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Contestation between Riparian People and States: The Sesan River Hydropower Projects, Cambodia

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Abstract:

This paper explores the relations between riparian people and states regarding the two Sesan River hydropower projects: the Yali Falls Dam and the Lower Sesan II Dam. I argue that the relations are contested and that these contested relations are rooted in the states' predominance and the local population's disempowerment, which are relevant to present-day human-security agendas.

Keywords: *Cambodia, Vietnam, hydropower, the Sesan River*

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Contestation between Riparian People and States: The Sesan River Hydropower Projects, Cambodia

Ta-Wei Chu

INTRODUCTION

The Sesan River, with total catchment area is 19,250 km^2 (7,630 km^2 in Cambodia and 11,620 km^2 in Vietnam) (MRC 2014: 5), is one of the largest tributaries of the Mekong River. Specifically, the Sesan River flows from Kon Tum and Gia Lai Provinces in Vietnam's Central Highlands to the Oyadav, Andong Meas, Taveng, and Veun Sai Districts in Cambodia's Ratanakiri Province. Ultimately, the Sesan River converges with the Sekong and Srepok Rivers[1] in Stung Treng Province, located west of Ratanakiri. People living along the Sesan River in Cambodia numbered around 29,000 (Baran *et al*. 2013: 32). Most riparian people are from indigenous groups, including the Brao, Jarai, Kachok, Kavet, Kreung, Lung, Phnong, and Tampuan.[2]

The increasing domestic demand for energy has prompted the Vietnamese government and the Cambodian government to initiate hydropower projects along the Sesan River. The two governments' narratives offer similar arguments: the hydropower projects will provide benefits such as electricity and job opportunities, all of which will enhance living standards and reduce poverty. However, neither government has invited the Cambodian Sesan River's riparian inhabitants to participate in the decision-making processes surrounding the development of the hydropower dams. Also, while reaping few of the much touted benefits, these inhabitants have been left facing many social and environmental repercussions traceable to the dams' construction and operation.

[1] The Sesan, Srepok and Sekong Rivers are collectively called the 3S Rivers.
[2] Riparian people also include a few ethnic Khmer and Lao.

A concept that is significantly associated with the aforementioned issues is human security. It emerged in the mid-1990s in the study of international relations. Human security emphasises the need of individuals for protection and empowerment, and defines the role of states as security providers. Thus, in the human-security concept, the primary security referent is individuals rather than states. Both the Cambodian and the Vietnamese governments have, as regards the hydropower projects, promised to shoulder the responsibility of meeting the riparian people's freedom-from-want needs. It is reasonable to say that the hydropower projects are human-security oriented. However, the absence of the Sesan River's riparian people from the hydropower-development projects is a compelling sign that the projects have seldom empowered individuals. In present-day human-security agendas, this depressing outcome reflects a phenomenon that critical theorists in the realm of international relations have been arguing: human security reinforces the power of states but does not empower individuals (McCormack 2008).

In this study, I will explore relations between riparian people (mainly the ones living in Stung Treng and Ratanakiri) and states (Vietnam and Cambodia) regarding the Sesan River's hydropower projects: the Yali Falls Dam and the Lower Sesan II Dam (LS2). I argue that, in terms of the Sesan River's hydropower projects, relations between riparian people and states have been contested: the main actors have been struggling for supremacy over the hydropower projects, and the causes of contestation have been rooted in the states' predominance and the individuals' disempowerment.

I have two main objectives in this study. First, this paper reflects my attempt to broaden the scope of studies about Mekong hydropower development. The Mekong River's riparian states, which include not only Vietnam and Cambodia but also China, Myanmar, and Thailand, have all developed hydropower dams to meet increasing domestic energy needs. Numerous studies have focused on riparian states' bilateral and multilateral cooperation and conflicts. However, local non-governmental organisation (NGOs) and riparian people have organised campaigns against dam projects. Their movements have influenced riparian states' hydropower policies. The states have either adopted an intimidation policy or revised their hydropower policy to respond to local NGOs (Yeophantong 2014) and riparian people (Mekong Watch 2015). There is no doubt that local NGOs and riparian people have been the main actors interacting with riparian states in the dam projects. Thus, relations between the local NGOs and the states and relations between the riparian

people and the states should be examined, as the relations between the riparian states already have. The present study can enrich research on Mekong hydropower development in terms of relations between non-state actors and states. My second main objective in this study is to explore the view that human security reinforces states' power but disempowers individuals. I take this argument further, proposing that the states' predominance and the individuals' disempowerment have turned the interactions between states and individuals into contested relations.

For my research presented here, I conducted two field studies. The first one took place from November to December 2015, and the second one took place from April to May 2016. In the process, I interviewed workers and directors of local NGOs based in Banlung, the provincial capital of Ratanakiri. The three main NGOs were Save Vulnerable Cambodians (SVC), the Highlander Association (HA), and the 3S Protection Network (3SPN),[3] all of which have been providing support to the dam-affected Cambodians living along the Sesan River. In addition, I interviewed a sample of 25 riparian people including elders and chiefs of local villages, members of a community committee, and indigenous women by using in-depth and semi-standardised interview methods. Most of these interviewees were indigenous people (Brao, Jarai, Kachok, Kreung, Lung, and Tompoun), but some interviewees were Khmer and Lao. I conducted my interviews in Ratanakiri's four districts: Oyadav (in Sesan Commune's Phi Village), Andong Meas (in Talao Commune's Kak Village), Taveng (in Taveng Kroam Commune's Phav Village and Tompoun Reung Thom Village), and Veun Sai (in Kachon Commune's Tiem Leu Village and Ka Choun Leu Village, in Phnom Kok Commune's Phnom Kok Lao Village, and in Ban Pong Commune's Fang Village). I hired interpreters who helped me conduct these interviews, which I recorded on an MP3 player and transcribed into English. In order to consider the interviewees' safety, I guaranteed anonymity to the interviewed riparian people.

This paper has three sections. In the first section, I will discuss the view that human security reinforces states' power but disempowers individuals and I will outline the causes of contestation between individuals and states. In the second and the third section, I will explore the relations between riparian people and states regarding the Yali Falls Dam and the LS2.

[3] 3SPN was previously known as Sesan Protection Network (SPN). In 2005, SPN changed its name to 3SPN.

The Predominance of States and the Disempowerment of Individuals in Human Security Agendas

Human security is a concept that brings individuals' security and rights to the fore. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) released *The Human Development Report 1994*, which asserts that individuals' security needs should be prioritised and that individuals should be free from physical violence and free from chronic threats in daily life (UNDP 1994: 3, 23). Also, human security emphasises that individuals have the right to voice their security concerns, determine their security needs, and participate in decision-making processes, which together should facilitate the so-called empowerment of individuals (Commission on Human Security 2003: 11).

Despite characterizing individuals as the primary security referent, human security concept does not reject the assertion that states are the main security providers. In the 2005 World Summit, the members of the United Nations (UN) unanimously agreed with the sentiments expressed in articles 138 and 139 of the UN Summit Outcome Document: "each individual state has the responsibility to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity" and when states are unable to protect their own population or when states themselves become a source of threats, the international community can "take collective action, in a timely and decisive manner" to protect victims (World Summit Outcome 2005: 31).

However, human security offers little room for measures that might empower individuals or that might lead to a mechanism capable of constraining state behaviour insofar as "states are more often part of the problem than the source of the solution" (Bellamy and McDonald 2002: 373). Against this backdrop, states' role as security providers in the context of human-security agendas has given states a chance to further develop their power. Regarding international human-security agendas, states can claim that insecurities such as poverty and underdevelopment in another country threatens their own citizenry and justifies their own intervention in the targeted country—a position exemplified by the US-led intervention in Iraq in 2003 (McCormack 2008: 118–121). In national human-security agendas, states can use human-security campaigns to achieve their domestic political goals, as was the case with the Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's 2001 anti-narcotics campaign, whose real purpose was to suppress political dissidents and human-rights activists (Horstmann 2008: 61). States have remarkable power when

it comes to identifying threats to individuals and legitimating governmental methods for the removal of these threats. By contrast, individuals contribute little to international and national human-security agendas and lack power to reject the states' security provisions (McCormack 2008: 124). Perhaps most telling is that individuals have suffered significant harm from security problems caused by the states acting as security providers. In short, human security has reinforced the power of the states while effectively disempowering the individuals (McCormack 2008).

In present-day human-security agendas, this phenomenon—the states' predominance and the individuals' disempowerment—has had two notable repercussions. The first is that security problems have become increasingly difficult to address. Individuals are probably the actors who know best which threats to them are critical and which methods are suitable to address the threats, because individuals are the actors who encounter these threats directly. The security policies in which individuals contribute can help to address threats and providing security properly. Thus, provision of security should be based on the individuals' perspectives and suggestions (Bruderlein 2001). However, in present-day human-security agendas, states are the dominant power and the provision of security is based mostly on states' often autocratic decision-making processes. This discrepancy creates a gap between the security that states provide and the security that individuals want. Against this backdrop, a problem that arises in present-day human-security agendas is state security's inability either to address individuals' security problems or to satisfy individuals' security needs.

The second repercussion of the states' predominance and the individuals' disempowerment has been the rise in security and social problems (e.g., human rights abuses, corruption). In most present-day human-security agendas, states are the main security providers, but states typically use their provision-of-security mission to achieve their own interests. Meanwhile, states' pursuit of their interests under the banner of providing security can cause social and security problems, as was the case with the 2003 US-led intervention in Iraq and with Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's 2001 anti-narcotics campaign. Critical theorists remark that states' behaviour in providing security is not altruistic but hypocritical (Peou 2014: 242–250; 375–382; 409–416).

The persistence of unresolved security problems along with a rise in security and social problems have degraded individuals' livelihood at best and claimed individuals' lives at worst. In

response to these issues, individuals have turned to activism (e.g., demonstrations, petitions). Individuals use these activist approaches to voice their security concerns, to promulgate suitable methods for dealing with problems, and to participate in related decision-making processes normally dominated by states. By adopting activist approaches, individuals have practiced their speech-and-act rights while trying to undo damage to their security. In a Tompoun-ethnic village where I interviewed a village elder and a village chief, the two individuals stated that they had both joined the 3SPN campaigns because they had wanted a chance to participate in the development of hydropower projects and to resolve problems like flooding, water contamination, and decreased fish resources.[4]

Individuals' activism is also a challenge to states' dominant position. Not many states tolerate individuals' activism, because states fear that a weakening of their dominant position would diminish their ability to pursue state interests under the banner of providing human security. Thus, in order to continue their successful pursuit of state interests, states particularly the non-democratic ones consolidate their dominant position in human-security agendas by suppressing individuals' activism. States' suppression of individuals indicates that states restrict individuals' exercise of subsistence rights, security rights, political rights, and civil rights. It is interesting to note that, according to Rhonda Callaway and Julie Harrelson-Stephens (2006), a loss of the above four rights are basic conditions for individuals' adoption of terrorist activities. Clearly, the issue of state suppression is open to many research directions. The focus of the current study is on the extent to which states' suppression of individuals can reinforce individuals' activism.

Contestation of the Yali Falls Dam

Since the late 1980s, the Vietnamese government has regarded hydropower development as a foundation of the country's economic reform. In December 1986, the Communist Party's sixth national congress adopted a policy of renovation (*Đổi Mới*), with the aim of changing the Vietnamese economy from a centrally planned system to a market-oriented one—all in the hope of spurring foreign investment. When more foreign interests invest in Vietnam, the more electricity Vietnam will need. However, in the late 1980s, Vietnam remained deeply deficient in the production of energy and power cuts were frequent. As rivers in Vietnam have steep slopes and

[4] Interview on April 24, 2016.

high flows during the rainy season, the Vietnamese government has regarded hydropower development as a major source of electricity capable of meeting national energy needs. The Sesan River has been a prime geographical area targeted for national hydropower development.

The Yali Falls Dam was Vietnam's first hydropower construction on the Sesan River in the 1990s. Costing US$1 billion, it has a 720 megawatt (MW) installed capacity and is approximately 80 km from Ratanakiri. The Vietnamese government started building the Yali Falls Dam in 1993, tentatively operating it in 1996, and formally operating it in 2000. The Yali Falls Dam's power is delivered to southern Vietnam, which is where a commercial and industrial hub of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City, is located (Hirsch and Wyatt 2004: 54). However, the Yali Falls Dam's environmental impact assessment (EIA), conducted by the state-owned Electricity of Vietnam (EVN) group and its Swiss consultant Electrowatt Engineering Services, covered only an area up to 8 km from the dam. In other words, the EIA excluded Cambodia's Sesan River basin.

The narrative that the Vietnamese government has been promoting about the Yali Falls Dam is that it would provide electricity, offer job opportunities, and supplement irrigation. The native inhabitants of the Central Highlands are ethnic minorities including members of the Jarai, Ede, Bahnar, Sedang, Hre, Mnong, and Jeh groups, often known collectively as Montagnards. In comparison with other regions of Vietnam, the Central Highlands are underdeveloped and poor. Some district authorities supported this project because they believed that it could "contribute to the [given] district's infrastructural and socio-economic development" (Dao and Phuong 2015: 184). One general benefit that the Vietnamese government promulgated was the dam's ability to achieve "freedom from want" for locals. However, the Vietnamese government did not consult the locals living downstream of the Sesan River about the Yali Falls Dam. Downstream riparian people in Ratanakiri did not know about the dam until after they had suffered their first dam-induced flooding in late 1996 (Hirsch and Wyatt 2004: 56).

The Yali Falls Dam has had huge social and environmental effects on riparian Cambodians living downstream of the river. The dam has caused erratic fluctuations in the river's behaviour: river levels now are sometimes abnormally high, which have triggered several floods and posed a significant risk to life and property. The riparian people rely on swidden agriculture and the collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs). In addition, they catch fish, rear animals, and

cultivate vegetables and fruit along the riverbank. When crops from swidden fields are poor, the riparian people sell fish, poultry, vegetables, and fruit for their income. However, when flooding occurs, swidden fields and riverbank gardens are destroyed and the indigenous people's property, including fishing gear, fishing boats, and animals are washed away (Fisheries Office and NTFP 2000: 10–13, 20–21, 29–30), which also means that the riparian people have no supplemental source of food and no alternative income. Many of my riparian interviewees expressed to me their unhappiness with the Yali Falls Dam's detrimental influence on their lives.[5] Now, these people struggle to catch fish and to counter their rapidly declining incomes. According to one interviewee, his monthly income had decreased from around US$100 to $30.[6]

Regarding the goal of meeting domestic energy needs, two particularly prominent interests have driven the Vietnamese government in its creation of the Yali Falls Dam: the indirect tightening of governmental control over rural populations and the illegal accumulation of personal wealth. The government's pursuit of these interests has created other security and social problems.

As for the first interest, the Vietnamese government has used the development of the Yali Falls Dam to tighten its control over Montagnards. In 1964, Montagnards created the United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races (*Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées*, FULRO). Montagnards did not enjoy autonomy despite Ho Chi Minh's promises during the Vietnam War, and FULRO eventually waged guerrilla action against North Vietnamese communists (Human Rights Watch 2002: 9). Between 1975 and 1979, following the fall of the American-backed South Vietnamese government, Vietnam's communist government killed or arrested about 8,000 Montagnards (Vietnam Committee on Human Rights 2012: 7). By 1992, most of the remaining FULRO guerrilla forces had surrendered their arms to the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). The lesson from this recent violent history is that many Montagnards held—and still hold—anti-government sentiment. To counter this sentiment, the Vietnamese government has employed a number of strategies, and hydropower has been an important way to achieve these ends. For example, the development of hydropower facilitates the construction of buildings and roads. Thus, in Montagnard-dominated rural areas, local populations have witnessed the establishment of such bastions of governmental influence as schools, which—among other

[5] Interviews on April 24, 2016, April 28, 2016, April 29, 2016, April 30, 2016, May 1, 2016.
[6] Interviews on April 29, 2016.

things—teach classes in the Vietnamese language, thus discouraging Montagnards' collective identity. The local populations have also witnessed the extensive development of roads, which greatly facilitate movement by the Vietnamese military and other government entities through the country's dense forests and Central Highlands. After the establishment of the Yali Falls Dam, the Vietnamese government could quickly dispatch tanks to the Central Highlands to suppress dissidents when needed (Human Rights Watch 2011: 8). In short, hydropower development has helped the Vietnamese government control the Montagnards physically and culturally.

A second major interest that has driven the Vietnamese government in its creation of the Yali Falls Dam is the illegal accumulation of personal wealth by government officials and their supporters. Hydropower is a big infrastructural undertaking that needs a vast and continual amount of funding (about US$1.25 million per MW) (Dao and Phuong 2015: 178). The exceedingly non-democratic and non-transparent nature of current Vietnamese governance has created multiple loopholes for Vietnamese officials and their supporters seeking to line their pockets. Particularly susceptible to these acts of corruption are the officials whose duties include granting approval for projects and organising the purchase of related materials. The Yali Falls Dam has been the centre of a corruption scandal that was linked to a human-security crisis. In 1996, the riparian people along the Cambodian Sesan River suffered severe flooding. The Vietnamese government gave no clear explanation of this disaster, and rumours of high-level corruption swirled among dam-affected residents. According to a widely cited report, a structural failure at the Yali Falls Dam resulted in the 1996 flooding, and the structural failure was attributable to the construction manager's decision first to sell a stockpile of expensive high-quality Japanese cement and then to purchase low-quality Vietnamese cement as a substitute—with the cash difference being pocketed illegally (Fisheries Office and NTFP 2000: 10).

Many affected riparian people have participated in meetings held by local NGOs. Meetings held by the 3SPN are probably the most important ones. Participants in the 3SPN-meetings have included provincial governors, district officials, commune chiefs, and chiefs and elders of villages. At the first National Sesan Workshop, held on November 27, 2002, 3SPN issued five demands for improving the Sesan River in light of hydropower development there:

1. We request that the government along with organizations (international) help stop the

construction of hydropower dams on the Sesan River, particularly Sesan 3 and Sesan 4.

2. We request that the natural flow of the river be restored.
3. We request that the dam builders and stake holders who have funded the construction of the dam compensate villagers for all lost and destroyed property and equipment.
4. We request that the government of Cambodia negotiate with the government of Vietnam to find a solution [to hydropower-related problems].
5. We request that the Mekong River Commission (MRC) and stake holders come to the provinces to study the impacts [of hydropower] in consultation with the people along the Sesan River (cited from Hirsh and Wyatt 2004: 61).

In points 1 and 5, villagers expressed their views on Sesan hydropower, including the impact of construction and operation. In points 2, 3, and 4, villagers declared that the Vietnamese government should take responsibility for the Yali Falls Dam's threat to human security. Local NGO meetings have become a platform on which Cambodian riparian people can practice their autonomy and can remedy their deteriorating security situation. Perhaps most important is the fact that the riparian people with 3SPN were challenging the Vietnamese government's dominant position in the Sesan River's hydropower projects.

Prior to the 3SPN's issuance of the five-point set of requests, the Vietnamese government had in fact promised to take responsibility for the human-security problems resulting from the Yali Falls Dam. At the first meeting held by the Cambodia–Vietnam Joint Committee for the Management of the Sesan River (CVJC) held in July 2001, the Vietnamese government agreed to notify the riparian people before the Yali Falls Dam released any water. Also, the Vietnamese government agreed to put together a hydrodynamic model of the Sesan River and to extend the EIA geographically to the Veun Sai District. At the second and third meetings of the Joint Committee, held in April 2002 and November 2003 respectively, the Vietnamese government agreed to account for fisheries in its hydrodynamic assessment and to conduct an EIA for the whole Sesan River in Cambodia (Wyatt and Baird 2007: 439). The Vietnamese government appear to have met the 3SPN's requests on points 2 and 4.

As for a water-release warning system, the Vietnamese government has not operated one efficiently. The Vietnamese government is supposed to give notification of a release fifteen days

in advance. After receiving notification, the villagers can move their property to higher terrains. However, the process of notification is complex: the Vietnamese government officials are supposed to notify the Vietnamese MRC office, which in turn is expected to pass the information on to the Cambodian MRC office to relay to the Cambodian government through central, provincial, district, and communal channels (Takahashi 2013: 3). In practice, floods have occurred only an hour after villagers received notification. For these reasons, many villagers have been unable to move their property to safe areas. The inefficiency of the water-release warning system is perhaps best exemplified in 2009's floods, known by locals as the "big floods" or "great floods." Several of my interviewees complained that the Vietnamese government did not give them timely notification and that they did not have enough time to move their property to safe areas.[7]

It is also worth noting that the Vietnamese government's examination of the EIA was problematic. At the second CVJC, Vietnam proposed that Sweco and Statkraft Grøner take responsibility for the EIA. These two companies had participated in the feasibility studies for the Sesan 3 Dam, but did not release their own EIA of the Sesan 3 Dam. Thus, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) regarded them as inappropriate for the task of conducting the Yali Falls Dam's EIA (Hirsh and Wyatt 2004: 63). The riparian people, too, were concerned that an EIA conducted by Sweco and Statkraft Grøner might give rise to serious conflicts of interest (Hirsh and Wyatt 2004: 64).

The Vietnamese government tended to ignore or neglect riparian people's five-point set of requests. Regarding point 1, the Vietnamese government continued its dam-building programmes and, in 2006, began operating the Sesan 3 Dam (260 MW) and the Sesan 3A Dam (108 MW) in 2006. Article 5 of the Mekong River Agreement states that "on tributaries of the Mekong River, including Tonle Sap, intra-basin uses and inter-basin diversions shall be subject to notification to the Joint Committee" (MRC 1995). Although the Sesan River is a Mekong tributary, the Vietnamese government notified the MRC and the Cambodian government about the Sesan 3 and Sesan 3A Dams only *after* planning and construction had gotten underway and did not consult the Cambodian government about the EIA (Wyatt and Baird 2007: 430). Obviously, the Vietnamese government breached the MRC guidelines.

[7] Interview on April 30, 2016.

Furthermore, the Vietnamese government has not responded to the villagers' loss of property and has not invited downstream riparian people to participate in any planning for hydropower development along the Sesan River. This evidence indicates that the Vietnamese government has largely, if not completely, ignored requests made in points 3 and 5.

Two central arguments made by the Vietnamese government have been that the Yali Falls Dam could "increase minimum dry season flows" (Hirsh and Wyatt 2004: 64) and provide electricity. An increase in water flows during the dry season might benefit agricultural irrigation and fishing. However, the social and environmental impacts of the Yali Falls Dam have been so severe that such an increase would be poor compensation for what the locals have lost. It is true that a cascade of hydropower dams on the upper stretches of the Sesan River has benefited many people in Ratanakiri insofar as the Cambodian government has purchased the resulting electricity from Vietnamese hydropower dams along the Sesan River and has directed this valuable energy to Ratanakiri. However, all the dam-affected households in Ratanakiri that I visited in early 2016 were still using automotive batteries for electrical power; in other words, the distribution of electricity to provincial residents has been both uneven and inadequate. The benefits claimed by the Vietnamese government have proven to be trivial—and sometimes wholly non-existent—for the dam-affected communities on the entire Cambodian side of the river.

Riparian people are not at the mercy of Vietnam-led top-down hydropower development. They have continued their activism. For example, they have demonstrated against the Vietnamese government's hydropower projects (Takahashi 2013: 3). In some villages that I visited, village chiefs or elders have been holding weekly or bi-weekly gatherings to discuss the harm done by dams to the villages. About three kilometres away from one village that I visited, villagers had built a temporary shelter to which villagers could evacuate in the event of a flood. In other words, villagers have collectively decided to take their own disaster-management steps.

The village gatherings can also strengthen relations between local NGOs and villagers. Village chiefs usually report the results orally to provincial and communal authorities and to local NGOs. Although the provincial and communal authorities rarely respond to a village's report, local NGOs such as HA can use the oral reports as a basis for assisting the villages in their plight. For example, using the reports, HA has organised human-rights and law workshops in many villages

and has created an office where leaders of each indigenous group can discuss and exchange information about dams and can provide villagers with funding, albeit limited, for the purpose of organising campaigns.[8] HA director Dam Chanty told me that villagers in some communes have created committees that organise campaigns against not only hydropower development but land-grabbers, as well.[9] In short, village gatherings have favoured village activism.

Contestation of the Lower Sesan II Dam

In recent years, demand for electricity in Cambodia has grown, owing mainly to economic and population growth (Kimkong *et al*. 2015: 154–155). However, Cambodia has lacked the capacity to provide itself with sufficient electricity. "Only 26% of the country is currently connected to the power grid," and "in rural areas less than 13% of households are connected to the grid" (Grimsditch 2012: 15–16). So far, electricity supply in Cambodia has relied heavily on diesel power plants and imports from Thailand and Vietnam, making Cambodian electricity prices the highest among mainland Southeast Asian countries (Baird 2016: 6). Against this backdrop, the Cambodian government has prioritised hydropower development. The 3S Rivers have become a central target in the government's plans to develop hydropower dams.

The LS2 is the largest hydropower project on the Sesan River in Cambodia. The LS2's installed capacity is 400 MW and costs approximately US$800 million. The LS2 is located in Stung Treng's Sesan District, which is 1.5 km downstream from the confluence of the Srepok and Sesan Rivers and 25 km upstream from the confluence of the Sekong River and the main part of the Mekong River. In 2007, the Cambodian Ministry of Industry, Mines and Energy (MIME) signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with EVN to conduct a feasibility study and an EIA. Power Engineering Consulting Joint-Stock Company N^{o}1 (PECC1), whose main shareholder is EVN, took responsibility for overseeing the feasibility study and contracted with the Cambodian national consultancy company Key Consultants Cambodia (KCC) to conduct the EIA. The LS2 was a joint venture between the Cambodian Royal Group (CRG) (49% of shares) and the EVN International Joint Stock Company (EVNI), a subsidiary of EVN (51% of shares). This joint venture is known as the Hydropower Lower Sesan 2 Company (HPLS2). The Cambodian

[8] Interview on December 3, 2015.
[9] Interview on December 3, 2015.

government agreed to purchase 50% of the output, and EVN agreed to purchase the remaining 50% and then to sell the purchase back to Vietnam (Grimsditch 2012: 26). Against this backdrop, MIME and EVN signed an MoU to create a "100Kv transmission line to supply power to Stung Treng Province, a 220Kv sub-station in Ban Lung to supply power for Ratanakiri province, and a 220Kv transmission line to export electricity from the Lower Sesan 2 Dam to Ban Lung, and then to Vietnam" (Baird 2009: 18).

According to numerous reports, the creation of the LS2 will have severe negative environmental and social impacts. According to the 2008 EIA conducted jointly by KCC and PECC1, the LS2 would destroy up to 30,000 hectares of wild forest and would flood 1,200 hectares of agricultural land (cited from Grimsditch 2012: 29). The dam will also affect the migration of some fish from the Tonle Sap Lake to the upper 3S Rivers basins, where spawning usually takes place. According to another report, the LS2 would decrease fish stocks by 9.3% throughout the Lower Mekong River Basin (Ziv *et al*. 2012: 5609), which means that the impacted areas will include Tonle Sap Lake, the Mekong Delta in Vietnam, the Sekong River Basin in Laos, and Mekong tributaries in Thailand (Baird 2009: 14, 113). As mentioned in the previous section, the indigenous people are traditionally dependent on swidden agriculture, fishing, and NTFPs. Inundated agricultural lands, damaged migratory fish routes, and destroyed forests mean that the riparian people will lose their key sources of food and income.

In contrast to the Yali Falls Dam, the LS2's stakeholders held public consultations twice. KCC held the first public consultation, which took place in February 2008. Of the 587 people who attended the meeting, 85% objected to the creation of the LS2. In May 2008, PECC1 held the second public consultation, and 94% of its attendees voiced support for the project. However, only 10 of this meeting's 45 attendees were from affected communities (International Rivers 2014: 14). The dam-affected attendees in the first and second public consultations were mainly representatives from the areas near the dam's construction site. In other words, although the Cambodian government provided a space for riparian people to express their perspectives, most dam-affected riparian communities had no representative at these gatherings. For all practical purposes, the LS2 is a project dominated by the Cambodian government.

Since 2008, many riparian people have participated in studies and meetings about the LS2 plans, and have typically expressed their opposition to it. Despite this criticism, the Cambodian government has insisted on moving forward with the LS2 project. In July 2011, the Prime Minister of Cambodia Hun Sen issued a letter containing the following assertion:

> concerning fish and fish migration, according to the study and examination and agreement from technical agencies, it is seen that the Sesan and Srepok rivers are not sources of fish spawning or fish resources for the entire Kingdom of Cambodia, i.e., there are impacts only on the species of fish that live in the Sesan and Srepok rivers. (cited from Baird 2016: 15)

In this letter, Hun Sen also "portrayed opponents of LS2 as opponents of development" (Baird 2016: 15). After releasing this public statement, the Hun Sen government has adopted intimidation policy to respond local NGOs and the dam-affected communities. According to 3SPN's director Nhuy Nang Noy, since 2012, local police have intervened in or even forcibly cancelled several meetings between riparian people affected by the dam and 3SPN workers.[10] In addition, a 3SPN worker confided to me that some unknown individuals had been suspiciously hanging around the edges of dam-affected communities.[11] The evidence, on the whole, suggests that the Cambodian government has tried to consolidate its already dominant position in the LS2 project by suppressing individuals' activism.

In February 2013, the National Assembly of Cambodia approved the Law on Cambodian Government Guarantee of Payments to Hydropower Lower Sesan 2 Co., Ltd (from here on, referred to as the LS2 Law). According to this law, "the LS2 will provide a thousand jobs for local people and increase incomes for [the] community indirectly to reduce poverty" and will, upon completion, serve as a "beautiful eco-tourist site" (cited from Kimkong *et al*. 2013: 48). Employment and reductions in poverty could certainly improve local people's freedom-from-want element. It is reasonable to assume that the Cambodian government has tried to characterise the LS2 as a human-security project.

However, the Cambodian government did not invite the riparian people to participate in the decision-making process for the drafting of the LS2 Law. According to Ian Baird's field study

[10] Interview on December 4, 2015
[11] Interview on April 29, 2016.

conducted in Stung Treng and Ratanakiri, none of the villagers there supported the LS2 project (Baird 2009: 72). The results of my interviews in Ratanakiri likewise revealed that none of my interviewees supported the LS2 project.[12] This set of empirical data suggests that a majority of locals neither want nor perhaps would significantly profit from the LS2 project's purported benefits frequently touted by the Cambodian government. This last point about benefits deserves a closer look. For example, local people may be poor from the perspective of developed countries' income standards, but poverty has never been the most serious threat to these people: the security problems critical to riparian people, except for hydropower dams, are land-grabbing and illegal logging (Ruohomäk 2003: 82). Land speculators have taken riparian people's lands and loggers have felled the region's trees. Now, many riparian people lack enough lands to practice swidden agriculture and can no longer collect NTFPs in forests. Thus, the Cambodian government's assertions regarding the LS2's benefits may in fact ring hollow, as these benefits—whether real or not—most certainly do not help resolve riparian people's most pressing current security problems. The Cambodian government's promised benefits do not reflect riparian people's actual situations.

Even the benefits that the Cambodian government touts are, themselves, problematic. Whether or not the promised benefits for tourism are real is unclear because—at the time of this writing—the LS2 remains under construction. However, of dubious value is the government's promise of job opportunities. According to the 2008 EIA, a maximum of 3,000 people can be engaged in the LS2 construction, but many job positions require workers to have technical expertise (International Rivers 2014: 13), an insurmountable standard for local indigenous people whose knowledge is steeped in agriculture and forests, not engineering. What is more, there are around 29,000 people living along the Sesan River in Cambodia (Baran *et al*. 2013: 32). These facts leave little room for doubt that few riparian people could find meaningful employment in the project. Thus, any claim to put the LS2 project to work at reducing poverty would appear to lack credibility.

States' handling of human security can create social and economic problems, and the Cambodian government's LS2 project has created a problem of corruption. On the surface, the government is using the LS2 project to meet national energy needs. In November 2012, the

[12] Interviews on April 24, 2016, April 28, 2016, April 29, 2016, April 30, 2016, May 1, 2016.

National Assembly of Cambodia approved EVNI's partial withdrawal from the LS2 project, and the Chinese state-owned firm China Huaneng Group (CHG) replaced EVNI as the main investor.[13] EVNI's withdrawal essentially aborted the company's plans to build transmission lines associated with the LS2. The LS2 Law includes a provision guaranteeing that the Cambodian government will purchase all of the LS2's output and repay CHG for all of its extended funding of the project. Interestingly, CHG has announced no plans to create LS2-related transmission lines (Baird 2016: 9), indicating that after the LS2's creation in 2017, the LS2 will be a hydropower dam capable only of generating power, not of delivering it. The Cambodian government, by guaranteeing that it will purchase power and repay funding, is essentially creating a situation where CHG can avoid taking any significant risk when investing in the LS2 project, despite the implausible absence of transmission lines. The Cambodian government has not explained why EVNI partially withdrew, why the Cambodian government chose CHG to replace EVNI, why the LS2 law has a provision lowering CHG's risk of financial losses, or why the Cambodian government agreed to let CHG continue building the LS2 without plans for creating transmission lines. Daniel O'Neill found that the Cambodian government has adopted this same method to guarantee that Chinese state-owned companies will run little risk when investing in hydropower projects, like the Kamchay Hydropower Project (Sino-Hydropower), the Stung Russey and Chrum Krom Hydropower Project (Michelle Corporation), and the Stung Tatay Hydropower Project (China National Heavy Machinery Corporation) (O'Neill 2014: 185–190). Son Chay, a politician in the opposition Sam Rainsy Party, criticised the national hydropower projects for their lack of transparency (Baird 2016: 8). These facts seem to suggest that the Cambodian government's handling of the LS2 project may have gained unstated benefits.

Unlike the Yali Falls Dam, the LS2 project has featured a resettlement and compensation policy for affected riparian people. The LS2 Law states that "the affected villagers would obtain proper and new houses with adequate infrastructures and modern irrigations" (cited from Kimkong *et al*. 2013: 48). In November 2013, the Cambodian government claimed that the riparian people living around the dam's site could receive a concrete house, 5 hectares of agricultural land, and 5,000 m^2 (50 m x 100 m) of community residential land (Kimkong *et al*. 2013: 52). However,

[13] Now, CRG has a 39% share and EVNI has a 10% share. China HydroLancang International Energy Company, a subsidiary of CHG, has the largest share, which is 51%.

neither the contracted dam-builder nor the Cambodian government invited any of these people to join the decision-making process for the dam's resettlement and compensation policy. According to Ian Baird's field study, the riparian people want new houses equal in quality to the current houses, healthcare facilities in the new residential areas, legally protected forest and grazing rights, and annual compensation rather than a one-time payment for declines in fishing business (Baird 2009: 71–114). This resettlement-and-compensation policy reflects the Cambodian government's autocratic approach to governing. By failing to accede to riparian people's dam-related requests, the government has failed to meet these people's security needs.

What is more, the Cambodian government has failed to fulfil even the commitments to which it pledged support in the original resettlement-and-compensation policy. The creation of the LS2 is having the greatest effect on two villages on the Sesan River (Srae Kor Mouy and Srae Kor Pei), and three villages on the Srepok River (Sre Sronok, Krabei Chrun, and Kbal Romeas). Many villagers in Sre Sronok and Krabei Chrun accepted the resettlement policy, but complained afterward about the resettlement area. According to interviews conducted by the group Scientists for the Mekong, each physcial residence in the new community is only 25 m x 50 m, which is substantially smaller than the area originally promised.[14] A second major problem is that the provided land is not cultivable.[15] And a third problem is that the quality of water is poor. Many villagers have developed diarrhea after drinking the water from wells.[16]

Owing to the poor reputation attached to the government's handling of Sre Sronok and Krabei Chrun residents, many riparian people elsewhere have rejected the resettlement-and-compensation policies put forward by the Cambodian government. In response, the government has employed an intimidation policy to force villagers into accepting the policies. A villager described an example of this intimidation to journalist Thin Wei Wein: "We were told we have the right to demand compensation but cannot reject the dam. The man who planned the meeting said those who reject or oppose the dam will face court and go to prison" (cited from Baird 2016: 15). According to a field study conducted by Mekong Watch, another villager described how the government intimidates and threatens: "[an] official said to me 'all families in your village

[14] https://www.scientists4mekong.com/cambodians-seek-compensation-for-ls2-dam-relocation/
[15] https://www.scientists4mekong.com/cambodians-seek-compensation-for-ls2-dam-relocation/
[16] Interview on April 29, 2016.

accepted already, so how about you? What do you want to do here? Do you want to cause trouble?'" (Mekong Watch 2015).

The Cambodian government's intimidation policy has not weakened the riparian people's activism. Instead, they remain steadfast in practicing their speech-and-act rights relative to the LS2 project. Many activists have joined demonstrations under the auspices of local NGOs and have submitted petitions to politicians and officials with the technical and strategic support of 3SPN. These petitions have been sent to Kol Samol (September 2014), Chairperson of the Provincial Council and President of the Committee for Solving the Impacts of the Lower Sesan 2 Hydropower Dam Project, Bu Jianguo (December 2013), Ambassador of the People's Republic of China in Cambodia, Heng Samrin (November 2014), President of the National Assembly of Cambodia, and Ham Pol (April 2015), Chairperson of the Commission on Planning, Investment, Agriculture, Rural Development, Environment, and Water Resources. Villagers' petitions have consistently put forward three important points: they will not voluntarily move under the current circumstances, they oppose the creation of the LS2 as it is currently planned, and they want to participate in the decision-making process for any future LS2 plans.

The Cambodian government is preparing to enact the NGO Law. This law will restrict NGOs' activities in Cambodia. In terms of the LS2 project, this law will not only affect local NGOs but also riparian people, because local NGOs and riparian people have been united in their opposition to the LS2 project. However, HA director Dam Chanty commented on the government's intimidation policy: "I am not afraid and…I am trying hard to [help] the people, as in Ratanakiri…I don't fear if I die but I am not ready to die yet."[17] Most of my interviewees stated that they would continue to participate as extensively as possible in demonstrations and meetings held by either local NGOs or the government.[18] It would appear that the Cambodian government's intimidation policy has not decreased but reinforced the dissidents' activism.

Conclusion

This paper has explored relations between riparian people and states regarding the Sesan River's hydropower projects in the context of a phenomena in present-day human-security agendas: the

[17] Interview on December 3, 2015.
[18] Interviews on April 24, 2016, April 28, 2016, April 29, 2016, April 30, 2016, May 1, 2016.

states' predominance and the individuals' disempowerment. The Cambodian and the Vietnamese governments' dominant roles in the two hydropower projects stand in stark contrast with the Cambodian riparian people's nearly total absence from the projects, and reflect how the reinforcement of state power can effectively translate into the disempowerment of vulnerable populations. In order to address the recent damage to their security, riparian people have participated in campaigns against the Vietnamese and the Cambodian hydropower projects. But, the riparian people's activism has seen little or no change in hydropower projects; after all, politics in post-colonial Vietnam and Cambodia have been opaque and undemocratic since the start. However, my research establishes quite clearly that the riparian people's activism has presented challenges to the hydropower projects of both the Vietnamese and Cambodian governments, ultimately compelling the governments to respond with intimidation. The goal of the governments has been to consolidate their dominant roles in the Sesan River's hydropower projects. Whether successful or not in the end, the Vietnamese government's disregard of riparian people's requests and the Cambodian government's repressive policies have served only to reinforce local people's activism.

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