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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Domestic political institutions and conflict dynamics in Chinese-backed dam projects: Ghana and Sudan compared

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This article examines how domestic political institutions shape the conflict dynamics surrounding Chinese-backed infrastructure projects in Africa. Focusing on Bui Dam in Ghana and Merowe Dam in Sudan, it argues that similar development projects can generate markedly different trajectories of contention depending on how states mobilise and deploy state capacity. Drawing on scholarship on regime type, state capacity, and contentious politics, the article shows that democratic and authoritarian political contexts condition both the strategies states adopt towards affected communities and the forms of resistance that emerge in response.

The article develops a comparative qualitative analysis based on fieldwork, interviews, documentary sources, and process tracing. It demonstrates that in Ghana, relatively stronger administrative capacity and more open political institutions enabled more institutionalised and negotiated forms of contestation, even though significant tensions, exclusions, and grievances persisted throughout the project. In contrast, Sudan's military-autocratic political structure and reliance on coercive state capacity contributed to highly exclusionary forms of project implementation, violent repression, and more transgressive conflict dynamics.

By placing domestic political institutions at the centre of the analysis, the article contributes to debates on China–Africa relations and infrastructure-led development by showing that the political consequences of Chinese-backed projects are mediated through the institutional and political environments in which they are embedded. More broadly, the study highlights the disconnect between official development narratives surrounding mega-dam projects and the lived experiences of affected communities.

Cet article examine comment les institutions politiques africaines façonnent les dynamiques de conflit entourant les projets d'infrastructures financés par la Chine en Afrique. A partir d'une analyse comparative du barrage de Bui au Ghana et du barrage de Merowe au Soudan, il montre que des projets de développement similaires peuvent produire des trajectoires de

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contestation très différentes selon la manière dont les États mobilisent et déploient leurs capacités étatiques. En mobilisant les travaux sur les régimes politiques, la capacité étatique et les politiques contestataires, l'article soutient que les contextes politiques démocratiques et autoritaires influencent à la fois les stratégies adoptées par les États envers les communautés affectées et les formes de résistance qui en découlent.

L'étude repose sur une analyse qualitative comparative fondée sur des enquêtes de terrain, des entretiens, des sources documentaires et le traçage de processus. Elle montre qu'au Ghana, la capacité administrative relativement plus forte et des institutions politiques plus ouvertes ont favorisé des formes de contestation davantage institutionnalisées et négociées, malgré la persistance de tensions, d'exclusions et de griefs importants. Par contre, au Soudan, la structure politique autoritaire et le recours plus important à la capacité coercitive de l'État ont contribué à des formes de mise en œuvre fortement exclusionnaires, à la répression violente et à des dynamiques de conflit plus transgressives.

En plaçant les institutions politiques africaines au centre de l'analyse, l'article contribue aux débats sur les relations Chine–Afrique et le développement fondé sur les infrastructures en montrant que les conséquences politiques des projets financés par la Chine en Afrique sont médiatisées par les environnements institutionnels et politiques dans lesquels ils s'inscrivent. Plus largement, l'étude met en évidence le décalage entre les discours officiels sur le développement associés aux mégaprojets hydroélectriques et les expériences vécues par les communautés directement affectées.

Keywords China–Africa relations • infrastructure conflict • state capacity • contentious politics • mega-dams • state–society relations

Mots-clés relations Chine–Afrique • conflits liés aux infrastructures • capacité étatique • politiques contestataires • méga-barrages • relations État–société

Key messages

- Chinese-backed infrastructure projects do not produce uniform political outcomes across Africa; their conflict dynamics are mediated by domestic political institutions and state strategies.
- Chinese financing enabled both Bui and Merowe Dam projects, but domestic political and institutional contexts shaped how conflict, displacement, and opposition were governed.
- Relatively more open political systems tend to manage infrastructure-related contention through more institutionalised and negotiated mechanisms, whereas authoritarian systems rely more heavily on coercive and exclusionary strategies.
- Official state narratives portray mega-dam projects as engines of development and modernisation, yet affected communities often experience them through displacement, dispossession, and uneven access to project benefits.
- Understanding the political consequences of infrastructure development in Africa requires greater attention to state–society relations, political opportunity structures, and the governance of contention surrounding large-scale projects.

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Introduction

Large-scale Chinese-backed infrastructure projects have become one of the defining features of contemporary China–Africa relations. Across Africa, Chinese-backed dams, railways, ports, and transport corridors are frequently promoted by both Chinese and African political leaders as engines of economic transformation, development, and stability. Yet, despite these developmental promises, many of these projects also generate intense social and political contestation, particularly among communities directly affected by displacement, land dispossession, environmental degradation, and uneven access to project benefits (McCully, 2001; Scudder, 2005; Sneddon, 2015; Middleton, 2022; Lema, 2025a). Existing scholarship on China–Africa infrastructure development has largely focused on China's financing practices, geopolitical ambitions, development model, or the broader global political economy of infrastructure expansion. While these studies provide important insights, they often pay less attention to how domestic political and institutional contexts within African countries shape the implementation and political consequences of these projects. Similar infrastructure projects may therefore produce very different forms of resistance, repression, negotiation, and conflict depending on the institutional environments in which they are embedded.

This article aims to close that gap by examining how domestic political institutions shape the conflict dynamics surrounding Chinese-backed mega-dam projects in Africa. Specifically, it argues that these differences are best understood through the domestic political and institutional contexts within which such projects are implemented. It focuses on a comparative analysis of Bui Dam in Ghana and Merowe Dam in Sudan, two major hydropower projects financed and constructed with significant Chinese involvement. It shows that although both projects were framed by state authorities as symbols of national development and modernisation, they generated markedly different trajectories of contention and state response. In Ghana, conflict surrounding Bui Dam was managed largely through institutionalised and negotiated channels, despite significant tensions, exclusions, and grievances. In Sudan, by contrast, resistance to Merowe Dam was met with extensive coercion, repression, and state-sponsored violent confrontation.

The article argues that these divergent trajectories cannot be explained by Chinese involvement alone. Rather, Chinese financing enabled both projects, while domestic political institutions mediated their political consequences. Drawing on scholarship on regime type, state capacity, and contentious politics, the article shows that relatively more open political systems tend to rely more heavily on administrative and institutional mechanisms to manage opposition to infrastructure projects, whereas authoritarian systems are more likely to depend on coercive state capacity and exclusionary forms of governance. These institutional differences shape the political opportunity structures available to affected communities and those backing them and, consequently, influence the forms and intensity of contentious collective action that emerge around the projects.

The comparison between Ghana and Sudan provides a useful framework for analysing these dynamics. Both countries pursued large-scale Chinese-backed dam projects presented as vehicles for development and national progress. However, they differed significantly in terms of political regime type, institutional structure, and state–society relations. Comparing these two cases, therefore, allows for an examination

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of how similar infrastructure projects generate different conflict trajectories under contrasting political and institutional environments. Methodologically, the article draws on comparative qualitative research, combining multi-sited fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, documentary analysis, and process tracing. It reconstructs how state authorities, affected communities, and other actors interacted throughout the planning and implementation of the two projects, allowing the analysis to move beyond static accounts of infrastructure conflict towards a processual understanding of how contention evolved over time. This allows the article to combine empirical analysis of the two dam projects with a broader theoretical discussion of the relationship between political institutions, state capacity, state–society relations, and infrastructure-related contention.

The article contributes to three interrelated debates. First, it advances scholarship on China–Africa relations by demonstrating that the political consequences of Chinese-backed infrastructure projects are mediated through domestic political institutions rather than determined by Chinese involvement alone. Second, it contributes to research on state capacity and contentious politics by explaining how political institutions shape the governance of infrastructure-related conflict through the mobilisation of different dimensions of state capacity. Finally, it highlights the persistent disconnect between official development narratives and the lived experiences of communities directly affected by mega-dam projects.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature on state capacity, regime type, contentious politics, and the political economy of large dams. The article then outlines the methodological approach before developing the theoretical framework guiding the analysis. The subsequent sections examine the Bui and Merowe Dam projects comparatively before concluding with the broader implications of the findings.

Situating the research

This section situates the article within a broader scholarship on state capacity, political institutions, contentious politics, and the political economy of large-scale dam schemes.

State capacity, political institutions, and development

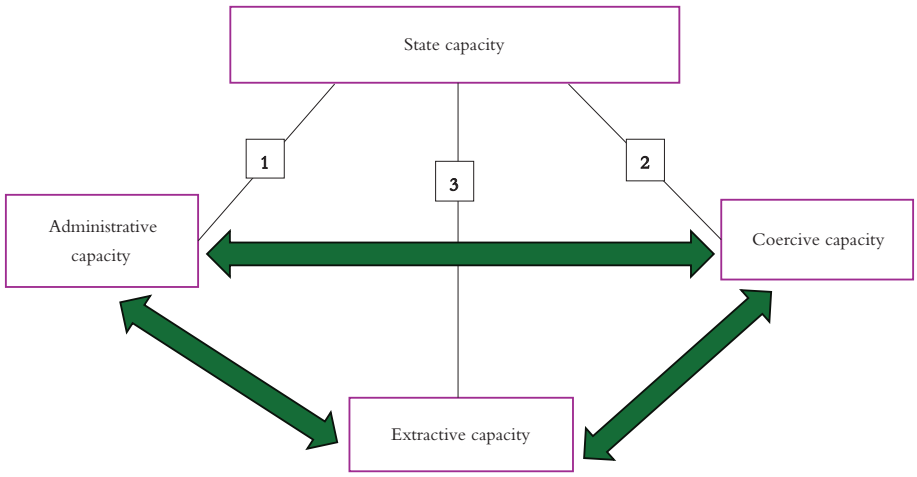
State capacity has long occupied a central place in debates on development, governance, and political order. Yet the concept is deeply contested. According to Johnson and Koyama (2017), the concept has its origins in the work of political scientists and fiscal sociologists such as Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol, and Michael Mann, who in turn built on a tradition in German scholarship associated with Otto Hintze and Joseph Schumpeter. More recently, however, the concept of state capacity has also entered the lexicon of development economists and international development agencies, as well as mainstream economics. This suggests that the use of the concept of state capacity varies considerably in the literature (Cingolani et al, 2015; Hanson and Sigman, 2021). According to Centeno et al (2017: 4), this creates a potential challenge to use the concept as a 'productive, analytical concept'. As Hendrix (2010: 273) argues, this is because state capacity 'remains a concept in search of precise definition' and measurement.

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Nonetheless, it is broadly understood as the ability of states to formulate, implement, and enforce collective decisions and public policies across their territories (Sikkink, 1991). As such, three dimensions of state capacity are of central interest for this study, namely the administrative capacity, the coercive capacity, and the extractive capacity. In effect, according to Hanson (2018: 20), the 'extractive, coercive, and administrative capacities are the core dimensions of state capacity'. First, the administrative capacity refers to the ability of state institutions to coordinate policy formulation and implementation, regulate social and economic activities, gather information, and engage with social actors throughout the territory under their control using institutional mechanisms at their disposal (Fukuyama, 2004). Coercive capacity, by contrast, concerns the ability of the state to maintain order and impose compliance through policing, surveillance, and the use or threat of force (Hanson, 2018). Consequently, the coercive dimension of state capacity depends on the state's ability to monopolise violence in enforcing rules, regulations, and policies (Krasner and Risse, 2014; Mao, 2021). Finally, the extractive dimension of state capacity refers to the ability of states to mobilise resources. This is not only essential for funding state activities of all types, but it also serves as a marker for the capabilities that underlie state power (Hanson, 2018: 19–20; Mao, 2021). The three core dimensions of state capacity are deeply intertwined, as Figure 1 suggests.

However, this article focuses primarily on the administrative and coercive dimensions of state capacity because they are particularly relevant for understanding how governments manage social contestation surrounding large-scale infrastructure projects. Importantly, the deployment of these dimensions of state capacity is shaped by broader political institutions and regime structures. Mann's (1984) distinction between infrastructural and despotic power provides an important starting point for understanding how states exercise authority. Infrastructural power refers to the capacity of the state to implement decisions through institutional coordination and

Figure 1: Linkages between the core dimensions of state capacity



Source: Author's conceptualisation based on scholarship on state capacity.

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engagement with society, whereas despotic power denotes the ability of political elites to impose decisions without routine negotiation with social actors (Lucas, 1998).

Building on these foundations, Evans (1995) argues that developmental effectiveness depends not only on bureaucratic competence but also on embedded autonomy; that is, institutionalised linkages between state institutions and society. Mkandawire (2001) further extends these debates in the African context by showing that state capacity evolves through historically contingent political coalitions, developmental priorities, and state–society relations rather than through bureaucratic strength alone. Together, these perspectives suggest that state capacity is both institutional and relational, shaping how governments respond to contentious politics surrounding infrastructure development. Indeed, recent scholarship increasingly conceptualises state capacity not simply as a hierarchical attribute of state institutions, but also as relationally constituted through state–society interactions and institutionalised forms of participation (Pill, 2024). Thus, states that maintain stronger institutional connections with civil society are often better positioned to manage social tensions through negotiation and incorporation rather than coercion alone.

The political economy and geopolitics of large hydropower schemes

Large dams have long embodied state-led development visions rooted in 'high modernist' faith in technological mastery over nature. As McCully (2001) argues, their expansion is tied to the global political economy of development finance, once dominated by the World Bank and the US Bureau of Reclamation but increasingly by China. While promising electrification, irrigation, and national prestige, they have often caused ecological degradation, displacement, and elite territorial control. Sneddon (2015) further views dams as geopolitical instruments, with Chinese-funded projects such as the Bui and Merowe Dams advancing broader economic and diplomatic strategies, including the Belt and Road Initiative.

These projects repackage technological mastery as South–South and 'win–win' cooperation while reproducing dependency and dispossession. The World Commission on Dams (WCD) report (2000) marked a turning point by documenting these costs and advocating participatory, rights-based, and sustainable decision-making. As Scudder (2005) notes, the WCD challenged development orthodoxy by emphasising displacement, compensation, and livelihood restoration, though implementation remains uneven. These dynamics reveal how domestic politics intersect with transnational forces: democratic Ghana has incorporated some WCD norms, whereas authoritarian Sudan combines external finance with coercion to reinforce elite control (Lema and Odota, 2025; Bader and Hodzi, 2026; Chen, 2026).

Infrastructure development and contentious politics

In line with Cross's (2014; 2015) argument, large infrastructure projects have historically been associated with state-led visions of development, modernisation, and territorial transformation. Dams, in particular, have frequently been promoted as symbols of national progress, economic growth, electrification, and state-building. However, a large body of scholarship also demonstrates that mega-dam projects often generate significant social, environmental, and political tensions, particularly through displacement, dispossession, ecological disruption, and unequal distribution

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of costs and benefits (McCully, 2001; Scudder, 2005; Sneddon, 2015). As Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) aptly note, while promises can inspire hope, unfulfilled promises breed disillusionment. Furthermore, research by Hall et al (2018) and others highlights that the implementation of megaprojects sets in motion a complex array of dynamics – social, economic, political, and environmental – many of which are both expected and unexpected, intended and unintended. These dynamics reveal that the construction of mega-dams is not merely a technical or economic endeavour, but one deeply embedded in contentious political terrain.

Indeed, as scholars of contentious politics argue, such projects frequently create new arenas of political struggle because they produce uneven costs and benefits and lead to what Lind et al (2020) and Hall et al (2015) describe as geographies of winners and losers.[1] As a result, communities affected by displacement, environmental disruption, or exclusion from decision-making processes often mobilise to contest state policies and assert competing claims over land, resources, compensation, as well as development priorities. Charles Tilly (2003: 9) defines contentious politics as 'public and collective claim-making' involving governments[2] in contexts where competing interests are at stake. More broadly, contentious politics refers to collective interactions in which state actors are directly involved either as targets, participants, or objects of political claims (McAdam et al, 2003). From this perspective, conflict surrounding mega-dam projects extends beyond material grievances alone and must also be understood through the political and institutional environments within which actors mobilise (Lema, forthcoming).

The institutional environments determine the availability of what contentious politics scholarship refers to as political opportunity structure. The concept of political opportunity structures is particularly useful in this regard. It refers to features of political systems that either facilitate or constrain collective mobilisation and contentious collective actions. According to Tilly and Tarrow (2015), two dimensions are especially important for understanding contentious politics: state capacity and the extent of democratic openness.[3] The forms and trajectories of contention surrounding infrastructure projects therefore depend significantly on how political institutions shape access to participation, negotiation, and dissent (Goldstone and Tilly, 2001; Bélanger and Lemieux, 2002).

This is particularly important for understanding infrastructure conflicts. In relatively more open political systems, affected communities and opposition actors are more likely to access institutional channels through which grievances can be articulated and negotiated, making contention more likely to remain institutionalised and managed through administrative and political processes. In more exclusionary or authoritarian contexts, however, restrictions on participation and heavier reliance on coercive governance narrow the opportunities available for dissent, increasing the likelihood of more confrontational and transgressive forms of contention. The interaction between political institutions and the dimensions of state capacity governments mobilise is therefore central to explaining variation in the conflict dynamics surrounding mega-dam projects.

Analytical framework: China–Africa infrastructure development and domestic political mediation

Recent scholarship on China–Africa relations has devoted considerable attention to Chinese financing, infrastructure diplomacy, resource extraction, and the geopolitical

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implications of China's expanding presence across Africa. Much of this literature examines China's development model, state-owned enterprises, and the political economy of infrastructure investment (Brautigam, 2009; French, 2015; Zajontz and Taylor, 2021; Zajontz, 2023). At the same time, a growing body of work has criticised overly externalised or China-centric interpretations of infrastructure development in Africa to shed light on African agency, domestic political dynamics, and the negotiated character of China–Africa engagements (Alden and Large, 2018; Soulé, 2025; Zou and Benabdallah, 2025).

In particular, Wang (2023) shows that infrastructure outcomes are shaped more by domestic political leadership and institutions than by Chinese actors alone. Building on this insight, this article argues that the political consequences of Chinese-backed infrastructure projects are determined primarily by domestic political institutions. While Chinese financing enabled large-scale dam construction, the management of associated social conflict depends on how African states deploy state capacity within different political environments. Thus, the political effects of these projects arise not from Chinese financing itself but from its interaction with domestic political institutions.

While existing scholarship offers important insights into China–Africa infrastructure development, less attention has been paid to how domestic political institutions shape conflict around these projects. Comparative research on how different regime types influence state responses to infrastructure-related contention also remains limited. This article addresses this gap through a comparative analysis of Bui and Merowe Dams. It argues that political institutions and state capacity shape both state responses and the forms of contention that emerge. More democratic, institutionally open systems tend to rely on administrative and inclusionary approaches, whereas authoritarian, institutionally closed systems depend more on coercive and exclusionary strategies, making conflict more likely to escalate into transgressive and violent forms.

Methodology

This study adopts a comparative qualitative research design to examine how domestic political institutions shape the conflict dynamics surrounding Chinese-backed mega-dam projects in Africa. The analysis focuses on Bui and Merowe Dams. These cases were selected because they share several important similarities while differing significantly in their political and institutional contexts. Both projects involved substantial Chinese financing and construction, were presented by state authorities as engines of development and modernisation, and generated displacement, contestation, and resistance among affected communities. At the same time, Ghana and Sudan differ sharply in terms of regime type, state–society relations, and modes of political governance, making them useful comparative cases for examining how domestic institutions shape infrastructure-related conflict dynamics.

This study draws on extensive multi-sited fieldwork conducted in Ghana, Sudan, and the United Kingdom between 2022 and 2025. Data collection combined desk-based research, archival research, participant observation (where feasible), and face-to-face and virtual semi-structured interviews (85 participants) and focus group discussions (50 participants), involving a total of 135 participants. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Ethical approval was obtained from the Comité d'éthique de la recherche en arts et humanités (CERAH) de l'Université de Montréal and all research participants provided informed consent.

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Privacy and anonymity were strictly ensured. All interviews and focus group data were transcribed, coded, and analysed.

The article combines comparative case analysis with process tracing (Trampusch and Palier, 2016) to reconstruct the planning and implementation processes of the dam projects and identify how political institutions and different dimensions of state capacity shaped state responses to contestation. Rather than treating conflict as a static outcome, the analysis examines how interactions among state actors, affected communities, and other stakeholders evolved over time and influenced the trajectories of contention surrounding the projects. The analysis also draws on thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns across interviews and documentary materials.

Theoretical framework: political institutions, state capacity, and conflict dynamics

This article argues that the conflict dynamics surrounding large-scale infrastructure projects are shaped not only by material grievances generated through displacement, dispossession, or environmental disruption, but also by the political and institutional environments within which these projects are implemented. Specifically, the article proposes that political institutions influence how states mobilise different dimensions of state capacity in response to opposition and resistance surrounding mega-dam projects. The framework developed here combines insights from scholarship on regime type, state capacity, and contentious politics. It focuses on the relationship between political institutions, state strategies, and the forms of contention that emerge around infrastructure projects.

At the centre of the argument is the distinction between administrative and coercive state capacity. Administrative capacity refers to the state's ability to govern through institutional coordination, consultation, regulation, and policy implementation, whereas coercive capacity involves maintaining order through surveillance, policing, and the use or threat of force. Although all states possess both capacities, political institutions shape which is prioritised in response to social contestation. More open and competitive political systems create greater pressures for consultation, negotiation, and accountability, making governments more likely to manage opposition through administrative and institutional mechanisms. This, however, does not mean that democratic systems eliminate exclusion, inequality, or conflict. Rather, contestation is more likely to occur through relatively institutionalised channels, including public consultations, legal challenges, civil society mobilisation,[4] media engagement, and negotiations over compensation and resettlement (Balcells, 2015; García et al, 2021).

By contrast, authoritarian political systems generally provide fewer institutional channels for participation and dissent. In these contexts, governments are more likely to rely on the coercive dimension of state capacity and exclusionary governance strategies to implement infrastructure projects and suppress opposition. Restrictions on participation, limited transparency, and the narrowing of institutional avenues for grievance articulation often increase the likelihood that contention will result in more confrontational and transgressive forms (Kalyvas, 2019).

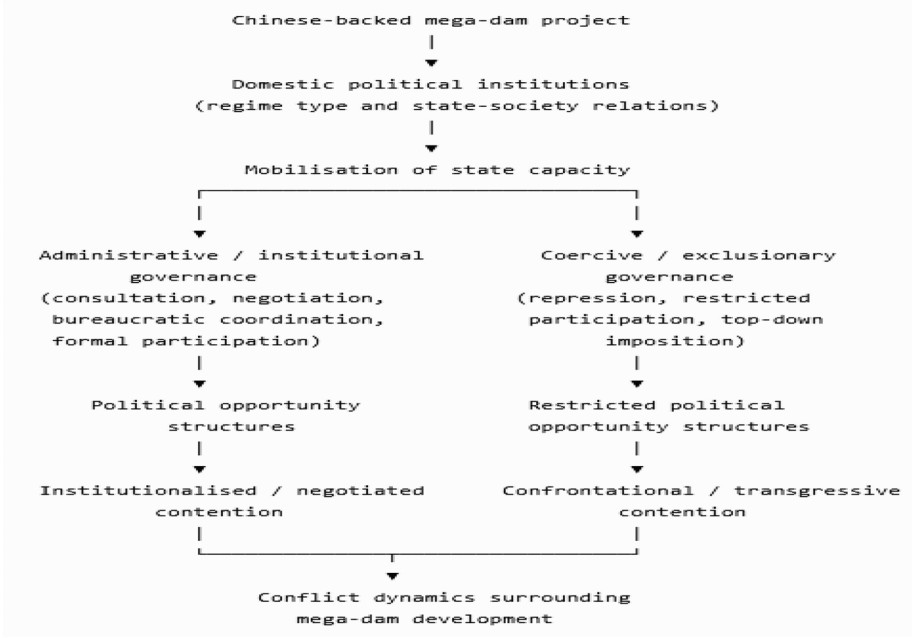
The framework therefore emphasises the importance of political opportunity structures. As elaborated earlier, it is the degree to which political systems provide access to institutional mechanisms for expressing grievances, mobilising opposition, and influencing state decisions (Khagram, 2004). More open political environments generally create greater opportunities for negotiation and institutionalised contention,

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whereas more restrictive political systems often increase the risks and costs associated with collective mobilisation. This distinction helps explain variation in the trajectories of conflict surrounding mega-dam projects. Where affected communities and opposition actors can access institutional channels for contestation, conflict is more likely to remain relatively contained and negotiated, even where tensions and grievances persist. Conversely, where institutional access is restricted and state responses rely heavily on coercion, conflict is more likely to escalate into more confrontational and violent forms of contention (Valenzuela, 1989; Anderson, 2016).

To be sure, the argument advanced here does not suggest that regime type mechanically determines infrastructure outcomes or levels of violence. For example, democratic systems may still marginalise affected communities, restrict participation, or deploy coercive measures, while authoritarian regimes may at times engage in selective consultation and negotiation. Rather, the article argues that political institutions shape the dominant strategies through which states govern infrastructure-related conflict and structure the political environments within which contentious collective action unfolds. More specifically, the framework argues that domestic political institutions shape the way in which state capacity is mobilised, which in turn influences state strategies towards opposition to projects, the structure of political opportunities available to anti-project actors, and ultimately the trajectories of the resulting conflict. Figure 2 summarises the analytical framework guiding this study.

Figure 2: Domestic political institutions, state capacity, and conflict dynamics surrounding mega-dam projects



Source: Author's conceptualisation based on scholarship on state capacity, contentious politics, and political institutions.

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The role of political authority and state capacity in dealing with dam conflicts in Ghana and Sudan

This section examines how domestic political and institutional contexts in Ghana and Sudan shaped the conflict dynamics surrounding the construction of the two Chinese-backed dam projects.

Bui Dam and the institutional management of contention in Ghana

Bui Dam was developed within a relatively more open and competitive political environment characterised by competitive, multiparty electoral politics, comparatively stronger institutional structures, and greater levels of public participation. However, while Ghana's political context created more institutional avenues for consultation and negotiation, the implementation of the project remained deeply unsatisfying and uneven, particularly among affected communities. That is because, although consultation mechanisms existed in Ghana, participation often remained constrained within parameters defined by state authorities, echoing broader critiques that participatory governance can simultaneously incorporate and marginalise dissenting voices (Pill, 2024).

The Ghanaian government framed the Bui Dam as a strategic national development project to address chronic electricity shortages, stimulate industrial growth, and promote development, particularly in the northern region. Supported by substantial Chinese financing and construction, the dam was presented as a symbol of modernisation and became a landmark in China–Ghana relations. Recent research situates the project within Ghana's broader energy transition and expanding Chinese engagement in its power sector (Zhang, 2026). However, like many large-scale infrastructure projects, it also caused displacement, environmental disruption, and disputes over compensation, resettlement, and livelihoods.

However, unlike the Merowe case in Sudan, discussed later, the planning and implementation of Bui Dam relied more extensively on institutional and administrative mechanisms. The establishment of the Bui Power Authority (BPA) through parliamentary legislation created a more formalised governance structure for project implementation and oversight. The project was also accompanied by an Environmental and Social Impact Assessment, stakeholder consultations, and the elaboration of both the Resettlement Planning Framework and the Resettlement Action Plan. Both documents were informed by domestic regulatory frameworks and international standards, as well as recommendations associated with the WCD (Agbemabiese et al, 2014; Asiama, 2015; Bebelleh, 2019; Lema, 2025b).

These institutional processes created channels for expressing and negotiating grievances, allowing civil society organisations, local communities, and affected residents to raise concerns about compensation, displacement, environmental impacts, and livelihoods. Consequently, the Ghanaian state relied primarily on administrative and institutional mechanisms to manage contestation. However, portraying the process as fully participatory would overlook important exclusions. Decision-making remained uneven, many affected communities had limited influence, and tensions persisted over compensation, relocation, and livelihood restoration. Critics also highlighted shortcomings in consultation, limited transparency, and the marginalisation of dissenting voices.

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Indeed, although consultation mechanisms formally existed, participation was often constrained by parameters set by state institutions and project authorities. Some affected residents reported that key decisions on relocation sites, compensation, and access to agricultural land had been made before consultations took place. Others viewed these exercises less as opportunities for meaningful negotiation than as mechanisms to legitimise decisions already made by the state. Residents of the resettled communities in Townships A and B described the consultation process as having little influence on decision-making, noting that 'They invited us to meetings, yes, but many of the important decisions had already been taken before we arrived'.[5]

Nevertheless, despite these tensions, contention surrounding the dam remained relatively institutionalised. Grievances were largely channelled through negotiations, legal frameworks, civil society advocacy, and administrative processes rather than escalating into violence. As a leading figure in the Ghana Dams Dialogue, a civil society platform promoting dialogue on dam-related issues in Ghana and beyond, observed: 'People complained constantly about compensation and farmland, but most still believed they could pressure authorities through meetings, petitions, local radio, and NGOs like the Ghana Dams Dialogue'.[6] This relative institutionalisation of conflict reflected not the absence of exclusion or inequality, but rather the existence of broader political opportunity structures associated with Ghana's more open political environment (Agbemabiese et al, 2014; Asiama, 2015; Bebelleh, 2019; Wilmsen et al, 2019).

The Ghanaian state therefore relied primarily on administrative forms of state capacity to manage opposition and implement the project. Institutional engagement, bureaucratic coordination, consultation mechanisms, and negotiated compensation processes were central to its approach to contestation (Requejo Castro et al, 2018). From the perspective of Ghanaian authorities, the primary objective was to contain tensions surrounding the project. According to one government (BPA) official, for instance, 'The objective was always to avoid escalation and keep discussions within formal structures'.[7] Thus, although some degree of coercive practices and undoubtedly asymmetrical power relations were not entirely absent, they did not become the dominant mechanism through which the project was imposed. This distinction is important because it highlights the article's broader argument: domestic political institutions shape not whether conflict emerges around mega-dam projects, but how such conflict is governed, expressed, and managed.

Merowe Dam and the escalation of conflict in Sudan

The development of the Merowe Dam unfolded within a markedly different political and institutional environment from that of Bui in Ghana. At the time of the project's implementation, Sudan was governed by a military-autocratic regime characterised by highly centralised decision-making, restricted political participation, and extensive reliance on coercive forms of state power. These institutional conditions shaped both the implementation of the dam project and the forms of resistance and conflict that emerged around it.

Like Bui, the Merowe Dam was presented by Sudanese authorities as a transformative development project aimed at expanding electrification, economic growth, and modernisation. Chinese financing, construction firms, and diplomatic support were crucial in enabling the project, particularly amid Sudan's international

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isolation and Western sanctions. The dam formed part of a broader political and geopolitical strategy through which the regime sought to consolidate authority, attract external investment, and strengthen infrastructural control over peripheral regions.

However, unlike the Ghanaian case, the implementation of Merowe Dam relied heavily on exclusionary governance practices and coercive state capacity. The Dams Implementation Unit (DIU), established through a presidential decree, operated with extraordinary powers and limited institutional oversight (Verhoeven, 2012; 2015; Dirar et al, 2015; Zeitoun et al, 2019; Lema, 2025b). Unlike BPA in Ghana, the DIU functioned as a highly centralised and politically insulated institution closely aligned with the ruling regime (Verhoeven, 2015). As a result, affected communities were excluded from meaningful participation in planning and decision-making. Consultation mechanisms were largely absent, while decisions on displacement, compensation, relocation, and livelihood restoration were imposed through top-down directives rather than negotiated processes. Many residents described the implementation process as deeply exclusionary. Many of the interviewees recalled: 'We were informed about the dam project and the need for relocation. We were not consulted about anything'.[8] Environmental and Social Impact Assessment procedures were also widely criticised as inadequate, incomplete, or poorly implemented.

These exclusionary dynamics limited institutional channels for expressing grievances and contesting state decisions, leading opposition to the Merowe Dam to take more confrontational forms. Resistance movements, activists, affected residents, and community organisations mobilised against forced displacement, inadequate compensation, and political marginalisation. In response, the state relied heavily on coercive capacity, deploying security forces to suppress demonstrations, monitor activists, enforce relocations, and contain dissent.

Reports of arrests, intimidation, violent repression, and broader restrictions on political organising reflected the authoritarian political environment within which the project was implemented. Several interviewees linked the escalation of tensions directly to state repression and fear surrounding the project, explaining that 'People were afraid to speak openly because security agents monitored meetings and gatherings'.[9] Rather than containing contention, these coercive responses helped intensify opposition and contributed to the escalation and prolongation of conflict surrounding the dam project. The narrowing of institutional channels contributed to more confrontational forms of mobilisation. Some research participants and anti-dam organisers stated: 'When every peaceful complaint was ignored, many people felt there was no option except stronger resistance. The dam project was taking everything away'.[10]

The Merowe case shows that conflict escalation cannot be explained solely by displacement or dispossession, as similar grievances over land loss, relocation, and uneven development existed in Ghana. The key difference lies in the institutional contexts through which grievances were managed. In Sudan, limited avenues for negotiation and contestation increased reliance on coercive governance and reduced opportunities for compromise. Thus, Chinese-backed infrastructure projects are politically mediated by domestic institutions: authoritarian structures shaped how displacement was managed, opposition was controlled, and coercive capacity was deployed. This supports the article's broader argument that political institutions shape conflict trajectories around infrastructure development. Where participation is restricted and coercive governance dominates, contentious politics surrounding

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megaprojects are more likely to escalate into prolonged and confrontational conflict (Valenzuela, 1989; Anderson, 2016).

Domestic political institutions and divergent conflict trajectories around Bui and Merowe Dam projects

The comparison between Bui and Merowe demonstrates that conflicts over large-scale infrastructure cannot be explained solely by the material effects of displacement, dispossession, or uneven development. In both Ghana and Sudan, Chinese-backed dam projects generated significant grievances among affected populations, including concerns over relocation, compensation, environmental disruption, and exclusion from decision-making processes. Yet the forms, intensity, and trajectories of the conflicts differed substantially across the two cases. This article suggests that these differences are best understood by looking at the domestic political and institutional environments within which the projects were implemented. More specifically, the cases demonstrate how political institutions shape the dimensions of state capacity governments mobilise in responding to infrastructure-related contention and, consequently, the political opportunity structures available to affected communities. As Figure 2 illustrates, the argument is not that regime type mechanically determines conflict outcomes, but that political institutions shape the dimensions of state capacity mobilised in response to contention.

In Ghana, relatively more open political institutions and stronger administrative political structures created broader opportunities for institutionalised forms of contestation. Consultation processes, environmental assessments, parliamentary oversight, media engagement, civil society advocacy, and negotiated compensation mechanisms provided channels through which grievances could be articulated and partially managed (Murg et al, 2021). While these institutional processes did not entirely eliminate exclusion, asymmetry, or dissatisfaction, they did contribute to containing conflict within institutional and negotiated arenas (Hensengerth, 2011; 2013; 2018). By contrast, Merowe Dam was implemented within a far more exclusionary political environment characterised by centralised authority, systematic exclusion, and extensive reliance on coercive state power.[11] Institutional avenues for negotiation and grievance articulation remained almost non-existent, and opposition actors had limited access to formal mechanisms through which they could influence project-related decisions. As a result, resistance assumed more confrontational and transgressive forms.

Nonetheless, the comparison does not suggest a simple dichotomy between consensual democratic governance and coercive authoritarian governance. The Ghanaian case also reveals important forms of marginalisation, uneven participation, and top-down decision-making. Similarly, authoritarian systems are not entirely devoid of negotiation or institutional management as studies by O'Brien and Li (2006) and Cai (2008), among others, with regard to contemporary China under the Communist Party show. Rather, this article argues that political institutions shape the dominant tendencies through which infrastructure-related conflict is governed and contested. The comparison also highlights the limits of explanations that attribute infrastructure outcomes primarily to Chinese actors or external financing structures. Chinese financing and construction were central to both projects, yet the conflict trajectories differed significantly. Had these projects been financed by different external

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actors, the governance requirements attached to their implementation may have differed. Nevertheless, the comparison suggests that domestic political institutions remained the principal mechanisms through which project-related contention was managed, negotiated, or repressed.

The findings also underscore the importance of situating domestic political institutions within broader international political economy dynamics. In both cases, infrastructure development formed part of wider state-led projects of modernisation, territorial integration, and political legitimation, with Chinese-backed dam construction providing the resources to advance these ambitions. However, the governance of displacement, dissent, and contestation ultimately depended on how domestic political authorities exercised state power. The comparison thus contributes to debates on China–Africa relations by showing that domestic political institutions shape the implementation and consequences of large-scale development projects. More broadly, the findings highlight how the political management of development projects and the institutional opportunities available to affected communities influence whether infrastructure development produces relatively contained contention or more violent conflict. Table 1 summarises these findings.

Development narratives and the lived realities of project-affected communities

Despite the important differences in the political management of Bui and Merowe Dams discussed in this article, both cases reveal a significant disconnect between official state narratives surrounding infrastructure development and the lived experiences of the affected communities. In both cases, official development

Table 1: Comparative political and institutional dynamics of the Bui and Merowe Dam projects

Dimension	Bui Dam (Ghana)	Merowe Dam (Sudan)
Political system	Competitive multiparty system	Military-autocratic regime
Dominant state capacity mobilised	Administrative/institutional	Coercive/exclusionary
Governance structure	Parliamentary and bureaucratic oversight	Centralised executive control
Consultation mechanisms	Partial and uneven consultation	Limited to non-existent consultation
Political opportunity structures	Relatively broader institutional access	Narrow to non-existent institutional access
Dominant forms of contention	Institutionalised and negotiated	Confrontational and transgressive
State response to opposition	Controlled negotiation	Extensive coercion and repression
Role of Chinese involvement	Financing and construction support	Financing and construction support
Conflict trajectory	Relatively contained but contested	Escalatory and repressive

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narratives obscured unequal social costs and marginalisation experienced by these communities. In Ghana, as in Sudan,[12] state authorities framed the dam projects as symbols of national progress, economic transformation, electrification, and modernisation. Government officials in both countries constantly portrayed them as essential for development, prosperity, national integration, and improved livelihoods (Ferguson, 1999; Bosshard, 2009; Hafsaas-Tsakos, 2011; International Rivers, 2012; Lauzon, 2012; Gocking, 2021; Adovor Tsikudo, 2023). These narratives reflected broader developmental logics that have historically accompanied large dam projects (Cross, 2014; 2015; McCully, 2001; Scudder, 2005; Sneddon, 2015). As scholars of infrastructure and megaprojects have shown, states frequently frame such projects as transformative interventions capable of delivering economic growth and national progress while downplaying their social, environmental, and political costs (Flyvbjerg, 2007; Ahlers et al, 2017).

However, the experiences of many affected communities diverged sharply. In both Ghana and Sudan, displacement, relocation, disruption of livelihoods, land loss, environmental degradation, and uncertainty surrounding compensation generated significant grievances among the project-affected communities. For most of them, the projects were experienced not primarily as opportunities but as processes of exclusion, dispossession, and unequal sacrifice in the name of national development. The comparative analysis of the two dams reveals that this disconnect persisted across contrasting political systems.

In Ghana, more institutionalised consultation and compensation mechanisms did not eliminate frustrations among affected communities, many of whom continue to express dissatisfaction regarding relocation processes, livelihood restoration, and participation in decision-making. Affected communities in the two resettlements townships constantly noted how Bui Dam failed to deliver the promise the government made about its expected benefits: 'We were promised development and urbanisation through the Bui City. But that has not happened. Yet for us, we lost land, fishing areas, and many things changed for the worse'.[13] Likewise, in Sudan, the tensions were further intensified by the military-autocratic governance practices, coercive displacement, and violent repression of dissent. Yet official narratives of the Sudanese government promoted the project as development, which contrasted sharply with local experiences of displacement and loss. One dam critic observed: 'The government talked about development, but for us development meant losing our homes and history'.[14]

Therefore, the persistence of these narrative gaps across both cases highlights a broader tension within infrastructure-led development projects (Bebelleh, 2019; Lema, 2025b). Official development discourse often operates at the level of aggregate national benefits while affected communities experience the projects through the immediate exposure to costs. This suggests that, although mega-infrastructure projects may produce developmental benefits, the distribution of those benefits and costs is deeply political.[15]

Conclusion

This article has examined how domestic political institutions shape the conflict dynamics surrounding Chinese-backed dam projects in Africa through a comparative analysis of Bui and Merowe Dams. Although both projects were promoted as engines

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of development, modernisation, and national progress, they generated markedly different trajectories of contention, resistance, and state response because they were embedded within distinct domestic political and institutional contexts. The analysis shows that Chinese financing and construction did not determine these outcomes. Rather, domestic political institutions shaped how states exercised state capacity to manage infrastructure-related contestation.

The article contributes to debates on China–Africa relations and infrastructure-led development by challenging explanations that privilege external actors. While Chinese financing, construction, and diplomatic engagement enabled both projects, their political consequences were mediated by domestic institutions, state strategies, and historically rooted state–society relations. Understanding the effects of Chinese-backed infrastructure therefore requires analysing how external finance interacts with the domestic political environments in which projects are negotiated, implemented, and contested. In so doing, the study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that situates Chinese infrastructure engagement within broader domestic political and institutional processes rather than treating it as an autonomous external force (see, for example, Lema and Odota, 2025; Zhang, 2026).

Despite important differences in how the projects were governed, both cases reveal a disconnect between official narratives of infrastructure-led development and the experiences of affected communities. In Ghana and Sudan alike, these narratives obscured the unequal social costs of displacement, livelihood disruption, and political marginalisation. The findings therefore suggest that the developmental significance of Chinese-backed infrastructure should be assessed not only by the physical assets or economic growth it generates, but also by how its costs, benefits, and opportunities are politically negotiated and socially distributed.

Notes

[1] According to Tilly and Tarrow (2015: 16), 'all forms of contention rest on performances'.

[2] But, as McAdam et al (1996: 21) acknowledge that 'contentious politics forms a continuous analytic terrain with no more than fuzzy boundaries' because it covers a wide range phenomena such as cycles of protests, civil wars, and revolutions.

[3] 'The extent (or lack) of democracy' is what this article refers to as the structure of political power, or regime type. It is also worth noting that Tilly (2003) and Tilly and Tarrow (2015: 57) emphasise that both regime type and state capacity are matters of degree: 'no pure broad, equal, full-consultation, protective democracy has ever existed on a national scale. Nor has any government – not even those we call totalitarian – had absolute control over the population, activities, and resources within its territory' (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015: 57).

[4] This is referred to as 'domestic democratic peace'.

[5] Interviews and focus group discussions, Bui resettlement townships (A and B), Ghana, June–July 2023.

[6] Interview, Accra, Ghana, August 2023.

[7] Interview, Bui, Ghana, June 2023.

[8] Interview with members of the Manasir community who rejected the government's resettlement scheme in favour of the Alkhiar al-Maghali (the Local Option), Sudan, February 2023.

[9] Interviews with anti-dam Sudanese activists relocated in London, UK, September 2024.

[10] Interviews in London, UK, September 2024.

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[11] It should be noted that the 2002 government resettlement plans were issued without participation or buy-in from the displaced communities. See Hafsaas-Tsakos (2011) and https://china.aiddata.org/projects/178/.

[12] In February 2005, former president Omar Al-Bashir claimed that Merowe Dam would 'represent the end of poverty in Sudan' (Bosshard, 2009; Hafsaas-Tsakos, 2011).

[13] Interviews and focus group discussions, Bui resettlement townships (A and B), Ghana, June–July 2023.

[14] Interviews with members of the resettled New Hamdab and New Amri communities in Sudan, February 2023.

[15] After families around the dam were forcibly relocated from their riverside lands to the inhospitable Nubian Desert, Sudanese television reportedly featured government agents posing as affected residents who accepted compensation and relocation. The resettlement sites had poor soils, barren landscapes, and no groundwater supply.

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Research ethics statement

This research has been approved by the 'Comité d'éthique de la recherche en arts et humanités (CERAH) de l'Université de Montréal', Project # CERAH-2023-4078 dated 2023-03-16.

Data availability statement

The qualitative data supporting the findings of this study consist primarily of interviews and fieldwork materials that are not publicly available due to confidentiality and ethical considerations. However, portions of the data may be made available upon reasonable written request. Interested parties may contact the author directly.

Statement on informed consent

This research adhered to the highest ethical standards to ensure the integrity and ethical conduct of the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research, the nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions. With the help of our local research assistant, we were able to translate the consent forms and interview questions to the local respondents for better understanding. Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were strictly maintained throughout the research. The research complied with international and institutional ethical guidelines.

Contributor statement

Sole author, from conception to execution.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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