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Environmental politics under authoritarian regimes: Experiences from Southeast Asia

Sreang Chheat
Melissa Curley

REGIONAL OUTLOOK

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About the Author

Sreang Chheat

Dr Sreang Chheat is an academic and policy consultant with over a decade of research and development work experience through affiliations with NGOs and institutions in Cambodia. These include the Cambodia Development Resource Institute, the Center for Khmer Studies and independent consultancies. He received his PhD in 2022 from the School of Political Science and International Studies, University of Queensland, Australia. His PhD thesis examined China's rising influence in Cambodia: Local Contestation and State Response. He has published several working papers on local governance and decentralization reform in Cambodia, as well as research on hydro-power development in Cambodia in Asian Studies Review. His current interests include Chinese aid and investment and environmental politics in the Southeast Asia. He has previously lectured at the University of Cambodia in Phnom Penh and at Griffith University's Centre for Governance and Public Policy. He holds a BA in History and a Master in Cultural Studies from the University of Phnom Penh, and a Masters in Global Studies from the University of Vienna, Austria/University of Wroclaw, Poland.

Melissa Curley

Dr Melissa Curley is Senior Lecturer in International Relations in the Department of Political Science and International Studies, University of Queensland. Her research interests include Southeast Asian politics and international relations, comparative authoritarianism, migration and security, Cambodian politics, and non-traditional security in East Asia. She has published on these topics in internationally peer-reviewed journals across International Relations, Political Science and Law, including in: Review of International Studies, Australian Journal of International Affairs, Journal of Law and Society, Asian Studies Review, Bond Law Review, and the Australian Journal of Human Rights. She is currently working on a book manuscript on Governance and Civil Society in Cambodia. Prior to joining UQ, Dr Curley worked in the Centre of Asian Studies at the University of Hong Kong from 1999-2005 in the China-ASEAN project. She holds an BA (Hons) in Government from UQ and a PhD in International Relations from Nottingham Trent University, UK.

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Abstract

This paper explores how authoritarian regimes in mainland Southeast Asia have engaged with, and responded to, environmental activism. Drawing upon the experiences of three Mekong states, we survey broad themes in environmental activism and advocacy in the electoral authoritarian state of Cambodia, and one-party states of Vietnam and Laos. The paper critiques the simplistic liberal literature concerning democratic transition which typically view civil society actors as democratic agents. By adopting a critical political economy approach to the study of environmental politics related to the hydropower development in the Mekong, the paper contends that different states have both harnessed civil society in pursuant of their legitimacy and power while at the same time seeking to control civic space. We also argue that the domestic political and socio-economic contexts in each state, as well as how actors engage in regional level advocacy, can shed light on our understanding of environmental advocacy under authoritarian conditions.

Introduction

At a global level, trends show that authoritarian states are increasingly incorporating civil society groups into governance mechanisms, to improve service delivery and citizens feedback in policy decision-making.[1] Yet at the same time, we also see increasing efforts to control and regulate the agency and funding to civil society, through legislation, regulation, intimidation, and restrictive administrative requirements.[2] To better understand how environmental advocacy is occurring in Southeast Asia's authoritarian states, we suggest a more nuanced understanding of state-civil society relations is required to appreciate the ways in which diverse groups may oppose, resist, or align with the state over specific issues. We also suggest that attention to the interplay between these domestic relations and the regional level of environmental advocacy can provide important insights. The growing demand for energy in mainland Southeast Asia continues to create layers of conflict, interest sharing and power dynamics within, and between, states in the region. In this paper we focus on environmental advocacy and hydro dam development—recognising that dynamics may be different in other sectoral areas.

In seeking to explore why environmental groups and civil society emerged under authoritarian rule, we look broadly at how civil society actors have been operating within their political systems, and what strategies civil society organisations (CSOs) are utilising to advance their agenda with the state. While recognising the important differences between electoral authoritarian states (Cambodia) and one-party states (Vietnam and Laos) common strategies may be present amongst CSOs.

The paper proceeds in four sections. The first reviews recent conceptual debates in the authoritarian governance literature relevant to civil society, and critiques of transition-ology in the hybrid regime literature. The second section surveys the spectrum of environmental issues that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs) have engaged within our three states in the context of the regional political economy. The third section then focuses on a case study of environmental activism and policy advocacy in Mekong River hydro-dam development. We explore how environmental groups have engaged in activism and/or attempt to provide policy input to provincial and state bureaucracies, and regional bodies such as ASEAN and the Mekong River Commission. Here we sketch out strategies utilised by civil society actors, as well as the limitations and facilitating conditions they encounter. We argue that the domestic political and socio-economic contexts in each state, as well as how actors engage in regional level advocacy, can shed light on our understanding of environmental advocacy within authoritarian conditions.

Conceptual debates

Are we there yet? Environmental sustainability & (the myth of) transition

There is little evidence of 'democratic transition' in Southeast Asia's long standing one-party states of Vietnam and Laos.[3] Meanwhile, Cambodia's democratic trajectory has declined in recent years to be widely classed as an 'electoral authoritarian state'.[4] This being the case, the contention or hope that democratic institutions and reforms are required for increased environmentally sustainable policies in the region is misplaced. Perhaps the more pertinent question to ask is how are policies that promote environmental protection and sustainability being promoted or advanced in the region? What is the role of civil society advocacy in this process? While these questions are too large for one paper, the experiences of Southeast Asia question the notion that states in the region will—or ever were—transitioning to democracy as the hybrid regime literature would have us believe.[5]

Civil society in authoritarian states: recent analytical insights

Simplistic notions of liberal civil society and its analytical value in transitional and authoritarian states has been critiqued for some time. It is widely recognised that the neo-Tocquevillian concept of civil society which dominated academic discussion in the 1980's and 1990's has been superseded by more nuanced accounts of state-civil society relations. These recognise cultural and social structures and reflect different patterns of state formation processes.[6] As Lewis outlines, a new wave of research about associational life under authoritarian regimes—a 'backlash against civil society'—emerged in response to critiques of the neo-liberal peace project, and the need to understand the implications of civil society organisations which coexist in non-democratic states. Drawing from empirical evidence, this literature also highlighted that not all NGOs or grassroots organisations could be seen as working towards 'democratic purposes', exposing many stereotypes about simplistic narratives linking civil society to democratisation.[7]

Recent scholarship on the diversity of state-civil society relations within one-party and electoral authoritarian states (such as China and Russia) are identifying common patterns. Authoritarian elites attempt to harness civil society and its associational and organisation attributes, promote forms of active citizenship to improve local governance outcomes,[8] while at the same time limiting civil society's 'dangerous' elements, thereby reducing the risk of unmanageable civic activism'.[9]

Such contradictions are being explored more extensively in political science literature which analyses how states such as China and Russia have adapted in the post-liberal political system. Work on 'new authoritarianism' under Vladimir Putin in Russia,[10] comparing forms of 'participatory authoritarianism' in Russia and China,[11] and 'consultative authoritarianism' in China[12] all explore the emergence of innovative authoritarian governance mechanisms and practices. Apart from the emergence of new institutional, legislative[13] and regulatory controls, this literature also points to the need to appreciate the ideas and beliefs of popular leaders and how they understand the external reality in relation to notions of what democracy means; how it can be redefined to suit their ideological goals. This literature sheds light on how authoritarian states continue to evolve and incorporate CSO's into state governance agendas, albeit not without resistance.

State-Civil Society relations in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia

In the context of Southeast Asia, a more nuanced view of state-civil society relations has also been documented, in one-party states such as Vietnam,[14] and in so-called hybrid or electoral authoritarian regimes including Malaysia, Thailand and Cambodia.[15] Recent literature on the global 'authoritarian turn,' 'autocratisation', and 'democratic backsliding'[16] lament declining conditions for democracy in Southeast Asia, with space for civil society becoming more constrained in varied ways.[17]

A diverse group of literature thus forwards a complex view of state-civil society relations in Southeast Asian authoritarian states, where NGOs/CSAs and the state "are enmeshed together in a complex and multi-layered network of material transactions, personal connections, and organisational linkages'.[18] Research on civil society in Vietnam is quite rich and has grown over the years since policies of *Doi Moi* (renovation) changed economic policy, and along with it, the way that state managed governance and service provision. Wischermann and Phuong note the development and spread of many new formal and informal associations since 1989,[19] while Wells-Dang's work in 2012 focussed specifically on civil society's role in climate change.[20] More recently, Vu and Le describe a complex civil society ecosystem in Vietnam, where following Edwards's 2013 article, the state and other economic actors form a 'complex and fragile ecosystem.'[21]

Rejecting the framing of liberal civil society as protecting and advancing political space, rather they explore how ideological struggles take place between the state and civil society actors which shows both *divergence and convergence* of narratives. State and civil society narratives both contradict and interact with one another, providing a 'crucial epistemological and ontological slang of changing state society relations in authoritarian contexts'.[22] In the online space, dissidents and activists, who are highly critical of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), exist alongside other civil society groups that work within the 'discursive orbit of the state' in order to advance their agendas, legitimate their role, existence, and political agenda.[23]

Real life (that is, non-virtual) resistance against the Vietnamese state in the 'rightful resistance'[24] spirit, has been documented by Chau[25] in his analysis of local villagers/farmers in Thai Binh province in 2010. When deliberately denied compensation entitled to them by central regulations, Chau's ethnographic fieldwork-based study explores how villages planned and staged a mass protest in 2010 against local district authorities who had not followed compensation guidelines and misappropriated funds owed to villages who had previously accepted compensation for their land.[26]

Like Vietnam, the literature on state-civil society relations in Laos emphasises the guiding structure of the party/state system. Much less has been written on Laos; possibly because it is one of the most restricted environments in the world for civil society actors.[27] Nevertheless, this does not mean that informal and non-profit associations (NPA) which are the more 'formalised' and 'professional' civil society groups are not making attempts to influence the government around climate change and environmental issues. As discussed further below, one interesting regional civil society issue in relation to Laos is the development of the Nam Theun 2 dam, inaugurated in 2010. The dam has resulted in significant criticism from downstream states of Cambodia and Vietnam who lament the lack of consultation and research on impacts to livelihoods, agriculture and food security.

As an electoral democracy established in the early 1990s, Cambodia adopted a democratic development approach in its reconstruction in the post-civil war stage. In addition to the electoral process that enables people to elect their political leaders in a multiparty political system, the country has promoted democratic development, allowing emergence of NGOs and CBOs to play a role in policy making and implementation. In the 1990s and 2000s, NGOs mushroomed in great numbers in response to financial support

made available by the international community, especially the Western donor countries.[28] By 2019, the number of NGOs was in the region of 5,000 even though the number of active NGOs may well be much lower. The Minister of Interior, Sar Kheng, said in August 2019 that there were 5,483 organisations registered after the passing of the 2015 NGO Law; 2,203 associations, and 3,280 NGOs.[29] We now turn to a more general discussion of the scope and context of environmental activism in relation to the Mekong region, before focussing on advocacy to hydro-development.

Scope and context of environmental activism

The scope and context of environmental activism in relation to the Mekong region encompasses multiple sectors, including water, food security, energy production, land use and development. Indeed, as Keskinen and his collaborators[30] in 2016 discussed in relation to the water/energy/food 'nexus', while interdisciplinarity has analytical benefits, emphasis within the 'nexus' approach and its application has varied widely. In addition to multiple sectoral interests (both public and private), other major actors involved in the environmental activist space include local grassroots community organisations known in some countries as CBOs, domestic NGOs, international NGOs (INGOs), inter-governmental organisations, International Organisations (IOs) and UN bodies. The dynamics of environmental resistance/advocacy in the Mekong region is vast and thus we provide below a cursory review of some major themes to establish some context.

Access to land, legal battles over land entitlements and compensation, and illegal 'land grabbing' is one of the major cross-country themes. This constellation includes literature that discusses land grabbing,[31] peasant and agrarian relations, compensation over land resumption for projects, not only in relation to hydro-dams but also including urban building construction, tourism developments and land resumed in nature parks/national parks (such as in the case of the Areng Dam, in the Cardamom mountains in Cambodia). Resistance to land use, reclamation/grabbing for example in Laos and Vietnam is governed by very different legal procedures than Cambodia,[32] though the outcomes resulting from grievances procedures or activism varies greatly.[33]

The actors involved in resistance against environmental degradation, land reclamation, land grabbing, and loss of livelihoods are also diverse. They range from grassroots people/villagers directly impacted, to domestic NGOs and INGOs who aim to partner with local actors to support and leverage their campaigns. The way in which these actors choose to network and partner with each other—and what political strategies they use to put pressure on government decision-making processes—differs. The way in which domestic actors use international NGOs or networks to gain resources to mount their campaigns or advocacy in the regional and international space is not uniform.[34] This dynamic is discussed further below in relation to resistance to hydro-dam development in Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia.

We highlight three points to be explored further from our initial review of the literature on civil society advocacy and resistance over hydro-dam development. First, NGOs and civil society networks in Cambodia can draw upon a more open media environment than in Laos and Vietnam, and leverage INGO and IO networks to pursue their agendas. Legislative control over civil society, however, has increased since the passing of the Law on Association and Non-Governmental Organisations (LANGOs), better known as NGO Law, in 2015, which also limits and regulates international funding to domestic civil society groups,[35] a global trend identified by Christense and Weinstein.[36] Furthermore, the Cambodian government has demonstrated its willingness and ability to flout its own regulatory and administrative processes in relation to hydro-dam construction (such as Environmental Impact Assessment or EIA). New regulations on INGOs have also recently been passed in Laos, where control is already considerable.

Second, the agency of civil society resistance in Vietnam and Laos is indeed constrained by the 'party-state' system.[37] Nevertheless, domestic NGOs and networks of other activists (such as scientists) use these regional networks and connections to the government to

influence policy.[38] Cultural and historical patterns of consultation and feedback to government, particularly from the village level, also impact how civil society actors strategise to influence the government.

Third, civil society actors from all three countries leverage regional advocacy networks and partnership arrangements with INGOs and IOs to push their agenda. This strategy can protect actors in Laos and Vietnam from more serious repercussions of in-country 'anti-state' actions, while allowing regional actors to forward their advocacy message. A division of labour between local civil society and the international advocacy space illustrates shared campaign goals operating at different levels. International NGOs and IOs (such as UN bodies) can provide valuable resources to local organisations or provide other forms of support such as training in awareness raising of rights and laws. In some cases, policy alignment does occur between civil society groups and the state, such as the case explored below between International Rivers and the Vietnamese government.

Environmental activism and policy advocacy in Mekong River hydro-dam development

This section surveys civil society actors' strategies in their advocacy in relation to hydropower development in the Mekong region. Different countries with differing political regimes offer varying political space for activism. Due to the authoritarian nature of many regimes in the region and the cross-border nature of hydropower, transnational activism, and social movements with transnational components, have become a cornerstone of activism. Civil society actors including NGOs have increasingly played an important role in ensuring that the development of the Mekong is gradually responsive to the needs of people of the region.

The Mekong River is the longest river in Southeast Asia, the tenth largest in the world, with a total drainage area of 795,000 km2 and an approximate length of 4,900 km.[39] Originating in the Tibetan Plateau of China, this mighty river flows through Myanmar, Lao PDR, Thailand, and Cambodia before emptying itself into the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. The river is an important source of livelihoods for more than 60 million people living in the Lower Mekong Basin (Mainstream and the tributaries) alone providing fisheries and supporting agriculture for the lower part of the river where the fertile soil is enriched with sediment from the Mekong River, making the Mekong Delta the 'rice bowl' of Vietnam. Besides, the Mekong River is home to a wide diversity of species including threatened species such as the Irrawaddy Dolphin, Siamese Crocodiles and Giant Catfish.[40]

In the Greater Mekong (China included), the number of dams (hydropower and irrigation) has been on the rise. As of July 2016, there were 755 dams of which 537 had been completed, 152 had been planned or proposed, 52 were under construction and 14 had been cancelled.[41] By types, 392 of these dams are hydropower, 337 irrigation dams, and 26 'other' types.[42] In the Lower Mekong River Basin, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam all have constructed dams. As of February 2019, Laos has 61 hydropower dams, with a combined installed capacity of 7,207 Megawatt. The government of Laos planned to begin developing another 10,000 Megawatt of electricity by 2020, and an additional 20,000 Megawatt by 2030, to make the country 'the battery of Asia'.[43] Vietnam built the Yali Falls Dam on the Sesan River in the Central Highlands of the country in 1993. The Yali Falls Dam went operational in 2001.[44] In 2018, Cambodia's 400 megawatt Lower Sesan 2 Dam began to generate electricity. Two years later in 2020, the Cambodian government decided to postpone the planning construction of the Sambor Dam (to be built on the Mekong mainstream) for at least one decade.[45]

While countries in the Mekong view this transnational river as a source of development and livelihood, the hydropower development on the Mekong mainstream, as well as its tributaries, has raised political tensions within and among countries. These tensions have been discussed in a range of literature, due to both the perception of the river as a common resource, as well as the state's sovereign right to exploit it. Hirsh[46] offers a longitudinal view of the shifting geopolitics and the 'materiality' of the Mekong as the shared river that has led to the re-emergence of focus on investment in hydropower dams on the Mekong mainstream. The shifting geopolitics has also been accompanied by the growing dependence on private investment (more recently by Chinese actors) instead of state-sponsored investments that characterised the development model during the Cold War. Consequently, countries along the Mekong have more political leverage to avoid pressure from partners (such as the World Bank) who emphasise a more inclusive

governance regime. Environmental and social impacts caused by hydropower development have been increasing, raising political tensions between and within states in the region.

As countries in the region continue to depend on the river for economic development, socio-economic and political challenges remain. The social and environmental challenges posed by hydropower dam development in general impact both people upstream and downstream, though with varying degrees. Water flow patterns change and associated ecological impacts have effects on fisheries and other riverine ecosystems. Civil society and scientists have warned and recorded enormous impacts of the hydropower dam projects especially fishery due to the changes to its migratory pattern although dam engineers have sought to build artificial paths for them to cross the dam and other mitigations, livelihood of the people living along the river is directly affected by dam, not to mention the inevitable resettlement and destruction to their culture, tourism and other significant aspects of economy.[47] These challenges have provided impetus for activism as well as diplomacy within and among societies and states in the region as state and non-state actors seek to advance their interests, using variegated strategies informed by existing political institutions and culture, and geopolitical circumstances with varying outcomes.

Laos: Lack of indigenous CSOs

It is important we begin the discussion of contestation over hydropower development in the Mekong by examining the projects on the mainstream Mekong by the Laotian state. This is not necessarily about Laos as the source of conflict, but rather as a country in the lower Mekong basin that has been *the subject of discussion* among countries in the Mekong.

As indicated earlier, Laos has been in the lead in terms of hydropower dam development specifically on the Mekong mainstream among all the countries in the Mekong. Other than China, which is geographically located in the upper Mekong Region, who has constructed a total of 11 dams on the mainstream Lancang River (the Mekong) and other dams on its tributaries.[48] Laos has developed two so far (Xayaburi and Don Sahong) and at least three more (Pak Beng, Pak Lay and Luang Prabang) are being considered.[49] As a result, while China's hydropower development remains one of the many challenges facing the countries in the Lower Mekong due to its unilateral decision in hydropower development, Laos's exploitation of the transboundary water resource, especially its planned dams on the Mekong mainstream, continues to be a source of advocacy by Cambodia and Vietnam, as well as non-state actors in the region.

While the Laotian state sees the Mekong as an important source of energy to realise its national development strategy as a 'battery of Asia', it does not mean that all sectors of the society are on the same page. However, it is also understood that the one-party state in Laos is known for its intolerance of open resistance to its policy. While different forms of resistance the state's neoliberal development policies have been observed particularly in the land concession projects,[50] the Laotian state has been increasingly closing the space for non-state actors and activists to operate especially with regards to sensitive issues such as land expropriation with the forced disappearance of a well-known activist Sambath in 2012.[51] This reality has led to the role of regional and international non-state actors playing the role of advocates in projects such as hydropower developments along the Mekong mainstream, the topic to which we will turn the subsequent subsections.

Ongoing contestation centres around hydropower development on the Mekong mainstream. High-profile dam projects in Laos that have received strong criticisms include Xayaburi, Don Sahong, and Pak Beng dams. The Xayaburi Dam was constructed in late 2012[52] whereas the construction of Don Sahong, located 2km upstream of the Laos-Cambodian border began in 2016.[53] Pak Beng is to be built on the Mekong mainstream

in Northern Laos.[54] These are just three high-profile projects that have been built and are to be built on the Mekong mainstream that have attracted disproportionate criticisms by neighbouring states and civil society actors.

Environmental activism concerning hydropower projects is expressed in various ways both within the individual state's institutional arrangements and regional organisation as well as within the civil society space. As to be discussed further in more detail in the subsequent subsections, state and non-state actors seek to advance their political agendas, which are at times in alignment with each other and at other times in conflict. To this end, environmental activism concerning hydro-dams in the region can be discussed at two interrelated, and often complementary, levels. At the regional level, environmental activism in the region targets the regional body, the Mekong River Commission (MRC), seeking to hold the inter-governmental organisation accountable and make it a more effective body in water governance. At the national level, activists seek to campaign against their own government's dam development policies. In addition to Laos discussed in this section, the focus will be on Cambodia and Vietnam where activists seek to manoeuvre within the political and cultural space available to them.

The Mekong River Commission (MRC): An evolving institutional arrangement

As an intergovernmental organisation, MRC was established by the 1995 Mekong Agreement signed by the four Mekong countries (Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam) to facilitate development of the Mekong River. Participation by non-state actors at the regional level is limited, though evolving. This level is concerned with the institutional mechanisms put in place by the MRC. Civil society actors develop transnational coalitions to advocate for policy change at the MRC and country level, which is discussed further below.

Article 1 of the 1995 Agreement[55] stipulates that the state parties agree:

> *'To cooperate in all fields of sustainable development, utilization, management and conservation of the water and related resources of the Mekong River Basin including, but not limited to irrigation, hydropower, navigation, flood control, fisheries, timber floating, recreation and tourism, in a manner to optimize the multiple-use and mutual benefits of all riparians and to minimize the harmful effects that might result from natural occurrences and man-made activities.'*

Articles 12 to 33 sets out the structure of the MRC and the power and obligations of each office and staff concerned. Three permanent bodies of the MRC are (1) the Council, (2) the Joint Committee, and (3) the Secretariat. The Council is composed of one member from each participating riparian state at the Ministerial and Cabinet level, with the power to make policy decisions on behalf of his/her government. The Council is chaired by a chairperson serving a term of one year on a rotating basis in alphabetical order of the participating countries. The Council makes policies and decisions and provides necessary guidance concerning the mandate of the MRC. The Council convenes at least one regular session every year. The Joint Committee and the Secretariat implement the decision of the Council.

In addition to the regional structure, each member country has its own National Mekong River Committee (NMRC) that serves as the country's secretariat to coordinate among different sectoral departments to serve the purpose of the country regarding the water management and development as well as cooperation with other participating countries within the framework of the 1995 Mekong Agreement. Depending on the political and legal framework of countries, NMRC may provide a window of opportunity for participation by civil society actors in the decision-making process of the country concerned as well as development projects concerning the Mekong mainstream as well as tributaries.

The participatory mechanism at the MRC level is the *Procedure for Notification, Prior Consultation, and Agreement* (PNPCA), adopted in 2003. Under Article 5 of the Agreement, states are required to notify and consult with other riparian states on the use of a river. To operationalise this mandatory process, the PNPCA was developed and adopted by the MRC in 2003.[56] Detailed guidelines on the Implementation of the PNPCA was adopted by the MRC Joint Committee in 2005.[57] This mechanism allows countries initiating development projects to work collaboratively with the other member countries to achieve mutual understanding and benefits from the projects proposed. As part of the prior consultation process, the PNPCA's guidance on the content of notification and consultation include required studies, roles and responsibilities of each actor involved in the process, timeframe, as further elaborated in the 2005 Guidelines including feasibility study and impact assessment.[58]

Participation in the decision-making process at the national level remains the pejoratives of the states concerned. The 1995 Agreement and PNPCA 2003 do not specifically require the inclusion of the public in the consultation process, leaving it to the member states to make decision in this regard within the framework of their respective political systems.[59]

Having said that, the MRC has sought to promote public participation in the governance of the Mekong River. Examples include MRC's 1999 'Public Participation in the Context of MRC', the strategy on public participation finalised in 2004, Stakeholder Participation and Communication Plan developed under the Basin Development Plan Programme Phase 2 (BDP2) developed in 2009. However, for participation in MRC's programs, there are two types of stakeholders: internal and external. Internal stakeholders are: government bodies in MRC structures such as the MRC Council, Joint Committee, the MRC Secretariat, the National Mekong Committees and their Secretariats, and the principal line agencies in each member country. External stakeholders are non-state bodies such as NGOs, implementing partners, civil society organisations, policy advocators, research institutions, individuals, the media and other groups who have interests or stakes to lose or gain from the concerned development projects.[60]

In the hydropower programme, the 2005 Booklet highlights the importance of effective public participation in the planning and implementation. According to the Booklet, '... MRC's hydropower development strategy advocates active stakeholder representation at all levels of planning and decision making, extending beyond the consultation stage'.[61] While this is emphasised more for the projects implemented by the MRC and its facilitation role in development projects such as hydropower development, the MRC encourages national governments and sectoral agencies to promote participation in line with their domestic circumstances, regulations, and practices.[62] For the development projects related to the Mekong, the national MRC secretariat is thus the focus point for participation.

While the MRC has adopted some important procedural mechanisms to provide a participatory channel for its members countries to have a say about water management in the region especially regarding the hydropower development, it remains the case that the member states maintain their sovereign power to decide whether the projects should go ahead.[63] At times, this is what Hirsch[64] means by the role of geopolitics in the hydropower development in the Mekong as relation between states within the region can be a determining factor on the development decision as well.

PNPCA remains the most important mechanism through which participation by state and non-state actors is harnessed. We return to this point later. Now, we turn to an overview of the case of Xayaburi Dam over which contestation is well documented.

Developed by the Laos government, Xayaburi power company is the Xayaburi project owner. The Electricity Generation Authority of Thailand (EGAT), who signed the Power Purchase Agreement (PPA) with the Xayaburi power company, was accused of doing so without a proper impact assessment for the project. Subsequently EGAT was sued by civil society organisations; however, the Administrative Court of Thailand claimed it did not have the jurisdiction to hear the case.[65] In April 2012, a construction contract was signed between Ch Karnchang public company and the Xayaburi power company and the dam proceeded to be built by Ch Karnchang. Xayaburi went online in October 2019.[66]

Yasuda[67] offers a periodisation of civil society actors' campaign over the dam between September 2010 until August 2012. Activities undertaken by non-state actor coalitions in Cambodia and Vietnam in articulation with regional networks are broken into three parts. First, from the beginning of the PNPCA process (Sep 2010) until the end of initial six months when the Joint Committee met to reach an agreement in April 2011. The second period spanned between after the JC meeting in April 2012 to the MRC Council meeting in December 2011. The third period covers a period between January-August 2012 during which time the Lao PDR officially acknowledged the construction of the Xayaburi hydropower dam. The Lao PDR officially launched the construction of the Xayaburi hydropower dam in November 2012, reiterating its compliance with the regional Mekong agreement, and noting the dam design had been improved because of concerns expressed by the other riparian states. Ironically, the launch was attended by ambassadors from Cambodia and Vietnam, two downstream countries which had raised concerns over the dam. Just three months later, at the MRC council meeting organised in January 2013, representatives of these two countries again demanded an impact study from the Xayaburi.

The MRC process has been criticised by non-state actors for its lack of transparency and public participation. The MRC recommends the national Mekong committee to organise public consultation as per their respective legal and regulatory framework. In the case of Xayaburi dam, according to Yasuda,[68] when consultation took place, however, information was not made available to non-state actors. For instance, during the six-month consultation process, the relevant documents such as Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), Social Impact Assessment (SIA), and feasibility study that were made available to the member states were not accessible by civil society organisations and local communities. Even worse, the Lao PDR was lambasted for not enabling its citizens to participate in the decision-making process, especially those who live in the development site.[69] Likewise, the 'Save the Mekong' (STM) coalition,[70] a regional civil society network formed in 2009 to tackle public concerns on negative impacts of hydropower development on the Mekong, has criticised the prior consultation process for its lack of inclusiveness and transparency. They raised concerns during the PNPCN process for several dams including Xayaburi, Don Sahong, and Pak Beng dams, all in Laos. Nevertheless, their claims were not adequately addressed by the MRC governments[71] prompting the coalition to boycott the prior consultation process for the proposed Pak Lay Dam in Laos that occurred in August 2018.[72] Similarly, Rachinsky-Skivakov[73] also noted that as part of the prior consultation process, the National Mekong Committee in each country member 'is expected, but not required' to consult CSOs and the public in their own country. Commentators and scholars have argued that the complex mechanism of the PNPCA prevents CSOs from engaging in meaningful participation.[74]

Also often seen as part of MRC's lack of effectiveness is the ambivalence surrounding its power in dispute resolution. In the event of conflicts arising from developments such as Xayaburi project, MRC could not do much other than ensuring that the procedural requirements were satisfied. This is, unsurprisingly, because the mechanism for dispute resolution is not clearly laid out in the Mekong Agreement. Further, unlike other treaties, the 1995 Mekong Agreement only mentions the possibility that an entity or party 'agreed upon by the parties concerned' can be sought to mediate in the event of disagreement. However, the clause, according to Yasuda, has not been strictly implemented, leaving the

riparian countries concerned to adopt a 'soft' approach toward conflict resolution. Some scholars see this unique approach as following the ASEAN way' which incorporates social characteristics of the culture in the region of 'conflict avoidance and harmony, consensual group behaviour, personal relationship over other relationships in politics or business and indirectness and circumlocution in communication'.[75]

Oxfam's evaluation of the MRC is as follows:

> *While MRC is still far from being meaningfully 'inclusive' of stakeholders beyond member governments, Oxfam and partner advocacy have contributed to some minor improvements. Ensuring MRC discloses information in a timely manner is critical to promoting more informed and meaningful dialogue… If maintained, the incorporation of Oxfam comments in the SHDS and Design Guidance could contribute to greater attention on social aspects, particularly gender, in MRC activities in the future. For example, the Design Guidance is the key document which MRC uses to inform technical review of mainstream dams submitted for Prior Consultation.*[76]

In essence, the MRC has provided an avenue for state and civil society actors to negotiate around the cost and benefits surrounding hydropower development in the Mekong basin. The Prior Notification and Consultation remains the single platform for states to exchange their views, however constrained due to geopolitics in the region and associated state-to-state relations in the region. Civil society actors have actively sought to exploit this window of participation with little success resulting in boycotts despite innovative strategies such as transnational coalition building among non-state actors. Such strategies have been employed to mobilise resources and to avoid repressions often characterising regimes in the region. As noted above, open activism and criticism in Laos is severely limited, while anti-state activism in Cambodia has faced a range of new coercive powers particularly since 2013.

Cambodia: Activism on hydro-dam development—state and regional coalition strategies.

Environmental activism in Cambodia encompasses a range of actors and strategies by civil society actors, especially non-governmental organisations and community-based organisations (CBOs). Their activism however varies in relation to projects developed inside Cambodia and outside, and political circumstances, and according to Yasuda,[77] political culture or norms.

Activism concerning dams inside Cambodia differs from one project to the next. Cambodia has built seven dams so far. This is a small number compared to its neighbours. Some aspects of activism are centred around environmental impacts and biodiversity loss, while others revolve around loss of livelihood and cultural heritage and impacts of displacement. In reality, these issues are not mutually exclusive. Civil society groups in Cambodia became increasingly aware of the negative impacts of hydro-dams with the development of Kamchay Dam in 2010. Civil society groups have participated in the development of projects especially in the late 2000s and the following decades. Kamchay Dam built in a protected forest in Kampong province was completed in 2010.[78] Other criticism of the development was directed to the lack of adequate compensation for those directly impacted, poorly managed social development fund, and poor implementation of compensation and access to electricity to the local people.[79]

These problems are primarily related to the weak governance system relevant to mitigating environmental and social impacts of development projects such as dams. The underdeveloped regulatory framework effective in Cambodia requires that dam projects with the capacity of 2 Megawatt or more must have its EIA before the government decides on the project.[80] However, implementation lags.[81] This is due to the mutual mistrust between the government and civil society groups. Some dams did not have an

EIA until after the project was completed as exemplified by the Kamchay dam.[82] Civil society groups have not been satisfied with the process as the participatory process is seen as not meaningful.[83]

Environmental activism in Cambodia is shaped by both the institutional constraints as well as opportunities arising from fast changing socio-economic and political changes. Within Cambodia, civil society groups are more constrained due to the limited political space, even though in a rare case they achieved a good result as well. Socio-economic and political change in the country has influenced the outcomes of environmental activism. The case of activism against Chhay Areng dam, with a planned capacity of 108 Megawatt, to be built on the Areng river in the protected forest of Cardamom Mountain in the north-western part of Cambodia has been regarded as a rare confrontation between civil society actors and the state that led to the government suspending the project.[84] With limited, ineffective administrative mechanisms put in place for participation in the hydropower dam project, civil society groups tend to opt for mobilisation within the space independent of the state, wherever possible, to advance their own developmental agenda.

Other contestations do not yield such a positive outcome. For instance, opposition to Lower Sesan 2 dam, built on a tributary of the Mekong, Sesan river with an installed capacity of 400 Megawatt, did not result in suspension of the project. Rather, the project went ahead and was completed in 2018. A few years later, to the surprise of many environmental advocates, the government decided to not build any dam on the Mekong Mainstream until 2030 as it cancelled the planned development of the 2,600-Megawatt Sambo Dam on the Mekong Mainstream.[85] This is indeed partly a result of an increasingly stronger opposition to hydropower projects by environmental groups not just in Cambodia but the international coalition of advocacy groups, such as International Rivers.

Cambodian civil society actors also join the regional coalition in protecting the environment in the Mekong region as well. At the regional arena, they are less constrained in terms of activism, even though it should not be denied that the repertoire of strategies is affected by the cultural factors as well.

While civil society movement in relation to projects developed in Cambodia has been relatively divided, Cambodian civil society groups concerned with environmental issues especially in relation to hydro-dam at the regional level are more unified. A coalition of NGOs was established under the name of the River Commission of Cambodia (RCC) to address the issues related to hydropower development in the Mekong. RCC has both domestic and international NGOs as members. RCC owes its origin to the Sesan Network established in 2003 by 3SPN, NGOF, FACT, and CEPA to support those people affected by dams along the Sesan River. It was renamed RCC in 2005/2006 as more members were added to cover the three rivers known as 3S—Sesan, Srepok, and Sekong—as the number of dams were growing in Cambodia and within the Mekong region.[86] As of 2016, RCC had more than 40 national and international NGO members working to protect and restore river ecosystems and riverine livelihood in Cambodia.[87]

As part of its vision, RCC wishes to influence the policies to be adopted by Cambodia government and other foreign countries in relation to development of dams along the river so that ecological systems, gender and climate change are properly considered in development. The Coalition's latest Terms of Reference says:

> *Rivers Coalition of Cambodia wants to see dams built and to be built in the future, respect the rights of those affected and ensure the environmental sustainability and livelihood of the people. To achieve this vision, RCC is convinced that public participation of people of both sexes in the planning and decision making is necessary so that affected people's interests, needs, and benefits are considered and addressed.*[88]

As a coalition, RCC does not necessarily object to the dam development. Rather, it seeks to promote the concept of environmental sustainability and people's livelihoods.

RCC is such a network that has engaged with civil society groups from other countries in the region in their campaign against hydropower dams in the Mekong. While several NGOs are engaged in environmental protection, as Yasuda (2014)[89] notes, RCC has become a central NGO network to take a prominent role in advocacy in Cambodia, as well as at the regional level. The development of the Mekong River is a main issue of advocacy of RCC. The first regional project the network engaged in was the Xayaburi Dam in Laos. For this case, it objected the proposal with a view that the project would have tremendous environmental and social impacts for the communities living along the river downstream particularly Cambodia and Vietnam;[90] its strong objection differs markedly from its reluctance in protesting against the Lower Sesan 2 where the local community overwhelmingly disapproved of the dam. Yasuda also attributes this difference in attitude to the existing rules and norms governing the strategies of the network in Cambodia as compared to the regional level.[91]

At the regional level, joining hands with like-minded transnational organisations, RCC members generally engage in various activities aimed to influence the state's decision. These activities include, but are not limited to, writing letters to regional governments, which they think can impose sanctions on the country developing the dam. For instance, in the case of Xayaburi dam, NGOs wrote letters to the Malaysian government as the Malaysian company was the developer of the project, and the government of Thailand who entered contracts with dam developers to buy electricity produced by the dam. However, the network is also influenced by their strategic and ideological position as some activities, especially the ones that may not be necessarily politically in line with that of the Cambodian state, were not necessarily endorsed by the network as such.[92]

In this sense, sensing the government's sentiment concerning a particular hydropower project may also offer the coalition a better political space to mobilise support within the country. For instance, in their campaign against Xayaburi dam, RCC managed to conduct awareness raising events in Kratie and Kampong Cham provinces, the affected communities of the Xayaburi Dam during the PNPCA discussion. Kratie based NGO including CRDT and The Community Economic Development (CED) conducted the events while International Rivers funded the activities. Moreover, in Kampong Cham, the Buddhist Association for Environmental Development (BAED), a relatively new member of the RCC since the early 2012, organised a Peace Walk campaign to stop the Xayaburi Dam on 29 June 2012. Approximately 500-600 people joined the march and collected thumb prints to send a petition to the Thai Prime Minister to stop the Xayaburi dam. However, for the Cambodian government official in attendance at the march such an act is considered as an act against the Cambodian government.[93] Such an event organised by civil society organisations against similar development within Cambodia is very rare.

In brief, non-state actors in Cambodia, emerged from the social destruction and with a strong link with international actors and western countries as their sources of funding, have undertaken their organisational missions in a very selective fashion. On the one hand, NGOs tread carefully in their advocacy inside Cambodia due to political, as well as cultural, constraints. Their activities in relation to projects developed in the region are also carefully crafted even though there is a certain level of political support from the government. Recent democratic regression and legal measures to control NGOs[94] and unions has further limited political space for non-state actors to voice their concerns, especially the ones that promote 'anti-state' narratives. At the regional level, these organisations have more space to manoeuvre even though as demonstrated by the way that RCC coalition operates political and ideological divergence remains a factor that weakens their activism. Vietnam presents a different picture due to its historical and political development.

Vietnam: Vietnam River Network (VRN)[95] - Governance and formal rules

Environmental activism in Vietnam is widely considered as 'embedded' within the one-party state political system. Civil society in the (post)socialist state in Vietnam has different ideological and historical roots than Cambodia. It is generally understood that, compared to Cambodia, Vietnam's civil society is more 'embedded' in that it has special relations with the state and the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). The word 'autonomous' civil society defined in the liberal literature as a third sphere between the state and family is less relevant for Vietnam. This difference implies the difference in access to resources and strategies used by the civil society actors and the effectiveness of their strategies. In Vietnam, civil society actors concerned with environmental protection especially hydropower development in the Mekong have recently emerged contemporaneous to the movement in Cambodia. However, this new sector has been integrated into the broad socialist mode of activism of the country.

In Vietnam, rights and freedom are legally protected even though the implementation could not necessarily stray away from the one-party state control. Yasuda provides a concise account of the political system and how this affects civil society activism in the Mekong hydropower project.[96] In the one-party state of Vietnam, freedom of expression is guaranteed in the Constitution and the Law on Media; however, this freedom is limited as stipulated in the Penal code when 'freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom of belief, religion, assembly, association and other democratic freedom infringe upon the interests of the state, the legitimate rights and interests of organisations and/or citizens. In such events, penalties may apply from warning, non-custodial reform for up to three years or a prison term of between six months and three years.[97] Further, the law on media ensures citizens' rights to contact and provide information to media without being subject to censorship and to express opinions on domestic and world and current affairs; the law also makes it mandatory for journalists to 'protect the guidelines and policies of the Party and the laws of the State, to seek out and protect positive initiatives, and to fight against wrong ideology. Such freedom should not be used against the party and the state.

Despite, and because of this set of rights and freedom is enshrined in the highest law of the country, many Vietnam scholars argue that the boundary between the state and civil society is fuzzy. Prior to the 1986 reform (Doi Moi), civil society was primarily referred to as 'mass organisations', and the latter de facto worked as the civil society arm of the CPV. The Vietnamese NGOs emerged in the 1990s (VNGOs). VNGOs differ from the mass organisations in that they are mainly professional associations, primarily issue-based organisations and many focus their work on social and human development. Initially, some VNGOs were established as science and technology organisations under the Decree 35-HDBT (1992) on the establishment of non-profit and science and technology organisations, and the Decree 81/2002/ND-CP on the implementation of the Science and Technology Law. Later, Decree 88 adopted in 2003 provides a legal framework which allowed for the establishment and registration of 'associations' which distinguish VNGOs from mass organisations, giving rise to the word NGOs (*tôchúc phi chinh phu*) meaning 'organisations external to the state'. NGOs are required by law to operate under government agencies with recognised competences, unsurprisingly making VNGOs highly susceptible to governments' influence. In response, many VNGOs are registered under the Vietnam Union for Science and Technology Association (VUSTA).[98]

Sinh[99] defines civil society organisations in Vietnam as 'those working to promote welfare and services for the people'. These activities have a long history from the village organisation in the past and continue to transform in the post-Doi Moi (reform) period (Nguyen 2014). Sinh's five types of organisations are: (1) mass organisations; (2) popular associations including the professional associations; (3) funds, charities, and supporting centers often set up by government decrees; (4) professional centers or research/education centres (Vietnamese NGOs or VNGOs such as the ones listed in the VNGOs Directory), and (5) community-based organisations (CBOs). As of 2014, there

were about 30 mass organisations under the umbrella of the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF) including the major ones Vietnam Women's Union (VWU), the Farmers' Association, the Federation of Labour, and the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, and Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Association (VUSTA). The latter is one of the prominent mass organisations under the VFF and has about 650,000 members or about half of the total number of the Vietnamese intellectuals. Professional associations registered under VUSTA have grown over time from 15 in 1983 to 34 in 1992, and 49 in 2001, and 114 in the years leading up to 2014. Moreover, VUSTA is composed of 60 provincial unions of science and technology associations as well as 73 national scientific and technological associations, an additional 300 organisations as affiliates. Its members operate 197 newspapers, magazines and websites.[100]

As noted above, it is inaccurate to suggest that civil society is non-existent in Vietnam's one-party state. Scholarship on state-civil society relations in Vietnam, particularly since Doi Moi, has demonstrated that activists and groups work out innovative ways to manoeuvre within the one-party state system. In the meantime, the state also wants to harness civil society for governance and social policy implementation. Like many other states, (post)socialist or otherwise, Vietnam seeks to promote consultative and administrative incorporation in which citizen groups are allowed to participate in the policy process under terms and conditions of control of the state as in the land management.[101] As far as environmental activism is concerned, it is important to understand the network that is the champion and its governance.

VRN is the champion in environmental activism in Vietnam. Its regulation was adopted in 2009, which defines the structure of VRN, and the different roles assigned to each position within the network. However, it does not provide a clear mechanism for decision making. For VRN, flexibility in the decision-making process, which mimics a systematic consultative process and consensus, is key as network members participate in various activities voluntarily.[102] According to Yasuda,[103] the VRN as an NGOs coalition registered as one of the projects of the Center for Water Resources Conservation and Development (WARECOD), a Vietnamese NGO registered under VUSTA. VNGOS registered under VUSTA are regarded as member association with rights to participate in VUSTA activities. Foreign NGOs are governed by the 2009 Regulation on the use of aid from INGOs, and government agencies approve the use of funds provided by foreign NGOS. What agencies decide to approve depends on the amount and the purpose of funds but are typically in line with government policy aims.

The emergence of VRN is closely linked to growing environmental concerns in the country as well as in the region. Notwithstanding growing concerns about environmental degradation, Vietnam still views hydropower as one of the main energy sources to respond to the rising energy demand in the country. According to an undated report by the Vietnam National Mekong River Committee, hydropower remains an important source of energy for Vietnam—the targets for total capacity produced by hydropower will increase from 17,000 MW in 2016 to 21,600 MW in 2020 to 24,600 in 2025, and 27,800 in 2030.[104] As of 2016, Vietnam has 306 hydropower plants in operation with a combined installed capacity of about 15.5GW, another 193 projects with a total capacity of 5.66GW were under construction. A further 245 projects with a capacity of 3GW were going through investment phases and 59 small projects with a total capacity of 421.88MW were under initial study.[105]

VRN initially monitored the public consultation process for dam projects in Vietnam. The first dams they worked on included Trung Song Hydropower project and Son Bung 4 project, both located in central highlands in Vietnam, and the Dong Nai hydropower dam in Southern Vietnam.[106] Their concerns center around environmental and livelihood impacts. In Vietnam, strong opposition from NGOs forced the government to overturn its decision on dam development. The temporary halt of the construction of a basin transfer

project from Vu Gia to Thy Bon River for the Dak Mi4 hydropower plant in response to the opposition by Da Nang residents and scientists.[107]

At the regional level, prominent among VRN's involvement is the Xayaburi dam. The Xayaburi Dam is the first project on the international river on which the VRN undertook advocacy work driven mainly by the VRN members themselves and according to the VRN interviewees without involvement of international partners who gave funding only.[108] Concerning the VRN's advocacy on the Xayaburi dam, decisions were made within the VRN's Mekong task force, and the decision was communicated to the rest of the network via email. Such a mechanism enabled VRN to act swiftly 'compared with the way network decisions are made within the RCC…' in Cambodia.[109]

VRN's Mekong Task Force has its own organisation. The task force consists of a small number of Vietnamese members including scientists based in the Mekong Delta, and other members based in Hanoi. VRN in the Mekong Delta organised a series of dialogue workshops to discuss hydropower dams with the local stakeholders; the workshops are one of the first attempts by the VRN to work with local stakeholders within the Mekong Delta and took place almost one year after the PNPCA process commenced and after the VRN's initial focus on dialogues with the national level decision-makers. Workshops involved government officials and local farmers, provincial leaders and members of staff from the provincial departments, in collaboration between the VRN and Can Tho University to which some of the scientists from the VRN's Mekong task force belonged. The first workshop was organised on 28 July 2011 in Can Tho city. Another workshop was organised on 25 November 2011, co-chaired by the Southwest Steering Committee and ForWet (Research Centre of Forest and Wetlands), a Vietnamese NGO based in Ho Chi Minh City involving the provincial governments. The Southwest Steering Committee is a politically important committee chaired by the Vice Minister and located directly under the bureau within the Central Party in Hanoi, consisting of 13 southern provinces in Vietnam mandated to consult with southern provinces on policy issues related to the Mekong Delta. The most important outcome was a letter from the Southwest Committee to the central government agencies. In total three workshops were organised.[110]

The embeddedness of civil society within the party-state political system in Vietnam has provided a more intimate working relationship which enables a degree of influence in policy development with relevant Vietnamese ministries. According to Yasuda, informal rules and norms in Vietnam also govern the behaviour of the advocacy group.[111] The three major rules and norms observed among civil society working in environmental activism are:

(1) Valuing science has a long history linked to the social value of education and science

(2) Personal trust, traditionally agrarian society with influences from Confucianism with a tendency to trust small circles of acquaintances such as family and village members and

(3) Fence-breaking, referring to violation of rules and regulations set up by the party and the state. This means that the tradition of having strong village communities influences the way centrally driven policy is implemented, and in turn feedback to the government.[112]

In the case of Vietnam, the NGO network has adopted a cautious approach, within the legal and cultural framework in Vietnam, engaging with the communist political and cultural system, through the government.[113] This is consistent with some of the findings in Zink's 2013 study into environmental policy making and the role of scientists and scientific advocacy with government ministries and decision-making in Vietnam.[114]

In short, NGOs and activist *agency* in Vietnam are strongly influenced by the structure of its party/state political system and other cultural influences. The (post) socialist one-party state has enabled an environment in which VNGOs and other actors (citizens and village groups) can play an important role in collaboration with the state to promote uniformity of implementation of state policies. Thus, there is evidence of the promotion of some diversity of opinions within the state-controlled mechanisms, such as party institutions. The value of science apparently offsets the lack of political space for expressing concerns outside of the state institutions. Moreover, the embedded nature of civil society working within the party-state apparatus has allowed civil society groups to align with and influence the national stance when it comes to advocacy regarding projects developed beyond the country's border. Here we suggest that embeddedness represents a different mode of incorporation; it can be an effective approach in advocacy in relation to projects developed in neighbouring countries.

Conclusion: Comparative analysis and environmental politics in Southeast Asia's authoritarian states

Resource exploitation remains critical for the economies in the three former French colonies in Southeast Asia. While the three countries share their colonial and communist experience, and different economic stages of development, in this working paper we have emphasised their shared dependence on natural resources to propel their economy to the next stage of development. Economic expansion in countries like Thailand fuel hydro-development in Laos. This also exports social conflict surrounding land development more generally to neighbouring countries. Similar economic development demand has been felt in other countries in the region and associated environmental, social and political tension that has invited criticism as well as contestation by environmental advocates and non-state actors.

Cambodia as an electoral authoritarian state, and Laos and Vietnam as (post)socialist one-party states, have demonstrated variegated ways in which non-state actors have engaged in their environmental activism. Laos, as a relatively closed political regime, has relied on resource exploitation for their economic development and has not provided much space for non-state actors to engage in policy making. Much less in the hydropower sector given the vital role of this sector in the economy. In other sectors, local communities may still be able to find different strategies in accordance with their cultural, historical and political knowledge, or at times purely out of grievances, to affect policy.

Cambodia as a nominally democratic state may provide more civic and political space for activism. The growth of the number of non-state actors, especially NGOs marks this space and the diversity of opinions. Such an arrangement can be seen as the dividend of the democratisation and democratic development process that the country has been undertaking for the last three decades, even though the extent to which civil society actors influence policy remains a contentious issue.

For Vietnam, the number of non-state actors has grown over time. So has the way that non-state actors operate to affect policy. The state-controlled mechanisms continue to provide effective policy dialogue both for issues arising from domestic projects as well as relevant projects developed in other countries in the region. Such space is well guarded by the state and has been utilised by the intellectuals to promote welfare and environmental sustainability.

Different political regimes in the three countries present different opportunities and costs for environmental activism. The unity within the civil society coalition is striking compared to RCC in Cambodia. Comparing the two countries, Wells-Dang[115] argues that Cambodia's advocacy is a boomerang approach in which the network shifts strategy to international audiences and pressure groups to compensate for the lack of space in the country. The international space then influences domestic political elites on the community's behalf to achieve a policy change (although this is not always the case). This approach is not adopted in Vietnam since the central government and large state-owned enterprises are less susceptible to public pressure. In Vietnam, 'calls for external intervention or open protest can easily boomerang back onto the activists themselves if

authorities frame them as tools of foreign interests.'[116] These different strategies may lead to divergent policy outcomes, which indeed are not necessarily indicative of whether one political system is more favourable to environmental sustainability than others.

Societies in the Mekong are undergoing enormous social and economic changes and experiencing, to borrow Hirsh's phrase,[117] '*shifting geopolitics*,' over the long 70 years of hydropower development strategies. Scholars should move beyond democratic-non-democratic activism to a more critical line of investigation into the ways that social actors engage in politics and interests involved. The changing role of the state in infrastructure development, the increasing role of private capital in promoting linkage between countries, the role of China in resource development in the region and associated environmental and social costs and resultant contestations all nestles into a complex process of political struggle. Civil society actors seek to instil an alternative ideological viewpoint toward sustainable development and environmental sustainability. Surging pressure on resources and associated impacts on the environment and livelihood have been met by growing contestation and non-state actors seeking to work collaboratively across the border to hold the riparian states, as well as regional bodies, such as the MRC to account. Attention should be paid to this trend in ongoing debates on the influence and impact of environmental activism in the region.

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GRIFFITH ASIA INSTITUTE

Griffith University Nathan campus
Nathan Queensland 4111, Australia

Email: gai@griffith.edu.au

griffith.edu.au/asiainstitute

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