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Legitimacy and Hydropolitics in the Mekong Region: Lao PDR and Cambodia

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Abstract

This article investigates the legitimising role of hydropower dams in authoritarian regimes, with a focus on Cambodia and Laos. Drawing on fieldwork observations conducted between 2018 and 2023, alongside secondary sources, it adopts a content analysis approach to explore how dam-related legitimacy aligns with broader typologies of legitimacy. Although both regimes are authoritarian and utilise hydropower as a socio-economic and symbolic tool to reinforce their authority, they do so in distinct ways. The Laotian government primarily mobilises hydropower to assert performance and identity legitimacy, emphasising developmental success and national identity. In contrast, the Cambodian regime must negotiate between performance and procedural legitimacy, which shapes its hydropower discourse differently. These variations reflect how authoritarian legitimacy is not uniform but contextually shaped by political institutions, economic constraints, and available resources. The study contributes to the literature on authoritarian governance by illustrating how infrastructure projects become instruments of regime legitimation across political landscapes.

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Keywords

Cambodia, laos, hydropolitics, Mekong region, authoritarianism

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Introduction

The 1990s began as a period of peace in the Mekong region, focusing on the spread of liberal, market-based development. Yet, as Middleton (2022) remarked, this period marked a watershed when the once free-flowing river become the subject of intensified exploitation, in particularly through development of large hydropower dams, driven by growing foreign direct investment searching for investment opportunities. As the appetite for exploitation of the river for economic purposes grew, the watersheds of the Lancang-Mekong became the "powersheds" whereby interests in dam development in the Mekong were rationalised by the rising demand for energy in the growing industrial hubs, including the south coast of China, Bangkok and parts of Vietnam (Middleton and Allouche, 2016). Particularly, rapid economic development in Thailand and Vietnam led to increasing demand for cheap and reliable energy to withstand volatile prices in international energy markets alongside reducing poverty levels among the Lower Mekong countries (Haefner, 2020).

Besides dams being rationalised by economic and political factors, the growing interest in hydropower development has been supported by a broader international development community, considering hydropower as a clean, renewable source for energy production. Dams have been particularly promoted by the World Bank and other global institutions as ideal sustainable projects, important for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions (International Finance Cooperation, 2017). However, despite the surge in dam construction in the region, its status as a clean energy source has been contested. Baird and Green (2020) criticize the greenwashing by the international community through financing of hydropower projects around the world as hydropower dams, particularly large dams, produce varying degrees of environmental and social impacts, often ignored by the technocratic approach of the Kyoto Protocol's CDM mechanism that adopts a rather narrow framing. Like the narrow framing of its contribution to GHG seen in the CDM's financing mechanism, the often-cited economic value of a dam, promoted by the World Bank, and other proponents, for country's poverty reduction and sustainable development can be questionable given the sheer environmental and social impacts (Baird and Quastel, 2015; Middleton, 2022). Business oriented and with limited institutional capacity to achieve a common understanding of discursive positions of various actors involved in making dams sustainable, this can lead into an agenda of greenwashing (Whitington, 2012). In addition, large megadams can also lead to sovereign dept and debt vulnerability, visible in Laos where over-investment in the domestic energy sector financed mostly by Chinese loans added to the current severe debt crises (Barney et al., 2025; Barney and Souksakoun, 2022).

Moreover, countless reports have uncovered the negative effects of China's hydropower dams on the livelihoods of those in downstream countries. The impacts have included declining fisheries and farming production, resulting in the loss of income; sudden and extreme changes of water level; and the loss of access to customary lands and traditions (Soukhaphon et al., 2021; Yoshida et al., 2020). However, given the fact that hydropower projects are capital intensive, return on investment is attractive to

investors, making it a lucrative business for investors. Consequently, profit-oriented attitude often stands in the way of achieving sustainable development, minimising environmental and social impacts. Consequently, the number of dams has grown in the Mekong, whether they are built on tributaries or mainstream. For instance, since the 1990s, China has completed the construction of 11 hydropower dams on the upper Mekong River.

In Laos, the power mix, calculated on installed capacity, is dominated by hydropower (80%), followed by coal, solar, and biomass with significant disparities existing between demand and supply inside Laos (Haefner and Po, 2022). Installed capacity in the north and central region surpasses local demand, while southern Laos faces shortages. The lack of a national grid has led to a situation where Laos exports significant amounts of electricity to Thailand from the north but must purchase electricity back at higher costs in the southern grid (Ricardo Energy and Environment, 2019). The amount of electricity purchased back is significant, accounting for around 20% of Laos's domestic energy consumption between 2009 and 2016, causing financial strain on the resources of power company Electricity du Lao (EDL) (Asian Development Bank, 2019). Although approximately 70% of Laos's generation capacity has been dedicated for export, domestic demand has been growing rapidly. Laos's per-capita electricity consumption is among the lowest in the ASEAN countries but is rising rapidly at an average rate of 14.5% annually over the past 10 years (Asian Development Bank, 2019).

Like Laos, Cambodia's installed capacity power mix is dominated by hydropower (60%), followed by coal and solar (29%) then oil, and waste (Stimson, 2021b). Cambodia's hydropower developments have been mainly driven by rapid electricity demands and not by export as is the case of Laos. Further significant expansion of power generation capacity is required to meet Cambodia's rapidly growing demand for electricity in order to avoid electricity shortages in the future (Haefner and Po, 2022). In 2018, the International Renewable Energy Agency estimated a 150% to 200% higher cumulative growth in energy demand for Cambodia through to 2025 (International Renewable Energy Agency, 2018:48). Cambodia's transportation network is evolving and expanding quickly but it lacks connectivity to many key economic centres domestically and to regional hubs such as Ho Chi Minh City and Bangkok (Stimson, 2021a).

All these challenges raise doubt about the determinant role of hydropower dams in economic development, poverty reduction, and climate change. As a result, these complex dynamics of energy politics in the Mekong region, including economic and political factors and environmental and social impacts, makes the scrutiny of how countries, especially authoritarian regimes, approach hydropower dam in their legitimacy timely and important (Stimson, 2021a).

This research draws on existing literature on the concept of legitimacy in authoritarian states and the role of hydropower dams in enhancing their legitimacy. While both Laos and Cambodia as authoritarian states rely on sustained economic growth dependent on electricity sourced from hydropower dams to boost their legitimacy, different strands of legitimacy – identity, performance, and procedural – distinguish the ways in which they respond to hydropower dams.

This article is based on secondary sources and fieldwork observations that include informal conversations with government officials, think tank representatives and NGOs workers between 2018 and 2023. While these two sources of data reinforce each other, a content analysis approach was applied to analyse the data. After this introduction into the context of energy politics and dam dynamics in the Mekong region, the article introduces the theoretical framework, focusing on legitimacy. The article then discusses Laos' responses to hydropower dams before discussing Cambodia's responses and comparing both, including key findings.

The Role of Legitimacy in Influencing Dam Developments

Legitimacy is crucial for any political regime, not least authoritarian regimes. Political regimes seek consent from the ruled or the population. While political regimes may tend to resort to coercion to rule, this is usually the last resort as violence is costly for the regime. That is not all. In the context of complex interdependence and global liberal order, international legitimacy is also crucial (Ruud and Hasan, 2022), and for this reason, violence can be quickly condemned and do more harm to a regime's legitimacy.

Legitimacy is an integral part of political rule. Max Weber famously stated that "Every system of rule attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy", making a claim of legitimacy and seeking recognition from their subjects (Fossen, 2024). Legitimacy or the right to rule, as moral or otherwise normative property that political authorities have or lack in relation to their subjects, is a matter of believing, correctly or incorrectly. Likewise, political legitimacy or the lack of it is a way of claiming and the subjects taking a stance whether to view an authority—a state, a government or a regime—as legitimate or illegitimate and the de facto (what is taken to be legitimate) and de jure (what is legitimate) aspects of legitimacy (Fossen, 2024). This should point to a different criterion, in practical terms, to evaluate whether a political regime is a legitimate one, and how they claim legitimacy. The latter part of this statement is of essence for the current purpose.

For Gramsci, a dominance of a political force in a class struggle is achieved through hegemony, whereby class ideologies are advanced with the help of intellectuals within the capitalist society—though hegemony public consent is mobilised for the support of a political force or class to gain access to state power and hence right to rule (Gramsci, 1971). Yet, such legitimacy through hegemony points to the political struggle at play, within civil society, in the context of ideological revolution. While trying to explain what legitimacy is, it can help us understand the concept, what is more at stake is how legitimacy is achieved.

Legitimacy is important for authoritarian rulers because it does not involve coercion and "seeks to guarantee active consent, compliance with the rules, passive obedience, or mere toleration within the population" (Gerschewski, 2013). There are three strands of legitimacy for authoritarian regimes. The first is identity legitimacy. To enforce identity legitimacy, the party relies on many small aspects like ideology (Von Soest and

Grauvogel, 2017). The ideological aspect encompasses both the grand ideologies such as communism, fascism, and totalitarianism and certain narratives that aim to glorify the state under autocratic leadership (Dukalskis and Gerschewski, 2017; Von Soest and Grauvogel, 2017). Narratives and discourses are in fact underpinning identity legitimacy and the party carefully selects specific narratives or discourses to brand their achievements and tie those achievements to the achievements of states (Omelicheva, 2016). The specific success or glory of the state and the party that rules the state therefore becomes one (Omelicheva, 2016).

The second strand is performance legitimacy. This type of legitimacy refers to socio-economic development that the party claims to bring about for their people. It also means that "a state's right to rule is justified by its economic and/or moral performance, and by the state's capacity of territorial defense" (Yang and Zhao, 2015). Performance legitimacy also includes the provision of reliable and outstanding public goods and services such as education and medical services to the general population (Kim and Moon, 2022). This implies that if the authoritarian states perform poorly on economic indicators, fail to defend their own territory or provide satisfactory public goods, their poor performance will weaken their legitimacy, inciting social disobedience to their rules (Tannenberg et al., 2011). Conversely, strong performance in these aspects can enhance the legitimacy of their regime.

Such emphasis on material benefits of the second strand differs from the last strand, procedural legitimacy. Procedural legitimacy is built through general elections and "other rule-based mechanisms for handing over power through 'orderly' process, be it nominally democratic through elections, hereditary power transfer…within a ruling party or based on mechanisms for the implementation of policies" (Von Soest and Grauvogel, 2017)S. Using elections as an instrument, authoritarian rulers claim to respect the democratic norms and processes of ruling and the will of the people even though the election itself is tightly controlled and manipulated by the authoritarian rulers (Morgenbesser, 2016). Authoritarian regimes can create "a legitimacy belief within non-democratic rule" (Dukalskis and Gerschewski, 2017).

Despite this difference among the three strands of legitimacy, not all authoritarian regimes are able to employ all strands for their legitimacy. Or put simply, they cannot achieve the same level of attention on all three strands., Gerschewski (2013) argues that "autocratic regimes are more performance-dependent than is often assumed". This argument, however, is only partially true. In fact, legitimacy is dynamic, and authoritarian states do not rely on a single aspect of legitimacy (Yang and Zhao, 2015).

To this end, it is important to ask what is the link between dams and legitimacy? The relationship between hydropower developments and legitimacy of a political regime has a long history and it has a strong link to authoritarian regimes. Apart from serving practical purposes (e.g., generating electricity, controlling waterflows and allowing for irrigated agriculture), dams are also powerful political symbols that can be used to build and reinforce national identities and legitimize those in power (Menga, 2015). Presented as an image of progress and success, mega dams create and strengthen a nationalistic discourse. A dam is viewed as an engineering achievement, and with its symbolic image

of success and progress, provides the political ruling elite, not just a way to achieve its energy sufficiency goal, but also as a legitimate endeavour for the country to strive as a new nation, for example as seen in Tajikistan after its break from the Soviet Union. Such discursive construction of the dam at the national and international scales, and opposition from its neighbours, play into the interest of the authoritarian rulers in a region where symbolism using physical infrastructures (such as hydropower dam) has been crucial in political life and a best alternative to using military force (Menga, 2015).

Similarly, Allouche (2020) stresses how political leadership employs water nationalism to justify and legitimate state's water policy for both domestic and international audience as a discourse that constitute a battleground of ideas and power in transboundary water interaction. While accepting the social construct of a nation-state, Allouche (2020) emphasizes the fragility of this construct, which requires legitimacy both domestically and globally to support their claims to hegemony over water, which are far from being uncontested—water-related slogans and landscape symbols reinforces the legitimising effects of these discourses and are employed as an ideology for consolidating hegemony at the transboundary level. Through these symbols, the process of water nationalism is a way of building a nation-state linking domestic and transboundary water resources to national territory.

In the context of authoritarian regimes, political ecology explains how the state uses hydropower projects to assert control over natural resources, territories, and populations, often prioritising national development objectives or the interests of elite groups over local communities and environmental sustainability. This approach also considers how projects are used to enhance the legitimacy of the regime by demonstrating progress on national electrification, economic development, and modernisation, despite potential social and environmental costs. Projects are used by regimes to gain both domestic and international legitimacy by showcasing their commitment to sustainable development or renewable energy, despite potential underlying motivations such as economic gains or political consolidation (Olsen and Gareau, 2018) even though the question of whether a hydropower dam is sustainable remains a topic of debate among scholars, especially since the publication of the World Dam Commission report in 2000.

Yet, hydropower development is also a tool for a state to extend its authoritarian rule over the fringes of the nation. Blake (2019), by applying Wittfogel (1957/81/81) concept of hydraulic despot, argues that Cambodia inhibits several important marks of a hydraulic despot as the country uses hydropower projects to extend its power to remote territory exacerbating the authoritarian rule. The concept of hydraulic despot centres around the ruler's capacity through his centralized bureaucracy to undertake a monumental hydraulic program to meet the needs of economic development, which consequently legitimize and/or sustain his rule and strengthen his power reach. The expression of engineering capacity to achieve this enormous national program demonstrates national power. Yet in the case of Cambodia, its hydraulic program is linked to China due to financial and technical support, and China's central role of dams in Cambodia. Cambodia shares a strong resemblance in terms of socio-political paradigms of hydraulic infrastructure development with Laos. Moreover, the Cambodian state has certain characteristics of a modern variant of a

hydraulic society, particularly the rise of unchecked autocratic ruler and a state that is increasingly organised to use dams and other associated infrastructure to extend its power to easily subjugate citizens.

In short, existing literature has illuminated our understanding of the many ways authoritarian regimes link hydropower dams to their legitimacy. A focus has been on classic cases or subsume authoritarian regimes into one broad regime type, resulting in a loss of focus on the nuanced differences among regime types, lacking considering experiences and strategies and how these shape the way authoritarian regimes approach hydropower projects. To do so, this research asks how dam-invoked legitimacy can be triangulated with types of legitimacy. This will be explored using the case studies of Cambodia and Laos, given their unique authoritarian variants within the broad category of authoritarianism.

Lao PDR: Less Accommodative by Enhancing Performance Legitimacy and Identity Legitimacy

Laos can be classified as a single-party authoritarian regime (Stuart-Fox, 2007). The Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) has ruled and dominated Laos since 1975. The LPRP still implements Marxist-Leninist ideology while running all aspects of Laotian politics and society (Croissant, 2022). The Laotian economy is driven by the resource sector with poverty levels having declined significantly in the last decades with the aim to graduate from its least-developed-country (LDC) status by 2026. Laos's growth has made it one of the 10 fastest-growing economies in the world with an average economic growth rate of 7.9% from 2006 until the COVID pandemic (Asian Development Bank, 2011; Sims, 2017). High levels of growth in Laos have been driven by the natural resources sector, including commercial export agriculture, hydropower, and mining, while most Lao citizens are subsistence farmers (Haefner and Po, 2022). These developments were driven by policies focusing on "turning land into capital" giving priority to the acquisition of land concessions and "becoming the battery of Asia," through hydropower developments along the Mekong mainstream and key tributaries such as the Nam Ou and Sekong Rivers (Haefner, 2016; Sims, 2017:20). In 2018, mining and hydropower accounted for 80% of FDI in Laos with two dams build on the Mekong mainstream and several others planned or under construction (Eyler and Weatherby, 2020). There are also more than 280 additional dams in the early phase of development, although 152 of these are small-scale dams under 15 megawatts (Stimson, 2021b).

Like many developing countries, hydropower development is seen as an effective investment to support economic growth and alleviate poverty. Laos, as argued by Olsen and Gareau (2018), follows through the World Bank's rhetoric of economic growth and poverty reduction to justify economic decisions that benefit certain members of the party elite (Olsen and Gareau, 2018). This is also linked to the focus by the International Financial Corporation (IFC) that emphasized the concept of 'Sustainable Hydropower' in Laos (International Finance Cooperation, 2017). The Lao government follows this with a strong narrative of building sustainable, renewable

energy projects for their legitimacy (Blake and Barney, 2018). This has been used for example on the website of the Theun Hinboun hydropower project claiming to be a "guiding model for sustainable hydropower development in the Lao PDR" (Blake and Barney, 2018). In the Lao context, this is particularly linked to graduating from LDC status, a rhetoric central to all areas in Laos.

Hydropower dams have been a critical source of legitimacy in Laos. Creak and Barney (2022) argue Laos draws upon three key types of "resources" in consolidating regime durability, namely natural resources, ideological and institutional resources, as they are mutually reconstituted and coproduced. This focus on the more statist and socialist dimensions of the Lao political economy, which is not necessarily in line with even an imperfect market-based economy, is creating a strong central authority emphasising the values of social order, national development, and security over individual and community rights. Its ideological arsenal covers a broad spectrum of Marxist-Leninist and socialist legacy conferring the leadership role to the party leadership of the revolution, party-centred nationalism, and party-led development, ultimately legitimating the party paramountcy.

Moreover, the embrace of nationalism as a constitutive element of the revolutionary movement, a culturalist nationalist ideology, replaced the one that wanted to build a new socialist person in the early 1990s that was characterised by a resurgent Buddhist traditionalism. This is facilitated by the institutional resources in the form of party organisations, including security apparatus that form a core part of the party-state system and facilitate statist exploitation of natural resources through adoptions of relevant laws and regulations (Creak and Barney, 2022).

Yet, the focus of ideologies and nationalism can be linked to identity legitimacy. Nationalism is not just about the country as dam builder itself, but a unified Laos nation that encompasses a long history of its existence and several ethnic groups living together in harmony under the leadership of the LPDP. For Pholsena (2006), Laos has actively sought to project an image of a unified, homogenous ethnic Laos as a nation-building project, calling it nationalism. In the post-communist era, based on its old culture and history of the previous regimes, creating a new identity to legitimate their rule of the party-state as it navigates into an era of dominance of liberal and market-based values focused on highlighting an image of a unified, culturally diverse nation notwithstanding Lao ethnic domination.

For decades, Laos's official discourse and political narrative has focused on transforming the country from land-locked to land-linked and becoming the battery of Asia. The ruling LPRP has used these political narratives to bolster its identity legitimacy by focusing on branding the country as the biggest energy producer in Southeast Asia and a central regional energy hub. Besides the rhetorical focus of becoming the battery of Asia, hydropower dam infrastructure itself also displays the government's development and power as the scale of hydropower dams are viewed as a symbol of human ingenuity. New dam projects are construed as symbols of technological progress, productivity, poverty eradication and the beneficent influence of patrimonial bureaucratic power, an approach supported by a stifling internal state discourse with terms that lie beyond

public debate or political negotiation (Creak and Barney, 2018). In addition, ruling elites can use the symbolism of water sites, including dams, to gain legitimacy as the words and slogan used are considered legitimate by the people who receive them (Allouche, 2020).

Similarly, for the ruling elite, projects can be used to create an ideology that legitimises the behaviour and decisions while diverting from core issues and creating an illusion that they are providing a better future for the population (Menga, 2015). This focus is visible on the website of the Lao Ministry of Energy and Mines focusing on 'Powering Progress', promoting a harmonious coexistence of rice cultivation and modern technologies for power and the symbol of modernity and technical mastery (Olsen and Gareau, 2018). Alongside this, the Lao government has used rhetoric to play down any opposition to the dams by arguing that criticism of hydropower dams fundamentally opposes the development of Laos as a whole, while effectively silencing opposition to the state's hydraulic ambition. Further, a "lack of alternatives narrative" is used in Laos to justify large scale hydropower projects to achieve poverty reduction and economic growth. This narrative has also been a central focus on media reporting in Laos, for example by Vientiane Times. One example is the highlighting of the positive aspects of hydropower development for instance when covering the 15-years anniversary of Nam Theun 2 hydropower dam, including statements such as 'Since beginning commercial operations on April 30, 2010, Nam Theun 2 has played a key role in Laos' socio-economic development by supplying clean energy to both Laos and Thailand. The hydropower facility has generated tens of thousands of gigawatt hours of electricity, helping to reduce reliance on fossil fuels' (Vientiane Times, 2025). Or alongside similar positive lines 'Laos' Nam Ngum 1 dam and hydropower plant is a historic achievement in construction, and its iconic image has appeared on Lao currency including the former 50 kip banknote and postage stamps' (Vientiane Times, 2023).

Overall, as argued by Menga (2015), ruling elites can use the symbolism of major dams to gain legitimacy and bolster a sense of national identity and patriotism. This is linked to contemporary growth of authoritarianism that has spurred an increase in the development of projects that serve symbolic purposes, including megaprojects such as hydropower dams (Huda, 2022). Further, the processes of hydropower development 'simultaneously reinforces the influence of the party whilst opening capital to foreign investors in the name of sustainable development, poverty alleviation and climate change mitigation' (Olsen and Gareau, 2018: 113).

It is also evident that the Lao state reinforced the nationalist tone to strengthen its position through hydropower projects. Given the shared river being governed by various regional and international legal framework and arrangements, it is crucial that the government is adept in using nationalist tone to prop up domestic legitimacy by stressing its sovereign right to development, including hydropower, for its much-needed national development. Particularly, due to Laos' geographical position upstream, its dams on the Mekong mainstream have raised questions about the transboundary impacts and hence opposition from downstream countries, namely Cambodia and Vietnam. Yet often Laos seeks to ward off such opposition by claiming the country has satisfied relevant procedural requirements such as the MRC's Procedures for Notifications, Prior

Notification and Agreements (PNPCA) before the dam construction, the process which has received criticisms by civil society and scholars (Haefner, 2024; Hensengerth, 2024). As Allouche (2020) demonstrates, such nationalist claims, despite interpretation of the legal requirements between countries that share the river, serve the interests of the state in the name of energy security and national interests at the expense of ecological interests and those living along the river.

In addition, the state in Laos demonstrates a very low level of intolerance to opposition forces against hydropower developments and local discontent. In general, local discontent manifests in various forms including protests, boycotts of government events, and criticisms posted on social media (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020). The main demand is for action from the governments regarding negative impacts of the projects (Gerschewski, 2018). A recent case includes Houayheuang Xayabouly (also referred to as Mouay), arrested in September 2019 for complaining on social media about the government's inadequate response to severe flooding in the south of Laos (Haefner and Po, 2022). She was sentenced to five years in jail for "campaigning against, defaming, and attempting to overthrow the party, state, and government" (Souksavanh, 2020). As a result of legislative changes, prominent cases of disappearances and long jail sentences, Laos has successfully ensured fewer voices are raised against hydropower dams by their citizens and local not-for-profit associations (NPAs). This control was further intensified in 2021 when the Lao government announced the formation of a task force to police social media platforms, especially targeting content on Facebook reporting "fake news" and posts criticizing the government or the LPRP (Strangio, 2021).

In addition to identity performance, performance legitimacy dominates the hydropolitics debate in Laos. No one is better placed than the former Lao Deputy Minister for Energy and Mines, Viraphonh Viravong, who dominated the sector until recently. Focusing on performance legitimacy, Viravong argued that hydropower is crucial to Laos's development as it is clean, cheap, and renewable "hydropower contributes something like 33 percent to the natural capital of the wealth of Laos. And if Laos wants to leave behind its least developed country status, this is our only choice" (quoted in Varchol, 2012). This is further emphasised by an MRC foreign engineer consultant 'economic development and national pride go hand in hand…' (as quoted in Olsen and Gareau, 2018). The developments of these large-scale projects also display to the international community that the country is determined to develop its country. To ensure performance legitimacy was not impacted due to the Xe Pian-Xe Namnoy dam failure in 2018, the government acted quickly with a focus on safety standards, for example as highlighted by the then Minister of Energy and Mines, Dr Khammany Inthirath, to local media that 'the government will regularly examine the standards of all hydropower projects in Laos to instill confidence in people living downstream' (Vientiane Times, 2019).

Overall, in the case of Laos, the focus of performance legitimacy is twofold. Firstly, increasing access to electricity for most citizens, and secondly, increasing revenues through selling surplus electricity to neighbouring countries, particularly Thailand as these counts for a large amount of revenue for the country although this is questioned by some academics. The electricity price is lower than in Cambodia, standing at

$0.110 in 2022, but more expensive than Thailand and Vietnam (Siciliano et al., 2025). A recent Asian Development Bank's report shows that 100% of Laotian population have access to electricity by 2022, increased from only 70% twelve years earlier (Sousa et al., 2023).

Overall, hydropower developments can induce intimidation, coercion and forced resettlement of affected people (Blake and Barney, 2018). This is aligned to authoritarian environmentalism in which authoritarian governments find it easier to implement environmentally significant projects quickly and efficiently due to their centralized decision-making processes and ability to suppress opposition. In terms of legitimacy, Laos has leveraged hydropower projects to gain both domestic and international legitimacy by showcasing their commitment to sustainable development and renewable energy; however, debatable this is. Like many other authoritarian states, hydropower dams are also conditioned by other key underlying motivations, especially economic gains and/or political consolidation. It is also true that Laos not only uses hydropower as the source for renewable energy for domestic consumption but also helps neighbouring countries in the region to access clean energy through electricity export, minimising the reliance of other countries on dirtier forms of energy (Olsen and Gareau, 2018).

Cambodia: More Accommodative Balancing Performance Legitimacy and Procedural Legitimacy

Cambodia can be classified as an electoral authoritarian regime whereby elections remain a procedural mechanism for power transfer even though liberal values such as human rights, individual liberty and freedom, and space for civic engagement has been to a great extent shrunk in recent years (Un, 2019). Since its first general election in 1993, Cambodia has organized general elections every five years. In every electoral cycle, there are multiple political parties contesting in the election. Without democratic consolidation, Cambodia's authoritarian regime is characterised by a plethora of non-state actors often financially and technically supported by western donors and locally based organisations that are concerned with local issues such as local livelihoods and environmental degradation (Ou, 2013). Compared to Laos, the civic space is more open to opposing voices and represents a higher level of tolerance of criticism of government's policies.

Even though the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) has won every election since 1998, its popularity has waxed and waned, showing greater risks of losing power if the CPP mismanaged the popular discontent. Like Laos, Cambodia, as a developing country, is in dire need of energy to boost its economic growth which the ruling CPP needs as a source of legitimacy. Despite Energy access in Cambodia has improved tremendously in the last 15 years from 34% in 2010 to 98% by mid-2022, two thirds of the households who are connected to the national grid experience frequent power shortages in the past, particularly in 2015 and 2016 in Phnom Penh (Siciliano et al., 2025). In terms of price, Cambodia's cost of electricity is the highest in the region, adding cost to doing business and for people's daily life. In 2022, industrial electricity cost stood at $0.137 per KW hour, followed by Laos ($0.110), Thailand ($0.091) and Vietnam ($0.068) (Ravindran,

2024). The government is committed to improving efficiency and achieves 70% of renewable energy in the install capacity mix, not building large hydropower plants in the Mekong Basin and no new coal fire power plants (Oeun, 2024).

One difference between Laos and Cambodia in energy politics is that Cambodia's reliance on hydropower dams to generate electricity is a double-edged sword for the CPP. On the one hand, it enhances the party's performance legitimacy through its contribution to universal electrification and ultimately economic growth. It is argued that electricity produced by hydropower dams is indispensable to boosting the economic growth of a country through achieving energy security and efficiency (Hirsh and Koomey, 2015; Szustak et al., 2021). On the other hand, hydropower projects may weaken CPP's right to rule due to challenges it must cope with social and environmental impacts, often resulting in protests and contestation. Consequently, the Cambodian government's relation to dams is a complicate one even though it acknowledges dams as a renewable energy source, which is in line with its commitment to sustainable power production.

Procedural legitimacy, however, is always important for the CPP as the ruling party relies on popular support in elections despite questions over the legitimacy of the elections. Hughes (2009) rightly pointed out the significance of electoral management for the CPP to gain both domestic and international legitimacy since the reintroduction of regular national election in 1993. One reason why the CPP still continues to rely heavily on the legitimacy aspect of ruling is that other measures such as repression, clientelism, and personalized control of the country are insufficient (Ngoun, 2022) and like anywhere else, it is more costly politically speaking. In such a situation, the state's tie with dams is a rather complicated one.

Focusing on performance legitimacy, a useful starting point for comparative analysis between Laos and Cambodia is to look at the latest data on Cambodia's energy generation and consumption. In 2023, Cambodia's total installed power capacity was 4649 MW, comprising of 3977 MW (85.54%) from domestic power sources, and 672 (14.46%) from power importation from neighbouring countries. Domestic power sources include 1700 MW (42.75%) of fossil fuels (coal and fuel oil) and 2277 MW (57.25%) of renewable energy (hydropower, solar power and biomass power). Cambodia is committed to introducing more renewable energy into the energy mix while reducing wastage and increasing energy efficiency (Oeun, 2024).

Data shows that Cambodia's ability to exploit hydropower to generate electricity is not as high as in Laos, but it remains significant. Electricity produced by renewable sources, mainly hydropower dams, comprise more than half of the total domestic electricity generation. Investment in hydropower projects are mainly from China to build and operate hydropower dams as Cambodia does not have the capability to do so on its own. At least six dams were built by 2018 with Chinese finance and technology (Elten, 2018). In recent years, based on local observations, people in both urban and rural areas have fewer complaints about electricity shortages due to a more stable electricity supply linked to the introduction of more renewable sources into the energy mix (Son, 2024). This implies a relative satisfaction towards the ruling party's management of electricity supply being linked to performance legitimacy.

Like Laos, the hydropower ambition in Cambodia is to ensure energy security to power its expanding economy. The fact that its electricity cost is the highest in the region is already a huge obstacle to business operation (Ravindran, 2024). However, unlike Laos, hydraulic policy is broader in its significance given the country has to also focus on water security and food security as its Tonle Sap (linked to the Mekong River) serves as the source of fisheries and agriculture in the flood plain, where rice is produced. The river-lake system affects flow, volume, inundation, productivity and livelihoods and is interrupted and impacted by hydropower dams upstream (Mak, 2024). Such geo-social, and geo-economic features of Cambodia raises important questions about the country's hydraulic projects. Yet, like Laos, the country continues to place emphasis on its commitment to regional legal frameworks that govern the river basin and its national interests in exploitation and use (Ojendal and Jensen, 2012).

In Cambodia, hydraulic development projects often meet with public contestation with the government been more ambivalent in their response to local discontent. Compared to Laos, there is more freedom to organize protests against hydropower dams in Cambodia. In March 2014, villagers affected by the building of the Stung Chey Areng dam by Sinohydro, a Chinese construction company, blocked the road (Seangly and Pye, 2014). The Cambodian government did not disperse the protesters, instead allowing the situation to dissipate (Seangly and Pye, 2014). Among the Chinese-influenced hydropower dams, the Stung Chey Areng Dam project experienced a high degree of resistance compared to other projects. The protest escalated to the point where protestors included not only local residents, but residents of Phnom Penh and neighbouring provinces. With such an escalation, the government saw it as a threat to its power and halted the project (Chheat, 2022). Yet, we also observed a more determinant government to make it hard for activists to challenge their position as seen in the case of Lower Sesan 2 and the planned Sambor dam. In the former case, the government and dam proponents limited the spatial frame of impacts to villages around the reservoir and downstream of the dam. This was achieved by the government hard line policy to delimit space for advocacy and sanctioning anti-dam movement, leading to division among civil society groups (Green and Baird, 2020).

Overall, the media is more diverse in Cambodia and is able to channel a level of debate on social issues including negative effects of hydropower dams on the livelihoods of affected people. Also, civil society groups have more freedom to demand justice, fair compensation, and resettlement packages for the affected victims compared to Laos. Local newspapers, like the Phnom Penh Post, regularly report on people's complaints, the protests, and the impact of the hydropower dams such as flooding and declining fish stocks. This included for example an article published in 2022 based on the result of a study by the MRCS on the impacts of two mainstream dams in Laos, Don Sahong and Xayaburi dams (Ry, 2022). So far, there has been no government restriction on local newspapers reporting on dam issues. Nevertheless, it should be noted that civil society has been increasingly restricted with the adoption of the Law on Non-governmental Organisation and Association in 2015 and Union Law in the following year, ushering a period of 'rule by law' (Curley, 2018).

Regarding procedural legitimacy, even though hydropower dams benefit the ruling party, maintaining the balance presents risks for the CPP. First, hydropower dams in some respects weaken procedural legitimacy of the CPP in the sense that those who are against it, including affected communities, do not support them electorally. Even though the dams have contributed to electricity access, reliability and potentially energy security, they also harm the environment and impact people living nearby dams causing them to protest and not support the Cambodian government's policies. Their actions will negatively affect the popularity and legitimacy of the government. The seriousness of such contestation can be seen in the government's decision to cancel the Areng dam in 2015 (Chheat, 2022) and the decision to halt the two in the pipeline mainstream dams in 2018, indicating the ruling CPP's concern about the potential backfire effect of contestation over dams to its legitimacy.

As mentioned earlier, to reduce the tensions and discontent from those affected, the Cambodian government "facilitates" protests, however tactical it may be. Protests against hydropower dam in Laos, such as the Xayaburi dam in the early 2010s, were tactically approved by the Cambodian government (Yong and Gillespie, 2022), possibly to please the environmental movement. Their willingness to allow protests, however, does not mean that the rights of non-state actors are fully protected by the constitution and the local authority, and such space can be easily closed if the topic is deemed sensitive by the government such as the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Triangle Area (CLV). This recently emerged and led to arrests of almost hundred people, including environmental and human rights activists, who publicly criticised the government for loss of sovereignty due to the project (Human Rights Watch, 2024). In fact, political openness is limited including for those affected and the civil society more broadly, which has been traditionally guaranteed by international organizations such as the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHCR) and Western donors such as the European Union and the United States in exchange for international aid (Haefner and Po, 2022; Un, 2009). By refusing to comply, Cambodia risks losing support from these donors, a situation that is intensifying (Hao, 2021; Hao et al., 2021).

Unlike Laos, Cambodia is subject to electoral politics which despite its many flaws remains binding and impacts Cambodia's state-society relation. In the past, the Cambodian government has fully understood the democratization-aid dynamic and has used the dynamic to its own advantage. Even though a free and open domestic political space threatens the political survival of the CPP, as more people are empowered politically, the more they are willing to contest the power of the CPP, the Cambodian government has understood this and turned it into a source of political incentive instead (Haefner and Po, 2022). The government keeps civic space open to a certain extent, thanks to continued criticism from the European Union and the United States that arose in recent years (European Parliament, 2023; US Department of State, 2022). Aid from western countries made up more than half of Cambodia's national budget, up until the mid-2000s, making it hard for Cambodia to stay clear of international pressure. Yet, it is also true, as Un (2009) argued, that a lack of coordination among the aid community is partly responsible for the lack of democratic consolidation. The ruling party often suppresses voices that deem to

threaten their power. For example, the Cambodian government shutdown the US-funded National Democratic Institute in 2017, arrested Kem Sokha, the former deputy of the dissolved Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) in 2017, dispersed or banned protests such as Black Monday, and punished critics such as Ou Virak (Curley, 2018). Nevertheless, the dynamic has shifted as China's role in development aid and investment has topped the list of donors to Cambodia starting from 2010 and its dominant role as financier in the infrastructure sector, including irrigation dam development (Green and Yi, 2024).

Also controversial is the fact that hydropower dams in Cambodia have faced difficulty in generating enough electricity due to periodic droughts in the Mekong River caused by various factors, including upstream hydropower dams in both Laos and China (Keeton-Olsen and Sineat, 2021). Between 2015 and 2016, electricity shortages caused by droughts affected urban residents in Phnom Penh (Keeton-Olsen and Sineat, 2021). With this risk in mind, the Cambodian government has on the one hand realized that hydropower dams are not as reliable as it has been anticipated due to its seasonal fluctuations among other factors. There is an urgent need to diversify the sources of energy and as a result, the Cambodian government has designed various policies such as addressing electricity efficiency and solar sources (Oeun, 2024).

To summarise, Cambodia's ambivalent position towards hydropower is linked to the political economy condition it faces. While the country lags its neighbours in terms of its energy infrastructure, leading to a relative low level of electrification and high electricity price, hydropower dams are contentious politics for the ruling party. Hydropower projects have been met with opposition from local communities and environmental advocates from inside the country and internationally. This is particularly the case due to its procedural democracy system in which politics are conducted. Consequently, a more accommodative attitude to anti-dam advocacy groups, including dam cancellation and suspension of dam projects on the Mekong mainstream testifies the seriousness of dam-related contention. Yet, dams remain crucial for the future of electricity sufficiency in Cambodia.

Conclusion

Two arguments have been advanced in this paper. The first is that single-party regimes rely more on identity and performance legitimacy, which consequently influences its relations with dams. This is because there is no general election that can put the survival of the regime at risk. This is the case for Laos. As Croissant (2022) argues, "Performance-based legitimation from economic growth and improving the livelihoods of the population have become important new sources of legitimacy for the party. In recent years, nationalist-oriented (instead of ideology-based) claims of legitimacy by the LPRP, who stresses its role as custodian of Lao culture and history and has facilitated a process of nation-building that includes both Lao and national minorities, have become key ingredients to the party's legitimation strategy". Second, an electoral regime relies more on performance and procedural legitimacy. In holding regular elections, an electoral

regime must consider the popular perceptions, anger, and satisfaction to win the election even though they still control the election. This is the case for Cambodia. As Hughes (2009: 33) argues, "The basic ingredients for procedural legitimacy, some freedom of choice at regular intervals, a variety of contenders able to mobilize a reasonable degree of support, and a system that delivers a plural outcome, exist" in Cambodia's elections. The commonality for both types of regimes is, as Gerschewski (2013) argues, that these two regimes depend on performance legitimacy as a strong source of their power.

Focusing on responses from the Lao and Cambodian governments regarding hydropower dams, this article reveals considerable differences in both governments. Even though both governments are authoritarian regimes and rely heavily on hydropower dams to legitimize their ruling, the type of legitimacy itself differentiates their responses. While the Laotian government mostly relies on hydropower dams for performance and identity legitimacy, the Cambodian government must approach dams in ways that it can balance between performance and procedural legitimacy. The countries' focus on different types of legitimacy shapes their responses to hydropower dams with Laos pursuing a less accommodative approach whereas Cambodia pursues a more accommodative approach. Hydropower dams are crucially vital for Laos and Cambodia to enhance the legitimacy of the regime's rule in two ways: for Laos to develop into the "battery of Asia" and leave behind the label of LDC status by 2026 and for Cambodia to address its increasing energy security and economic development more broadly.

The Lao government envisions itself as the battery of Asia and uses hydropower dams to boost economic growth, gain revenues and uses the projects as symbols of national pride and progress. And this narrative is moulded in nationalist tone to ward off oppositions both domestically and internationally. At the same time, Laos is limiting the space for freedom of speech and assembly and plays down any criticism about hydropower as being against the development and progress of the country. The sole focus of the public media coverage is on the positive impacts of hydropower development for economic growth, a source of clean energy, and becoming the battery of Asia while also helping neighbouring countries to access clean energy. This emphasis ensures Laos can provide electricity to all citizens and increase the state's revenues by selling surplus electricity to neighbouring countries. Laos tends to adopt a less accommodative approach towards the opposition that would challenge the development of hydropower dams in Laos or even voice concerns about the development of hydropower dams in neighbouring countries. As a closed regime, Laos relies more on identity performance whereby the rule of the LPRP and its security apparatus and organisational capacity is equipped to deliver modernity and development and material benefits from dams as the two key sources of legitimacy. It does not rely on procedural legitimacy because there is no general election in Laos.

For Cambodia, hydropower dams are a contentious issue that requires careful attention by the ruling party. Its dependence on hydropower as an important energy source is undeniable to address its energy security, electrification and economic development. Yet, its economy is more diversified than Laos, including agriculture, tourism, the garment industry, and, in recent years, real estate that increasingly become important

sources of economic growth (Haefner and Po, 2022). Moreover, distinct relations between the river, its economic and political goals are shaped by the ecology of relations between the resources and society in that infrastructure projects such as dam are critical for the economy. In this regard, Cambodia adopts a more ambivalent approach towards the opposition that would challenge the development of hydropower dams in Cambodia. The Cambodian government has opened some space for civil society and residents to voice their concerns and organize protests against the negative impacts of dams. By allowing limited public participation, often pursued in a very tactical manner, Cambodia has adopted a more compromising stance as its broader legitimation strategy, balancing performance legitimacy and procedural legitimacy as general elections happen every four years. Both countries, however, rely on performance legitimacy for their political survival.

In addition, both governments share the interests in prioritising 'national interest' through nationalist rhetoric and sovereignty claim in advancing those interest. Despite the fact that the Mekong is governed by complex dynamic governance arrangements and political economy, which involves various actors and interests, countries remain rhetorically committed to and abide by the binding rules and procedures. In such a complex governance terrain, both states, like other authoritarian states, seek to weaken the position of those opposing voice as enemy of the state or anti-development. At the regional and international level, invoking sovereignty claims are to strengthen the state's domestic legitimacy as they are presenting and representing the domestic/national interests vice a vice those outside countries or actors (Allouche, 2020; Menga, 2015).

Yet, as authoritarian regimes are also faced with different political dynamics and economic necessity, their utility of hydropower dams as the source of legitimacy and the ways they address any residual challenges vary. As argued in this paper, faced with a more complex political economy, Cambodia's state juggles between various interests including donor community, financiers, local constituencies, and the democratic process in their approach to utilise hydropower dam as source of their legitimacy. This is not to say that Laos does not present a complex set of challenges in their policy. However, the country's one-party state does not necessarily subject policy process to regular electoral intervals like Cambodia. This is not to mention the state-society relations that the two countries share such as corruption, patronage politics, and resource exploitation for personal enrichment.

Given the importance of hydropower dams for the economy in both countries, it might be expected that Laos and Cambodia would act similarly to the opposition forces regarding hydropower dam issues. The two governments adopted different approaches. The Laotian government has a less accommodative approach whereas the Cambodian government has a more accommodative approach. In Cambodia, the government has been more tactical in response to protests hydropower dams in that they allowed some to happen while restricting others. For example, allowing to dissipate the situation surrounding the Stung Chey Areng while dams such as the Lower Sesan II were met with fierce government reactions. On the contrary, an electoral regime opens up more space for an opposition to contest elections. The participation of the opposition in the elections,

however, is highly repressed and the election process is fraudulent ensuring that the opposition has minimal chance of winning the election (Howard and Roessler, 2006). Despite the manipulation and control, the election itself is important for authoritarian regimes. As Von Soest and Grauvogel (2017) argue, "even if the elections are fraudulent, these authoritarian regimes allow citizens a stronger oversight than their closed counterparts".

In Laos, protests against dams are almost non-existent with the earlier mentioned example of Houayheuang Xayabouly showcasing the Lao government's response to criticism linked to environmental matters. Due to recent legislative changes, prominent cases of disappearances and long jail sentences, Laos has successfully ensured few voices are raised against hydropower dams in Laos by citizens or local not-for-profit associations. The ways that the Lao PDR legitimises its policy on hydropower dam is emblematic of how other authoritarian states utilise dam to prop up their legitimacy and stay in power by not just emphasising on its contribution to energy sufficiency, which is a critical factor to satisfy the demand of the economy but also people's consumption, but also its symbols of modernity and progress. Yet, what might be different is that Lao PDR makes sure that in promoting this narrative, it emphasises the country identity, which is not just constrained by its geography and blessed with the water resources but also identified with the leadership of the communist party.

Laos and Cambodia, both authoritarian regimes, hold different attitudes toward hydropower dams in enhancing their right to rule. While this may point to an understanding that regime types shape the way that authoritarian regimes utilise dams as their source of their legitimacy, more research is required to arrive at a firmer conclusion.

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