

Greening a Machiavellian State? Insights for International Environmental Governance

Prakash Kashwan*

Assistant Professor, University of Connecticut, Department of Political Science, USA

The age of climate change that we live in has forced scholars and policymakers to rethink fundamental tenets of international environmental governance [1]. Moving beyond the 'pure modes of governance, in which either state or market actors play a leading role, scholars now recommend co-management, public-private partnerships, or social-private partnerships [2], each of which accord significant space to non-state actors. Such propositions and the numerous ongoing attempts to implement them have in turn led to concerns about the accountability of the non-state actors involved. Others have put forth proposals for 'stakeholder democracy', with an added emphasis on democratic representation and accountability of civil society participants in international environmental governance [3]. In this article, I argue that important as these proposals are, they have detracted from a critical scrutiny of the continuing dominance of the state, and the need to hold the state to account. I argue that to aid the agenda of state accountability, scholars and policymakers will need to address two fundamental aspects of contemporary international environmental governance: first, the dominant discourses of environmentalism that inform policies of international environmental governance need to be questioned; second, the top down efforts of international agencies must give way to interventions that aid politically mobilized groups of citizens capable of pressuring governments to adopt nationally suitable environmental action.

Environmentalism of the North and International Environmental Governance

The story of Cuyahoga River catching fire in the June of 1969, etched in public memory by the pictures published in the Times Magazine later that year, gave a big boost to environmental consciousness in the U.S.A. This event also signified a moment of transition for an industrialized country beginning to recognize the extent of its environmental degradation. This is the fundamental premise of what is referred to as 'environmentalism of the North' or the 'post-industrial environmentalism'. In essence, post-industrial environmentalism is founded on the assumption that individuals and governments can afford to think about environmental concerns only after they have secured a certain level of industrial development [4].

The context of post-industrial environmentalism has two important implications for the dominant discourses of international environmental governance. First, heightened levels of pollution in the immediate aftermath of industrialization draw attention to the consequence of poorly regulated industrial development, and create a legitimate space for state intervention. Second, because much of the landscape modified by industrialization or the accompanying processes of urbanization cannot be restored to its former pristine state, alternative green spaces are in demand. Often times, this demand translates into increased support for the provisions and stricter protection of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries set aside exclusively for conservation. Next, I examine how the legitimacy accorded to a state-driven model of strict nature conservation shapes international environmental governance.

State-Sponsored Green Washing in the Global South and Environmental Politics

The context of post-industrial development creates space and legitimacy for a state-driven model of nature conservation that relies on the creation of new enclosures devoted exclusively to the agenda of nature conservation. The application to developing countries of this model to the goals of promoting nature conservation in the developing countries is problematic on at least three counts.

First, post-industrial environmentalism, focused too narrowly on the 'green agenda', assumes away the history and the politics of state control over natural resources. National governments own and control more than 85 percent of the forests in the global South. Such a skewed allocation of property rights came about as a result of colonial era forest settlement processes, which set aside as state forests the territories that were previously occupied and used by individuals and groups within local communities [5] Any attempt to strengthen conservation regimes in 'state forests' reinforces colonial era distribution of forest property rights in the global South.

Second, the failure of formal property rights reforms has meant that forest-based livelihoods of indigenous and other forest-dependent people continue to be labeled as illegal. Under these conditions, the creation of exclusive nature reserves or setting aside forests as carbon sinks, lead to the displacement of a large number of indigenous and other rural people who lack formal property rights to their ancestral lands [6]. Even in cases where contingencies of electoral democracy prevent displacements, declaration of nature reserves greatly increases the possibility that populations living within the boundaries could be evicted at a future date. Moreover, such illegal existence of people is marred by legal restrictions on the provision of basic amenities—schools, roads, health centers, and drinking water—the kind of infrastructure which only governments can provide in remote forested areas.

As this discussion suggests, the healthy environment of the forested regions does not, by itself, guarantee "the right to life, liberty and security of person" for indigenous and other forest people [7]. To the contrary, good forests have often attracted strict and exclusionary regimes of laws meant to protect forests at the cost of forest-based livelihoods and farming. In their zest to bring 'state forests' under regimes of exclusionary nature conservation, developing country

*Corresponding author: Prakash Kashwan, Assistant Professor, University of Connecticut, Department of Political Science, USA, E-mail: prakash.kashwan@uconn.edu

Received August 12, 2013; Accepted August 16, 2013; Published September 09, 2013

Citation: Kashwan P (2013) Greening a Machiavellian State? Insights for International Environmental Governance. J Pol Sci Pub Aff 1: e106. doi:10.4172/2332-0761.1000e106

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political elites have often sacrificed the political values of freedom and liberty of the poor, including a violation of property rights of indigenous and other forest-dependent people [8].

Third, and perhaps most importantly, developing country governments have strategically exploited their positions as sovereign actors to distort international environmental negotiations for continued control and exploitation of state forests. For instance, the anticipation of large scale international funding for forest-based carbon sequestration has prompted government forestry agencies and ministries to *recentralize* forest policy, which often entails violation of rights of indigenous people recognized in national statutes [9]. In some cases, international conservation groups have been complicit in such attempts, which reinforce the exclusion and the marginalization of forest peoples [10]. Large developing countries have cited historical and contemporary inequities between the north and the south to secure greater bargaining power within international environmental negotiations, all the while perpetuating domestic inequities through continued denial of political and economic rights to indigenous and other marginalized groups [11].

Why it is that international environmental institutions have failed to move the developing country governments to effective environmental action? A critical understanding of these failures is a pre-requisite for the promotion of the new-age environmental governance tools that rely on state and non-state actors working together. Based on the discussion above and a reading of the contemporary debates among the scholars of environmental politics [12], the following explanations are worth a consideration.

First, as suggested above, the dominant discourses of environmentalism legitimize stricter protection of nature reserves under a regime of state control. In addition to the constraints related to sovereignty of nation states, the success of international environmental policy has also been marred by a naïve techno-managerial approach to environmental governance. Many, if not most, of the international environmental policy experts continue to believe that the root cause of environmental degradation in developing countries is their lack of technological and institutional expertise. Such reasoning fails to appreciate the Machiavellian character of developing country leaders and public officials, who have repeatedly exploited this naivety to indulge in the politics of promise. Even as governments promise action on the ground, national and international funds meant for environmental conservation are often diverted to serve non-environmental interests of the governing elite [13].

Second, as recent research has suggested, the complexity of international environmental governance in this age of climate change is truly overwhelming – it involves multiscale processes and multiple stakeholders with remarkably different sets of interests and ideas vis-à-vis the environment. Some proposals about market-based instruments of environmental governance have sought to skirt around this complexity by assuming that once the right set of incentives are created, national governments will behave as market players [14]. For instance, the much debated international carbon forestry program REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation “plus” conservation, the sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks) aims to pay national governments to ensure production of measurable and additional carbon credits through domestic programs of forest protection and conservation.

Programs such as REDD+ and other market-based instruments are thus a product of a combination of factors – the constraints related

to national sovereignty and the need for quick-fix solutions that enable national and international policymakers to bypass the immense complexity of environmental problems. The tendency to come up with quick-fix solutions is rooted in a post-industrial conception of environmentalism, which fails to account for the long history of state control of forests during colonial and post-colonial era. Finally, the forested landscape that international actors seek to set aside exclusively for the goal of nature conservation continue to be critical sources of livelihood for indigenous and other forest-dependent people. Thus, any policies that target large areas of landscape to enable economies of scale in the production and trade of environmental services are likely to exacerbate the ongoing conflicts between government forestry agencies and forest-dependent people.

Rethinking Environmentalism and Environmental Policies

Contemporary environmental governance presents a unique paradox—while it is practically impossible to bypass the State, developing country governments are deeply entrenched in the contemporary distribution of property rights in natural resources. One can cite numerous cases in which the institutions of state other than the executive acted as an effective check against the actions of government officials. Such institutions include the judiciary, legislature, and numerous other statutory agencies that are vested with the responsibility of protecting socio-economic and political rights of minority and other groups marginalized from the mainstream society [15]. Clearly, the introduction of multiple and countervailing checks and balances, with power vested in actors and organizations with competing interests may improve accountability at times [16]. Yet, in the long-run environmental activists must create a popular constituency capable of pressuring governments to act [17], which as discussed above, would require rethinking the dominant tenets of environmentalism. I argue that such a rethinking would require combining the philosophical propositions of the ‘environmentalism of the poor’ with the empirical findings contributed by the scholars of common property.

Environmentalism of the poor focuses on questions of resource rights for indigenous and other politically marginalized communities who, because of their natural resource-based livelihoods, have a direct stake in conserving land, water, and forest resources [18]. Scholars of common property have also demonstrated the importance of devolving rights and meaningful powers to forest-dependent groups. However, the two sets of scholars differ in their emphases. While the proponents of ‘environmentalism of the poor’ justify stronger local rights on the basis of *political* grounds, common property scholars argue for rights for the sake of securing and enhancing the *economic* stakes that local users have in protecting natural resources. In other words, common property scholarship has shown why political decisions to devolve stronger rights to local users are also likely to contribute to a judicious stewardship of local resources [19].

A successful combination of the *political* and the *economic* perspectives requires mobilization of local users at two levels. First, locally effective collectives vested in the practical business of resource management. Second, users must be mobilized into federated associations that can keep up the pressure on governments to enact and enforce policies aimed at protection of natural resources. Such demand will emerge from the real stakes that local groups develop when strong and secured rights are devolved. The success of Mexican and Nepalese community forestry programs is a testimony to the potential gains to be had from working simultaneously on political

and economic determinants of resource governance [20]. Scholars arguing for women's property rights have also employed a similar combination of political economic arguments [21].

In the long run, the environmental movement will succeed when national governments are held to account by political constituencies that vote for policies aimed at sound environmental governance [22]. However, such constituencies will not emerge as long as benefits of greening the earth are not shared widely. The scholars and practitioners of international environmental governments will, therefore, do well to engage with the idea and practices of the state in the global South. In the end, international environmental governance must tackle head on the question of how to guard the guardians, which in turn, is linked to a much broader agenda of deepening democracy.

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