C at 20 °C min<sup>-1</sup> rate, and maintaining at that temperature for 20 min. XRD patterns of the artificial fluorspar were recorded by using an X-ray diffractometer with copper K $\alpha$  radiation (MultiFlex; Rigaku, Tokyo, Japan).

In the present study, the F<sup>-</sup> yield, the remaining TOC ratio, and the CO<sub>2</sub> yield were determined by the following Eq. (1)–(3), respectively.

$$\text{F}^- \text{ yield} = [(\text{F}^- \text{ moles in the reaction solution}) / (\text{fluorine atom moles in the initial polymer})] \quad (1)$$

$$\text{TOC ratio} = [(\text{TOC moles in the reaction solution}) / (\text{carbon atom moles in the initial polymer})] \quad (2)$$

$$\text{CO}_2 \text{ yield} = [(\text{CO}_2 \text{ moles in the gas phase}) / (\text{carbon atom moles in the initial polymer})] \quad (3)$$

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1. Decomposition of PVDF

##### 3.1.1. Effect of $\text{OH}^-$

First, the effect of KOH concentration on the PVDF reactivity was examined. Figures 1A, 1B, and 1C display KOH concentration dependences of  $\text{F}^-$  amount in the reaction solution, TOC amount in the reaction solution, and  $\text{CO}_2$  amount in the gas phase, respectively, obtained from reactions of PVDF at 250 °C for 6 h. When the treatment was performed without KOH, almost no reaction occurred. Traces of  $\text{F}^-$  (1.4  $\mu\text{mol}$ ; yield ~0%) were noted in the resulting reaction solution (Table 1, entry 1). Likewise, the TOC amount (3.7  $\mu\text{mol}$ ) in the reaction solution and the  $\text{CO}_2$  amount (2.1  $\mu\text{mol}$ ) in the gas phase were negligible (both yields were ~0%). These data indicate that PVDF is stable in pure superheated water (i.e., under Ar) at 250 °C.

In contrast, an addition of KOH dramatically increased the PVDF reactivity in superheated water at this temperature. When 0.125 M of [KOH] was employed, the formed  $\text{F}^-$  amount jumped to 794  $\mu\text{mol}$ , revealing 83% yield (Fig. 1A). In addition, when the [KOH] was further increased to 1.0 M (charged amount, 10 mmol in 10 mL), the molar amount of which corresponds to a 10-fold molar excess (= 10 mmol/959  $\mu\text{mol}$ ) relative to the amount of

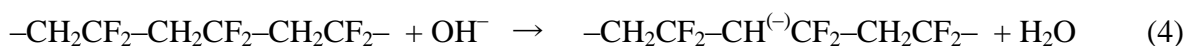
fluorine atoms (959  $\mu\text{mol}$ ) in the initial PVDF, the  $\text{F}^-$  amount increased to 910  $\mu\text{mol}$  (Table 1, entry 2, the average value of two reactions), which corresponds to 95% yield. Therefore, the fluorine content in the initial PVDF led to an almost complete mineralization. The KOH-induced  $\text{F}^-$  formation was accompanied by increasing TOC amount that gradually increased with higher [KOH] up to 1.0 M (Fig. 1B). This observation indicates that non-fluorinated organic compounds generated with increasing [KOH], because the  $\text{F}^-$  yield was considerably high even at low [KOH] such as 0.125 M (Fig. 1A, the  $\text{F}^-$  yield was 83%). When [KOH] was 1.0 M, the TOC amount reached 144  $\mu\text{mol}$  (Table 1, entry 2, the average value of two reactions), which corresponds to 15% of the carbon molar amount in the initial PVDF. In the gas phase, very few  $\text{CO}_2$  amount was detected, and the amount reduced when the reactions were performed with KOH (Fig. 1C). At [KOH] of 1.0 M, the  $\text{CO}_2$  amount was only 0.5  $\mu\text{mol}$  (the yield was  $\sim 0\%$ , the average value of two reactions, Table 1, entry 2). When [KOH] was increased from 0 to 1.0 M, the pH of the resulting reaction solution increased from 3.9 to 13.6. In such a highly basic solution, even if  $\text{CO}_2$  was formed, most of the molecules were transformed into  $\text{CO}_3^{2-}$  in the reaction solution. Instead, black solid residues were produced when the reactions were performed with KOH. The carbon percentage of the residue obtained from reactions with 1.0 M [KOH] was 44 wt% (the average value of two reactions). In contrast, the fluorine percentage of the residue was 0.51 wt%. These values and the weight of the residue showed that the carbon and fluorine amounts were 744 and 5.4  $\mu\text{mol}$ , respectively, indicating that the molar amount of carbon was 138 times higher than that of the fluorine. This carbon amount corresponds to 79% of the carbon content (937  $\mu\text{mol}$ ) in the initial PVDF. On the other hand, the fluorine amount corresponds to only  $\sim 1\%$  of the fluorine content (959  $\mu\text{mol}$ ) in the initial PVDF, which is consistent with the fact that  $\text{F}^-$  ions were produced in the reaction solution with a high yield (95%). The carbon recovery—[(total moles of carbon atoms in residue, TOC, and  $\text{CO}_2$ )/(moles of the carbon atoms in initial PVDF)] was

95% [= (744 + 144 + 0.5) / 937 × 100]. This result indicates that the carbon amount was well-accounted for by the residue, TOC in the reaction solution, and CO<sub>2</sub> in the gas phase.

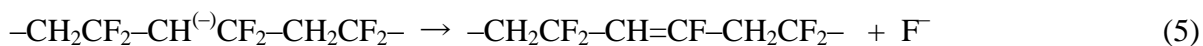
To identify this carbon rich residue, Raman spectroscopy was employed. Figures 2A and 2B display the spectra for the carbon-rich residue and PVDF before the treatment, respectively. In the spectrum of PVDF, intense peaks were noted at 2984, 1432, and 794 cm<sup>-1</sup> (Fig. 2B). These signals are attributed to CH<sub>2</sub> groups [27, 28, 34–36]. In addition, several peaks appeared around 1300–870 and 606 cm<sup>-1</sup>, which are assigned to CF<sub>2</sub> groups [27,34–36]. The peaks ascribed to CH<sub>2</sub> and CF<sub>2</sub> groups were not observed in the spectrum of the carbon-rich residue (Fig. 2A). Instead, two intense bands were observed at 1596 and 1367 cm<sup>-1</sup>. This feature was very similar to that observed for amorphous carbon [37–39], showing two bands characteristic of stretching of C=C bonds. Furthermore, when PVDF was reacted in 1.0 M of [KOH], trace amount (0.02 μmol) of C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>3</sub>F<sub>3</sub> was detected in the gas phase (total-ion current chromatogram in the GC/MS measurement is displayed in Fig. S-1 in Supplementary material).

According to these results, the PVDF degradation mechanism caused by OH<sup>-</sup> can be explained as follows (Scheme 1).

First, OH<sup>-</sup> favors the deprotonation of methylene moiety flanked between two electron-withdrawing CF<sub>2</sub> groups [Eq. (4)]:

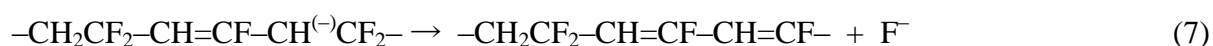
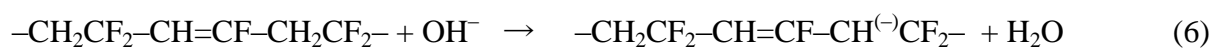


The deprotonated anion is unstable to form a C=C bond in the polymer chain, accompanied by releasing F<sup>-</sup> into the reaction solution [Eq. (5)]:



The initial step is also described by Ross et al. [26], who monitored PVDF surface degradation by IR spectroscopy, using 12 M NaOH solution at 80 °C, although the IR spectra in this report revealed that most of CH<sub>2</sub> and CF<sub>2</sub> units in bulk PVDF remained after such a treatment for 254 h.

A further deprotonation in the polymer chain results in an additional C=C bond and F<sup>-</sup> release [Eq. (6, 7)].



The sequence of these steps results in the formation of a carbon rich residue. The generation of C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>3</sub>F<sub>3</sub> trace in the gas phase can be explained by chain scission during the defluorination processes. When the superheated water reactions were performed with KOH, the TOC amount in the reaction solution increased with increasing [KOH] (Fig. 1C). This phenomenon is also consistent with the occurrence of chain scission during the defluorination processes.

As expected, not only KOH, but also NaOH induced the defluorination of PVDF to F<sup>-</sup>. When PVDF was reacted with 1.0 M of [NaOH] at 250 °C for 6 h, the F<sup>-</sup> amount was 858 μmol, or 89% yield (Table 1, entry 3).

Next, the effect of the reaction temperature on the PVDF decomposition was examined by using 1.0 M of [KOH] at a constant reaction time of 6 h. Figures 3A, 3B, and 3C display the temperature dependences of the amounts of F<sup>-</sup>, TOC, and CO<sub>2</sub>, respectively. The reaction performed at 150 °C led to very little PVDF decomposition, producing 22.8 μmol of F<sup>-</sup> (2% yield); 14.2 μmol of TOC amount (2% of the carbon content in the initial PVDF); and 0.25 μmol of CO<sub>2</sub> (~0% yield). Elevating temperature to 200 °C dramatically enhanced the F<sup>-</sup>

amount (846  $\mu\text{mol}$ ), which corresponds to 88% yield (Table 1, entry 4). Furthermore, at 300  $^{\circ}\text{C}$ , the  $\text{F}^-$  amount reached 958  $\mu\text{mol}$  (100% yield) while the TOC amount also increased to 159  $\mu\text{mol}$  (17% of the carbon content of initial PVDF). The  $\text{CO}_2$  amount in the gas phase also slightly increased to 1.2  $\mu\text{mol}$ , although the yield was negligible ( $\sim 0\%$ ). As described above, the  $\text{F}^-$  amount jumped at 200  $^{\circ}\text{C}$ , and kept steady at higher temperature (Fig. 3A). In contrast, the TOC amount remained low up to 200  $^{\circ}\text{C}$ , then increased at 250  $^{\circ}\text{C}$  and remained the same at higher temperature (Fig. 3B). This difference suggests that the defluorination proceeded at first [Eq. (4–7)], followed by chain scission in the remaining polymer.

Effect of the reaction time was also examined for reactions in 1.0 M of  $[\text{KOH}]$  at 250  $^{\circ}\text{C}$  (Fig. 4). Almost complete mineralization of the fluorine content was observed even at a short reaction time of 2 h (Fig. 4A): the  $\text{F}^-$  amount reached 903  $\mu\text{mol}$  or 94% yield. The  $\text{F}^-$  amount remained almost constant after 2 h (e.g., at 18 h, it was 933  $\mu\text{mol}$ , which corresponds to 97% yield) whereas the TOC amount was 146  $\mu\text{mol}$  (or 16% of the carbon content in the initial PVDF). The  $\text{CO}_2$  amount in the gas phase was almost constant during the reaction time (Fig. 4C). After 18 h, it was 0.4  $\mu\text{mol}$  (yield  $\sim 0\%$ ).

### 3.1.2. Combination of $\text{OH}^-$ with $\text{O}_2$

The reactions described above were performed under Ar. Changing the coexisting gas from Ar to  $\text{O}_2$  induced significant differences on the PVDF reactivity, especially on the fate of the PVDF carbon content. Figure 5 displays the molar amounts of main products from the 6 h-reactions in superheated water under  $\text{O}_2$  using 1.0 M of  $[\text{KOH}]$ , and under these conditions, the reaction temperatures varied from 150 to 300  $^{\circ}\text{C}$ . The elevation of temperature from 150 to 200  $^{\circ}\text{C}$  enabled a dramatic increase of the  $\text{F}^-$  amount. For a reaction performed at 250  $^{\circ}\text{C}$ , this amount was 866  $\mu\text{mol}$ , or 90% yield (Table 1, entry 5), which was similar to that using Ar (95%, Table 1, entry 2). The TOC ratio at this temperature (16%, Table 1, entry 5) was also the same as that obtained from the reaction using Ar (15%, Table 1, entry 2). However, the

TOC amount showed a unique temperature dependence (Fig. 5B), different from that observed for the reactions under Ar (Fig. 3B). In the presence of O<sub>2</sub>, the TOC amount increased with increasing temperature to 200 °C, then turned to decrease at higher temperature. Furthermore, the solid residue, observed for the reactions under Ar, almost disappeared when PVDF reacted under O<sub>2</sub> above 200 °C, at which the TOC amount was 186 μmol (i.e., 20% of the carbon content in the initial PVDF). Finally, at 300 °C, the amount decreased to 132 μmol, or 14% of the carbon content in the initial PVDF. This result suggests that the carbon rich moiety generated after releasing F<sup>-</sup> [Eq. (5–7)] can decompose in the presence of O<sub>2</sub>. Figure 5C shows the temperature dependence of the CO<sub>2</sub> amount by this treatment that resulted in trace (0.4–0.6 μmol) while the temperature varied from 150 to 300 °C.

To identify the organic component that generates TOC amount, the reaction solution was monitored by ATR-IR spectroscopy. When the reaction was performed at 250 °C with O<sub>2</sub> for 6 h, which gave 90% F<sup>-</sup> yield and 16% of the remaining TOC ratio (Table 1, entry 5), the spectrum of the resulting reaction solution after dryness displayed two intense absorptions at 1646 and 1374 cm<sup>-1</sup>, accompanied by a broad adsorption around 3200–3300 cm<sup>-1</sup> (Fig. S-2 in Supplementary material). Indeed, this pattern was similar to that of potassium oxalate [40]. Therefore, this reaction solution was subjected to ion chromatography, which conditions were adjusted for the detection of organic acid anions. Consistently, the measurement detected 41.0 μmol of oxalate anion [(COO<sup>-</sup>)<sub>2</sub>], indicating that the carbon atom amount was 82.0 μmol (= 41.0 × 2), which accounts for 55% of the TOC amount (149 μmol) in the reaction solution. Therefore, the majority of the TOC amount was accounted for by oxalate anion.

### 3.1.3. Consecutive runs.

Because PVDF (30 mg) was almost completely defluorinated to form F<sup>-</sup> by superheated water treatment with 1.0 M of [KOH] at 250 °C for 6 h, we examined consecutive runs. That

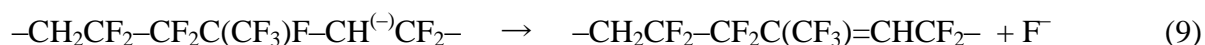
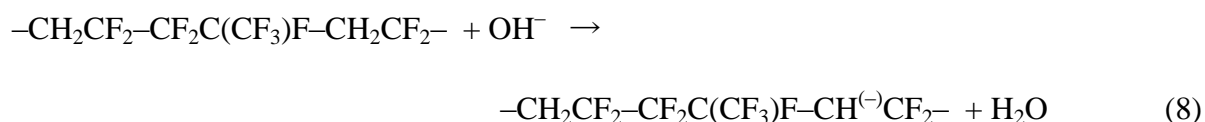
is, after one reaction using PVDF with 1.0 M of [KOH] under Ar at 250 °C for 6 h was complete, new PVDF (30 mg) was charged to the resulting reaction mixture, and then the second reaction was performed under Ar at 250 °C for 6 h. Four consecutive runs were performed, where the yield of F<sup>-</sup> ions accumulated from the first to n<sup>th</sup> run (n ≤ 4) was defined by Eq. (8).

$$\text{F}^- \text{ yield until } n^{\text{th}} \text{ run} = \frac{[\text{F}^- \text{ moles detected after } n^{\text{th}} \text{ run}]}{(\text{moles of F atoms in PVDF charged from 1st to } n^{\text{th}} \text{ run})} \quad (8)$$

The F<sup>-</sup> amounts and the yields are displayed in Fig. 6. The formers increased linearly with the number of consecutive runs, whereas the latter ones were similar (93–98%): no decrease was observed, indicating that at least four consecutive runs were possible under the present reaction conditions.

### 3.2. Decomposition of poly(VDF-co-HFP) copolymer

Because PVDF was efficiently mineralized in superheated water in the presence of an alkaline reagent, this methodology was applied to decompose poly(VDF-co-HFP) copolymer. The microstructure of this copolymer contains VDF-HFP-VDF units. In such a case, F<sup>-</sup> is expected to be generated not only from the VDF units, but also from the HFP ones [Eq. (8, 9)] [41].





Furthermore, if the HFP-VDF-HPF units are present, they are likely to release more  $F^-$  [41].

Figure 7 displays the effect of temperature on the amounts of  $F^-$ , TOC, and  $CO_2$ , generated from reactions with 1.0 M of [KOH] under Ar for 6 h. When the reaction was performed at 150 °C, little reaction proceeded, giving 43.1  $\mu\text{mol}$  of  $F^-$  (i.e., 5% yield); 26.6  $\mu\text{mol}$  of TOC amount (3% of the carbon content in the initial copolymer), and 0.11  $\mu\text{mol}$  of  $CO_2$  (~0% yield). Elevating reaction temperature enhanced the decomposition of this copolymer. The  $F^-$  formation greatly increased above 200 °C (Fig. 7A). When the reaction was performed at 250 °C, the  $F^-$  amount reached 934  $\mu\text{mol}$ , which corresponds to 100% yield (Table 1, entry 6). That is, the fluorine content in initial poly(VDF-*co*-HFP) copolymer was completely mineralized. The TOC amount also increased with increasing temperature (Fig. 7B). At 250 °C, it reached 188  $\mu\text{mol}$ , which corresponds to 21% of the carbon content in initial poly(VDF-*co*-HFP) (Table 1, entry 6). Small amount of  $CO_2$  (0.1–0.2  $\mu\text{mol}$ ) was also detected at each temperature (Fig. 7C), although the yield was ~0%.

Figure 8 displays results of (A)  $F^-$ , (B) TOC, and (C)  $CO_2$  formations from this copolymer, where the reactions were performed in the presence of  $O_2$  for 6 h. The temperature dependence of the amount of each product was almost identical with that performed under Ar. The reaction at 250 °C generated 951  $\mu\text{mol}$  of  $F^-$  (101% yield), 200  $\mu\text{mol}$  of TOC (22% of the remaining ratio), and 0.3  $\mu\text{mol}$  of  $CO_2$  (0% yield) (Table 1, entry 7).

### 3.3 Decomposition of ETFE

First, decomposition of ETFE was examined by use of a 31 mL-autoclave, which was used for reactions of PVDF and poly(VDF-*co*-HFP) copolymer as described above. For a reaction performed with 1.0 M of [KOH] at 250 °C for 6 h, the  $F^-$  amount was 903  $\mu\text{mol}$ , or 98% yield while the TOC amount was 243  $\mu\text{mol}$ , corresponding to 26% of the carbon content in the initial ETFE (Table 1, entry 8). This means that the fluorine content in initial ETFE was

completely mineralized, similar to PVDF and poly(VDF-*co*-HFP) copolymer. Significant differences in the reactivity between ETFE and PVDF were observed at lower temperature. For a reaction performed at 200 °C, very small F<sup>-</sup> amount (1.1 μmol, 0% yield) was detected from ETFE (Table 1, entry 9). In contrast, PVDF produced F<sup>-</sup> with a much higher yield (88%) under the same conditions (Table 1, entry 4). This difference suggests that OH<sup>-</sup> can abstract H<sup>+</sup> from the methylene moiety in PVDF easier than that from ETFE. In PVDF, each -CH<sub>2</sub>- unit from normal head to tail addition is bounded to two -CF<sub>2</sub>- units, which are strongly electron withdrawing. The alternation of -CH<sub>2</sub>- and -CF<sub>2</sub>- units may facilitate the abstraction of H<sup>+</sup> and subsequent C=C bond formation and F<sup>-</sup> release [Eq. (4-7)]. In contrast, ETFE consists of alternation of -CH<sub>2</sub>CH<sub>2</sub>- and -CF<sub>2</sub>CF<sub>2</sub>- units; each -CH<sub>2</sub>- unit is adjacent to a -CF<sub>2</sub>- unit and a -CH<sub>2</sub>- unit. This microstructure may suppress the H<sup>+</sup> abstraction. That is, the difference in the environment around the -CH<sub>2</sub>- group results in different behaviors of both polymers at such a temperature (200 °C).

Next, temperature dependence of the reactivity of ETFE was investigated by use of a bigger autoclave (96 mL) with 1.0 M of [KOH] or [NaOH]. Both these alkaline reagents caused no significant difference in the amounts of F<sup>-</sup>, TOC, and CO<sub>2</sub> (Fig. 9A, 9B, and 9C, respectively). While the F<sup>-</sup> and TOC amounts were low below 230 °C, they increased at higher temperatures. For a reaction performed with 1.0 M of [KOH] at 260 °C for 6 h, the F<sup>-</sup> amount reached 874 μmol or 94% yield (entry 1, Table S-1 in Supplementary material). Likewise, when the reaction was performed with NaOH under the same conditions, the F<sup>-</sup> amount reached 925 μmol, or 100% yield (as average value from two reactions, entry 2, Table S-1 in Supplementary material). Reactions under O<sub>2</sub> atmosphere were also performed (Fig. 10). At 260 °C, the F<sup>-</sup> amount reached 893 μmol or 97% yield (as average value from two reactions, entry 3, Table S-1 in Supporting Information). It should be noted that when the reaction was performed at 320 °C in the presence of O<sub>2</sub>, the TOC amount decreased to 64

$\mu\text{mol}$ , that is, 7% of the carbon content in the initial ETFE. In contrast, a reaction carried out under Ar at 320 °C did not decrease the TOC value (321  $\mu\text{mol}$  or 34% of the carbon content in the initial ETFE) from the value at 260 °C (see Fig. 9, NaOH plots). This result suggests that non-fluorinated organic component in the water was oxidatively mineralized by  $\text{O}_2$ .

### 3.4. Synthesis of artificial fluorspar

Finally, we examined the transformation of  $\text{F}^-$  ions obtained from superheated water treatment into  $\text{CaF}_2$  to close the loop on the fluorine element. After PVDF was treated with 1.0 M of  $[\text{KOH}]$  under Ar at 250 °C for 6 h, the  $\text{F}^-$  ions in the reaction solution were reacted with  $\text{Ca}(\text{OH})_2$ . The powder formed was washed with aqueous HCl, followed by pure water. The XRD pattern of the dried powder showed peaks only assigned to  $\text{CaF}_2$  (Fig. 11A). The weight of the collected pure  $\text{CaF}_2$  indicated that 77% of the fluorine atoms in the initial PVDF were recovered into  $\text{CaF}_2$ . The same treatment was performed from the reaction of poly(VDF-co-HFP) copolymer with 1.0 M of  $[\text{KOH}]$  at 250 °C for 6 h and from that involving ETFE with 1.0 M of  $[\text{NaOH}]$  at 260 °C for 6 h under Ar. Both reaction solutions generated pure  $\text{CaF}_2$  (Fig. 11B and 11C) with 84% and 73 % yields (based on the fluorine content in the initial polymer) for poly(VDF-co-HFP) copolymer and ETFE, respectively.

## 4. Conclusions

Mineralizations of PVDF, poly(VDF-co-HFP) and ETFE copolymers in superheated water in the presence of an alkaline reagent were investigated. These polymers underwent a quasi-complete defluorination, releasing  $\text{F}^-$  ions into the reaction solution at a relatively low temperature (250 °C) under Ar atmosphere. When PVDF was reacted in the presence of 1.0 M of  $[\text{KOH}]$  at 250 °C for 6 h, which amount corresponds to 10 times the molar amount of fluorine content (as atoms) in PVDF, the  $\text{F}^-$  yield released into the reaction solution reached

95%. This transformation was accompanied by formation of carbon rich residue consisting of amorphous carbon. When the PVDF reaction was performed with O<sub>2</sub> instead of Ar, significant differences were observed in the products: while F<sup>-</sup> ions efficiently produced, carbon rich residue did not form. In such conditions, oxalate was the major species that composed the total organic carbon content in the reaction solution. Four consecutive runs (that is, after one reaction of PVDF with 1.0 M [KOH] at 250 °C under Ar for 6 h was complete, new PVDF was charged to the reaction mixture and reacted again) were performed, and no decrease of the F<sup>-</sup> yield was observed.

The fluorine atoms in poly(VDF-*co*-HFP) and ETFE copolymers also completely mineralized to form F<sup>-</sup> ions in the reaction solutions with 100 and 98% yields, respectively, after treatment with 1.0 M of [KOH] for 6 h under Ar. Addition of Ca(OH)<sub>2</sub> into the reaction solutions from superheated water treatment for these polymers and subsequent washing procedures with 1.0 M of [HCl] and pure water gave pure CaF<sub>2</sub>, i.e., artificial fluorspar, with 77, 84 and 73% yields for PVDF, poly(VDF-*co*-HFP) and ETFE copolymers, respectively. Further efforts using similar approaches for recycling other fluoropolymers are under progress in our laboratories.

#### **CRedit authorship contribution statement**

**Jin Hamaura:** Investigation, Validation. **Ryo Honma:** Investigation. **Hisao Hori:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing - original draft. **Abdelatif Manseri:** Writing - Review & Editing. **Bruno Ameduri:** Conceptualization, Writing - Review & Editing.

#### **Declaration of Competing Interest**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal

relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this [article](#).

#### *Data Availability*

The raw/processed data required to reproduce these findings cannot be shared at this time as the data also forms part of an ongoing study.

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#### **Appendix A. Supplementary data**

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eurpolymj>.

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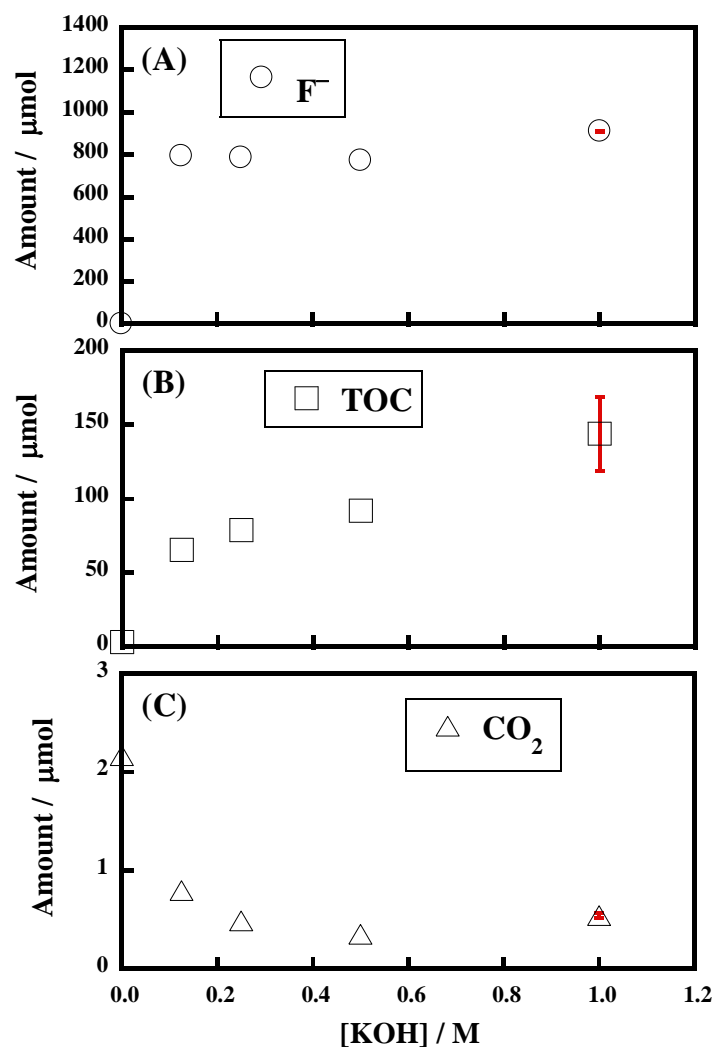
**Table 1**  
Products from Superheated Water Treatment of PVDF and Copolymers. <sup>a</sup>

Entry	Polymer <sup>b</sup>	Alkaline reagent [Conc.(M)]	Coexisting gas	<i>T</i> (°C)	<i>P</i> (MPa)	F <sup>-</sup> (μmol) [yield (%)]	TOC (μmol) [ratio (%)]	CO <sub>2</sub> (μmol) [yield (%)]
1	PVDF	none	Ar	250	4.4	1.4 [0]	3.7 [0]	2.1 [0]
2	PVDF	KOH [1.0]	Ar	250	4.4	910±4 <sup>c</sup> [95±1]	144±25 <sup>c</sup> [15±3]	0.5±0.0 <sup>c</sup> [0]
3	PVDF	NaOH [1.0]	Ar	250	4.4	858 [89]	225 [24]	0.4 [0]
4	PVDF	KOH [1.0]	Ar	200	2.3	846 [88]	32 [3]	0.2 [0]
5	PVDF	KOH [1.0]	O <sub>2</sub>	250	4.1	866 [90]	149 [16]	0.4 [0]
6	Poly(VDF- <i>co</i> -HFP)	KOH [1.0]	Ar	250	4.4	934 [100]	188 [21]	0.2 [0]
7	Poly(VDF- <i>co</i> -HFP)	KOH [1.0]	O <sub>2</sub>	250	4.2	951 [101]	200 [22]	0.3 [0]
8	ETFE	KOH [1.0]	Ar	250	5.2	903 [98]	243 [26]	0.1 [0]
9	ETFE	KOH [1.0]	Ar	200	2.3	1.1 [0]	29 [3]	0.1 [0]

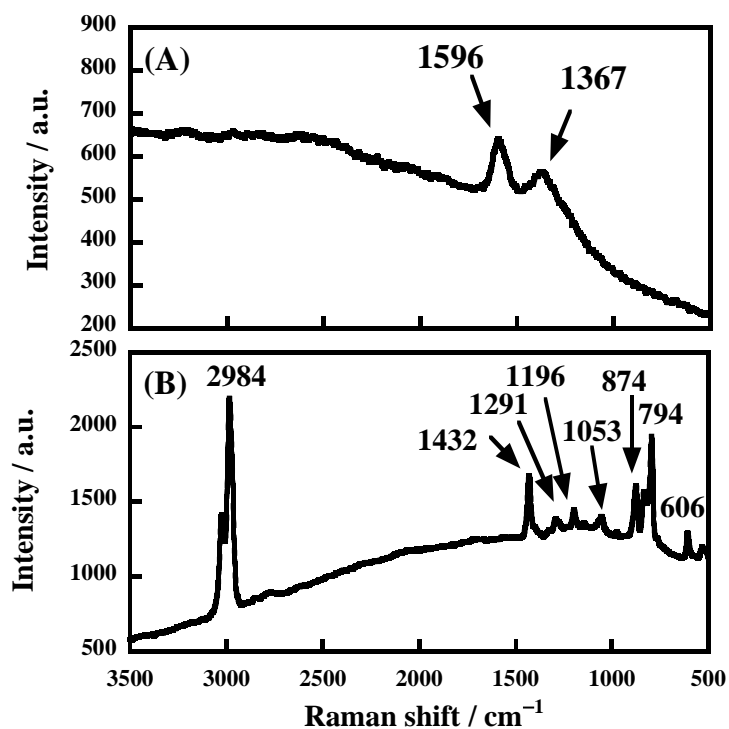
<sup>a</sup> Internal volume of the autoclave, 31 mL; initial solution volume, 10 mL; reaction time, 6 h.

<sup>b</sup> Charged weight, 30 mg.

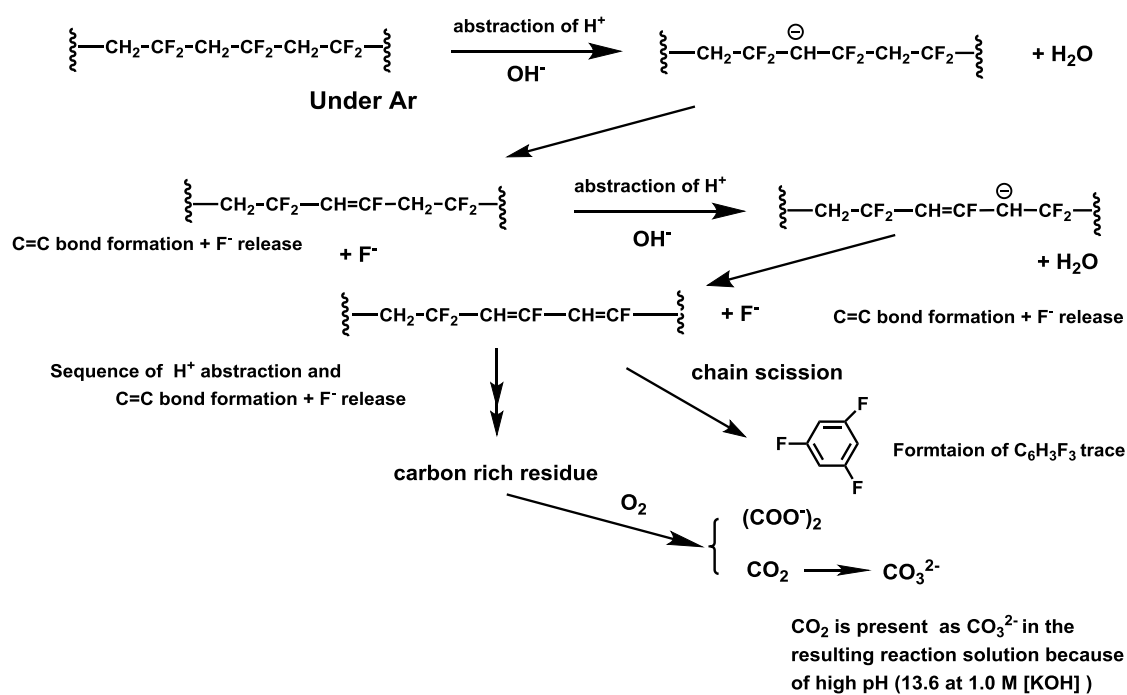
<sup>c</sup> Obtained from two replicate experiments under the same reaction conditions.



**Fig. 1.** Initial KOH concentration dependences of (A) the  $F^-$  amount in the reaction solution, (B) the TOC amount in the reaction solution, and (C) the  $CO_2$  amount in the gas phase. PVDF (30 mg; fluorine amount as atoms, 959  $\mu\text{mol}$ ; carbon content as atoms, 937  $\mu\text{mol}$ ) was reacted in the presence of KOH under Ar in superheated water at 250  $^\circ\text{C}$  for 6 h. Error bars at 1.0 M of [KOH] were obtained from two replicate experiments under the same reaction conditions.



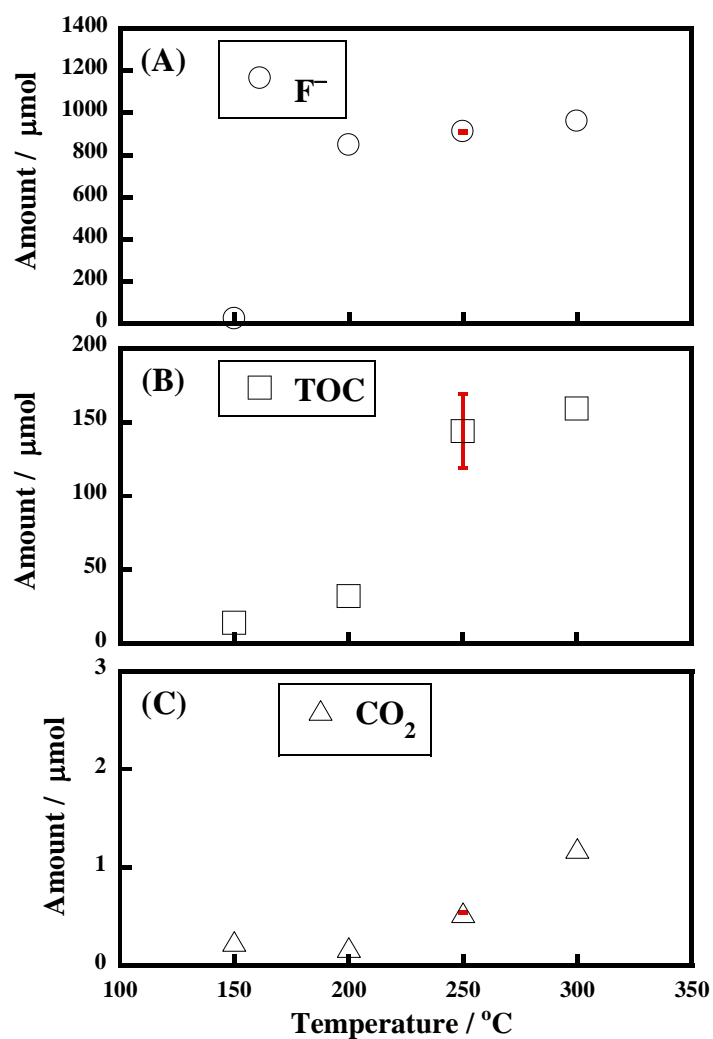
**Fig. 2.** Raman spectra of (A) the solid residue formed from a reaction of PVDF in superheated water with 1.0 M of [KOH] under Ar and (B) PVDF before the treatment. For (A), the treatment was performed at 250 °C for 6 h.



**Reaction under Ar: Efficient F<sup>-</sup> formation + carbon rich residue**

**Reaction under O<sub>2</sub>: Efficient F<sup>-</sup> formation + no residue**

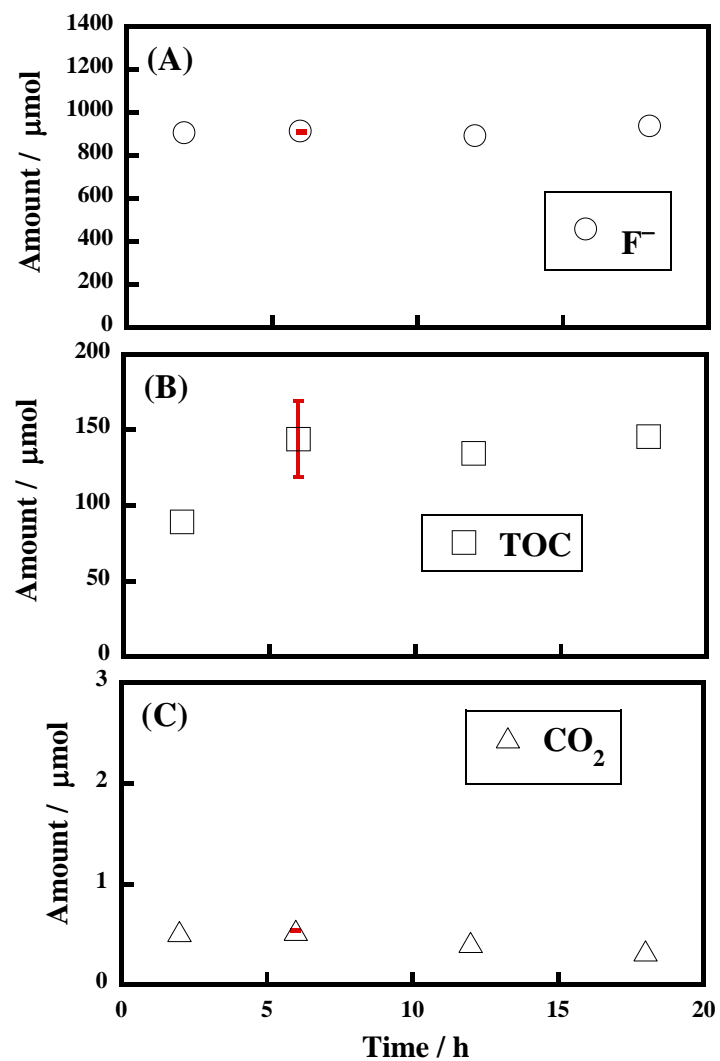
**Scheme 1.** Proposed mechanism for PVDF decomposition induced by OH<sup>-</sup>



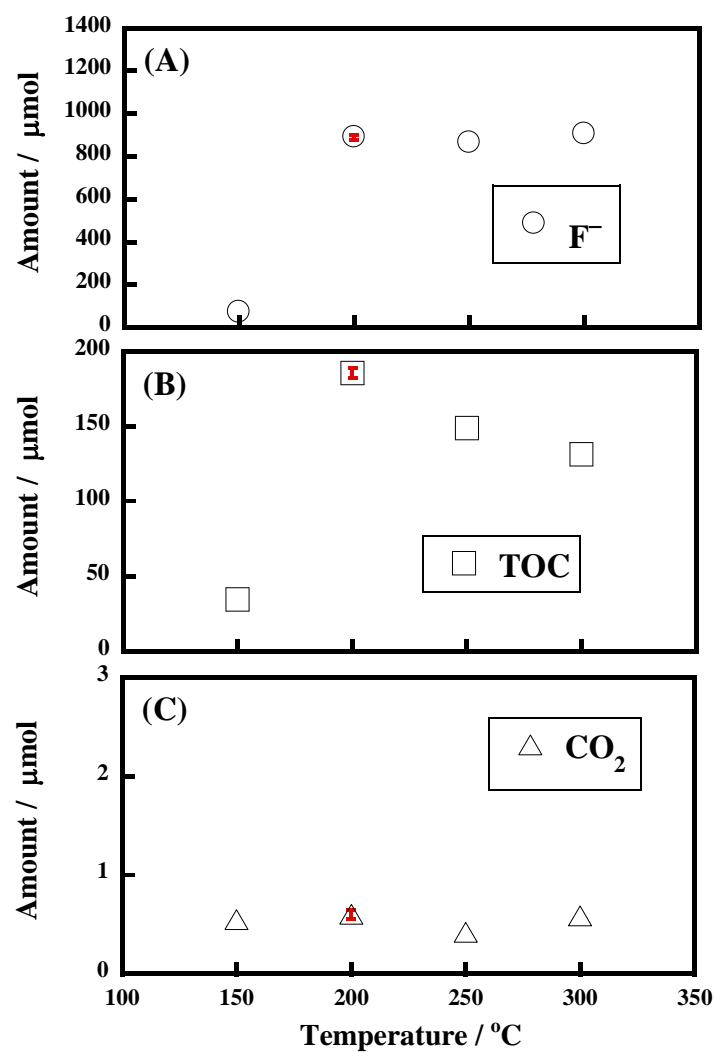
**Fig. 3.** Effect of temperature on (A) the F<sup>-</sup> amount in the reaction solution, (B) the TOC amount in the reaction solution, and (C) the CO<sub>2</sub> amount in the gas phase. PVDF (30 mg) was reacted in the presence of 1.0 M of [KOH] in superheated water under Ar for 6 h. Error bars at 250 °C were obtained from two replicate experiments under the same reaction conditions.



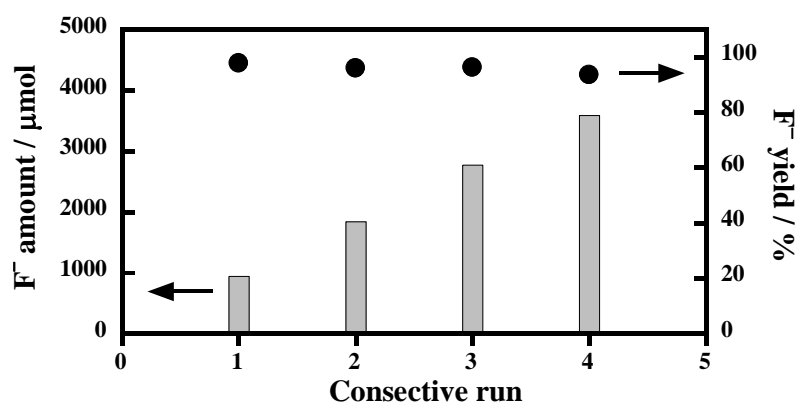




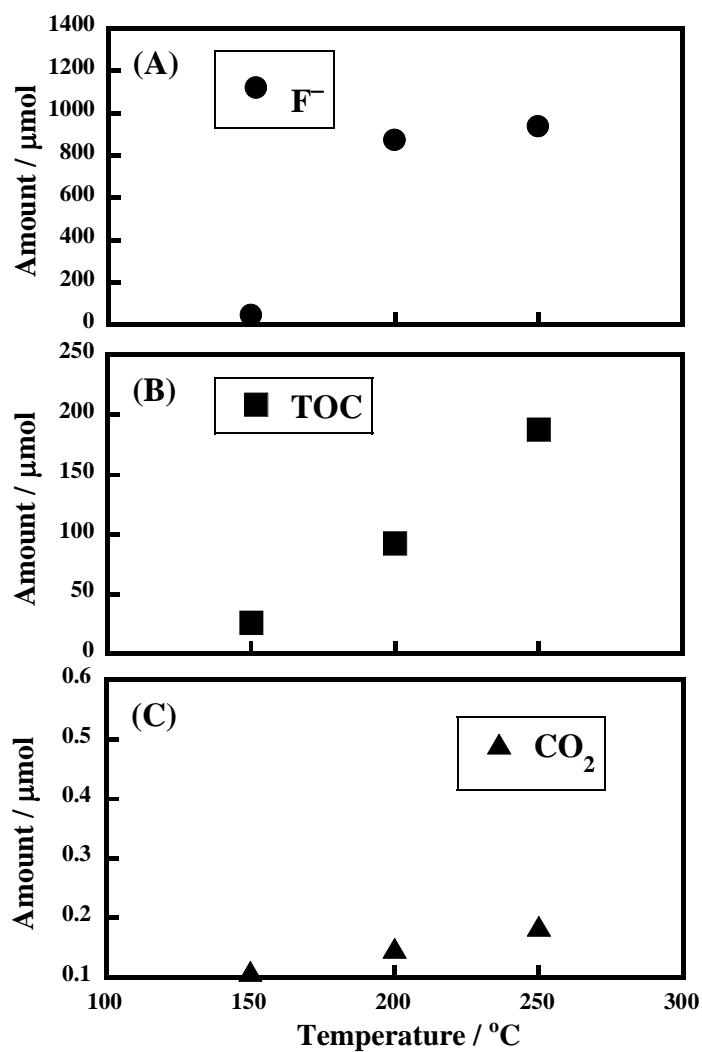
**Fig. 4.** Effect of reaction time on (A) the  $F^-$  amount in the reaction solution, (B) the TOC amount in the reaction solution, and (C) the  $CO_2$  amount in the gas phase. PVDF (30 mg) was reacted in the presence of 1.0 M of [KOH] under Ar in superheated water at 250 °C. Error bars at 6 h were obtained from were obtained from two replicate experiments under the same reaction conditions.



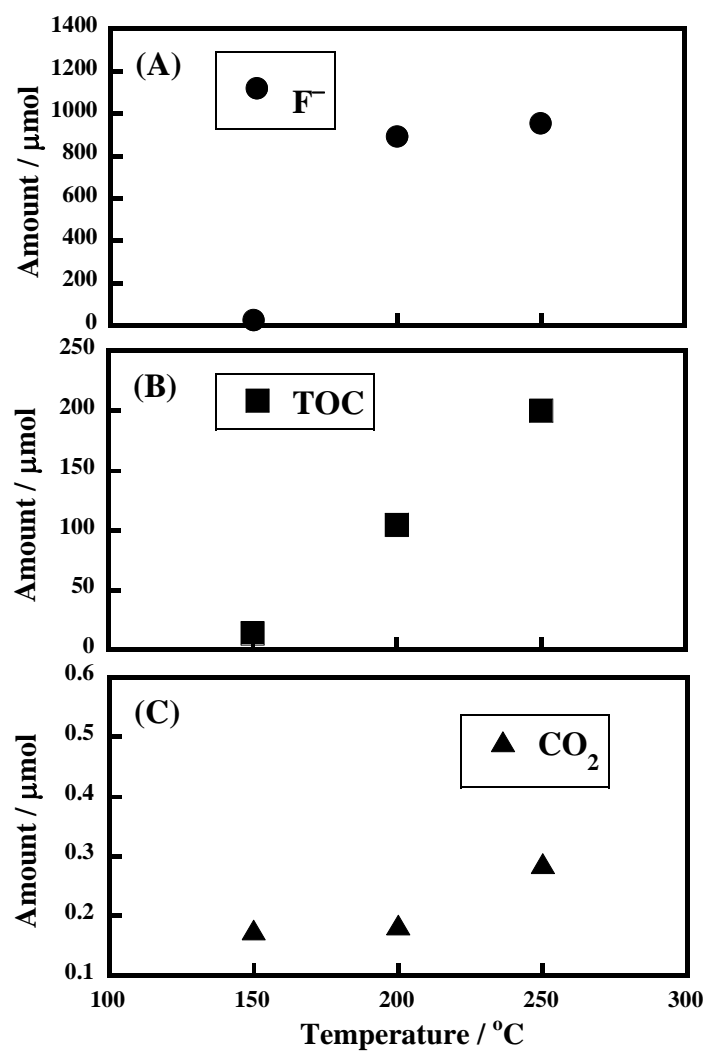
**Fig. 5.** Temperature dependence of PVDF decomposition in the presence of O<sub>2</sub>: (A) the F<sup>-</sup> amount in the reaction solution, (B) the TOC amount in the reaction solution, and (C) the CO<sub>2</sub> amount in the gas phase. The reaction conditions were the same as those described in the caption of Fig. 3, except that O<sub>2</sub> was used instead of Ar. Error bars at 200 °C were obtained from two replicate experiments under the same reaction conditions.



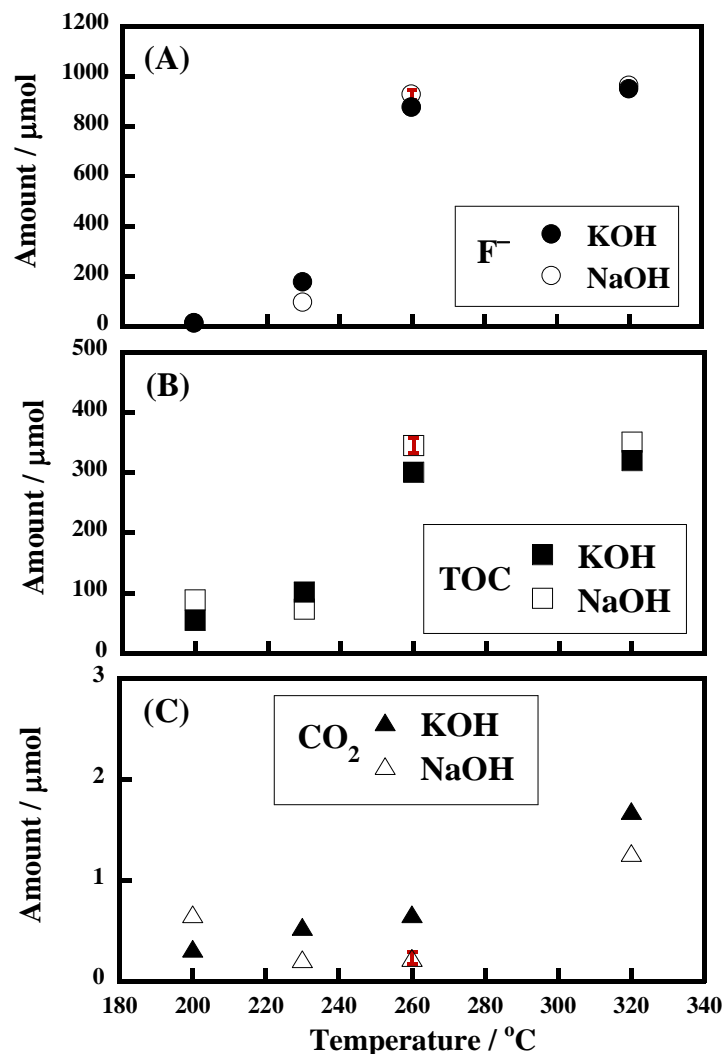
**Fig. 6.** F<sup>-</sup> amount and F<sup>-</sup> yield after consecutive runs for PVDF decomposition. PVDF (30 mg) was reacted with 1.0 M of [KOH] in superheated water at 250 °C under Ar for 6 h. After the reaction, the autoclave was cooled to room temperature, and new PVDF (30 mg) was charged to the resulting reaction mixture, purged with Ar, then the mixture was further heated at 250 °C for 6 h.



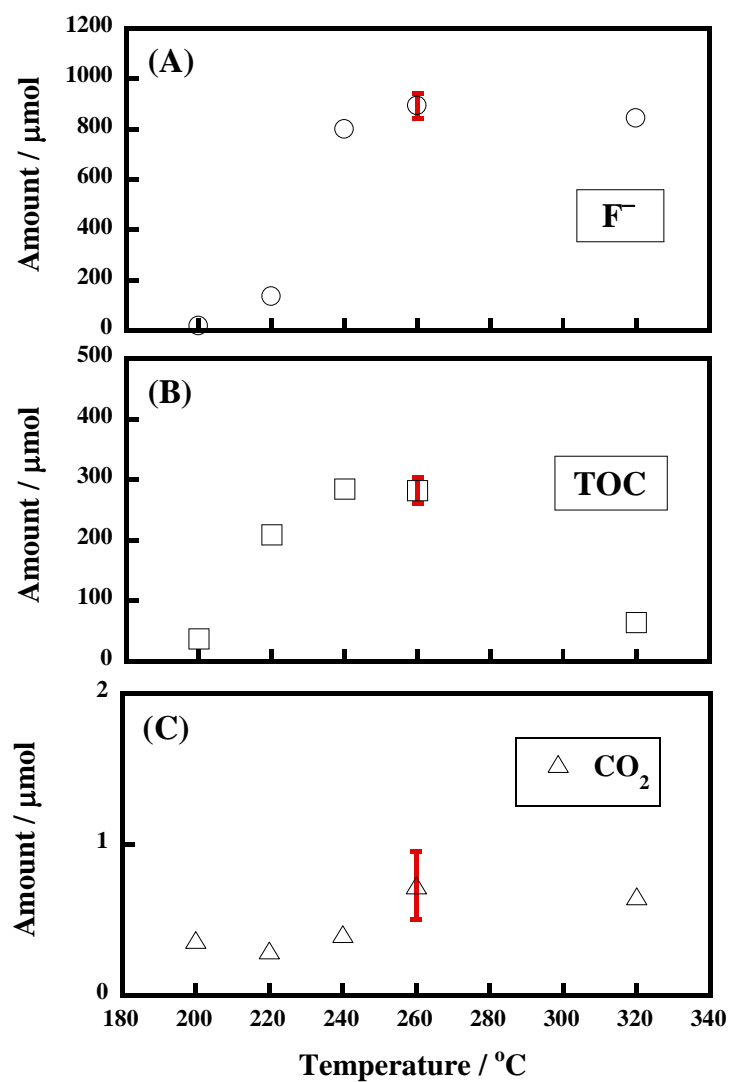
**Fig. 7.** Effect of temperature on (A) the F<sup>-</sup> amount in the reaction solution, (B) the TOC amount in the reaction solution, and (C) the CO<sub>2</sub> amount in the gas phase. Poly(VDF-*co*-HFP) copolymer (30 mg, fluorine amount as atoms; 938 μmol; carbon content as atoms, 902 μmol) was reacted in the presence of 1.0 M of [KOH] in superheated water under Ar for 6 h.



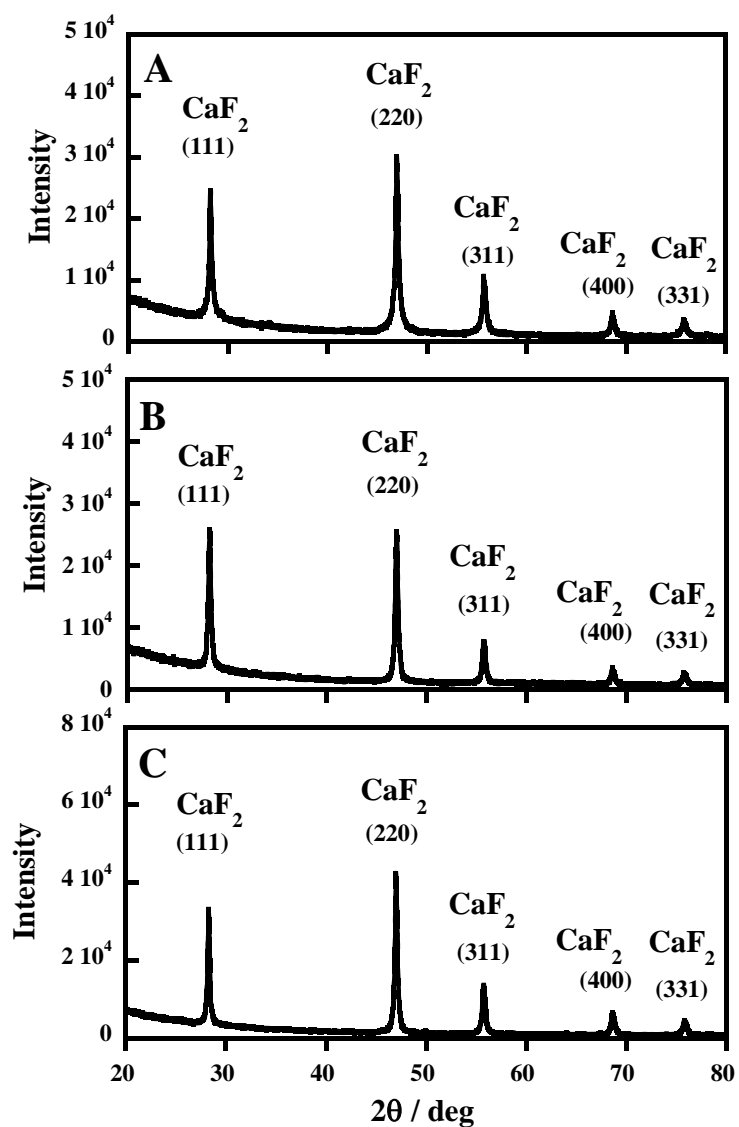
**Fig. 8.** Temperature dependence of poly(VDF-*co*-HPF) copolymer decomposition in the presence of  $O_2$ : (A) the  $F^-$  amount in the reaction solution, (B) the TOC amount in the reaction solution, and (C) the  $CO_2$  amount in the gas phase. The reaction conditions were the same as those described in the caption of Fig. 7, except that  $O_2$  was used instead of Ar.



**Fig. 9.** ETFE reactions using KOH or NaOH in a bigger autoclave (96 mL): Effect of temperature on (A) the  $F^-$  amount in the reaction solution, (B) the TOC amount in the reaction solution, and (C) the  $CO_2$  amount in the gas phase. ETFE (30 mg) was reacted in the presence of 1.0 M of [KOH] or [NaOH] in superheated water under Ar for 6 h. Error bars for the reaction using NaOH at 260°C were obtained from two replicate experiments under the same reaction conditions.



**Fig. 10.** Temperature dependence of ETFE decomposition using NaOH in the presence of O<sub>2</sub>: (A) the F<sup>-</sup> amount in the reaction solution, (B) the TOC amount in the reaction solution, and (C) the CO<sub>2</sub> amount in the gas phase. The reaction conditions were the same as those described in the caption of Fig. 9 (NaOH), except that O<sub>2</sub> was used instead of Ar. Error bars at 260 °C were obtained from two replicate experiments under the same reaction conditions.



**Fig. 11.** XRD patterns of the artificial fluorspar obtained from (A) PVDF, (B) poly(VDF-*co*-HFP) copolymer, and (C) ETFE.  $\text{Ca}(\text{OH})_2$  was added to the reaction solution from superheated water treatment, and the formed precipitate was washed with aqueous HCl and pure water, and dried.