

Political Opportunity and Anti-dam Movement in China

(Abstract)

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The emergence of anti-dam movement in Yunnan of China in the past few years have aroused attentions not only from scholars of civil society and sustainable development, but also social scientists bewildered by the question of how social movement can be developed under an authoritarian regime like China. This paper is to discuss the political opportunities as well as constraints presented in China that shape the dynamics of environmental movement particularly the anti-dam movement in Nu River of Yunnan.

Adopting Tarrow's (1996) and McAdam's (1996) conceptions of political opportunities, the paper discusses how the opening up of political access, the instability of elite alignments, the presence of elite allies and the state's capacity and propensity for repression have structured the process of anti-dam movement in Yunnan.

Concerning the opening up of political access, the paper discusses how environmental activists make use of the limited institutional channels to arouse the attention from the top leaders concerning the possible consequences of dam construction such as giving China negative international image. The newly enacted regulations on environmental impact evaluation and public participation in the evaluation also provide opportunities for public mobilization.

Concerning the problem of dividing elites, the paper discusses how it has reduced the regime's capacity of social control and created room for NGOs to engage in collective actions. The discussion focuses on the conflicts between the environmental protection bureau and other authorities that take economic development as top priority in their policy agendas. It also discusses how some new ideas promoted by the regime such as "harmonious society" have been taken up by the bureau and environmental NGOs as weapons to struggle with other departments.

The idea of elite allies in this paper refers to the covert cooperation between the environmental authorities and NGOs. Since economic development is still regarded as the top priority in the government, environmental protection bureau finds itself rather marginalized in the upper echelon of power. The paper reports how the bureau seeks for partnership in civil society by creating room for anti-dam movement and how environmental NGOs orchestrate their actions accordingly.

The last dimension of political opportunity concerns the state's tendency and capacity for social control. In China, there have been contradictory developments in this aspect. The new regime has promoted "people-based" policies and "scientific perspective of development" including the idea of sustainability. This apparently facilitates the emergence of a more liberal environment for civil society. On the

other hand, the “color revolutions” happened in Central Europe in the past few years have alerted Chinese authorities the potential of civil society turning into an independent if not subversive political force. The nature of anti-dam movement will be understood quite divergently when seen from these two different angles. This explains the unstable political environment these NGOs face.

The authors of this paper have spent two years conducting field work in villages around two rivers of Yunnan where large dams are planned to build. The dynamics of anti-dam movements in these two rivers are quite different with one relying mostly on the effort of external NGOs while the other on indigenous villagers. This paper will report the former movement around Nu River.

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