Project Southeast Asia

"Contemporary Issues in Southeast Asia"
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Panel:
Environment

1. Hazy Governance: The Politics of Environmental Securitisation

Dr Lee Jones
(Queen Mary, University of London)

Since the 1970s and particularly with growing concern about climate change, environmental degradation has increasingly been identified as non-traditional security (NTS) issue, a 'threat' to the economies and social stability of states. One example of this is the annual Indonesian forest fires which blanket large parts of Southeast Asia in acrid smog ('haze'), imposing huge health and economic costs, estimated at $9bn in the worst year, 1997-1998. Using an innovative framework drawing on state theory, critical political economy and critical political geography, this paper considers how and why 'haze' has been securitised and why it is being governed in particular ways. It argues that a concerted regime of actors ranging from government officials to international NGOs have pushed for the rescaling of this issue and its governance to the regional level and have sought to construct new modes of networked, multi-level governance that have partially internationalised elements of the Indonesian state. However, their efforts have been strenuously resisted by other forces, particularly powerful groups in the timber industry and other agri-businesses and their corrupt networks within local and national state apparatuses. The result is a very uneven, conflict-ridden governance system which fails adequately to tackle transboundary pollution but is nonetheless functional for powerful societal interests.

2. Environmentalism and the ethno-national struggle in Kachin land, northern Burma

Laur Kiik
(MA candidate in the Department of Anthropology, Columbia University)

This paper explores how environmentalism has arisen amid a broader complex of imagining and fighting for Kachin ethno-national futures in northern Burma/Myanmar, on the China-Tibet-India mountainous borderlands. My ethnographic fieldwork in 2010 and 2011 took place as the marginalized Kachin nation and its Independence Army faced renewed onslaughts by the Myanmar Army and a growing refugee crisis on the China border. The current situation follows two decades of ecological destruction, land confiscations, and dispossession of native populations by military-backed Chinese and Burmese natural resource extraction companies. Their projects of

rainforest clear-cut logging, jade and gold mining, hydroelectric dams, and mono-crop plantations primarily supply to the booming Chinese market. In the meantime, on-going transnational and Myanmar-based wildlife conservation efforts, as well as the recently headline-making publicities on the suspension of the Myitsone Dam construction, remain largely disinterested in and disconnected from the Kachin ethno-national struggle, as well as its intersections with local environmentalism.

In this paper, I document how Kachin social leaders and educated youth navigate and cultivate landscapes of fear, paranoia, love, anger, entitlement, powerlessness, injustice, resistance, and religious belief, as they combine ethno-nationalist, biblical, and social activist idioms to develop a native environmentalism. As one entry-point into these landscapes, I study the recently emerged Kachin environmentalist rock music, its affective performances, lyrics, and video imagery of the 'homeland nature crying'. These popular songs continue to be voiced and felt by Kachins to Kachins, and work to create new national-environmental subjectivity.

Scholarship in the field of 'political ecology' has done much to represent critically the structural economic inequalities and instances of capitalist exploitation accompanying natural resource extraction projects, ecological degradation, as well as conservation. This paper calls for additional attention to the lived feelings of ethnic homeland ownership, emergency conservation, and the projects of oppressed ethnic and religious identities.

3. In search of environmental accountability: mobilisation, the politics of risk and inclusive citizenship

Li Kheng Poh
(PhD student, Human Geography, School of Environment and Technology, Bright on University)

Far less attention has been paid to conflicts arising from the impacts of pollution in the context of environmental campaigning in Asia, especially NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) campaigns. This study seeks to address the research lacuna by comparing the contrasting results of the Broga (2003-2006) anti-incinerator and the Bukit Merah (1984-1993) anti-toxic waste disposal campaigns in Malaysia, and their implications for theorizing environmental accountability.

Both the campaigns came to a close with very different results. Whereas the Broga incinerator project was cancelled in August 2006, the Bukit Merah court case dragged on for seven years. These two cases were chosen based on their shared characteristics; and the time difference (19 years between the start of the Bukit Merah campaign and that of Broga) would allow for comparisons on the degree of environmental accountability available to grassroots campaigners. The Broga and Bukit Merah campaigns are symptomatic of rapid urbanisation and economic growth experienced in Malaysia since the 1970s.

I draw on concepts of transnational activism and networks; explore the use of discourses of rights and environmentalism, and the use of the law and internet technologies; and examine the conscious lack of identity politics (in line with the

racial ordering of Malaysian society) in order to make sense of campaign strategies. I also explore the differences in understandings of risks and in the responses of the state and business interests behind the projects being opposed.

In carrying out an in-depth analysis of these two environmental campaigns, I hope to understand the relationships between accountability and participatory rights within the context of present day Malaysia where there have been increasing political dissent and the opening of democratic spaces through various expressions. By claiming and demanding theirs rights, the actions of citizen campaigners are re-shaping the meaning of citizenship.

The implications of this study will contribute to current research that examines the relationships between accountability, participatory rights and new forms of citizenship.

4. **Biodiversity, liberalization and wildlife trade in Vietnam: pangolins, timber and state-society relationships**

Dr Peter Larsen
(The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva)

Wildlife trade in Vietnam is estimated in the millions of dollars annually involving extensive networks of traders across Southeast Asia. It also represents one of major threats against biological diversity in Vietnam and the wider Asian region (McNeely et al., 2009). Whereas the Vietnamese economy success story is largely based on export-driven growth following the economic reforms started in the 1980s under the 'đồi mới ' banner (An and de Tréglodé, 2009), contemporary wildlife trade has the less glorious role of contributing to the dwindling loss of biological diversity (MOSTE, 2007). Compared to the vast amount of literature describing the social and economic significance of the đồi mới processes, the environmental dimension remains poorly described. The question, this chapter seeks to answer, is how to understand the role and characteristics of Vietnamese environmental policy, illustrated by the policies to curb illegal wildlife trade. Environmental degradation phenomena are at times seen as a consequence of the liberalized economy, the commodification of natural resources and of weak environmental protection measures (Kleinen, 2007). This is a hypothesis we want to test here. A commonly stated argument, in environmentalist discourse, involves the 'lack of', 'weak' or 'inadequate' environmental safeguards to accompany economic change. Based on the example of wildlife trade, we argue, that such interpretations risk neglecting more complex institutional patterns. While wildlife trade policy hardly figures a top-priority among policy makers, Vietnam has nevertheless a long track record of putting in place wildlife trade legislation and regulatory measures. Whereas observers and policy analysis tend to recommend strengthening enforcement systems, configuring wildlife trade as an external problem, we seek to draw further attention to the inter-linkages between regulation implementation itself and wildlife trade dynamics. We argue that current 'command and control' approaches to wildlife trade face fundamental internal constraints, which need to be understood in the broader context of state-society relationships in contemporary Vietnam. We emphasize wildlife trade at the core of the state domain intersecting with border management, movement and taxation. At the intersection between provincial and central management, wildlife trade encapsulates both inward

and outward processes of transformation and sites of contestation. It illustrates how both inward processes of state control (such as sourcing wildlife trade from protected areas) or outwards forms (controlling flows across borders) are highly contested sites of practice. The resulting practices, we argue, reveal the negotiated nature of state-society relations and the paradoxical co-existence of a strong state alongside a vibrant shadow economy.