

**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].

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	II
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	IV
NOTES TO THE READER.....	VI
TABLE OF CONTENTS	VII
LIST OF ACRONYMS	X
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2 A FRAMEWORK FOR CONTEXTUALIZED STRATEGIC ACTION.....	9
2.1 INTRODUCTION	10
2.2 APPROACHES FROM PUBLIC POLICY STUDIES	12
2.3 CONTENTIOUS POLITICS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS.....	24
2.4 EXPLAINING CONTEXTUALIZED STRATEGIC ACTION: A DISCOURSE-ORIENTED FRAMEWORK.....	31
2.5 RESEARCH QUESTION AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK	43
2.6 CONCLUSION	44
CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY: A CRITICAL REALIST APPROACH.....	46
3.1 INTRODUCTION	46
3.2 KEY METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES	48
3.3 RESEARCH SUB-QUESTIONS, CASE STUDIES, AND DATA ANALYSIS.....	64
3.4 CONCLUSION	71
CHAPTER 4 CONTEXTS OF CONTENTION: STATE–SOCIETY RELATIONS AND THE ASSEMBLY OF THE POOR.....	73
4.1 INTRODUCTION	74
4.2 LARGE-SCALE CONTEXTS OF CONTENTION.....	75
4.3 PATHWAYS TO AUTHORITARIANISM AND DEMOCRATIZATION.....	85
4.4 EMERGENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT ACTORS.....	101
4.5 CONCLUSION	115
CHAPTER 5 THAILAND’S POLITICS OF POWER SYSTEM PLANNING AND REFORM.....	119
5.1 INTRODUCTION	120
5.2 ENERGY SECTOR AND INDUSTRY STRUCTURE	122
5.3 THAI PLANNING PRACTICES, 1960S–1980.....	127

5.4 THAI PLANNING PRACTICES, 1980S–2004.....	134
5.5 THE RISE OF A SUSTAINABLE ENERGY ADVOCACY NETWORK.....	153
5.6 CONCLUSION	157
CHAPTER 6: CONFLICT OVER PAK MUN DAM, 1989–1994.....	162
6.1 INTRODUCTION	162
6.2 CAMPAIGNING FOR TRANSPARENCY AND PARTICIPATION, 1989–91.....	166
6.3 CAMPAIGNING FOR ACCOUNTABILITY AND COMPENSATION, 1992–94.....	184
6.4 ANALYSIS	192
6.5 CONCLUSION	198
CHAPTER 7 POST-OPERATIONAL CONTENTION, 1994–2003.....	200
7.1 INTRODUCTION	201
7.2 POST-OPERATIONAL CONTENTION.....	204
7.3 ANALYSING POST-OPERATIONAL CONTENTION	237
7.4 UNEXPECTED EVENTS AND INSTITUTIONALIZED PRACTICES.....	246
7.5 CONCLUSION	253
CHAPTER 8 LIVELIHOODS IN DISPUTE, 1999–2003	258
8.1 INTRODUCTION	259
8.2 RIVAL DISCOURSE COALITIONS AND POLICY NARRATIVES.....	260
8.3 LIVELIHOODS IN DISPUTE	277
8.4 CONTESTING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT LIVELIHOODS IN THE THAKSIN ERA	286
8.5 RECEPTION OF OPPOSITIONAL KNOWLEDGE DISCOURSES	295
8.6 INTENSIFYING LIVELIHOODS: CANALS, FINGERLINGS, AND NEW FISHING GEAR	300
8.7 CONCLUSION: LIVELIHOODS IN DISPUTE	311
CHAPTER 9 CONCLUSION: RIVERS OF CONTENTION.....	316
9.1 CASE STUDY FINDINGS IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE	316
9.2 CAUSAL ANALYSIS: MECHANISMS OF CONTEXTUALIZED STRATEGIC INTERACTION.....	325
9.3 REAPPRAISAL OF RESEARCH DESIGN AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK	340
9.4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH.....	347
REFERENCES	350

Table 1.1 Research Sub-Questions 3

Table 2.1 Type of outcome, as function of level of acceptance of challenger, and level of advantages won by challenger..... 29

Table 3.1 Key features of three philosophies of science..... 51

Table 3.2 Capacities and liabilities of key concepts/objects in my framework..... 55

Table 3.3 Research sub-questions..... 65

Table 4.1 Structure and meaning as contextual elements of social movements 75

Table 4.2 Actors, relations, and trajectories in Phongpaichit and Baker, 1860s–early 1990s..... 78

Table 4.3 Explanations of continuity and change in Phongpaichit and Baker 83

Table 4.4 Two types of path dependent sequence that ensue after a critical juncture 88

Table 4.5 Hypothesized antecedents, critical junctures, and consequences for Thai state building, post-1932 90

Table 4.6 Institutional legacies of the first critical juncture 97

Table 4.7 Some influential NGOs, 1960s–present 101

Table 4.8 Public demonstrations, 1982–95..... 110

Table 5.1 Jurisdiction over electricity sector policy-making..... 127

Table 5.2 Institutional change in power systems, United States and Thailand 130

Table 5.3 Important planning practice refinements, 1980s–present 138

Table 5.4 Reflections on how DSM is perceived within a Thai utility 150

Table 5.5 Contested elements of power system planning, recent period..... 154

Table 6.1 Chronology of Pak Mun Dam case, 1982–94 167

Table 6.2 Categories of households recognized for compensation of structures and fixed assets 174

Table 6.3 Discursive features of debates over Pak Mun Dam, 1988–91..... 186

Table 7.1 Chronology of Pak Mun Dam case, 1994–2003 202

Table 7.2 Interim fisheries compensation awards..... 214

Table 8.1 Discursive features of livelihood and fisheries-related debates over Pak Mun Dam .. 261

Table 8.2 Validity in positive science..... 274

Table 8.3 Summary of Pak Mun irrigation project 306

Table 9.1 Research sub-questions..... 318

Table 9.2 Causal pathways and mechanisms recurrent across cases and scales 327

Table 9.3 Social mechanisms in Hajer (1995) and in present study 342

Figure 1.1 Thailand and the Mun River 2

Figure 2.1 The policy life cycle..... 13

Figure 2.2 Advocacy Coalition Framework..... 19

Figure 2.3 Framework for analysing mobilization in contentious politics..... 27

Figure 2.4 Giddens’ model of action 36

Figure 3.1 Structures of causal explanation 57

Figure 4.1 Collier and Collier’s critical juncture framework..... 87

Figure 5.1 Total primary energy consumption by end-use sector 123

Figure 5.2 Proportion of electricity generated by different fuel sources..... 123

Figure 5.3 Trajectory of power demand and supply 125

Figure 5.4 Thailand’s electricity supply industry 126

Figure 6.1 Mun River from Ubon Ratchathani to junction with Mekong 169

Figure 7.1 Structure of Ad-Hoc Committees related to Pak Mun Case, 2001–03..... 227

Figure 8.1 Tai Baan’s classification of livelihoods 265

Figure 8.2 Primary and secondary occupations reported by Khon Kaen University 271

Figure 8.3 Contrasting spatial distribution of villages studied by NSO (2003) and UBU (2002) 275

Figure 8.4 Preferred management options of households surveyed by NSO..... 276

Figure 8.5 One framework for analysing sustainable livelihoods..... 280

Figure 8.6 Average household fishing incomes from five studies, 1990–2002 290

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