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NEW YORK — The recent police killing in China's Guangdong Province of as many as 20 villagers who were protesting the government's seizure of land for a power plant is symptomatic of an emerging pattern of rural unrest that challenges the very legitimacy of the Chinese state and the development path on which it has embarked.

China's fabulous growth since the 1980s was achieved through environmental destruction and social and economic polarization which now threaten its continuation. This paradox puts the state in near panic as it tries to hold down the resulting widespread unrest in the countryside. While rural strife is not new - in 1994, I witnessed thousands of peasants in Henan Province fight a local government militia over unpopular taxation and state policies - its scope and frequency have increased greatly.

Rural unrest is the biggest political problem China faces today, even though lethal violence in such events is rare. In 2004, according to official estimates, there were 74,000 uprisings throughout the country - a result of widening gaps between rich and poor, and between urban and rural areas, and between the rapidly growing industrial east and the stagnating agricultural hinterlands.

Guangdong - a booming epicenter of foreign direct investment, with thousands of new factories of global as well as Chinese corporations - embodies these inequalities most intensely. It is not surprising that the province has become a focus of resistance to development as peasant lands are overrun with industries.

Peasant land loss is a time bomb for the state. While avoiding full land privatization and, until recently, massive landlessness of the rural majority, Beijing still allows unregulated rural land development for new industries and infrastructure. Land seized from peasants reduces their minimal subsistence base, leaving them with what is called "two-mouth" lands insufficient to feed most families, thus forcing members of many households to join China's 200 million migrants in search of work across the country.

In many areas where I have carried out research, some households have lost even these small subsistence lands, swelling the ranks of China's landless peasants, who number a staggering 70 million according to official estimates.

Peasants are losing their land to roads, power plants, dams, factories, waste dumps and housing projects for wealthy city-dwellers escaping urban pollution and small apartments.

Compensation for land seizures is minimal and not nearly enough in a rural society where

collective welfare mechanisms no longer exist because of post-Mao reforms.

Such circumstances - combined with unresponsive local governments - force residents to take desperate means to try to limit the resulting increase in vulnerability. On Dec. 6, peasants in Dongzhou, Guangdong, blocked access to a power plant after years of petitions and peaceful protests had failed to get them promised compensation for their confiscated lands.

The Chinese state is very clear on the rural roots of the 1949 revolution, ones emanating from massive inequality and social insecurity. But there is a new clarity now for peasants and rural workers, who have seen the state increasingly side with the newly rich over the past two decades, often at a direct cost to themselves, their families and communities.

This harks back to the period prior to China's 1949 revolution when enormous numbers of landless peasants formed the core of the largely rural movement led by Mao and others. Following their victory, it was the redistribution of land to the poorest peasants that gave the Communist Party its greatest enduring legitimacy in rural areas. It is the loss of this legitimacy that lies at the heart of the most recent strife.

Beijing could use the violence in Guangdong as an opportunity to address the structural roots of the larger unrest - environmental, social and economic. Instead the state is opting to characterize the killings as the mistake of an overly zealous local police officer rather than a systematic attempt to contain rural discontent by any means.

The dilemma for China is not a public relations one, nor is it about how to cope with this one particular set of events. Unless overall policies are altered to address the needs of China's vulnerable rural majority, Beijing will surely face more protracted and violent challenges from the victims of the country's development "success."

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