

Rivers of Contention: Pak Mun Dam, Electricity Planning, and State–Society Relations in Thailand, 1932–2004

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Abstract

This study investigates how actions – especially narratives and claims – of civil society advocates influenced electricity generation planning and hydropower project implementation, in the context of a democratising authoritarian state. To pursue this research agenda, I use a critical realist philosophy of science to ground a conceptual framework whose fundamental components consist of institutions, interests, and discourses.

The research presents three case studies from Thailand, a nation-state with distinct authoritarian legacies, as well as significant economic and political dynamism in the late 20th century. The cases step from macro to micro levels of analysis:

(1) Electricity generation planning: an overview and critique of the social construction of peak power demand and supply options in Thailand, 1960s–2004. I focus on the rise of energy conservation advocacy in the early 1990s, and the rise of more confrontational energy activism in the late 1990s;

(2) Pak Mun Dam: contention between EGAT, anti-dam villagers, and other state and civil society actors, 1989–2003;

(3) Pak Mun Dam: analysis of how knowledge discourses shaped debates over fisheries and local livelihoods in the lower Mun river basin, 1999–2004.

I pursue these cases in the larger context of Thai state–society relations, 1932–early 2000s: from the Khana Ratsadorn (People’s Party) and its founders’ increasingly authoritarian struggles to shape the state; through to the rise of civil society in the Indochina-war era; through the emergence of parliamentary politics and NGO evolution in the 1980s and early 1990s; to the Thai Rak Thai “money politics” party that emerged in 1998. Specific research questions focus on patterns and outcomes of state–society interaction, the role of lay and expert knowledge discourses in structuring conflict, and plausible causal connections between outcomes and concepts used in the conceptual framework.

The study is based on fieldwork conducted between 2001 and 2005, with 18 months of intensive work concentrated in 2002 and 2004. Recurrent procedures consisted of collecting policy narratives and arguments and re-constructing actors’ interests (including those of leaders in organizations) via participant observation,

interviews, and textual analysis.

The thesis argues that anti-dam advocates influenced project implementation practices at Pak Mun Dam by forming social change networks, gaining contingent recognition as new political actors. Through innovative and disruptive action, through claims for transparency and justice, through mass performances of worthiness, unity, and commitment, and through the production of local knowledge, they helped set agendas. They triggered elite intervention, as well as reactive counter-mobilization and occasional violence. The escalation of uncertainty from unintended outcomes challenged elites – aided by deliberative exchanges – to reconsider unfavourable decisions, to reconsider their preferences, and to make concessions.

At the same time, a number of events made the Assembly of the Poor, the main anti-dam movement organization, vulnerable to destabilizing action at the local and national levels. These include: the formation of competitive organizations in the lower Mun basin; complex and intractable issues (such as multiple rounds of compensation); and inability to take credit for championing the interests of vulnerable small farmers. Destabilizing interactions occurred particularly in the restricted media space of the post-financial and economic crisis years. Populist platforms put forward by Thai Rak Thai and Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra pre-empted the AOP's influence.

Sustainable energy advocates influenced practices of power system planning by teaching new techniques of energy conservation, and diffusing new norms. In the recent period, however, as some of them engaged in more contentious interaction, such as intervening in conflicts over new coal and hydroelectric power plants (in southern Thailand and Laos respectively) they disrupted dominant rationalities, and found themselves confronting some of the same core practices of a power-wielding bureaucracy and an authoritarian state, namely rhetorical strategies that police the boundaries of policy-relevant knowledge.

The thesis, intended to contribute to social science methodology and theory, concludes with a critical appraisal of the conceptual framework. I suggest new research agendas for analysts interested in mechanisms of civil society advocacy in the context of democratising states.

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Notes to the Reader

All Thai-to-English translations provided are my own, unless otherwise noted.

All interviews were conducted in confidence and interviewees' names have been changed accordingly.

I have transcribed Thai words using the Royal Institute's phonetic transcription method (Aroonmanakun and Rivepiboon 2004). My spelling of proper names departs from the RI system when an alternative spelling is adopted by a person, or else consistently used in the Bangkok English-language press.

Individual authors of Thai texts appear in the text and references in the order [First Name Last Name].

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List of Acronyms

AOP	Assembly of the Poor
DEDE	Department of Alternative Energy Development and Efficiency
DOF	Department of Fisheries
EGAT	Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand
EPPO	Energy Policy and Planning Office
GWh	gigawatt-hour
MW	megawatt
IIEC	International Institute for Energy Conservation
IRN	International Rivers Network
IPP	independent power producer
IRP	integrated resource planning
kW	kilowatt
MEA	Metropolitan Energy Authority
NEPO	National Energy Policy Office
NESAC	National Economic and Social Advisory Council
NESDB	National Economic and Social Development Board
PEA	Provincial Energy Authority
RFD	Royal Forestry Department
RID	Royal Irrigation Department
UBU	Ubon Ratchathani University