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Challenges and Prospects of the Green movement in the Republic of China

Studies demonstrate that the Taiwanese civil society is still relatively weak in structure, lacking organizational robustness as well as broad grass-roots base¹. Due to such drawbacks its effectiveness in forging meaningful partnership with policy-making bodies is limited in scope and impact. Taiwanese civil movement continues to emerge, and therefore, its capacity to persuade lags behind what was achieved by its counterparts in the Western developed countries. One of the best-organized civil society movements in the Republic of China is the Green movement. By stepping out to the forefront of public sphere and thus advancing its participatory character it has contributed significantly to the democratic transformations of 1990s, challenging passive dynamic between the government and the people as a result². The Green movement represents a platform for manifestation of some of the objects of social contention, which historically tended to be superseded by the debate on Taiwanese nationalism in regards to the cross-Taiwan Strait relations. Issues brought to public attention by the environmentalists demonstrate a network of inequalities and injustices hidden behind the government's proclamation on the collective fate of the nation in economic development.

Unfortunately, while environmental non-governmental organizations are willing to enter in alliances, build partnerships with political actors and work on government-sponsored projects recognizing the potential to advance environmental justice – their role is limited to acting as secondary advisors in design and implementation of environmental

¹ CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation. *An Assessment of Civil Society in Taiwan (2005)* (Kaohsiung: Center for International NGO Studies National Sun Yat-sen University, 2005), 8

² Jerry McBeath and Leng Tse-Kand, "Environmentalism and Civil Society in Taiwan and Mainland China." American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, September 2005.
http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p42587_index.html (accessed November 26, 2009), 3

laws. In consequence, their formal status remains quite low³. Political actors tend to regard dialogue with environmentalists as means for appeasing or simply winning over the electorate. Ideological principles of environmentalists are subject to political manipulation⁴. Manipulation of environmental stakes, and under-engagement with underlying social injustices, is not surprising recognizing that the most pressing issue on the government's agenda is provision of stimuli for economic growth.

Meanwhile, the side effects of the economic opportunism are overshadowed. A lot of important environmental issues do not ascend to the level of public debate, even such pressing issue as the global climate change does not attract much formal attention. Lack of transparency translates into lack of public concern and engagement with the issues. This situation could be linked to the fact that the hazardous effects of industrial ventures are also missing appropriate coverage in media. Extensive scientific and journalistic scrutiny of such projects is required to note their dire long-term environmental and social consequences⁵ in form of, among others, excessive toxic spills decreasing wildlife diversity and acid rains damaging natural rural ecosystems⁶. Formal mechanisms of communication are urgently needed to provide local activists with greater legitimacy, when advocating for implementation of stricter environmental measures. Greater cooperation between

³ Shen Tzung Lin, "The Evolution of Taiwan's Environmental Movement," *Green NGO and Environmental Journalist Forum Report* (Hong Kong: The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2001), 10

⁴ Jerry McBeath and Leng Tse-Kand, "Environmentalism and Civil Society in Taiwan and Mainland China." American Political Science Association Annual Meeting. September 2005.
http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p42587_index.html (accessed November 26, 2009), 4

⁵ Shen Tzung Lin, "The Evolution of Taiwan's Environmental Movement," *Green NGO and Environmental Journalist Forum Report* (Hong Kong: The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2001), 9

⁶ Jerry McBeath and Leng Tse-Kand, "Environmentalism and Civil Society in Taiwan and Mainland China." American Political Science Association Annual Meeting. September 2005.
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environmental groups, both locally and internationally, would provide impetus for launching more successful educational campaigns. The public demonstrates a lack of adequate access to education, which would explicitly deconstruct the intricacies behind environmental problems, and explain a connection between local issues and broader patterns. In consequence, the Green movement finds it challenging to establish a reliable network of financial contributors and supporters. The overall poor condition of social engagement in public sphere further deteriorates the prospects of the Green movement.

In this paper I will discuss the complex interplay of environmental stakes and claims to recognition of neglected aspects of social justice. I will argue for this relationship having challenging, transformative character for the shape of the Taiwanese public sphere for it transcends the government's attempts at engineering a sense of Taiwanese identity. I will begin by outlining atmosphere in which the environmental movement has emerged, the causes for which it advocates and explain how is the social justice issue involved. I will proceed by elaborating on the obstacles to its successfulness, which are linked to limited liveliness of the populace focused on material wellbeing, lack of strong external links with global agents geared towards social change, and finally, its conflict with a state-engineered sense of Taiwanese identity. I will conclude by underlining the role of young people in leading the Green movement into the future of Taiwanese civil society, and explicating how such activism could impact the dialogue across the Taiwan Strait.

Looking back at Taiwan's short history of liberalism and popular engagement with policy-making bodies, the incapacity of civil society to mobilize behind causes silenced in

the government's agenda is of little surprise⁷. Perceived vulnerability of Taiwan's economic success discourages support of independent ways of civil mobilization. Republic of Taiwan's ambiguous international status further complicates the processes of integration with resourceful international networks of non-governmental organizations. Nevertheless, the Green movement demonstrates potential for propagating preemptive approach towards emerging environmental and social injustices, as it nourishes activism in the public sphere and challenges official notions of identity.

If the elections of 1994 have opened the era of democratic Taiwan, then one would expect the civil society movement to unfold as the key advocate of participatory public sphere. However, the democratization of Taiwan proceeded from within the ruling elites, via the 'silent revolution'. It was a successful attempt at reframing regime's ideological and strategic tenets – degree of pressures to its instability were recognized and resolved in time, Kuomintang did not transform by surrendering to external pressures. From this perspective it could be argued that there is short tradition of honest dialogue between decision makers and the masses. For this reason it is understandable when claims raised by citizens are not receiving appropriate attention beyond their local context. Nonetheless, one of the initial civil society movements, the Green movement, seems to constitute a force challenging to this pattern of state-society relations⁸.

Recognizing that Kuomintang's democratization aimed at cultivating legitimacy and popular support, encouragement of vibrant discussion in the public sphere is expected to

⁷ Jerry McBeath and Leng Tse-Kand, "Environmentalism and Civil Society in Taiwan and Mainland China." American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, September 2005.
http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p42587_index.html (accessed November 26, 2009), 17

⁸ Ibid., 18

follow if the government is to be accountable to its people. Democratic form of governance entails not only adherence to a system of check and balances, but also responsiveness to concerns voiced in the public. Gradual advance of environmental movements in 1980s and 1990s⁹ demonstrates increased confidence of private citizens to mobilize behind issues largely neglected by the political parties as well as in official decision-making processes. Green movement was initially considered radical because it revolved primarily around nature conservation and in opposition to expansions of nuclear power plant network. However, increased media coverage of controversial development projects and concerned voices of indigenous populace seeing their ecosystem endangered, persuaded decision makers to partially include environmentalism in the official agenda. Another factor positively influencing the spread of Green movement in Taiwan was the support it gained from members of academia¹⁰ who by nature are well renowned and highly respected in the Asian culture. Nowadays, over three hundreds environmental NGOs operate in Taiwan¹¹, leading grass-roots environmental activism, acting as advisors in design and implementation of environmental policies and organizing educational campaigns. The establishment of the Environmental Impact Assessment law accounted for generation of a channel through which to bring cases of environmental violation and to successfully legal punishment¹². Moreover, the Eco-Conservation Alliance demonstrates persistent effort in trying to forge formal communication mechanisms, mechanisms, which could smoothen

⁹ Jerry McBeath and Leng Tse-Kand, "Environmentalism and Civil Society in Taiwan and Mainland China." American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, September 2005. http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p42587_index.html (accessed November 26, 2009), 3

¹⁰ Shen Tzung Lin, "The Evolution of Taiwan's Environmental Movement," *Green NGO and Environmental Journalist Forum Report* (Hong Kong: The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2001), 9

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9

¹² *Ibid.*, 9

cooperation between environmental activists and their external counterparts¹³. It reflects recognition of the necessity to contribute their expertise in environmental assessment as well as the necessity to circulate knowledge over negative trends in forefront of public attention. It embraces fair partnerships with legislators rather than passiveness in response to attempts at politicizing environmental issues¹⁴. Those actors stress dialogue and the universal importance of nature, nature, which knows no ideological or political boundaries.

On the other hand, the environmental justice remains of little priority to policy makers concerned with economic development first and foremost. Although the creation of the cabinet-level unit of environmental protection in form of the New Environment Foundation may be indicative of positive long-term trends – as it fosters spread of information on government proceedings and provides consultative services¹⁵; there is a gap between the highlights of grass-roots perception of the environmental social justice issues and the government’s sentiments. Underlying rapid economic development, presented as the common goal and fate of the Taiwanese population, there is a problem of social injustice it causes and perpetuates with continued emphasis on environmentally hazardous industrial growth. Initially, environmental damage impacts low-wage strata of the society living in the rural areas. In consequence, when environmental activism escalates it is likely to unfold another side effect of rapid industrialization – growing class

¹³ Shen Tzung Lin, “The Evolution of Taiwan’s Environmental Movement,” *Green NGO and Environmental Journalist Forum Report* (Hong Kong: The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2001), 10

¹⁴ Jerry McBeath and Leng Tse-Kand, “Environmentalism and Civil Society in Taiwan and Mainland China.” American Political Science Association Annual Meeting. September 2005.
http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p42587_index.html (accessed November 26, 2009), 4

¹⁵ Kelly Her, “Going Green,” *Taiwan Review*, January 8, 2002

divisions – an issue persistently ignored due to its leftist connotations. Including class-consciousness in the public discourse has been long suppressed¹⁶ by superimposition of nationalistic sentiments and propagating a popular desire to unify with Mainland China, which nowadays are replaced by propagation of an aspiration to full international recognition. It reveals itself that environmentalism has the potential for reversing such trend with oppressing effects of industrialization expanding social inequalities. It would a contribution of a more individualistic character to formally generated sense of Taiwanese identity.

As outlined, the rise of environmental concerns is more evident in the rural areas, where harmful effects of intrusion in the nature's processes are more readily observable¹⁷. There is room for vigorous civil mobilization, though the resources to proceed with environmental advocacy are limited, as is the manpower¹⁸ and the willingness in the face of threatened economic opportunities. In addition, scarcity of links with well-founded organizations and cutting edge transnational experts negatively impacts movement's robustness and a sense of legitimacy. In addition, it restrains the extent of its transparency. This logic could be attributed to the fact that voicing the importance of inclusion of environmental stakes in the government's agenda is diluted when the issues are removed from the global context. Should the bigger picture had been brought to attention, perhaps the side effects of rapid development would not be considered neglectful, and as a result consequently would not be pushed to the margins of budget allocation.

¹⁶ Ming-yan Lai, *Nativism and Modernity: Cultural Contestation in China and Taiwan under Global Capitalism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 44

¹⁷ Shen Tzung Lin, "The Evolution of Taiwan's Environmental Movement," *Green NGO and Environmental Journalist Forum Report* (Hong Kong: The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2001), 9

¹⁸ Kelly Her, "Going Green," *Taiwan Review*, January 8, 2002

Unhelpful to Taiwanese environmental movements tightening their transnational partnerships is Taiwan's locked membership in the United Nations¹⁹. It impedes U.N humanitarian and environmental programs' solid engagement with Taiwanese activists, it restrains widespread diffusion of ideological standards governing environmental activism, and delays investment in financial and knowledge transfer to Taiwan. Empowerment of newly emerged Green civil society movement depends to a large extent on the exchange of ideas and resources with its foreign counterparts as the learning process is accelerated when immature and inexperienced agents of social change are provided with crucial feedback on how to reinforce its organizational structure, how to foster more effective campaigns, how to reach out to broader audiences, and most importantly, how to lobby successfully. The situation is further deteriorated recognizing the relatively poor popular comprehension of science behind environmental problems. With lack of significant financial support from neither international organizations nor skeptical and disengaged locals – more willing to donate to charitable and social welfare organizations – environmental movement is trapped competing over scarce resources²⁰ and consequently finds it difficult to appeal to broad audiences.

The way Taiwanese identity is configured to either cherish or disregard the value of natural endowment plays a key role in defining the future of the Green movement. Similarly to how Taiwan's national priorities are advanced, the process of shaping national Taiwanese identity was to a large extent engineered from above, shifting the focus from

¹⁹ CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation. *An Assessment of Civil Society in Taiwan (2005)* (Kaohsiung: Center for International NGO Studies National Sun Yat-sen University, 2005), 34

²⁰ Jerry McBeath and Leng Tse-Kand, "Environmentalism and Civil Society in Taiwan and Mainland China." American Political Science Association Annual Meeting. September 2005. http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p42587_index.html (accessed November 26, 2009), 7

one inherently China-centered to one embedded in the specificity of the islanders' historical experience²¹. Contemporary sense of Taiwanese identity, as to achieve a sense of commonality between citizens of different ethnic background, is intended to overcome divisions drawn along different generations' heritage. A modern sense of commonality supersedes both ethnic and generational sentiments by fostering a spirit of popular mobilization behind the goal of economic growth. If the new Taiwanese identity, which transcends historically and regionally problematic divisions, is embedded in the embrace of Taiwanese land as the focal point of common experience²² and a symbolical stage of enacting the goal of advancing material welfare²³, then the Green movements originating in vicinity of hazardous development projects may with time become involved in politics as not only environmental activists but also as protectors of what constitutes to be a metaphorical basis of the New Taiwanese identity. However, if the vision instilled in Taiwanese identity is of increasing economic wealth neglectful of environmental sacrifices, then prospects for environmental movement to enter the forefront of policy making are dire. Ecological sustainability is not compatible with Taiwan's complex economic position, whereas measures typically recommended by Green movements are oriented in long-term and thus show little immediate results, which could gain them immediate popularity²⁴.

Western notion of sustainable development, inherent in the modern Green movement, manifests itself as void, if not corrupt, in the in Taiwanese atmosphere of

²¹ André Laliberté, "Taiwan: Between Two Nationalisms," *Institute of International Relations at the University of British Columbia Working Paper 12* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1997), 32

²² Ming-yan Lai, *Nativism and Modernity: Cultural Contestation in China and Taiwan under Global Capitalism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 97

²³ Han-pi Chang, *Taiwan: Community of Fate and Cultural Globalization* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 1996), 135

²⁴ Kelly Her, "Going Green," *Taiwan Review*, January 8, 2002

preoccupation with maintenance of sustained economic growth²⁵. Republic of Taiwan is constantly challenged by the prospects of its industries relocating their manufacturing base to the Mainland China in order to take advantage of cheap labor and increase returns on capital. When government implements measures restrictive to the greenhouse gas emissions and expands areas under environmental protection in this already territorially constrained state, it further decreases incentives for local investment and so, from the economic point of view such policies prove counterproductive to the society at large. Furthermore, concepts operating in Western post-modernity, such as sustainable development, are not automatically transferable to Taiwanese environment. External pressures calling for implementation of measures, which would reduce negative environmental impact of industrialization are perceived as harmful to an image of Taiwan as welcoming environment to both foreign investment and local entrepreneurship – especially considering increasing competition from the ascending Southeast Asian states. At most, Taiwanese political actors may incorporate some of the broadly agreed upon environmental recommendations into their electoral agendas for the purpose of appealing to particular communities, inevitably politicizing environmental issues.

On contrary to general pattern of environmentalists' popularity, the urban youth is more inclined to support the Green movement because young people are actively engaged in the global transfer of knowledge by making use of Information and Communication Technology²⁶, including the knowledge on the environmental science. They are equipped in

²⁵ Jerry McBeath and Leng Tse-Kand, "Environmentalism and Civil Society in Taiwan and Mainland China." American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, September 2005. http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p42587_index.html (accessed November 26, 2009), 5

²⁶ Shen Tzung Lin, "The Evolution of Taiwan's Environmental Movement," *Green NGO and Environmental Journalist Forum Report* (Hong Kong: The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2001), 11

the means for building strong networks of support and information exchange. Moreover, urban youth is looking for alternatives to politically engineered scope of political choices. Realizing the dependence of future generations on the legacy of modern developments, as well as seriousness of international patterns of environmental threats, young people are the most inclined to oppose politicization of environmental issues. Furthermore, there is potential for joint environmental action across the Taiwan Strait, as the nature knows no political boundaries. Other citizens experiencing direct effects of environmental catastrophes could also be mobilized if their current priority of material advancement is altered. Finally, with proceeding global climate change the environmental concerns may soon supersede the unification dilemma. If the environmental movement is to strengthen itself, however, it requires greater involvement of young people in the public sphere because urban youth still demonstrate relatively low levels of political participation²⁷.

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²⁷ Meggie Lu, "Election Fallout: Green Party stays upbeat despite poor performance," *Taipei Times*, January 14, 2008.

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