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Tactics of Environmental NGOs in Influencing Public Policy in Malaysia

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ABSTRAK

Pertubuhan Alam Sekitar Bukan Kerajaan di Malaysia boleh mempengaruhi pembuatan dasar awam melalui beberapa taktik politik. Kajian ini meninjau dan membandingkan taktik yang digunakan oleh tiga pertubuhan, iaitu Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM), Persatuan Pencinta Alam Malaysia (MNS) dan Dana Alam Semulajadi Dunia (WWF). Persatuan Otomobil Malaysia (AAM) dipilih sebagai kumpulan kawalan. Data dan maklumat dikumpul dengan menemuduga secara bersemuka ketua pegawai eksekutif pertubuhan berkenaan atau wakil mereka menggunakan soalselidik yang telah sedia terbentuk. Temuan kajian ini menunjukkan pertubuhan alam sekitar tersebut adalah berbeza dari AAM dari segi taktik mempengaruhi dasar awam. Mereka lebih cenderung menggunakan taktik langsung dalam mempengaruhi keputusan dasar awam. Taktik seperti menjalan dan mengemukakan keputusan penyeldidkan, mengemukakan pandangan peribadi, melobi dan menghubungi pegawai, sering digunakan berbanding dengan taktik seperti kempen menulis surat dan telegram, melobi pihak "grassroots", merangka undang-undang atau menganjur konferen. Diantara pertubuhan alam sekitar, MNS menggunakan lebih taktik samada taktik langsung atau tidak langsung berbanding dengan SAM atau WWF. MNS juga mepunyai lebih banyak sumber kewangan dan ini mungkin menerangkan ia lebih banyak menggunakan banyak taktik. Kajian masa hadapan perlu menggunakan sampel yang lebih besar disamping mengkaji keberkesanan taktik yang digunakan.

ABSTRACT

Environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Malaysia can influence public policy-making through several political tactics. This study surveyed and compared the tactics used by three selected NGOs, namely, the Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM), the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Malaysia. The Automobile Association of Malaysia (AAM) was conveniently selected as the control group. Data and information were gathered through face-to-face interview technique with the chief executive officers of the respective organizations or their representative using a structured questionnaire. The findings reveal that the environmental NGOs are different from the AAM in their choice of tactics of influencing public policy. The former prefer to use direct tactics in influencing policy decisions. Tactics such as conducting and presenting research results, presenting personal viewpoints, lobbying and contacting officials, are often used compared to tactics like letter-writing and telegram campaigns, grassroots lobbying, drafting legislation or organizing conferences. Among the NGOs, the MNS has been the most tactical in the sense that it has used more tactics, both direct and indirect, more often than the SAM or the WWF. The MNS is also the most resourceful of the NGOs and this probably explains its capacity to employ more political tactics. Future studies should use a bigger sample as well as investigate the effectiveness of the various tactics used.

INTRODUCTION

Environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) worldwide have been recognized as influential actors in the decision-making arena on policies related to the environment. The manner in which these NGOs influence decision-making vary and depends on the strength of the NGOs themselves as well as the institutions which

they target their activities (Mohd and Laarman 1994). At one extreme, there are NGOs which work closely with the public in harnessing their support to influence policies while at the other extreme there are other NGOs that directly lobby the policy makers themselves. The degree of success of environmental NGOs in influencing policy decisions vary among nations. In some countries, such as the United States of America, environmental NGOs have been responsible for bringing about the institutionalization of environmental concern. In such countries, these NGOs have permanently dotted the political landscape of the nations.

Environmental NGOs have also made their presence felt in the decision-making arena on environmental policies in Malaysia. These NGOs have started to influence decision-making either directly or otherwise. The Sahabat Alam Malaysia (Friends of the Earth, Malaysia), for example, has been organizing conferences on the environment on a regular basis during the past many years which put forward recommendations to be taken up by government departments and ministries. The Malaysian Nature Society (MNS), on the other hand, has played an active role in organizing expeditions to remote forest areas and has made several discoveries of new flora. The outcome of these expeditions help to educate members of the public as well as policy makers on the richness of the country's biological diversity which need to be conserved for future generation. The World Wide Fund for Nature, Malaysia (WWF) has been frequently commissioned by the government to undertake studies that would form the base for policy decisions.

Although the general tactics used by some environmental NGOs are known, there has been no systematic study to account for the similarities and differences in the specific tactics used by the different organizations in influencing policy decisions. By analyzing these specific tactics the public in general, and the members of the organizations, in particular, would be able to gauge the effectiveness of these NGOs in influencing policy decisions.

Environmental NGOs and Tactics of Influence

Environmental NGOs are essentially interest groups whose main goal is, among others, to influence government decisions in favour of the common interest that is shared by the members of the organizations. Members of these voluntary organizations are bonded together by this common interest about the environment and they will pursue it by making claims or demands upon other groups in the society, including the government. The shared interest determines the kind of policies that the organizations will influence and also serve as a yardstick against which these organizations judge the actions or inactions of other members of the society.

In designing tactics to influence policy decisions, environmental NGOs must give overriding attention to the centres of influence. The centres of influence are essentially the points where decisions are made and these generally include the legislative, executive and judicial divisions of the government. Various tactics are open to the NGOs to access the centres of influence and these can be broadly categorized into two, namely "inside" and "outside tactics" (Gais and Walker 1992).

Inside tactics, or conventional lobbying, involve close consultation between the NGOs and policymakers. Through these tactics, the NGOs or their representatives communicate data or opinions to governmental decision makers in an attempt to influence policy decisions. Representatives of the NGOs usually try to convince policymakers that some form of action should be taken to modify an established position or to change it in the midst of competing groups to change it. Hence, popular inside tactics include personal presentation of viewpoints, conducting and presenting research results and legislative and administrative lobbying. (Table 1)

In comparison, outside tactics involve "constituency lobbying", or the use of electoral or constituency connections to exert pressure on policy decisions. Outside tactics serve as indirect efforts to exert influence upon policy processes. However, the main goal is to build support within the general public for a new set of values that may become manifest in the future policies (Gais and Walker 1992). Frequent outside tactics include letter-writing campaign, working with the media, and organizing meetings and conferences.

METHOD

Survey

The focus of the study is on national NGOs concerned with the protection and conservation

of the environment. The main criterion used in selecting the NGOs is that these NGOs must be known to be active in promoting environmental protection and conservation as evident by their programs and activities reported in the literature or by the media. Using this criterion, three environmental NGOs were selected, namely, the Malaysian Nature Society, the Sahabat Alam Malaysia and the World Wide Fund for Nature, Malaysia. The Automobile Association of Malaysia was selected as the control group because it is quite a prominent non-governmental organization focusing mainly on non-environmental issues.

Data and information required for this study include the history, financial sources, membership, organizational set-up, and the tactics usually employed in attempting to influence policy decisions. Such data and information were gathered through direct interview with the presidents of the organizations or their representatives using a prepared questionnaire. The questionnaire was mailed in advance of the interviews. Telephone calls were also made to inform the organizations representatives of the study and to request for their cooperation. Interviews were conducted between 15th August 1998 to 5th January 1999. All groups participated in the survey.

In order to gather data on the tactics of influence, the representatives were presented with a list of tactics deemed to have been used by the NGOs. The respondents were also allowed to indicate other tactics that were not listed. For each of the tactics, the respondents were asked to indicate its frequency of use on a four-point scale; namely, 1 = used most of the time; 2 = used sometimes; 3 = used rarely; and 4 = never use. The measure of central tendency used in the analysis was the median score.

RESULTS

Background Information of the NGOs

Information on date of establishment, membership size, number of full-time staff members, and sources of funds of the NGOs are given in Table 2.

TABLE 1
Inside and outside tactics of influence

Inside tactics	Outside tactics
Legislative and administrative lobbying	Working with the media
Litigation	Organizing conferences
Testifying at hearings	Endorsing political candidates
Conducting and presenting research results	Protests and demonstration
Informal contact with officials	Letter-writing and telegram campaigns
Drafting legislation	Entering into coalitions
Personal presentation of viewpoints	Grassroots lobbying

Source: Schlozman and Tierney (1986)

TABLE 2
Age, membership, number of staff, and sources of funds of the NGOs

Name of NGO	Year established	Number of members	Number of full-time staffs	Important sources of funds
Malaysian Nature Society	1951	3732 (61 are organizations)	36	Membership, pubications, donors, contracts
Sahabat Alam Malaysia	1974	500 individuals	5	Membership
World Wide Fund for Nature	1972	Non-membership	60	Donors
Automobile Association of of Malaysia (control group)	1932	100,000 (individuals and organizations)	270	Membership

Among the environmental NGOs, the MNS is the oldest, has the largest membership and the most resourceful, in the sense that it has indicated to have more "important" sources of funds, compared with the other NGOs. In spite of these facts, the environmental NGOs are relatively smaller than the control group, the AAM. The membership of the AAM is about 30 times more than the MNS and its staff members is about eight times more than the that of the WWF.

The environmental NGOs and the AAM, however, share one common characteristic which is their strong dependence on their members for funds. Except for the WWF, which is a non-membership organization, the other organizations indicated that contribution from membership dominate their budget.

Tactics Influencing Policy Decisions

Table 3 shows the results on the frequencies of use of tactics by the NGOs in trying to influence public policy decisions. Data presented in the table shows that there are more differences than similarities in the use of tactics by the environmental NGOs and the AAM. The only similarities are that both the environmental NGOs and the AAM frequently use the media as well as in providing speakers for purposes of seminar and other meetings. Also, both groups of NGOs sometimes testify at meetings and resort to letter-writing and telegram campaigns in promoting their interests on relevant issues.

The differences in tactics used by the NGOs are many. The environmental NGOs are more likely to use "inside" tactics such as conducting and presenting research results, presenting viewpoints, contacting officials informally, and lobbying. The AAM, on the other hand, are more likely to organize conferences, lobby their supporters, draft legislation as well as getting involved in court cases. The AAM, therefore, frequently resort to "outside" tactics in attempting to influence policy decisions.

Among the environmental NGOs, there are as many similarities as there are differences in the use of various tactics. It appears that conducting research and presenting its result, using the media, grassroots lobbying, entering into coalitions and drafting legislation are common tactics used by the environmental NGOs in trying to influence decisions. These NGOs seem to differ on the use of the other tactics.

The results also show that the MNS is the most tactical of the environmental NGOs in the sense that it has been using more tactics, both inside and outside, more frequently compared with the other two organizations. The MNS seems to target their members, the public as well as the policy makers as an overall strategy to influence policy decisions. Being a non-membership organization, the WWF seldom resorts to using letter-writing and telegram campaigns. A strong asset of the WWF seems to be its research capability and it has made use of this asset in influencing public decisions through

TABLE 3
Frequency in the use of tactics of influence

Tactics	MNS	WWF	SAM	Median	AAM
Conducting and presenting research results	1	1	1	1	2
Working with the media	1	1	1	1	1
Providing speakers	1	1	2	1	1
Personal presentation of viewpoints	1	1	2	1	2
Lobbying	1	1	2	1	2
Informal contacts with officials	1	1	2	1	2
Letter-writing and telegram campaigns	1	2	2	2	2
Organizing conferences	1	2	2	2	1
Entering into coalitions	2	2	2	2	1
Grassroots lobbying	2	2	2	2	1
Drafting legislation	2	2	2	2	1
Litigation	3	4	2	3	1
Testifying at hearings	3	4	2	3	3
Protest and demonstration	3	4	4	4	1
Endorsing political candidates	4	4	4	4	4

Notes: 1. Used most of the time 2. Used sometimes
3. Used rarely 4. Never used

various tactics as shown in the table 3. The SAM appears to concentrate on conducting research and using the media, probably in publicising the research results.

Table 4 shows the results on the three priority tactics used by the NGOs, as indicated by their representatives during the interviews. It can be seen that there is a sharp contrast between the environmental NGOs and the AAM. Most of the priority tactics used by environmental NGOs are not on the priority list of the AAM. Research activities dominate the tactic of the environmental NGOs whereas the AAM prefers to resort to campaign as its priority tactic.

TABLE 4
Priority tactics of influence

Rankings	MNS	SAM	WWF	AAM
1	Research	Research	Research	Campaigns
2	Presenting viewpoints	Media	Informal Contacts	Grassroots lobbying
3	Campaigns	Lobbying	Media	Media

DISCUSSION

The results presented earlier provide some insights into the questions of whether or not environmental NGOs are really different from other NGOs in terms of tactics in influencing policy decisions and whether or not environmental NGOs are more likely to succeed or otherwise in influencing such decisions.

The findings of this survey reveal that the three environmental NGOs appear to adopt different political tactics than the AAM in influencing public policy decisions. In terms of overall tactics as well as priority tactics used, the environmental NGOs often resort to those tactics that bring their leaders or their representatives into close contact with policy makers. Tactics like conducting and presenting research results, presenting viewpoints, contacting government officials and lobbying are popular with these NGOs. The AAM, on the other hand, prefer to adopt indirect ways to get to the policy makers. It often employs tactics such as public campaigns, grassroots lobbying and using the media to get their viewpoints across to policy makers.

A few factors can be highlighted to explain the differences in the tactics used by the environmental NGOs and the AAM. These factors are the assets that are available to the groups which include financial resources, membership size, and number of staff and their expertise. Generally, the more assets a group has the more tactics are available for them to choose to influence policy decisions. Of the various factors, the two most influential ones are the size of membership and staff expertise.

The size of membership, and their geographical distribution, could explain the choice of indirect tactics by the AAM. The AAM has more than 100,000 members comprising individuals and groups and they are located all over the country. These members present a strategic asset to the association because their time and energy can be harnessed to lobby the public or carry out campaign activities on behalf of the association. The leaders of the association need not have to lobby the policy-makers themselves but can do so through their members. Such tactics are relatively cheaper compared with those like conducting and presenting research results and, therefore, can be employed with little costs to the association. Elsewhere, studies have shown that the presence of association subunits or branches is related to a preference of indirect or "outside" tactics (Gais and Walker, 1992).

Theoretically, many factors affect the choice of tactics used by environmental groups of which staff number and their expertise are two of them (Berry, 1977). The MNS and WWF have a sizeable number of staff and most of them have strong research background. Therefore, it is not surprising that research and presentation of its results is the most popular tactic employed by these two organizations. These organizations are well known to be science-based organizations in the sense that they rely heavily on scientific data and evidence to recommend policies and strategies on relevent environmental issues. The MNS, for example, has been organizing scientific expeditions to remote forest areas, including Belum forests and Endau-Rompin forests. These expeditions led to many scientific discoveries as well as created greater awareness of the public on the importance of conserving these areas. As a result of these expeditions, the state governments of Johore and Pahang agreed to set aside 98,000 ha of the Endau-Rompin forest as a national park.

The WWF, on the other hand, is often commissioned by government departments and other interested parties to carry out studies on

various topics related to environmental policies. Two examples of such studies are the formulation of National Ecotourism Plan and Assessment of Biological Diversity in Malaysia. From these examples, it can be seen that the expertise of the staffs of the WWF is sought after by government departments in recommending environmental policies and strategies. The award of such studies to the WWF acknowledges the research capability and strength of the organization.

One of the philosophies of the SAM is that it believes in presenting true and reliable facts in promoting new policies and improving the current ones. Therefore, the organization is committed to research in whichever way possible. It is felt, however, that the involvement of SAM in research activities is not on the same extent as the MNS or the WWF. SAM has very few staff members for it to get involved in significant research activities. It is believed that SAM works together with the Consumer Association of Penang or other sister organizations in conducting research on environmental issues.

Having discussed the tactics used, the next question would be are the environmental NGOs effective in influencing policy decisions? The results of the survey only provide some general answers to the question because in reality a lot of other factors influence government policy decisions.

Theoretically, inside tactics are more effective than outside tactics in influencing policy decisions. Outside tactics are usually used to exert extra pressure on policy decisions, particularly when the inside tactics fail to do so. The rationale for inside tactics is that policy-makers are overloaded with daily demands and pressures. NGOs take the opportunity to assist these policy-makers, and in return have their legislative interests represented (Ornstein and Elder, 1978). In all cases, NGOs or their representatives communicate data or opinions to governmental decision-makers in an effort to influence policy decisions. NGOs try to convince policy-makers that some form of action should be taken to modify an established position or preserve it in the midst of competing interests to change it.

The findings presented earlier show that the three environmental NGOs are more likely to use inside tactics than the outside ones in influencing policy decisions. Tactics like conducting and presenting research results, presenting viewpoints and lobbying policy-makers are popular with these NGOs. Theoretically, therefore, the environmental NGOs have been using effective tactics in influencing policy decisions. However, further research needs to be done to measure the impacts of these tactics on policy decision-making.

CONCLUSION

Many environmental NGOs in this country are involved in the struggle to influence government policy decisions on the environment by employing various political tactics. This study gives a picture on the tactics used by three selected NGOs. The selected environmental NGOs, however, can be considered as the representatives of the big and popular ones. The tactics that these NGOs use may not represent the tactics used by the smaller and less popular environmental NGOs. The smaller NGOs, presumably being less endowed with financial and human resources, are less likely to use costly tactics such as conducting and presenting results and lobbying policy-makers as what being done by the three NGOs studied. The picture painted for the environmental NGOs give the impression that they are quite different from other NGOs, like the Automobile Association of Malaysia, in terms of the tactics used in influencing policy decisions. It seems like environmental NGOs prefer to use direct tactics while non-environmental NGOs prefer the indirect ones.

Future studies should focus on a bigger sample of NGOs, preferably involving a cross section of the entire environmental NGO population. The findings of such studies will give a better picture on how the community of environmental NGOs attempt to influence policy decisions in this country. Detail studies should also be conducted to measure the impact of the NGO strategies and tactics on policy decisions.

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