

**NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS
AND GOVERNMENT IN CHINA:
ENEMIES OR ALLIES?**

Sonia WONG

EAI Background Brief No. 704

Date of Publication: 8 March 2012

Executive Summary

1. In one-party authoritarian states such as China, the rise of civil society represents a threat to political power holders. As a result, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in China are often viewed by governments with deep-seated suspicion and have to survive in hostile political environments. Nevertheless, they have grown at a steady pace.
2. The government's attitude toward NGOs has been conflicting. While the Chinese government badly needs the public services provided by these organizations, it also wary of such organizations becoming a rival political power that may eventually undermine its political rule.
3. Despite the political sensitivity of NGOs, the regulator, the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA), has a weak regulatory capacity. The regulation of NGOs by the central government through routine institutionalized administrative measures has been lax and weak.
4. To compensate for the weak regulatory oversights, the central government has set up a decentralized control system by requiring each NGO to find a government/party unit to serve as its sponsor before it can be formally registered with the MCA. Thus, each registered NGO is held accountable to one government/party unit.
5. Millions of NGOs are operating either without registration or registered as commercial entities. According to current regulations on NGOs in China, organizations operating as social organizations without registering with the MCA are illegal organizations. However, due to the need to utilize the public services provided by these organizations, many local government officials have been providing them with implicit patronage.
6. Thus, NGO-government relationship in China is closer and more personalized than that found in western countries. Nevertheless, the government has

imposed an array of restrictive measures on NGO's activities, entry and access to resources that aim at preventing NGOs from developing into a rival political power.

7. The coexistence of restrictive measures and close personalized relationship allows the government to achieve the twin objectives of utilizing and controlling the NGO sector at the same time. Such a control system, however, has also created serious organizational and governance problems for the NGOs.