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Democratic Regression and Environmental Injustice in Andesite Mining Policy: A Qualitative Case Study of Wadas Village, Indonesia

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Democratic Regression and Environmental Injustice in Andesite Mining Policy: A Qualitative Case Study of Wadas Village, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study looks at how democracy has declined in andesite mining policy in Wadas Village, Indonesia, using an environmental democracy framework. It defines this decline as reduced public participation, reduced transparency, and weaker accountability in environmental decision-making. The research employed a qualitative case study. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with informants from government officials, community members, and civil society actors. Then, these interviews were supported by policy documents, media reports, and field observations. The analysis of data using an interactive qualitative method, employing open, axial, and selective coding to identify key governance patterns. The findings indicate that policymaking is mostly top-down, with little public consultation, limited access to environmental information, and state actions that include intimidation and the repression of dissent. These factors construct power imbalances between the state and local communities, leading to ecological conflict and threats to local livelihoods. This study contributes by showing how democratic decline can be measured at the local level and how the loss of environmental democracy leads to conflict. The policy recommendations are to create participatory mechanisms, make Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) more transparent, and strengthen accountability to prevent coercive environmental governance.

Keywords: Democratic regression, development policy, ecological conflict

Abstrak

Studi ini meneliti bagaimana demokrasi telah menurun dalam kebijakan pertambangan andesit di Desa Wadas, Indonesia, menggunakan kerangka demokrasi lingkungan. Penurunan ini didefinisikan sebagai berkurangnya partisipasi publik, berkurangnya transparansi, dan melemahnya akuntabilitas dalam pengambilan keputusan lingkungan. Penelitian ini menggunakan studi kasus kualitatif. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan informan dari pejabat pemerintah, anggota masyarakat, dan aktor masyarakat sipil. Kemudian, wawancara ini didukung oleh dokumen kebijakan, laporan media, dan observasi lapangan. Analisis data menggunakan metode kualitatif interaktif, menggunakan pengkodean terbuka, aksial, dan selektif untuk mengidentifikasi pola tata kelola utama. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pembuatan kebijakan sebagian besar bersifat top-down, dengan sedikit konsultasi publik, akses terbatas terhadap informasi lingkungan, dan tindakan negara yang mencakup intimidasi dan penindasan terhadap perbedaan

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pendapat. Faktor-faktor ini membangun ketidakseimbangan kekuasaan antara negara dan masyarakat lokal, yang menyebabkan konflik ekologis dan ancaman terhadap mata pencaharian lokal. Studi ini berkontribusi dengan menunjukkan bagaimana penurunan demokrasi dapat diukur di tingkat lokal dan bagaimana hilangnya demokrasi lingkungan menyebabkan konflik. Rekomendasi kebijakan tersebut adalah untuk menciptakan mekanisme partisipatif, membuat Penilaian Dampak Lingkungan (EIA) lebih transparan, dan memperkuat akuntabilitas untuk mencegah tata kelola lingkungan yang bersifat memaksa.

Kata Kunci: Regresi demokrasi, kebijakan pembangunan, konflik ekologis

INTRODUCTION

Indonesian national development policies often clash with local communities' interests. This can happen when strategic projects are directed to areas of high ecological and social value (Suprayoga et al., 2020; Syafi'i et al., 2025). One study related to environmental governance in the United States and Canada explains that the fragmentation of power and the absence of multistakeholder consultation mechanisms have weakened the state's ability to formulate just and effective environmental policies (VanNijnatten, 1996). Furthermore, in Puntland, Somalia, it was also shown that passive civil society participation proved ineffective in curbing environmental degradation. Meanwhile, active involvement actually had a significant impact on sustainable environmental policies (Jama et al., 2020). Robinson et al. (2023) noted that environmental decision-making involving diverse actors and employing structured techniques can yield more inclusive solutions.

In Indonesia, challenges in natural resource governance are particularly pronounced under decentralization, as local authorities have gained greater formal power while participatory mechanisms frequently remain limited in practice (Annahar et al., 2023). In the mining sector, policies commonly regard local communities and indigenous peoples as passive recipients rather than active participants in decision-making processes (Putri, 2023). Nevertheless, considerable evidence demonstrates that their involvement is essential for promoting environmental sustainability, ensuring social legitimacy, and formulating enduring policies (Bose, 2023; Nur et al., 2024; Putri, 2023).

Despite these advances, the literature remains uneven. Much of the existing scholarship focuses on macro-level democratic decline, institutional change, or elite political dynamics. Studies by Tomsa & Bax (2023) and Warburton & Aspinall (2019) demonstrate that democratic regression in Indonesia has reshaped political institutions and weakened accountability, with important implications for environmental governance. Other research on mining policy highlights persistent issues of transparency deficits, regulatory complexity, and uneven civil society influence (Putri, 2023; Sholihin, 2021). However, relatively few studies explicitly

examine how democratic regression operates at the micro-level of environmental governance, particularly at the village level, where policies are implemented and experienced directly by affected communities. This gap is critical because it is at the local level that democratic principles—such as participation, transparency, and accountability—are either realized or undermined in practice, and where ecological conflicts become most visible.

To address this gap, this study employs environmental democracy as its primary analytical framework. Environmental democracy emphasizes three core principles: meaningful participation, access to information, and public accountability in environmental decision-making (Parkins & Mitchell, 2005; Pickering et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2018). These principles provide a normative and analytical basis for evaluating the quality of environmental governance. In this study, democratic regression is conceptualized as the erosion of these principles in practice, manifested through restricted participation, limited transparency, and weakened accountability. When these dimensions decline, policymaking becomes increasingly exclusionary, reinforcing power asymmetries between state actors and affected communities and increasing the likelihood of ecological conflict (Rojas & Montaña, 2022).

Building on this perspective, this study develops a conceptual model linking democratic regression to ecological conflict through the lens of environmental democracy. Democratic regression is operationalized through three analytical dimensions: (1) restricted public participation, (2) limited access to environmental information, and (3) coercive or repressive state practices. These conditions produce asymmetrical power relations in which decision-making authority is concentrated among state actors and project authorities, while local communities are excluded from meaningful deliberation. As a result, environmental governance tends to prioritize macro-development agendas over local ecological sustainability, generating environmental risks and social resistance. In this framework, ecological conflict is understood not as an isolated reaction to development but as a consequence of exclusionary governance processes embedded within formally democratic systems.

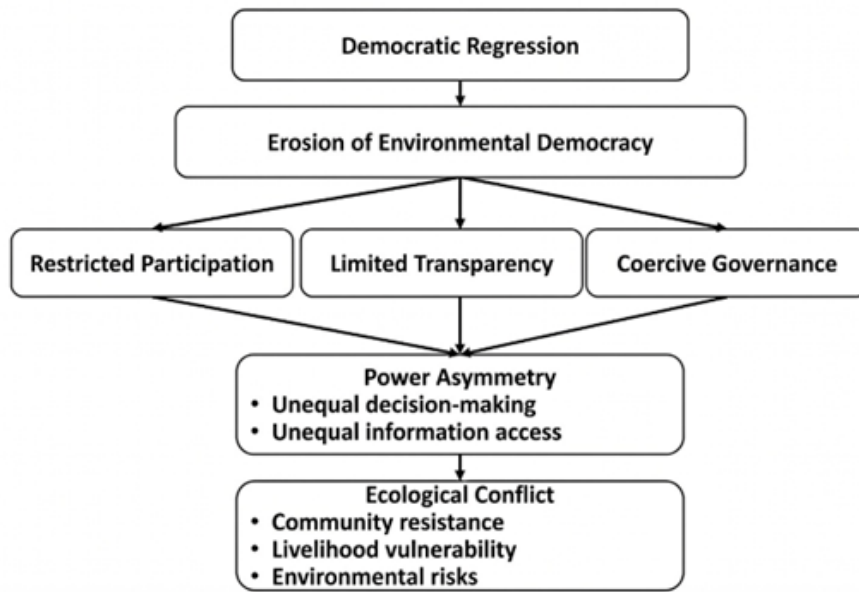


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Democratic Regression and Ecological Conflict

The case of andesite mining in Wadas Village, Purworejo, provides a critical empirical setting to examine these dynamics. The designation of Wadas as a material source for the Bener Dam—a national strategic project formalized through Central Java Governor Decree No. 590/20 of 2017—was implemented without substantive community involvement and with limited transparency regarding ecological risks. Community resistance intensified due to concerns over environmental degradation, particularly in a landslide-prone area, and the lack of accessible environmental information. The escalation of conflict in February 2022, marked by arrests, intimidation, and other coercive measures, illustrates how democratic regression in environmental governance can translate into concrete forms of ecological and social injustice at the village level (Siregar et al., 2022).

Based on this context, this study addresses the following research question: how does democratic regression manifest in village-level environmental governance, and how does it shape ecological conflict in the case of andesite mining in Wadas Village? This study contributes to the literature in two main ways. First, it advances the concept of environmental democracy by empirically linking democratic regression to micro-level governance practices in decentralized contexts. Second, it provides a case-based analysis demonstrating how exclusionary policymaking processes generate ecological conflict and policy inequality. By doing so, this research offers both theoretical insights into democratic regression and practical implications for strengthening participatory, transparent, and accountable environmental governance.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine how democratic regression operates in village-level environmental governance and how it shapes ecological conflict in the andesite mining case in Wadas Village, Purworejo, Central Java. A case study approach was selected because it enables an in-depth analysis of governance processes, actor relations, and contested environmental decision-making within a specific local context. The study was conducted in 2023 using both primary and secondary data sources.

Primary data were collected through structured in-depth interviews, while secondary data were obtained from policy documents, regional spatial planning documents, village deliberation records, media reports, civil society archives, and visual documentation related to the Wadas conflict. A total of 13 informants were selected using purposive sampling based on three criteria: (1) direct involvement in or knowledge of the mining policy, (2) relevance to decision-making, implementation, resistance, or advocacy processes, and (3) the ability to provide information on participation, access to information, accountability, and conflict dynamics. The informants consisted of government officials, village authorities, Wadas residents, community leaders, members of Gempa Dewa, WALHI Yogyakarta, and LBH Yogyakarta. Purposive sampling with diverse participants is widely used in qualitative research to capture multiple perspectives and strengthen analytical balance (Harnagea et al., 2018; Manaf et al., 2021).

The inclusion of state actors was necessary to understand institutional perspectives on policy formulation, land administration, and security responses. However, to address the potential risk of elite bias, these perspectives were systematically balanced with accounts from affected residents and civil society actors, who were treated as central sources for understanding lived experiences of exclusion, participation, and coercion. Data collection proceeded until thematic saturation was reached, indicated by the absence of substantially new themes in subsequent interviews (Harnagea et al., 2018; Iseselo et al., 2024).

Data were collected through field observation, interviews, and document analysis. Field observation was conducted to understand the social and geographical context of Wadas Village, particularly the environmental characteristics of the mining area and the dynamics of the conflict. The interview protocol was developed based on the study's conceptual framework, especially the principles of environmental democracy and the analytical dimensions of democratic regression. The guiding themes included: (1) community participation in decision-making, (2) access to environmental information, (3) institutional accountability and coercive or repressive practices in policy implementation. Example questions explored residents' involvement in consultations, the information available on environmental impacts, authorities' responses to public objections, and participants' evaluations of the fairness of the policy process. The structured format ensured consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility to explore emerging issues. All interviews were

conducted with informed consent, and participants' identities were anonymized where necessary due to the sensitivity of the case (Harnagea et al., 2018; Stenner, 2023).

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014) and a systematic coding process. First, all transcripts, field notes, and documents were read repeatedly to identify recurring issues and patterns. Second, open coding was applied to classify significant statements related to participation, information access, institutional responses, and conflict dynamics. Third, these codes were grouped through axial coding into broader categories such as restricted participation, limited transparency, and coercive state practices. Finally, selective coding was used to connect these categories to the study's main analytical constructs, particularly democratic regression, power asymmetry, and ecological conflict. Through this process, democratic regression was empirically derived from consistent patterns of exclusion, weak transparency, and coercive governance practices identified in the data (Miles et al., 2014).

To enhance trustworthiness, this study applied source triangulation, method triangulation, and comparison across actor groups. Information from official actors was systematically compared with community narratives, documentary evidence, and field observations. Reflexivity was also maintained throughout the research process. The researcher recognized that unequal power relations between state actors and affected communities could influence both access to information and interpretation. To minimize bias, official accounts were continuously examined alongside community and civil society perspectives. The coding and interpretation process was guided by the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1, particularly the relationships between participation, transparency, power asymmetry, and ecological conflict (Iseselo et al., 2024; Stenner, 2023).

RESULTS, DISCUSSION, AND ANALYSIS

Results

This study finds that democratic regression in the Wadas mining policy is empirically manifested through the erosion of environmental democracy principles, particularly participation, access to information, and accountability. These dimensions are operationalized in this study as restricted participation, limited transparency, and coercive governance practices, which together produce power asymmetry and contribute to ecological conflict.

Firstly, Restricted Participation (Erosion of Participation). The findings show that community participation in the policymaking process was highly limited and largely procedural, indicating a clear deficit in participation. Although the government formally conducted outreach activities, they were neither sustained nor designed to enable meaningful deliberation. A resident of Wadas Village stated, "The government did hold outreach. However, it was only held once in 2018... After that, there were no more outreaches." Similarly, a village community leader explained that consultation forums were conducted in a top-down manner and primarily

functioned as information delivery rather than spaces for negotiation or collective decision-making.

This indicates that participation was restricted both temporally and substantively. Temporally, because engagement occurred only once and was not continuous. Substantively, because residents were not given the opportunity to influence outcomes from an environmental democracy perspective, participation should enable affected communities to actively shape policy decisions. However, in the Wadas case, participation was reduced to a formal requirement, reflecting a shift toward restricted participation as a key indicator of democratic regression.

Secondly, Limited Transparency (Erosion of Access to Information). The second major finding concerns restricted access to information, which reflects the erosion of the principle of access to information in environmental democracy. A representative of Gempa Dewa (community organization opposing mining) stated: “We don’t have complete access to information... the village tends to be secretive, and the wider community is not involved.” Residents reported limited access to critical policy documents, including Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA), spatial planning details, and mining location maps. In several cases, information was either not disclosed or presented in highly technical terms that the public could not interpret.

This condition reflects limited transparency, in which state actors control information, disclosure is partial or delayed, and communities lack the capacity to engage with available information. As a result, residents were unable to fully understand the environmental risks associated with mining activities, including threats to water sources and agricultural systems. This asymmetry in knowledge reinforces unequal power relations and weakens communities’ capacity to participate effectively. Thus, the findings show that limited transparency functions as a structural mechanism of exclusion, directly undermining environmental democracy.

Thirdly, Coercive Governance Practices (Erosion of Accountability). The third dimension of democratic regression is reflected in the weakening of accountability, as evidenced by the use of coercive governance practices during policy implementation. A civil society actor from LBH Yogyakarta reported that residents who opposed the project faced intimidation and pressure during field activities and protests. Similarly, Wadas residents described experiences of surveillance, restriction, and fear when expressing opposition. These findings indicate that state institutions responded to dissent not through dialogue, but through control and enforcement.

Coercive practices identified in the field include: intimidation during land surveys; pressure on residents to comply with policy decisions; and restrictions on public expression and protest. These practices demonstrate that accountability mechanisms were weak or absent. Instead of being responsive to public concerns, authorities prioritized policy implementation through enforcement. Within the conceptual framework, this reflects coercive governance

practices, in which the state acts as an enforcer rather than a facilitator, and dissent is treated as disruption rather than legitimate participation. This condition marks a significant departure from democratic governance norms and reinforces democratic regression.

Fourthly, From Environmental Democracy to Power Asymmetry and Ecological Conflict. The combined effects of restricted participation, limited transparency, and coercive governance practices produced a power asymmetry between state actors and local communities. This asymmetry is evident in unequal access to decision-making processes, unequal control over information, and unequal capacity to influence policy outcomes. As a result, community resistance emerged not merely as opposition to development, but as a response to systematic exclusion from governance processes. Residents expressed concerns about the loss of water sources, the degradation of agricultural land, and long-term livelihood insecurity. These concerns indicate that ecological conflict in Wadas is not only environmental but also political and structural, rooted in the erosion of environmental democracy.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the Wadas case reflects a systematic erosion of environmental democracy, particularly in its three core principles: participation, access to information, and accountability. These principles are not only weakened but also reconfigured through practices of restricted participation, limited transparency, and coercive governance, which together indicate a democratic regression at the local level.

Firstly, Restricted Participation and the Formalization of Inclusion. The findings on restricted participation indicate that democratic inclusion in Wadas operates primarily at a procedural level. While formal mechanisms of participation were present, they did not enable meaningful influence over decision-making. This supports the argument of Reed et al. (2018) that participation without deliberative power yields symbolic legitimacy rather than substantive inclusion. However, this study extends existing literature by showing that restricted participation is not merely a limitation of institutional capacity, but a structured governance practice.

Participation was organized in a way that limited its temporal scope (one-time consultation) and its substantive impact (no decision-making influence). In this sense, participation functions as a legitimizing tool rather than a mechanism for democratic control. This finding also aligns with Parkins & Mitchell (2005), who emphasize that deliberative participation is essential for legitimate environmental governance. The absence of such deliberative processes in Wadas indicates a shift from participatory governance toward administrative compliance, in which consultation is conducted to meet formal requirements rather than to incorporate public input.

Secondly, Limited Transparency and the Politics of Information Control. The findings on limited transparency reveal that access to environmental information was systematically

restricted, undermining the principle of informed participation. This is consistent with Pickering et al. (2020), who argue that access to information is a foundational element of environmental democracy, enabling citizens to engage critically with policy decisions. In the Wadas case, information asymmetry was not simply the result of technical barriers, but functioned as a political mechanism of control. By limiting access to Environmental Impact Assessments and other key documents, authorities effectively constrained communities' ability to evaluate risks and articulate informed opposition. This finding reinforces Putri's (2023) finding that transparency deficits characterize Indonesian mining governance. However, this study advances the argument by demonstrating that limited transparency serves as a strategic dimension of democratic regression, reinforcing unequal power relations and reducing public oversight capacity. Thus, transparency should not be understood merely as an administrative issue, but as a central dimension of power in environmental governance.

Thirdly, Coercive Governance and the Weakening of Accountability. The presence of coercive governance practices indicates a significant erosion of accountability in the policymaking process. Instead of responding to public concerns through dialogue and institutional mechanisms, state actors relied on enforcement and control. This finding aligns with Tomsa & Bax (2023), who argue that democratic regression in Indonesia is associated with an increasing reliance on coercive instruments in governance. However, this study contributes by showing how coercive practices are embedded in localized governance interactions, particularly in rural and resource-dependent communities. The use of intimidation, restrictions on expression, and pressure on residents reflects a governance model in which dissent is treated as a threat rather than as a legitimate democratic input. This represents a shift from accountability-based governance to enforcement-based governance, where state authority is maintained through control rather than responsiveness. In this context, accountability is not absent, but reconfigured—prioritizing policy implementation over democratic responsiveness.

Fourthly, Integrating the Dimensions: From Environmental Democracy to Democratic Regression. Taken together, the three dimensions—restricted participation, limited transparency, and coercive governance—demonstrate how the erosion of environmental democracy produces power asymmetry in policymaking. These findings support the theoretical argument that democratic regression is not only a macro-level political phenomenon but also a micro-level governance process, embedded in everyday policy practices (Tomsa & Bax, 2023; Warburton & Aspinall, 2019). The Wadas case shows that participation is formally present but substantively restricted, information is selectively controlled, and accountability is replaced by coercive enforcement. This combination creates structural conditions that marginalize communities from decision-making processes, despite their direct impact on policy outcomes.

Finally, Implications for Ecological Conflict. The findings also demonstrate that ecological conflict in Wadas is not simply the result of competing interests between development and community resistance. Rather, it is a structural outcome of democratic regression. This aligns with Rojas & Montaña (2022), who argue that exclusionary governance processes tend to generate resistance. However, this study extends that perspective by showing that conflict emerges from the interaction of multiple governance failures, including restricted participation, limited transparency, and coercive practices. In this sense, ecological conflict is not an anomaly, but a predictable consequence of governance systems that fail to uphold environmental democracy.

Analysis

This study demonstrates that democratic regression in environmental governance operates through the systematic erosion of environmental democracy principles, namely participation, access to information, and accountability. By translating these principles into observable empirical dimensions—restricted participation, limited transparency, and coercive governance practices—this research provides a concrete operationalization of democratic regression at the micro level. Existing literature on democratic regression has primarily focused on macro-political dynamics, such as institutional weakening and elite consolidation (Tomsa & Bax, 2023; Warburton & Aspinall, 2019). However, this study shows that democratic regression is also reproduced through everyday governance practices, particularly in environmental policymaking at the village level.

The findings indicate that participation is maintained procedurally but restricted substantively; transparency is formally recognized, but practically limited; and accountability mechanisms are replaced by coercive enforcement. This suggests that democratic regression does not necessarily entail the disappearance of democratic institutions, but rather their functional transformation, in which formal structures persist while their substantive roles are weakened. In this sense, democratic regression is best understood as a process of institutional hollowing, rather than institutional breakdown.

This study advances the concept of environmental democracy by demonstrating that its core principles can function as analytical indicators of governance quality, rather than merely normative ideals. Specifically: Participation '!' restricted participation reveals the degree of inclusion, Access to information '!' limited transparency reflects informational inequality, and Accountability '!' coercive governance indicates the nature of state–society relations. By mapping these relationships, environmental democracy becomes a diagnostic tool for identifying democratic decline in environmental governance.

This contributes to the literature by bridging a gap between normative theory and empirical analysis. While previous studies emphasize the importance of participation and transparency (Parkins & Mitchell, 2005; Pickering et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2018), this study demonstrates how their erosion can be systematically observed and measured in real-world policy processes. A key contribution of this study is the identification of power asymmetry as the central mechanism linking democratic regression to ecological conflict. The findings show that restricted participation limits community influence; limited transparency constrains access to knowledge; and coercive governance suppresses resistance.

Together, these dynamics produce a structural imbalance in which decision-making authority is concentrated in state institutions, while affected communities are marginalized both politically and epistemically. This asymmetry is not incidental, but institutionally produced and maintained through governance practices. It reflects a shift from participatory governance to hierarchical control, where power is exercised through both administrative and coercive means. This study demonstrates that ecological conflict in Wadas is not simply the result of competing interests between development and local communities. Rather, it is a structural outcome of democratic regression. In line with Rojas & Montaña (2022), exclusionary governance tends to generate resistance. However, this study extends that argument by showing that conflict emerges from the interaction of multiple governance failures, rather than from a single factor. Specifically, ecological conflict arises when communities are excluded from participation, access to information is restricted, and accountability mechanisms are replaced by coercion.

Under these conditions, resistance becomes not only likely but structurally inevitable, as communities seek to reclaim agency in decision-making processes that directly affect their livelihoods. The findings of this study confirm the conceptual framework proposed in the introduction, establishing a clear causal pathway:

**Democratic regression → erosion of environmental democracy →
power asymmetry → ecological conflict**

This pathway highlights that environmental conflict is deeply embedded in governance structures. It is not merely a policy failure, but a reflection of broader democratic decline.

This study makes three main theoretical contributions. First, the micro-level operationalization of democratic regression. It shows how democratic regression can be identified through everyday governance practices, rather than only through macro-political indicators. Second, the advancement of environmental democracy as an analytical tool demonstrates that participation, transparency, and accountability can be used to empirically

assess governance quality. Third, the integration of democracy and environmental conflict literature. It establishes a causal relationship between democratic regression, power asymmetry, and ecological conflict, linking previously fragmented research areas.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that democratic regression in the andesite mining policy in Wadas Village is empirically manifested through three interrelated dimensions: participation deficit, information asymmetry, and coercive governance. These dynamics reflect the erosion of the core principles of environmental democracy—participation, access to information, and accountability—at the village level. The findings show that community involvement was largely procedural and non-deliberative, access to environmental information was restricted, and policy implementation relied on coercive measures. Together, these conditions produced power asymmetry, where decision-making authority was concentrated in state institutions while affected communities were systematically marginalized. As a result, ecological conflict emerged not merely from competing interests but as a structural outcome of exclusionary governance processes. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it operationalizes democratic regression at the micro level by identifying concrete governance practices—restricted participation, limited transparency, and coercive enforcement—as measurable indicators of democratic decline. Second, it advances the concept of environmental democracy by demonstrating that its core principles can function not only as normative ideals but also as analytical tools for diagnosing governance quality. Third, the study establishes a causal linkage between democratic regression, power asymmetry, and ecological conflict, thereby integrating and extending existing scholarship on democracy, environmental governance, and resource conflict.

Based on these findings, this study proposes several actionable policy recommendations. First, governments should institutionalize participatory mechanisms at the village level by ensuring continuous, deliberative, and inclusive public consultation processes throughout all stages of policymaking, rather than relying on one-off outreach activities. Second, it is necessary to implement transparency reforms, particularly by guaranteeing public access to Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) documents, separating project assessments (e.g., dam and mining projects), and providing accessible, comprehensible environmental information to affected communities. Third, state institutions must strengthen accountability and safeguard civil liberties by limiting the use of coercive measures in policy implementation and establishing independent oversight mechanisms to handle grievances and conflict. These recommendations are directly derived from the empirical findings and aim to reduce power asymmetries while preventing future ecological conflicts.

This study is limited to a single case and sector, and therefore, its findings should be interpreted within this context. Future research may expand the analysis to other regions or employ comparative and quantitative approaches to further examine how democratic regression shapes environmental governance across different settings. Nonetheless, this study highlights that strengthening environmental democracy is not only normatively desirable but also essential for achieving equitable and conflict-sensitive resource governance.

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