To Kill or Confine? How Vietnam and the Philippines Respond to Environmental Activism

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To Kill or Confine? How Vietnam and the Philippines Respond to Environmental Activism

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Abstract

Environmental protection is an increasingly salient topic for contemporary society, especially in the context of the climate crisis. People all around the world are engaging in environmental activism, yet environmentalism research has disproportionately centered on the West. Considering how most countries on the front lines of climate change are non-Western, this gap must be rectified. Southeast Asia (SEA) is a region severely overlooked in this regard, particularly in terms of what environmentalism actually brings here. There is insufficient knowledge on how SEA states respond to environmental activism, despite the relevance for its citizens and environmental sector practitioners, who witness some of the worst repercussions of environmental degradation. Therefore, this paper aims to expand our understanding of state responses to SEA environmentalism and contentious political action by investigating Vietnam and the Philippines. A comparative study was conducted on these two cases, which employed qualitative content analysis on texts like news articles to study responses to environmentalism. Findings reveal that both countries display a variety of responses, but are most inclined to repress. However, they differ considerably in how they approach each response type in terms of methods, actors involved, and consistency. It is proposed that each country's distinct response pattern is linked to their respective regime type, as suggested by existing literature on contentious political action. Beyond the popular notion that non-democracies are more likely to repress contentious claim-making, this study illustrates how hybrid regimes can be more covert and lethal in their repression than other regimes. From these findings, this paper stresses the importance of local socio-political contexts for those engaged in environmental protection and advocacy. Additionally, this investigation hopes to spur similar research on other SEA countries and expand the political science literature on this region.

Keywords: environment, activism, state response, repression, regime, Southeast Asia, Vietnam, Philippines

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I. Introduction

Environmentalism has been on the rise, with more people advocating for environmental protection and conservation, especially in the context of climate change. Since its origination in Europe in the mid-20th century, environmentalism founded on post-materialist and progressive values has spread to all corners of the world (Grasso & Giugni, 2022, p. 3). However, research on the topic has not been able to match in pace and is mainly focused on the West. This leads to limited knowledge on how environmental activism is unfolding elsewhere and its impacts, including subsequent state responses. Southeast Asia (SEA) is one of the regions receiving the least amount of attention, even though it is extremely vulnerable to climate change and suffers from numerous environmental issues (Simpson, 2018). This study aims to help fill that gap by answering the question, *how do Vietnam and the Philippines respond to environmental activism?* Both countries are on the frontlines of our climate crisis and are among the top ten countries most affected by extreme weather events (Kreft & Eckstein, 2014). Further knowledge of responses to environmentalism would be relevant for the populations and environmental sector practitioners in these countries. Additionally, it could contribute to the fledgling literature on SEA environmentalism and contentious political action as a whole. The ultimate goal is to bring more attention to SEA, starting with Vietnam and the Philippines, and hopefully spur similar research on nearby countries.

Findings reveal that Vietnam and the Philippines share some broad similarities in their responses to environmental activism, namely the dominance of repression and the wide array of methods used. However, under closer inspection, each country has its distinct pattern of responses, which is partially linked to their regime type. The Vietnamese and Philippine responses will be explored in the next sections. First, an overview of the current state of environmental activism research and its uneven geographical distribution is given. Second, existing theories and research on state responses to contentious political action are covered, which inform the initial hypotheses and chosen research design. Finally, results for both cases are reported, followed by a comparative discussion. The paper concludes with some reflections on the investigation, including its implications for academia and society, as well as future areas for further research.

II. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

A. Western-centrism in environmental activism research

Activism is aimed at bringing change through unconventional political means. It entails a varied repertoire of actions, ranging from more conciliatory, like petitioning and leafleting, to more confrontational, like protesting, sit-ins, and road-blocking (White, 2013, p. 131). Environmental activists have been particularly inclined to sabotage as a tactic, to the extent that "eco-tage" has been identified as their distinct claim-making method (Sumner & Weidman, p. 874). These actions can be performed by many different actors, from individuals to groups and organizations such as local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Despite it not being an exclusive phenomenon to any geographical area, academic research on contentious political action has mostly centered on the West, especially liberal democracies (Barrow & Chia, 2016; Fukuyama, 2001). Far less work has been done on activism and subsequent state responses in other regions, especially Africa, followed by East and Southeast Asia (Earl, 2011, p. 271). With scholarly interest in environmentalism also displaying the same geographic patterns, it is unsurprising that the literature on non-Western state responses to environmental activism is in the early stages of development. Common case studies include the United States and the United Kingdom, as exemplified by Mireanu's (2014) study of how they and other Western European countries have transitioned to criminalizing environmental activists through the "terrorism" label. Scholars only expanded their research scope to Central and Eastern Europe rather recently, including countries like the former Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary, let alone non-Western countries (Císař, 2022; Shriver & Adams, 2010). The status quo is demonstrated in a very recent work by Dawson (2024), who states that environmental movements in the Global South are not replicas of their northern counterpart, and hence, knowledge of Western environmentalism is insufficient for understanding this phenomenon elsewhere. Some scholars expanding the research arena of environmentalism in the developing world include Brisman et al. (2017), Goyes et al. (2017), and Walters (2017), who all warn that activists here face more challenges. Empirical findings confirm this, as seen in the first worldwide assessment of state repression of environmental activism by Poulos and Haddad (2016). The study highlights that where environmental protections are most needed, environmentalism also faces the strongest

challenges; and yet, academia has generally neglected such cases because they are outside of the West. Therefore, it seems imperative to broaden our knowledge to other regions, including SEA. A nascent collection of SEA political research by scholars like London (2022) and Deinla and Dressel (2019) has sufficiently informed us of the countries' political systems and individual civil societies. When it comes to contentious political action, scholars have been more preoccupied with the claim-makers than the responding parties. This is observed with SEA environmentalism, as exemplified by the works of Vu (2017) on Vietnam's Tree Movement and Delina (2022) on the Philippine anti-coal movement. Within this context, Yew's (2016) study is notable, as it reveals how the Malaysian state indirectly represses environmental protests through occupational pressure and administrative constraints, for example. Similar studies should be replicated across the region to understand how environmental activism fares under different governments, and the types of responses they provoke. This research takes the first step by investigating Vietnam and the Philippines. Through studying these cases simultaneously, we can know more about how each country responds to environmentalism, and examine whether SEA states respond similarly. With relatively strong regionalism and a sense of community solidified by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), some parallelism between the countries is not inconceivable (Shambaugh, 2020).

B. How can states respond to contentious political action?

Despite being disproportionately centered on the West, the existing literature on contentious political action is still a valuable guide for this investigation. State responses to contentious claim-making have long been a focal point of academic inquiry and have been comprehensively conceptualized. Debate abounds in this field, but scholars agree that there are at least two main types of state responses - repression and concession.

There is a virtual consensus that repression refers to repressive actions targeted at individuals or groups attempting to bring socio-political change through non-conventional means (Earl, 2011, p. 262). However, there is no universally accepted definition of repression. Some take a broader view, such as deMeritt (2016, p. 1), who understands repression as the "threat or act of subduing someone by institutional or physical force," and Tilly (1987), who describes it as any action by a group which raises the contender's cost of collective action. In contrast, other scholars are more

precise in their definition and specify the actions and actors involved, for example. Davenport (2007, pp. 1-2) and Stockdill (1996, p. 146) list the acts of arrest, assault, killing, spying, and more in their conceptualizations. As activism is commonly targeted towards the state, which is also tasked with maintaining public order, repression is usually associated with the government. Nonetheless, this mindset is slowly changing, as there are proponents like Earl (2004) and Ferree (2005) who include the work of non-state actors under repression, even if they are not tied to the authorities. Beyond defining repression in general, some scholars have instead focused on the finer distinctions within repression. Carley (1997) and della Porta and Reiter (1998) have sought to create classifications based on tactics, such as one for protest policing methods. Meanwhile, Koopmans (1997) has created the dichotomy of "situational" and "institutional" repression. "Situational" refers to immediate measures in direct response to contentious action to prevent further escalation, such as detention. "Institutional" refers to institutional means of deterring any future contentious claim-making, including censorship laws. From the broad repertoire of repressive acts, others have followed up with indices and scales to show how actions compare with each other in terms of impact (Davenport, 2007; McPhail & McCarthy, 2005). There is no consensus on a scale, especially because it could undermine the differences between actions and render them all commensurable (Earl, 2011, p. 264). Nevertheless, coercion and incarceration are generally considered to be more on the extreme side, versus surveillance, for instance (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Rather than viewing repression through the lens of magnitude and intensity, Earl (2003, pp. 47-48) suggests three other dimensions to consider, namely the repressing agent, the response's character, and its observability to the public. Agents range from state actors like the police to private actors like countermovements and vigilantes. The character of repression can either entail coercion, meaning threats and use of force, or channeling. Channeling is a more indirect form of repression that targets the form, timing, and resources of contentious claim-making. It can include bureaucratic and legal means, such as exploiting tax codes and redirecting protestors to administrative procedures (Jenkins, 1998; Meyer & Minkoff, 2004).

One could say the antithesis of repression is concession, which is any act of meeting claim-makers' demands or assuaging their concerns. From Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation, a range of concession acts can be identified, from the most far-reaching and meaningful ones, to more symbolic ones only aimed at subduing contention. The former might include official policy reform and new initiatives, while the latter might include conversing with

citizens without heeding their opinion, or temporary and minimal changes that do not address the root issue. In the middle is what deMeritt (2016, p. 3) calls "low-level accommodations" that somewhat meet claim-makers' demands, such as the granting of amnesty and prisoners' release. This is not always easy to distinguish from either meaningful or symbolic concessions, however. Where a state response lies on the scale or "ladder" of concession depends on the specific context and issue.

Regardless of how repression and concession are performed, identifying such acts has not proven to be difficult, as it all depends on whether a response challenges or benefits claim-makers. However, scholars are caught in a bind by that ambiguous space between repression and concession, when the state turns a blind eye (Tilly, 1978). Does "toleration" fall on the repressive or conceding side of the scale? The argument can go both ways, but an alternative camp prefers a distinct space for toleration, even though there is no unanimity on what this entails. Most describe tolerance as the absence of repression, but citizens' demands are still ignored without any meaningful concessions, which means inaction (Cai, 2010; Franklin, 2008). However, Yuen and Cheng (2017) argue there is more to tolerance than passivity, which is just a sub-type. They identify two types of toleration; the first is neglecting or ignoring, the dismissive activity commonly associated with tolerance (Bishara, 2015). The second is attrition, a more proactive undermining of contentious claim-makers through sustained pressure but without outright repression or coercion, such as through legal interventions or countermovements (Yuen & Cheng, 2017, pp. 616-620). The scholars recommend distinguishing attrition from repressive channeling because the former does not involve material means, as seen when states appeal to legitimate institutions or try to maintain elite cohesion. In reality, however, these responses are not easy to separate, because both involve covert and subtle tactics to challenge claim-makers, including the use of legal means.

Based on existing research on responses to contentious political action, a state is expected to choose from the following: repression, attrition, neglect, and concession. This paper will seek and examine these acts while investigating how Vietnam and the Philippines respond to environmental activism, albeit with some modifications. Firstly, the broad definition of repression by Earl (2011, p. 263) will be adopted to account for the wide range of methods available. However, unlike Earl (2011), repression by private actors will not be included unless

they were ordered by government authorities, since the research focus only pertains to state responses. This boundary is set for the three other types of responses as well. Additionally, Earl's (2003) dimensions of repression will be taken as a guiding frame to see how states repress and are supplemented by Koopman's (1997) situational-institutional distinction. Although the "character" dimension is meant to separate coercion from channeling, it will be excluded as channeling will be merged with attrition. As mentioned, channeling is not easily distinguished from attrition, but considering attrition as a category helps separate extremely subtle acts that hinder claim-makers from stronger repression that outright suppresses them. Hence, it seems beneficial to maintain Yuen and Cheng's (2017) category of attrition, but include channeling under it. Since attrition (and channeling) can be performed by either state or private actors, it is worth considering the identity of the agent as suggested by Earl (2003). Finally, while there might be many types of concessions, as indicated by Arnstein's (1969) various levels of citizen involvement, this investigation will keep the distinction to symbolic and meaningful concessions. This is because anything in between is not easily identified, which is further complicated by the context-dependent nature of concessions' effects. All these expected responses are summarized in the table below with some illustrative examples.

Table 1: Types of state responses to contentious political action

Type of response	Description	Dimensions to consider	Specific actions
Repression	Action aimed at preventing, controlling, and constraining non-institutional, collective action.	- Nature: institutional or situational; - Identity of the agent; - Observability.	Harassment, arrests, policing, torture, prison maltreatment, killing, surveillance, legal persecution, stigmatization, restrictive legislation.
Attrition	Subtle, covert undermining of claim-makers that does not seem to violate civil rights and integrity.	Identity of agent	Maintain elite cohesion, mobilising countermovements, appealing to legitimate institutions, administrative restrictions and delays (e.g. use of tax codes).
Ignore/ Neglect	Not responding positively or negatively to environmental activism.	Not applicable.	Lack of response or comment.
Concession	Meeting claim-makers' demands or assuaging their concerns.	Impact: symbolic or meaningful.	Negotiate, grant pardons or amnesties, cancel projects, start new initiatives.

C. A potential determinant of Vietnam and the Philippines' responses

Alongside academic interest in how states respond to contentious political action, there is also curiosity over why governments respond in a certain way. Many factors have been proposed as determinants, such as the nature of the contentious act like its size and acceptability, and the balance of power between the government and claim-makers (Gamson, 1990; McAdam, 1982). Regime type has emerged as an important predictor of state responses, including in the context of

environmental activism, as suggested by Poulos & Haddas (2016). Violent repression is more common in authoritarian states lacking adequate legal protections than in democratic countries (Besley & Persson, 2011; Poe et al., 1999). There are multiple explanations for this. For authoritarian regimes, repression is more effective and less costly than concessions, as they have strong control over society (deMeritt, 2016; Linz, 2000). Contrastingly, democratic regimes are more likely to offer concessions than repress because political leaders here are more strictly accountable to their constituents, a phenomenon Davenport & Inman (2012, p. 622) call "Domestic Democratic Peace." Yuen and Cheng (2017, p. 617) remind us that a response is not exclusive to any regime type, but they agree that regime types can affect the likelihood of that response. The effect of regime type on state responses to contentious political action is worth contemplating for SEA as it consists of extremely diverse political systems and is particularly relevant for Vietnam and the Philippines with dissimilar political regimes (Barrow & Chia, 2016). Counterintuitively, although authoritarian regimes are more likely to repress than concede compared to democracies, claim-makers might suffer the most in intermediary regimes. Multiple scholars argue that repression is employed more aggressively in states that are neither fully authoritarian nor fully democratic, and hence propose the "More Murder in the Middle" hypothesis (Fein, 1995; Pierskalla, 2010; Regan & Henderson, 2002). This is due to high levels of uncertainty regarding the capacity and behavioral norms of the main actors (Leitner et al. 2008). In the semi-open political nature of hybrid regimes, claim-makers continue pushing their activism believing they will eventually convince the government but, when authorities are also unwilling to concede, intense escalation ensues. In an authoritarian regime, there is less need for repression because citizens feel deterred from making claims in the first place from expectations of neglect and retaliation (deMeritt, 2016, p. 6). Middeldorp and Le Billon (2019) clarify that rather than generally being more repressive, intermediary regimes resort to more covert and lethal forms of repression with higher death risks, such as targeted killings. Full authoritarian regimes also repress activists but are comfortable with open repression, like arrests, because they are not as constrained by domestic public opinion. Additionally, open repression is easy with their authoritarian grip over the judiciary and media, and close-knit ties between political, economic, and military elites (Cruz, 2011; Hill & Jones, 2014). This pattern has been documented in environmentalism, with semi-authoritarian or semi-democratic regimes like

Nicaragua and Brazil observing high death rates of environmental activists (Middeldorp and Le Billon, 2019, p. 328).

Since neither Vietnam nor the Philippines are full democracies, both countries are expected to be more inclined to repress environmental activism, especially compared to giving clear concessions. Additionally, it is hypothesized that the Philippines utilizes more covert and deadly repression methods than Vietnam, as the former is a flawed democracy, while the latter is authoritarian (EIU, 2024). It is acknowledged that some indices distinguish flawed democracies from hybrid regimes, like the EIU's Democracy Index; however, because the Philippines is not a full democracy, existing academic work on the responses of intermediary and hybrid regimes could still be applicable for further investigation.

III. Research design

To compare state responses to environmental activism by Vietnam and the Philippines, a comparative small-N study was conducted.

For the objective of broadening knowledge on SEA environmental activism and contentious political action in general, these two cases appeared extremely suitable for investigation. Firstly, as mentioned, both states are among the list of countries most affected by climate change, meaning environmentalism, and climate activism in particular, is likely salient in their societies. Secondly, they share many similarities, such as their geography and especially their economy; both are lower-middle-income countries striving to reach upper-middle-income status within the upcoming decade (Leung, 2024; Ta-Asan, 2024; WorldData.info, 2024). This means rapid economic development is a top priority for Vietnam and the Philippines, which is sometimes incompatible with environmental protection, therefore creating the possibility that they share the same responses. Thirdly, both countries are members of ASEAN, suggesting they share a regional identity and mindset, which could also lead to matching responses to environmentalism. Additionally, as most SEA countries are also in ASEAN, the cases of Vietnam and the Philippines could help draw inferences for the entire region. This is not to say that Vietnam and the Philippines are without differences; in reality, SEA is known for its multiplicity and diversity across many domains (Barrow & Chia, 2016). It is difficult to find two identical countries in the

region. Nevertheless, when many similarities exist in parallel with differences, this makes for an interesting investigation; it could reveal whether it is the states' shared or unique factors that affect their responses more, if there is indeed an effect. For Vietnam and the Philippines, the political regime is one of the main aspects where they diverge, so it was worth considering this element of difference when comparing the countries.

Qualitative content analysis of various text types was employed to study each country's responses to environmental activism in detail. These include cultural documents like news and magazine articles from local and international sources, academic publications, and reports covering environmental activist events or general socio-political developments. The triangulation of sources helped ensure a comprehensive coverage of events and subsequent state responses, as well as an accurate depiction of them. By cross-referencing different sources, it was easier to spot any biases or inaccuracies in the source material to be removed; however, efforts were made from the start to collect accurate information from trustworthy and objective sources. About 50 texts of different types were analyzed for each case, which were collected by purposive sampling; any text that indicated a response to environmental activism was deemed of interest. The coding unit was a sentence or paragraph, making it possible to capture specific details of state responses.

To capture the full spectrum of issues that fall under environmentalism, the coverage scope of environmental activist events was kept rather broad. Three commonly identified groups of environmental issues were considered for this investigation. "Brown" issues focus on the human health and well-being implications of environmental degradation, with factors like soil, water, and air quality being taken into account, as well as proper waste disposal (Pakulski & Tranter, 2004, p. 225). "Green" issues emphasize minimizing human impacts on nature's well-being and focus on conservation (p. 225). "White" issues touch on the numerous risks associated with scientific and technological interference with nature and its processes; they raise questions about the genetic modification of all organisms, such as for food production (p. 229). One of the biggest concerns among environmentalists is climate change, which makes climate issues an additional category. This is despite overlaps with green and brown issues due to the effects of climate change on humans and nature (Grasso & Giugni, 2022, p. 5). Environmental activist events targeting any of these issue groups were considered for analysis. The identity of the

claim-maker(s) and their employed methods did not matter; so long as it was an act of advocating for the environment, it was worth seeing how the state responded in turn.

Despite the relatively open scope of analysis, data collection was only limited to events from the 1970s until now. The reasoning is that environmental movements in SEA only started clearly emerging in the 1970s, as exemplified by the Filipino people's struggle against hydroelectric dams and deforestation at the time (Boomgaard, 2006). Prior to this, the region had just started prioritizing development, leaving little room for environmental protection on the agenda. Efforts were made to include particularly well-known and significant events throughout this period.

In preparation for data analysis, a coding frame was created based on the reviewed literature. Each main category covers a certain type of state response and the sub-categories break these down further where necessary. The coding frame can be found in Appendix 1.

IV. Positionality

As someone who is not actively participating in the environmental movements of Vietnam or the Philippines, there may be aspects to these phenomena that I have not been able to cover. This is especially the case with the Philippines, as I am not from the country and do not speak Filipino, which presented some barriers to my data collection process. Researching Vietnam proved to be easier as a Vietnamese person because I understood the local language, had some prior knowledge of domestic events and structures, and where to source data. There was a risk of having unequal amounts of data between my two cases as a result; however, efforts were made to rectify this. In the end, the same amount of texts were collected for both cases. For the Philippines, this consisted of many international sources to overcome the language barrier and limited local knowledge. Fortunately, a lot of Philippine news and official documents were also available in English. Additionally, a quick background research on environmentalism in the Philippines was also conducted to have an overview of the most important events in recent decades, many of which were later included in the analysis.

V. Findings

A. Vietnam

Vietnam is witnessing a growth in environmental activism, with society being particularly concerned about pollution, environmental destruction, and climate change, which are largely linked to the country's rapid economic and development plans. The state is reacting to this in various ways by displaying all four possible types of responses to contentious political action, and the situation is rather bleak for environmental activists. Repression is the dominant response and the government employs many tactics to achieve this, usually relying on state actors.

The government is not hesitant to use extreme measures overtly, via official security forces, government institutions, and workers. For instance, the police are deployed to disperse the crowd in situational responses to protests, and violent crackdowns are not uncommon. Many instances involve protesters being beaten with shields and batons or fired with tear gas. Additionally, protesters can be detained and threatened with fines or other legal consequences, forcing them to give up on their claims. Demonstrators against infrastructure projects in Thanh Hoa and Nghe An are some of the many people who have experienced this (Vu, 2023a; Vu, 2023b). Despite being comfortable with overt repression, authorities are still active in covertly restraining environmental activists. At protest sites, the police prevent information from leaking by warning protesters and spectators, dictating media reports, and even jamming electronic signals (Finney, 2021). If precautions fail and information about a protest spreads, the government can still block Facebook - the country's most popular social media platform - and other websites. This is done during politically sensitive times, such as during the public uproars against Bauxite mining and the pollution caused by the Formosa plastics plant (Geertman & Boudreau, 2018).

Once someone has engaged in environmental activism, they are officially on the government's radar. Many protesters are monitored and followed long after a demonstration, which is especially likely for those who gave their information to the police. The daily lives of activists are usually disrupted, due to random questioning or visits by the authorities, having their place of work or study being contacted, and more (The 88 Project, 2021). Families, friends, and acquaintances of activists can be affected by this web of repression. If an activist is deemed overly prominent or concerning, the final move is to prosecute and incarcerate them.

Imprisonment of environmental activists under false charges is a characteristic method of repression in Vietnam. This is possible because the political system has a weak rule of law, and a clear separation of powers between different branches of government is absent, meaning the executive can control the judiciary (Tria Kerkvliet, 2010, p. 53). Hence, Vietnam has one of the highest numbers of political prisoners in Southeast Asia (Wee, 2023). Victims include Hoang Duc Binh, who organized protests against the Formosa plant, and Chung Hoang Chuong, who criticized the government's deadly response to a land protest (Eckert, 2017; RFA, 2021). Incarceration is the tragic fate of many online activists and journalists in particular, as they are an obstacle to the state's efforts to control the media and public knowledge. Videographer Nguyen Van Hoa, for instance, was imprisoned only for filming an environmental protest (Whong, 2020). Activists are commonly charged for "abusing democratic freedoms to infringe upon the interests of the state (Article 258 of the Penal Code), or "making, storing, spreading or propagating anti-state information" (Article 117 of the Criminal Code), and for other reasons like disobeying the court, or resisting officers (FIDH, 2023). However, with high-profile individuals that are more difficult to undermine and criminalize, the authorities resort to false tax evasion charges. This is the case with environmental NGOs and civil society leaders like Nguy Thi Khanh and Dang Dinh Bach, who even helped with the government's climate transition plan (RFA Vietnamese, 2023). When in prison, these activists are subjected to maltreatment, such as being held in poor facilities, being physically abused, and being refused medical treatment (Swanton, 2023). This inhumane treatment is likely aimed at deterring activists from performing contentious actions after their prison release. More recently, the authorities have adopted exile as a silent way to remove dissidents, with people like Nguyen Van Hai being offered an early prison release if they agree to leave the country and never return (FIDH, 2023, pp. 48-49).

Alongside swift situational repression of environmental activism, the Vietnamese state has been ramping up institutional measures to deter all dissent before it even takes shape. Riot Police Regiments have been set up in various provinces and cities since 2021 to tackle protests (RFA Vietnamese, 2022). They are tasked with cracking down on "illegal demonstrations" and "cases of public disorder," and given the broad scope to do more "as required." For the same objective of deterring protests, there is no Law on Protests, even after years of debate in the National Assembly. A law that explicitly grants or revokes people's rights to protest would likely promote even more demonstrations, something the government fears (RFA Vietnamese, 2022).

Additionally, government control over social media is tightening, which used to be one of the few places to freely voice your dissent. The 2018 Cyber Security Law requires many online platforms, including Facebook, Google, and TikTok to take down any content "threatening to national security" within 24 hours (Nguyen, 2024). Furthermore, the government mounts numerous institutional challenges to civil society groups with its regulatory framework. It is extremely difficult to form organizations outside of approved government structures, which is why organizations are usually tied to the state in one way or another. These organizations are closely monitored and can easily be removed if they are not in line with the state, conditions even international NGOs are subjected to (Freedom House, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023). These are only some of the many institutional means of stifling environmental activism in Vietnam, on top of existing restrictive laws like the aforementioned Articles 258 and 117.

Even though repression is the state's dominant response to environmental activism, it is important to note the few cases of concession. Despite the majority being symbolic, it is still interesting to see this authoritarian regime being forced to concede. Environmental activists made many gains in the 1990s and 2000s, right after Vietnam entered its transformative Doi Moi ("Restoration") period, which entailed some political, but mainly economic, reforms (Hong, 2009). For instance, the late 1980s to 1990s saw people protesting against multiple polluting factories in their neighborhoods and the government granted some meaningful concessions in response. The state moved the Ba Nhat factory to a rural area designed for chemical production, while the state-owned Viet Tri Chemicals had to invest in new methods of reducing emissions (Tria Kerkvliet, 2010). In another case, citizens successfully prevented Hanoi's Reunification Park from being turned into an entertainment theme park, hence preserving one of the few remaining green spaces in the city (Wells-Dang, 2012). Since then, concessions seem less likely, and they rarely meet all of the citizens' demands even when attained. Even in the historic Formosa pollution case that triggered an unprecedented amount of nationwide opposition, people were not duly compensated, and the polluting plant was still allowed to operate, albeit under "stricter" monitoring. Years later, emissions from the plant still cause problems for the nearby community and put their health at risk (Whong, 2022).

Compared to repression, and even concession, the intermediary responses of attrition and neglect feature less prominently in Vietnam. There are some acts of attrition that supplement outright

repression, such as the denouncing of NGOs and activists as harmful elements to society or labeling protests as a public disturbance. However, due to the government's willingness and ability to repress environmentalism at little cost, attrition is rarely needed. Ignoring environmentalism is even more uncommon, or at least harder to identify. The state prefers to take clearer courses of action, either repression or concession, rather than fall somewhere in between; it might be because ignoring claim-makers would just fuel them to keep pushing their demands. For a full overview of how the Vietnamese government responds to environmental activism and specific examples, see Appendix B.

B. The Philippines

One could say that Philippine environmentalism is more developed than Vietnam's because it started earlier and tackles a broader range of issues, such as genetically modified food. Nonetheless, environmental defenders do not fare well here; some argue the Philippines is one of, if not the worst, places to advocate for the environment (Global Witness, 2024).

The Philippine state also employs all four possible options in response to environmentalism, and there is less imbalance between them compared to Vietnam. For instance, concessions feature more prominently, even if they are symbolic, and many public demonstrations are ignored. As a result, one might think that the Philippines responds more favorably to environmental activists, but this is the furthest from the truth. The reason why activists here are in such danger is because the state vigorously engages in covert repression, using targeted killings as a main method. Many challenges against environmentalism are simply hidden in plain sight, especially when attrition is employed alongside repression.

The state's preference for murdering environmental defenders has earned the Philippines its infamous reputation. Most of the time, perpetrators are private parties with hidden identities, such as paramilitaries who can be linked to the authorities. This is exemplified by the case of environmental campaigner Gerry Ortega, whose killing was organized by former Governor Joel Reyes (Harbinson, 2015). Allegedly, however, the state's military is still directly responsible for more than one-third of these killings since 2002 (Sarmiento, 2019). When the state chooses to be directly involved instead of hiring private actors, killings are disguised under legitimate military operations. This was seen in the village Ned when six tribal members and their leader Datu

Victor Danyan were massacred in the military's efforts to eliminate "communist rebels" (Sarmiento, 2022a). These killings can happen on a small scale, like in targeted assassinations, or reach the level of large-scale bombings and shootings as seen in Mindanao during its martial law period (Sarmiento, 2019). Opting for large-scale operations shows that the authorities can be indiscriminate in their repression, and do not refrain from involving the wider personal network of activists; many Indigenous children have died as a result. Before resorting to taking their lives, the authorities usually subject environmental defenders to other secret repressive acts, including surveillance, intimidation, and physical harassment, as shared by Brandon Lee (Delina, 2020, pp. 8-9). Many activists have also been abducted, such as Jonila Castro and Jhed Tamano, but the government usually denies involvement (Alyansa Tigil Mina, 2023).

There is an inclination to hide such repressive acts, but the government conducts overt repression from time to time. For instance, the protests against the Didipio mines were met with forceful dispersal by security forces, which is not a regular occurrence (Mongabay, 2020). After all, freedom to assembly is guaranteed in the constitution, and people exercise this right very frequently (Presidential Communications Office, 2020). Environmental defenders can also be arrested, usually under the accusation of being communist sympathizers, as experienced by members of the Tumandok ethnic group (Aguirre, 2021). Incarceration is not the state's main repression method, especially compared to Vietnam, but there are still at least 51 political prisoners in the Philippines who are land and environmental defenders (Chavez, 2020b). The state's repression of environmentalism is even more evident when institutional means are used, which were particularly frequent under President Duterte's administration and the Marcos dictatorship. A few years ago, an anti-terror law was passed to give the police and military more powers to tackle suspected terrorists; the vague definition of "terrorist" means environmental activists can be targeted (Zoledziowski & Gutierrez, 2020). In fact, environmental defenders are at increased risk with this law as they are usually labeled as communists, and the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines is officially classified as a terrorist group. Publicly "red-tagging" activists like this is the state's way of undermining them, which lends justification to any overt repression against them (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In addition to individuals, local and international civil society groups can also be red-tagged, as seen with the Farmers Development Center and Oxfam.

Since the Philippine state is willing to go to extreme lengths to challenge environmental defenders, softer acts of attrition seem unnecessary, but they still appear from time to time. The most discernible is the authorities' insufficient investigation and prosecution of environmental activist killers. A study of 50 murder cases reveals that none have gone to prosecution (Hance, 2012). It exemplifies how acts of attrition can complement repression, since this allows the killings to continue. Additionally, authorities might resort to bribery to make activists give up their claims, as experienced by the Chico Dam protesters; however, this might only pertain to earlier response stages, before events escalate (Göransson, 2022).

It seems that more environmental defenders die at the hands of the Philippine state than the Vietnamese government, and yet the former is simultaneously more receptive to environmentalism. It is not uncommon for the Philippine government to at least give symbolic concessions in the form of verbal commitments to address issues or hearings where people can voice their opinions. This was observed with the Manila Bay reclamation projects when authorities suspended them for further investigation but secretly continued construction activities (Alyansa Tigil Mina, 2023). There are even meaningful concessions sometimes, such as the usage postponement of the country's single nuclear power plant. However, such concessions are rare. The local government and judicial branch have been key to some of these concessions, which have some independence from the national executive branch. For instance, the Supreme Court has issued the "writ of kalikasan" in many cases to "protect Filipinos' constitutional right to a balanced and healthy environment"; including the case of a nickel mine in Palawan, prompting it to respond to locals' environmental concerns (Fabro, 2023). One of the strongest concessions to the environmental movement recently was the nationwide ban on open-pit mining in 2017, propelled by Environment Secretary Gina Lopez (Sarmiento, 2022b). However, the ban was lifted after a few years following her removal from office, illustrating the somewhat inconsistent nature of the government's response at times. The authorities might shift between responses in a relatively short time frame, such as due to changes in political leadership. For a full overview of how the Philippine state responds to environmental activism and specific examples, see Appendix C.

C. Discussion

This research's findings are generally in line with theoretical expectations based on existing academic literature. Both Vietnam and the Philippines have repression as their dominant response to environmental activism, despite exhibiting all four types of responses, as predicted based on their non-fully democratic nature. A key area where they diverge is how they repress, as the Philippines relies on more covert and deadly methods to eliminate activists, as demonstrated by the series of targeted killings and attacks. Meanwhile, Vietnam is not hesitant to repress overtly via protest crackdowns, incarceration, institutional restrictions, and more. These patterns support the idea that hybrid regimes secretly conduct deadly repression because they cannot afford to repress openly without consequences, unlike full authoritarian regimes (Middeldorp & Le Billion, 2019). Indeed, Vietnam has few obstacles in plainly stifling activists and arbitrarily applying the law because there is virtually no separation of powers between government branches, and information dissemination is tightly controlled (Tria Kerkvliet, 2010, p. 53). In comparison, the Philippine judiciary maintains some independence from the executive and can sometimes keep the latter in check, as demonstrated by the Supreme Court issuing a writ against the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (Fabro, 2023). Moreover, the Philippines' unrestricted online media makes it difficult to conceal overt repression in the first place (Abbott et al., 2023). Therefore, covert killing is one of the few ways the Philippines can properly eliminate environmental activists while minimizing backlash.

The cases of Vietnam and the Philippines do not follow the "More Murder in the Middle" hypothesis, as the "hybrid" Philippines does not employ repression more aggressively than Vietnam. Vietnam arguably has a wider range of repressive methods and is more active in stifling environmentalism through institutional means, on top of intense situational repression. The death rate of environmental defenders is indeed higher in the Philippines, but it would be misleading to say that it represses more extremely. This is why Middeldorp and Le Billion's (2019) specification of specific methods like targeted killings in hybrid regimes is more insightful.

The importance of regime type is clearly demonstrated by these results but is not only reflected in the choice to kill or not: it permeates all aspects of a state's responses. In Vietnam's authoritarian regime, freedom of speech and assembly is not protected, and there is virtually no

tolerance for government criticism (FIDH, 2023). Hence, if any form of dissent is not accepted, the only option is to tackle it immediately out of fear that neglect would only prompt escalation. In contrast, it is not as easy to overtly crackdown on activists in the Philippines where freedom of speech and assembly is guaranteed. Therefore, when the government is not receptive, they opt to ignore to avoid costly consequences, if not repress in secret. Since overt repression is more costly for Philippine authorities, they are also more active in covert attrition, which can help other repression efforts; Vietnam does not need subtle attrition as much. Additionally, the decision to concede is also affected by one's regime. Most concessions by both countries are symbolic rather than meaningful, but one is more likely to observe this in the Philippines than in Vietnam. This could be because Philippine politicians are somewhat held accountable to the public with free and fair elections, which places extra pressure to be responsive to public opinion if they want to maintain their positions (Tria Kerkvliet, 2010, p. 34). On the other hand, citizen votes for the Vietnamese legislature do not truly matter, because only the Communist Party contests, with pre-nominated candidates. Hence, officials are more concerned about pleasing Party leaders for their work (p. 36). The lack of citizen-state accountability is further reinforced by the monolithic working nature of the Party; all officials must fall under Party lines and work as a collective whole, so it is rare to see anyone act independently. Since Vietnam is a one-party state, the centralization within the party extends to the running of the entire country as well (Wells-Dang, 2012, p. 120). Local governments answer directly to the national government and must follow their line of action. Contrastingly, there is less centralization in the Philippine public administration, meaning local governments might respond differently to environmentalism than the national government; there have been multiple occasions of local officials offering support to environmental activists (Chavez, 2020a). Finally, the fundamental characteristics of each country's regime affect the consistency of their responses. In relation to the centralized nature of the Vietnamese state as well as the continuous presence of the Communist Party, we see consistency in its responses. It is relatively rare to see the authorities backtrack on their responses, at least in the short term. In comparison, the Philippine state's response is a bit more susceptible to change, as exemplified by the introduction and withdrawal of the open-pit mining ban after a few years. This is due to changes in political leaders and officials, and lower levels of bureaucratic centrality.

VI. Conclusion

This paper has investigated how Vietnam and the Philippines respond to environmental activism. Findings reveal that both countries exhibit all possible types of responses: repression, attrition, neglect, and concession. However, they are most likely to repress, albeit in slightly different ways. Vietnam is comfortable with overt repression, whether it is physically, legally, or institutionally. In comparison, the Philippines is more inclined to conduct covert repression, with targeted killings being the principal method. One explanation lies in their respective political regimes. Vietnam's authoritarian system gives the state broad powers to stifle any dissent with little difficulty, while the Philippines' flawed democracy puts more constraints on state power. Hence, the Philippine authorities must act covertly to eliminate environmental defenders with minimized repercussions, and killing is a guaranteed way to silence activists permanently. These patterns follow initial predictions regarding how regime type can affect state responses to environmentalism and general contentious political action; this mainly pertains to the choice of challenging or supporting activists, and the specific methods of repression. Results also show that beyond the choice of using lethal methods or not, regime type might also contribute to other aspects of state responses, such as the need to answer to the public, and the consistency of responses across time and levels of authority.

Efforts were made to ensure high validity in the research process, mainly with source triangulation. Through this method, different perspectives and angles of events were accounted for. Additionally, independent news sources were sought to ensure an accurate portrayal of events. Nonetheless, there is still room for improvement in the methodology. Data was sampled purposively and not randomly, which might have led to an uneven distribution of data, even though all collected data was relevant for the investigation. This mostly pertains to the types of cases and data sources that were included. Indeed, certain news sources appeared more frequently than others, and there is a risk that only high-profile cases of environmental activism were covered, to the exclusion of many others. For instance, brutal state responses are reported more frequently than simple neglect, due to the former's shocking nature, making it likely that many subtler cases were accidentally excluded from the sample. Additionally, non-random sampling meant there was an uneven coverage of events per year or period. It is worth

considering random sampling and a larger sampling size in the future to account for more environmental activism events.

These findings have contributed to the academic literature on state responses to contentious political action, specifically regarding environmental activism. The research arena has been rather Western-centric with SEA being particularly neglected, and this study has tried to fill that gap by investigating two SEA states on the frontlines of climate change. Differences between the Vietnamese and Philippine responses suggest that it is difficult to make generalizations about SEA environmentalism at the moment; however, this might simply be a testament to the multiplicity of the region. In that case, there is even more reason to direct our attention to SEA and conduct similar research on other regional countries. Additionally, results highlight the importance of regime types when responding to contentious political action, and support the notion that repression is more common outside of full democracies. Most importantly, however, this investigation has clarified that hybrid regimes do not necessarily repress more aggressively as some have suggested, but they would rather repress in secret and lethal ways, which lends support to Middeldorp and Le Billon's (2019) argument.

From this investigation, civil society groups can deduce that their experience of environmental activism is highly dependent on the political regime. Hence, they should adapt to local contexts for survival and success. For instance, those working in the environmental sector must understand that international groups and foreigners are not excluded from repression in Vietnam and the Philippines, and realize why stoking local environmentalism is not an easy matter.

This study has only taken the first step in investigating Vietnam and the Philippines' responses to environmental activism but further research is necessary for a comprehensive understanding. The next logical step is to find other determinants of state responses beyond regime type, and ultimately uncover why Vietnam and the Philippines are staunchly against environmentalism. While it is beyond the scope of this investigation, analysis has suggested that these two countries' responses vary depending on the specific environmental issue, the leaders and officials in charge, the presence of international pressure, and the identity of claim-makers. For instance, certain Presidents have been instrumental in mounting challenges to environmental defenders in the Philippines, including Duterte and Marcos Sr. with their hard-line policies. It would be worthwhile to explore the effects of each factor in detail and their relative importance. Future

research in this direction could help improve the situation for environmental defenders and the natural environment in Vietnam and the Philippines.

VII. References

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VIII. Appendix

Appendix A: Data coding frame

Category of response	Sub-category	Indicator words	Code
Repression	Situational Repression	arrest, prosecute, violence, crackdown, suppress, target, harass, kill	RS
	Institutional Repression	law, bill, legislation, prevent, control, restrict, announce	RI
	Repression by State Actor	officials, officers, workers, military, police, deploy, order	RG
	Repression by Private Actor	plainclothes, firm, company, agency, groups, gangs, unidentified, unknown	RP
	Covert repression	abduct, harass, threat, assassinate, surveillance, kill, monitor	RC
	Overt repression	crackdown, arrest, announce, report, policing, prosecute, denounce	RO
Attrition	Attrition by State Actor	undermine, bureaucratic, administrative, restrictions, delay, divert, direct, institutions, unite, divide	AG
	Attrition by Private Actor	countermobilization, firm, company, group, mobilize, hire, appeal	AP
Ignore/ Neglect		no response, no comment, inaction, ignore, neglect, disregard	IN
Concession	Symbolic Concession	acknowledge, understand, consider, deliberate, temporary, listen, negotiate, discuss	CS
	Meaningful Concession	agree, concede, follow, meet, promise, grant, guarantee	CE

Appendix B: Results on Vietnam

Response	Sub-type	Presence	Methods	Example of events
Repression	**Situational Repression**	Yes	arrests; threats of violence and fines; violent crackdown on protests; incarceration; removing and banning protest material; blocking social media; breaking up private meetings	protests against infrastructure projects (e.g. in Thanh Hoa, Nghe An); Hanoi Tree Movement; Formosa protests; imprisonment of environmental NGO leaders and activists (e.g. Bach, Khanh, Loi, Duong);
	Institutional Repression	Yes	setting up security forces to respond to protests; regulations that restrict speech and assembly	formation of Riot Police Regiments; withdrawing a draft Law on Protests; Law on Cybersecurity; strict NGO regulatory framework; AI social listening programme in HCMC; Criminal Code prohibiting government criticism
	Repression by State Actor	Yes	deploying police forces to protest sites (sometimes in plainclothes); courts sentencing activists to prison; legislations from the National Assembly	protests against infrastructure projects; Formosa protests, imprisonment of environmental NGO leaders and activists
	Repression by Private Actor	Yes, but minimal	hire thugs to assault activist	assault against activists (e.g. Le My Hanh)
	Covert Repression	Yes	jamming mobile phone signals; preventing the media from reporting on issues; collecting information on protesters; monitoring and surveillance; forging criminal evidence; closed	protests against infrastructure projects; experiences of activists (e.g. Cao Vinh Thinh); Hanoi Tree Movement

			trials; maltreatment in prison; contacting workplace and acquaintances of activist; locking people in so they cannot protest; forcing activists to go into exile	
	Overt Repression	Yes	protest crackdown, arrests, prosecutions, announcing regulations	protests against infrastructure projects (e.g. in Thanh Hoa, Nghe An); Hanoi Tree Movement; Formosa protests; imprisonment of environmental NGO leaders and activists; Law on Cybersecurity
Attrition	**Attrition by State Actor**	Yes	labelling activism as a public disturbance; not accepting petitions in court; colluding with foreign court; denouncing NGOs and activists; delaying bills; forcing all public gatherings to be registered	protest against infrastructure projects (e.g. in Hai Ha); Formosa pollution scandal; debates over Law on Associations
	Attrition by Private Actor	Yes, but minimal	mobilize countermovements	Le My Hanh attacker criticizing her and other activists online; community criticism of activists online
Ignore/ Neglect	N/A	Yes, but very minimal, or not easy to identify	ignoring people's complaints; not resolving issues; moving forward with plans despite protests; not answering questions; refusing discussions	actions regarding the Formosa plant long after the first scandal; development and infrastructure projects (e.g. hydropower plant. bauxite mining); Hanoi Tree Movement; climate strike in HCMC; private sector projects (e.g. Daewoo Hotel)
Concession	**Symbolic Concession**	Yes; the more	offering certain concessions in exchange for reduced	protests against infrastructure projects (e.g.

		common form of concession	activism (e.g. release of detained protesters); conducting investigations (but not properly making wrongdoers take responsibility); verbal commitments; listening to claim-makers; hosting press meetings and dialogues; signing environmental treaties and revising environmental laws with weak enforcement; reducing the scale of projects; temporary solutions without addressing the root problem; insufficient compensation	in Hai Ha); Formosa pollution scandal; rhino horn trade; signatory of international treaties (e.g. UNFCCC, CITES); Law on Environmental Protection; scale-down of mining plans
	Meaningful Concession	Yes, but relatively rare	forcing companies and factories to reduce their negative effects on locals; cancelling infrastructure and development projects	changing the operations and locations of certain factories (e.g. Dona Bochang, Ba Nhat Chemicals, Viet Tri Chemicals); cancellations (Hanoi Reunification Park re-development; Hanoi Tree Movement; Dong Nai dams)

Appendix C: Results on the Philippines

Response	Sub-type	Presence	Methods	Example of events
Repression	**Situational Repression**	Yes	(targeted) killing; abducting; forceful dispersal of protests; red-tagging individuals and groups; harming friends and family of activists, threats; harassment; arrests of "communists"	experiences of activists (e.g. Castro and Tamano; Datu Victor Danyan); opposition against infrastructure projects (e.g. Manila Bay Reclamation, La Mesa Dam; Chico Dam); opposition against mining (e.g. in Tampakan, Didipio); experiences of NGOs (e.g. Oxfam, Center for Environmental Concerns)
	Institutional Repression	Yes	expanding the power of security forces to target activists; increasing presence of military; martial law; control of print media by elites	anti-terror law; termination of Enrile-Soto accord; Mindanao martial law (2017); Community Support Program; corporations being offered the service of militias to protect their interests; use of COVID-19 lockdown guidelines to monitor people and deter assembly
	Repression by State Actor	Yes	deploying the military in "legitimate operations;" deploying security forces to protest sites; deadly raids	opposition against mining (e.g. in Tampakan); large-scale bombing and shooting operations in villages (e.g. in Mindanao); opposition against infrastructure projects (e.g. dams on Jalaur and Panay Rivers; Chico Dam)

	Repression by Private Actor	Yes	hiring private actors (e.g. paramilitaries) to conduct killings and harassment	experiences of activists and environmental workers (e.g. forest ranger "Toto," Porquia; Claver)
	Covert Repression	Yes	targeted killings and attacks by private actors; intimidation; house searches; false reports of operational surveillance	experiences of activists (leader of Manobo Indigenous group; Brandon Lee); opposition against infrastructure projects opposition against mining (e.g. in Pantaron)
	Overt Repression	Yes, but inconsistently employed	forceful dispersal of protests; red-tagging individuals and groups	experiences of activists; opposition against economic and development projects (e.g. Chico Dam, Didipio mine)
Attrition	**Attrition by State Actor**	Yes	inefficient or no prosecution of environmental activist killers; bribing activists; denouncing activists and NGOs; removal of activists in office; granting businesses extra protection	experiences of activists (e.g. Datu; Celino, Castro and Tamano); experiences of NGOs (e.g. Oxfam); experiences of workers and officials (e.g. Lopez); opposition against infrastructure projects (e.g. Chico Dam)
	Attrition by Private Actor	No, or not very clear	there are individuals who bully and harass activists online, but it is unclear if they are linked to state authorities	experiences of activists (e.g. Maria)
Ignore/Neglect	N/A	Yes	ignoring people's complaints; not resolving issues; moving forward with plans despite protests; not answering	opposition against development and infrastructure projects (e.g. in Sitio Seedling; Marcopper mine; Maguila-guila dam, Didipio mine); opposition

			questions; refusing discussions; not monitoring companies	against genetically-modified rice
Concession	**Symbolic Concession**	Yes	temporary suspension of infrastructure and development projects; accepting petitions and hearings; insufficient compensation; agreeing to investigate matters; verbal commitments without enforcement; temporary solutions without addressing root of the issue; delaying projects but not cancelling	opposition against infrastructure and development projects (e.g. Manila Bay Reclamation; Marcopper; coal-fired power plants; land reclamation in Dumaguete); opposition against mining projects (e.g. Brooke's Point, South Cotabato); encouraging the youth to take part in climate strike
	Meaningful Concession	Yes	holding companies accountable; strengthening environmental regulations and their enforcement; issuing writs; cancellation of projects; new environmental initiatives	Commission on Human Rights naming oil and gas companies that must bear environmental responsibility; proposal of environmental enforcement bureau; cease-and-desist orders (e.g. mine in Palawan); cancellation of projects (e.g. quarry agreements in Masungi; SMI mine; Chico Dam); ban on open-pit mining; mines closure; Plastic Smart Cities program in San Isidro; ban on coal-fired power plants in Bohol; postponement of nuclear plant