

Original Research Article

## Interaction between Civil Society and Government: A Case Study of the Evolution of Waste Management Policies in Taiwan

Chun Hei SO<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The Chinese University of Hong Kong

**\*Corresponding Author:** Chun Hei SO  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

### Article History

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**Abstract:** The environmental movement in Taiwan emerged against the backdrop of democratization. Initially, Taiwan's waste management policies relied heavily on incineration and landfilling, with little to no policy framework before the 1980s, leading to waste being discarded indiscriminately. In 1984, the construction of "sanitary landfills" began, marking a shift away from random dumping. However, the 1985 fire at the Neihu garbage mountain—caused by excessive garbage accumulation and subsequent methane ignition—served as a wake-up call for Taiwanese society, highlighting the need for better waste management. Civil society in Taiwan has played a crucial role in shaping waste management policies, successfully reversing government policies from the bottom up. Throughout this interactive process between civil society and the government, one can observe not only the "protest politics" that emerged post-democratization but also the growth of Taiwanese civil society, evolving from NIMBY-driven demonstrations to the pursuit of environmental justice. This paper employs a case study approach to explore how Taiwanese civil society has influenced the evolution of waste management policies, examine its interactions with the government, analyze the process, and assess the characteristics of various actors and the methods used to effect policy changes.

**Keywords:** Taiwan, Lifting of Martial Law, Environmental Movement, Civil Society, Protest Politics, Democratization.

### 1. RESEARCH THEME

The 1970s marked a challenging period for Taiwan. In 1971, the Republic of China, (ROC/Taiwan), long represented by the Kuomintang (KMT), lost its United Nations seat to the People's Republic of China (PRC). Subsequently, many countries severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan, and the United States began engaging with the PRC to counter the Soviet Union, eroding the KMT's legitimacy, which had relied on U.S. support. Following Chiang Kai-shek's death in 1975, his presidential duties were temporarily assumed by Yen Chia-kan before being passed to Chiang Ching-kuo. Appointed Premier in 1972, Chiang Ching-kuo sought to restore the KMT's ruling legitimacy through various measures. However, Taiwanese society remained suppressed to some extent during the 1970s, with the KMT retaining a dominant grip on power. From the 1980s onward, mass movements began to increase, with approximately 1,000 demonstrations and rallies of varying scales occurring in 1983 alone. In Max Weber's terms, society was beginning to "disenchant." The KMT authorities recognized that decentralizing power was inevitable. In 1987, Chiang Ching-kuo lifted martial law, signaling the end of the authoritarian era. His successor, Lee Teng-hui, focused on democratization and localization reforms, ushering in a democratic era (Wakabayashi, M., 2013).

The environmental movement in Taiwan emerged within this democratization context. Initially, waste management policies relied on incineration and landfilling, with no coherent policy before the 1980s, resulting in widespread littering. The construction of "sanitary landfills" began in 1984, shifting away from indiscriminate dumping. However, the 1985 Neihu garbage mountain fire—triggered by excessive waste and methane ignition—prompted Taiwanese society to recognize the need for improved waste management. Civil society has been instrumental in shaping

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these policies, successfully reversing government decisions from the ground up. This interaction reveals not only the "protest politics" post-democratization but also the evolution of Taiwanese civil society from NIMBY protests to the pursuit of environmental justice (Ho, M. S., 2006).

This paper uses a case study approach to investigate how Taiwanese civil society has influenced waste management policy changes, explore its interactions with the government, analyze the process, and evaluate the characteristics of various actors and methods of policy change.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Concept of Civil Society and Its Relationship with Governance

The term "civil society" sometimes rendered as "citizens' society" in the Chinese-speaking world, has ancient roots, with most scholars tracing its origins to Greece. Over time, it developed into a concrete concept by the 16th century. The renowned thinker Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel viewed it ethically, dividing society into three parts: family, civil society, and the state, with civil society acting as a bridge between family and state.

Different scholars offer varied definitions of "civil society" (Zhong, J. Y., 2003):

- Scholar L. Diamond defines civil society as "a self-constituted and autonomous realm of organized life existing outside the government, yet regulated by the rule of law or established norms."
- Scholar Michael Walzer describes it as "a domain where people, free from coercion, can form various groups for reasons of family, interests, benefits, or ideology, with a network of relationships woven by these groups."
- Scholar Edwards Shils sees it as "a part of society with its own life, distinct from the state, and typically possessing autonomy relative to the state."
- Scholar Jan Art Scholte views it as "a political field where voluntary groups intentionally seek to shape rules governing different aspects of social life, with actions targeting formal directives, informal structures, and social order."
- Scholar Golden White considers it "an intermediary associational domain between the state and family, occupied by organizations separate from the state, which enjoy autonomy in their relationship with the state and are formed voluntarily by societal members to protect or advance their interests and values."

Gerry Stoker (Stoker, G., 1998) outlines key characteristics of governance, noting that it involves not just the government but also other actors. He observes that governments increasingly collaborate with civil organizations to address issues, with interdependent actors exchanging resources, ultimately forming an autonomous network to resolve problems.

Civil society is indispensable in governance. Today, various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operate within the "public sphere" of society, forming autonomous networks that provide the government with suggestions and opinions. Some organizations are even incorporated into governmental decision-making processes, even under authoritarian regimes.

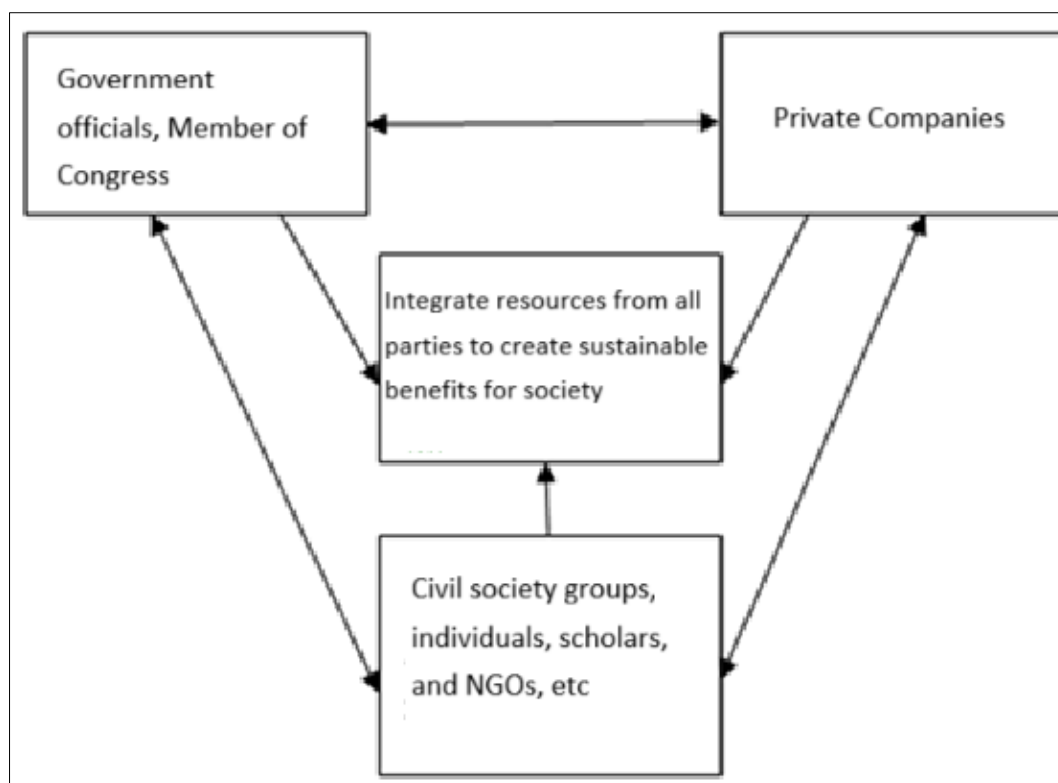
### Public-Private Partnerships

Western scholars note that public-private partnerships (PPPs) are effectively achieved in democratic countries, where governments, private companies, NGOs, and other public entities collaborate to achieve specific goals. Simply put, PPPs involve a triangular relationship among government, businesses, and civil society, influencing and cooperating with one another (Langton, S., 1983).

Taiwanese scholars define PPPs as: "A collaborative relationship between the public and private sectors (including non-profit organizations) aimed at pursuing better quality of life and meeting needs, characterized by equal, divided, and shared attitudes, integrating resources, and working together toward common goals through positive interaction. In this relationship, the public and private sectors engage in two-way communication and shared responsibility, creating sustainable benefits and welfare for society (Chen, P. J., 1999).

### Social Movements

Social movements are a form of public participation aimed at challenging and overturning existing social norms and resisting government policies and authority. When the government perceives the cost of suppression to be lower than the cost of response, it is likely to respond with force. The basic logic of social movements is that individual voices, when united, employ corresponding protest tactics such as demonstrations or confrontations on a given issue. During protests, certain individuals are frequently present while others are rare. In Taiwan's environmental movement, many long-term protesters are elderly, a factor related to life course. Generational factors shaping individual traits are also evident in Taiwan's anti-nuclear movement. Similarly, Taiwan's waste movement reveals the characteristics of different actors.



**Figure 1: Civil Society (Figure source: Compiled by this paper)**

### 3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the interaction between civil society and the government in the evolution of Taiwan's waste management policies. The case study method is particularly suitable for exploring complex social and political processes in depth, allowing for an analysis of historical context, key events, and actor dynamics within a specific setting (Yin, 2018). Data were collected from secondary sources, including academic books, journal articles, newspaper reports, government documents, and online resources related to Taiwan's democratization, environmental movements, and waste policy changes. These sources were systematically reviewed and analyzed to trace policy shifts, identify key actors (e.g., civic groups, experts, political parties, and government entities), and evaluate their interactions. The analysis involves process tracing to map the chronological development of events from the 1970s to the early 2000s, supplemented by thematic coding to highlight themes such as protest politics, public-private partnerships, and policy reversal. No primary data collection, such as interviews or surveys, was conducted due to the historical focus of the research.

### 4. Opening the Door to Democratization

All civic movements in Taiwan are tied to the democratization process. In the early 1970s, the U.S. shifted its policy toward the PRC, and the ROC was expelled from the United Nations, posing severe challenges to the KMT regime, leading to the so-called "1972 system" (Wakabayashi, M., 2009). After Chiang Kai-shek's 1969 car accident, his health declined, and governance was largely delegated to Chiang Ching-kuo. Appointed Premier in 1972, Chiang effectively held significant power. To reestablish the KMT's legitimacy in Taiwan, he initiated localization reforms as a response to the collapsing "external legitimacy."

Losing external support, the KMT shifted to seeking internal recognition, marking the beginning of the Taiwanization of the KMT. Through supplementary elections, the KMT increased the number of Taiwanese representatives and localized its internal personnel. Economically, it supported small and medium enterprises, promoting economic development to demonstrate the superiority of KMT rule over the CCP, aligning with capitalist interests and framing the CCP as a common enemy. However, this openness targeted the elite rather than the masses, with Taiwanization occurring without democratization. Economic growth simultaneously created a large working class and an emerging middle class in urban areas, whose economic interests were inadequately addressed, making them supporters of opposition movements (Wang, Z. H., 1989).

The Zhongli Incident prompted the KMT to open the door to democratization, though suppression failed to halt the formal organization of the dangwai (outside the party) movement and other groups post-1978. From the 1980s, various

social movements emerged, challenging the KMT's authority. The KMT's attempt to create a new economic boom failed, intensifying opposition movements. Between 1983 and 1987, over 1,000 protests and demonstrations occurred annually. Lee Teng-hui, then a member of the Executive Yuan, viewed this as a crisis of public authority. By the 1980s, society no longer feared state authority, and the KMT found control difficult. After weighing the costs, the KMT determined that the cost of suppression exceeded that of compromise, leading to gradual reforms (Zhu, Y. H., 1989).

Opposition movements emerged from this period, extending beyond demands for political liberalization to include various civic rights movements, with the environmental movement also taking root. In 1988, Chiang Ching-kuo's sudden death without designating a successor (Hao, B. C., 1995)—likely unexpected by Chiang himself—led to Lee Teng-hui's ascent to the presidency. After a period of turbulence, Lee was elected as the first democratically elected president in 1996. During his tenure, the space for civic movements expanded, enabling the success of the waste movement within this broader climate.

## 5. Starting from the Ground Up

Before the 1970s, Taiwan's waste management primarily involved direct dumping. The *Waste Disposal Act* was enacted in 1974, shifting to incineration and landfilling. In the 1980s, as democratization accelerated, civic movements grew. The year 1985 marked a turning point. The government actively built "sanitary landfills" (landfills), but waste volumes continued to rise, forming garbage mountains. In 1985, a severe fire broke out at the Huzhouli landfill, also known as the Neihu garbage mountain, located beside the Keelung River in Taipei's Neihu District. Since the early 1980s, excessive garbage had generated methane and caused fires. The Taipei City Government decided to close the Neihu garbage mountain and seek new landfill sites (Lin, X. J., 2011).

This fire raised societal awareness of the severity of the waste problem, emphasizing that it could not be resolved without careful management. A significant shift in mindset occurred, with the notion of "out of sight, out of mind" being abandoned. Cleaning streets was no longer seen as a complete solution, and environmental issues and deeper reflection began to permeate public consciousness (Yu, F., 2013).

## 6. Civic Groups, Citizen Experts, and Political Parties

The Taiwan Housewives' Union was the first civic group to address waste issues, opposing excessive plastic bottle use and criticizing the government's inaction starting in 1987. This sparked a trend of civic engagement with waste problems. Concurrently, as landfilling alone could not handle the growing waste volume, the government opted to build incinerators. In 1991, the Executive Yuan designated incineration as the primary waste management method, later adopting a Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) model in 1996 to construct 15 incinerators across Taiwan (Taiwan Environment Watch Association, 1999, July 23). However, this decision sparked fierce public opposition.

From 1998, numerous demonstrations opposed the incinerator plans, leading environmental groups to form the "Supervisory Alliance" (Ho, M. S., 2000). Various protests erupted across Taiwan. In 1999, a precursor to the Green Citizens' Action Alliance invited U.S. expert Dr. Paul Connett to Taiwan. A specialist in incineration, Connett collaborated on 13 lectures nationwide, explaining the issues and impacts of dioxin emissions from incineration in simple terms to ensure public understanding. This was a critical step, bringing knowledge about incinerator effects to communities and villages, fostering widespread reflection.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was a key driver of the environmental movement, collaborating with environmental groups on street protests. However, DPP Chairman Hsu Hsin-liang stated that the party could not remain in opposition indefinitely and could not align with protesters forever (China Times, 1993, May 29). In the late 1980s, many environmental movement leaders, including those in the waste movement, were DPP members. After Chiang Ching-kuo's 1987 lifting of martial law and the opening of electoral competition, the DPP gradually withdrew from the environmental movement, reducing support for aggressive protests. This is understandable, as an opposition party aiming for governance needed to appeal to moderate voters, making continued radical tactics unfeasible. The relationship between civic groups and the opposition party shifted from collaboration to separation. By the mid-1990s, civic groups relied more on their own strength for protests, decreasing dependence on political parties (Guo, Z. L., 1998).

## 7. Responding to the Trend—Government Takes Active Action

Following waves of opposition from civic groups, the government shifted its approach, collaborating with them to gather public input and accept dissenting views.

In 2001, the government proposed the *Follow-up Plan for Waste Management*, shifting from an "incineration-led, landfilling-supported" strategy to prioritizing resource recovery and waste reduction at the source (National Development Council, 2015, April 28).

In 2003, the government launched the "Waste Policy Summit," engaging industries, related groups, and the public in discussions. The summit addressed the core issue of waste at the source. In 2002, civic groups had formed an alliance demanding alternatives to incineration. The Legislative Yuan's "Sustainable Development Committee" subsequently held public hearings to facilitate dialogue between environmental groups and the government. The summit, held over six sessions, concluded with two key outcomes: halting incinerator construction and redirecting budgets toward recycling efforts. The push from civic groups was highly effective, prompting the government to respond actively. Most notably, the government completely reversed its policy, investing heavily in waste recycling and reuse. The following figure, using the Taipei City Government as an example, illustrates the implementation of recycling policies (Su, J. B., 2003).

Handling Method	Period	Handling Place	Specific situation
Open dumping	1969-1985	Neihu	Discontinued
Landfilling	1985-2010	Fudekeng → Shanzhuku	Discontinued
Incineration	1991-present	Neihu Plant Muzha Plant Beitou Plant	still functioning
First-stage recycling	1992-2003	Taipei City	Fixed time, fixed point, fixed route, twice-weekly collection
Four-in-One Resource Recycling Program	1997-present	Taipei City	Four-in-one system for sorted recycling, collection, transportation, and disposal; implement the no-garbage-on-the-ground policy
Pay-as-you-throw garbage fee	2000-present	Taipei City	Fully implement pay-by-bag levy, increase recycling to three times per week
Sorted recycling by designated days	2003-present	Taipei City	Increase recycling to five times per week, and conduct sorted recycling by category on different days
Food waste recycling	2003-present	Taipei City	Free collection of household kitchen waste
"Full resource recycling, zero landfilling"	2010-present	Taipei City	Already implemented

Figure 2: (Taipei City Government Environmental Protection Bureau, 2015)

## 8. Result—Exemplar of Public-Private Partnership

Taiwan's waste management policy serves as a model of public-private partnership, successfully reversing policy from the bottom up, with civil society playing a pivotal role. The democratic context enabled government collaboration with civil society.

### Characteristics of Various Actors

1. **Government:** Taiwan's democratization began in the 1980s, and the KMT government ceased excluding civic groups and the public from dialogue, establishing various communication mechanisms. After Lee Teng-hui's 1996 election, civic activity space expanded, further increasing post-party alternation—a significant legacy of Lee.
2. **Civil Society Organizations:** Taiwan's environmental groups are grassroots, comprising ordinary citizens and diverse scholars and experts. They are relatively diverse. They proactively organized various meetings and invited experts to explain waste management issues to the public, deepening community and rural awareness of waste concerns, which was a major driving force for policy change.
3. **Political Parties:** In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was a major promoter of the environmental movement, and for a period, it collaborated with environmental groups. The two sides once cooperated to organize street demonstrations and protests. Although the DPP later gradually withdrew from the environmental movement and no longer fully supported intense environmental protests, they still cooperated with environmental groups, which is one of the important reasons for the success of the policy change.

### Policy Advocacy Coalition

The Taiwan experience shows that the use of resources is a key factor. The government and relevant civil groups formed a policy coalition, holding different public hearings and cooperating with the civil sector, absorbing them into decision-making channels, and shifting budgets from building incinerators to handling recycling, embodying public-private partnership.



### Method of Policy Change—Bottom-Up Reversal of Government Policy

In summary, the driving force behind the transformation of Taiwan's waste management policy is the participation of civic groups. Civil society successfully gathered sufficient political power to elicit a response from those in power, ultimately reversing government policy from the bottom up. After successfully reversing the government policy, the government did not exclude civic groups from the decision-making process but continued to cooperate.

### 9. Research Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of civil society in Taiwan's waste management policy evolution, it has several limitations. First, as a single case study focused on Taiwan, the findings may have limited generalizability to other contexts, such as authoritarian regimes or countries with different levels of democratization. Second, the reliance on secondary sources—such as academic literature, news articles, and government reports—introduces potential biases, as these materials may reflect the perspectives of authors or institutions rather than a fully objective account. Access to certain archival or unpublished documents was not possible, which could limit the comprehensiveness of the historical analysis. Third, the study does not incorporate quantitative data, such as statistical analyses of protest participation or policy impact metrics, which could strengthen the evaluation of outcomes. Finally, the research is constrained by its temporal scope, ending in the early 2000s; future developments in Taiwan's environmental policies, influenced by ongoing global climate challenges, are not addressed. These limitations suggest avenues for future research, including comparative studies or mixed-methods approaches.

## 10. CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated the pivotal role of civil society in shaping Taiwan's waste management policies amid the broader context of democratization. Beginning with the authoritarian era's rudimentary approaches to waste disposal—characterized by indiscriminate dumping and later shifts to landfilling and incineration—the 1985 Neihu garbage mountain fire marked a turning point, galvanizing public awareness and civic action. Through a case study analysis, we traced how civil society, including groups like the Taiwan Housewives' Union and environmental alliances, evolved from localized NIMBY protests to broader advocacy for environmental justice, effectively reversing government policies from incineration-focused strategies to resource recovery and waste reduction by the early 2000s. Key actors—government, civic organizations, and political parties—interacted dynamically, with democratization enabling public-private partnerships and policy advocacy coalitions that facilitated this bottom-up change.

The findings underscore that Taiwan's success exemplifies how civil society can drive policy transformation in emerging democracies, highlighting the importance of grassroots mobilization, expert involvement, and responsive governance. However, as noted in the limitations, the case's specificity to Taiwan suggests caution in broader applications. Future research could compare this with similar movements in other Asian contexts or examine contemporary challenges like electronic waste in a globalized era. Ultimately, Taiwan's experience offers valuable lessons for fostering sustainable environmental policies through inclusive state-society relations.

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