Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Global Politics and Socio-Humanities
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.35776

Cadre-Mass Conflicts, Villagers' Tactics and Rural Factional Politics: A Case Study of Land Expropriation and Demolition in Village D of City P, Shandong Province

Yuhao Dai

Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China
2490395057@qq.com

Abstract. With the deepening of urbanization, large-scale rural land expropriation and housing demolition have emerged. Interest competition and underlying conflicts arising from this process have become key research topics in existing scholarship. Taking the land expropriation and demolition process of Village D in City P, Shandong Province as a case, this paper illustrates the strategies adopted by villagers when confronting conflicts with village cadres against the backdrop of grassroots governance prioritizing "zero incidents". The study finds that villagers' strategic behaviors center on "disturbance", combining formal and informal forms of resistance, with organized, violent and non-violent actions coexisting. Such behaviors reflect villagers' expedient adaptation to the prevailing social environment. Nevertheless, in the long run, they exert severe adverse impacts on rural cadre-mass relations and grassroots governance.

Keywords: Cadre-mass conflicts, Villagers' tactics, Factional politics, Land expropriation and demolition, Grassroots governance

1. Introduction

In recent years, various social conflicts stemming from land expropriation and demolition have drawn widespread attention from all sectors of society. Surveys on mass incidents in contemporary China conducted by scholars reveal that agriculture-related issues account for roughly 30% to 40% of all cases, among which 60% to 69% are directly linked to land expropriation and demolition [1]. Demolition constitutes a fundamental component of urban development and construction systems, and has also become a prominent research focus for sociologists studying urbanization in recent decades [2]. However, demolition policies allow flexible implementation, and residents subject to expropriation frequently develop a sense of relative deprivation and unfairness during policy enforcement. This has given rise to constant disputes among residents, local governments and developers in urban and rural demolition practices, with the governance of "holdout households" throughout demolition procedures standing as a pervasive practical challenge [3].

Most existing research focuses on interest games unfolding during demolition, a stage where social conflicts erupt most intensely. In extreme cases, some residents even treat their own bodies as bargaining chips to secure maximum economic compensation [4]. Other scholars have explored

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DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.35776

ethical conflicts within this context: rooted in the discourse of "right to subsistence" and supported by moral resources, collective actions launched by residents or farmers in Chinese cities are framed as efforts to "defend their homes" [5].

In parallel with continuous refinement of demolition policy frameworks and rising compensation and resettlement standards in economically developed regions, the overall living standards of households affected by demolition have markedly improved [6]. In economically advanced areas, skyrocketing land and housing prices have enabled some farmers to reap substantial gains from housing resettlement following land acquisition. The mindset of "getting rich through demolition" has become prevalent among suburban farmers in these regions, and farmers' active pursuit of demolition benefits has grown increasingly common. Prior studies note that the logic of farmers' petitioning has shifted from initial rights defense to interest pursuit, most visibly demonstrated by the spread of profit-driven petitions and the emergence of professional petitioners in certain regions [7]. Conflicts triggered by rural land expropriation and demolition fall into three primary categories: disputes between villagers and village cadres, conflicts between villagers and grassroots governments, and friction among villagers themselves [3]. Most existing literature assumes farmers rely primarily on non-violent strategies when responding to demolition; some studies presuppose village cadres wield greater power than ordinary villagers yet fail to analyze rural cadre-mass conflicts under the current grassroots governance mandate of "stability control first, incident prevention paramount". Other analyses of rural land expropriation and demolition entirely overlook village cadres, the intermediary group positioned between government authorities and ordinary villagers.

In reality, grassroots rural actors are neither elite groups nor pure representatives of the underclass; they operate as independent agents with distinct action goals and behavioral logics [8]. Villagers' strategies toward demolition adjust alongside shifting external conditions, and interest-driven conduct has become a prominent feature of demolition dynamics in many villages [9]. Villagers broadly expect substantial financial gains from future land expropriation and demolition, an attitude that partially fuels negative outcomes such as land right disputes among neighbors [10]. Other scholars have analyzed farmers' strategy of "disturbing to safeguard rights" during land acquisition and demolition, arguing that under overlapping constraints of the pressure-based administrative system, bureaucratic hierarchy and land expropriation institutions, farmers must escalate the scale of incidents to push their demands and grievances onto government policy agendas as priority matters for resolution [11]. Additionally, governments at all levels have issued numerous policy documents to standardize and promote land expropriation and demolition work, yet these texts only outline general objectives and guiding principles without rigid provisions for specific implementation approaches. Grassroots civil servants and village cadres exercise local government authority on their behalf, leveraging rural social networks to advance demolition work, and their enforcement logic invariably includes various expedient adjustments to formal policy texts [12]. Accordingly, rural land expropriation and demolition operate on a principal-agent relationship between local governments and grassroots political authorities, and progress in demolition reciprocally shapes cadres' behavioral choices, while village internal power structures are continuously restructured and reproduced through each specific incident [13].

From the practical progress of constructing a new socialist countryside, reconstructing relations between governance actors and farmers forms the core task. Therefore, understanding rural governance requires centering farmers as the fundamental perspective and taking village self-governance organizations as the core analytical lens [14]. In summary, rural cadre-mass relations must be integrated into research on land expropriation and demolition. Only through typical cases

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.35776

with rich, detailed processes can we fully capture how land acquisition and demolition reshape cadre-mass relations and villagers' tactical responses. This study thus takes the land expropriation and demolition process of Village D in City P, Shandong Province as its case, delineates the tactics villagers deploy to address conflicts with village cadres under the grassroots governance priority of "zero incidents", and conducts a sociological analysis of these phenomena.

2. Research methodology

2.1. Case study methodology adopted in this paper

City P is a county-level city under the administration of Shandong Province, located in the western Jiaodong Peninsula. As of the end of 2023, City P held a permanent resident population of 1.1776 million, including 556,900 urban residents and 620,700 rural residents, corresponding to an urbanization rate of 47.3%. Over the past 20 years, land expropriation and demolition projects in City P have surged in volume. Village D lies on the northern suburban fringe of City P, less than one kilometer straight-line distance from the urban core, and fewer than one kilometer west of the high-speed railway station opened in 2020. It stands as a typical suburban village[1]. By the end of 2016, Village D contained 370 mu of cultivated land, 351 households and a total population of 1,080 residents. Limited arable land and proximity to the city have rendered agriculture underdeveloped here; villagers mainly earn incomes through small businesses and casual labor, with a portion holding no stable employment. Furthermore, all neighboring villages completed demolition within the previous decade.

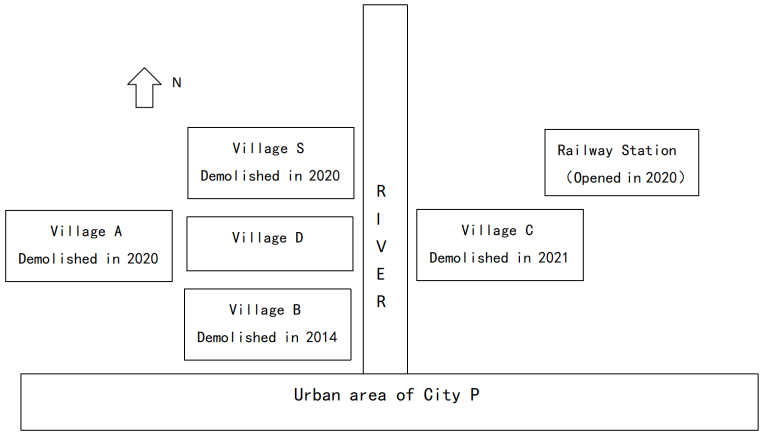


Figure 1. Location map of Village D

2.2. Data collection: participant observation and interview methods

This research primarily employs participant observation and semi-structured interviews to thoroughly examine internal village power structures and interest bargaining in Village D, and analyze the barriers obstructing its demolition. Overall, demolition work in Village D has faced persistent obstacles, with no substantive demolition procedures launched as of October 2024[2]. Villagers split sharply into opposing factions supporting and opposing demolition. Through

[1] See Figure 1 for the geographic location of Village D

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.35776

sustained fierce resistance, the anti-demolition faction forced the village Party branch secretary and village committee director to resign in October 2022. At present, daily village affairs are managed by a first-party secretary dispatched from the sub-district office overseeing Village D.

3. Cadre-mass conflicts and villagers' tactics amid land expropriation and demolition

3.1. Cadre-mass conflicts: land lease disputes, demolition compensation standards and intra-village factional strife

3.1.1. Origins of cadre-mass conflicts in Village D

Cadre-mass conflicts in Village D stem from multiple sources, with the earliest disputes originating from a series of land lease contracts signed between the village collective and individual villagers in the 1990s. During that decade, some business-operating villagers leased large tracts of wasteland on the eastern side of Village D to build factories. As the land belonged collectively to the village, 30-year lease agreements were signed between individual villagers and the village collective. Subsequent disputes arose over lease terms; although both parties brought their disagreements to legal resolution, the litigation permanently damaged mutual trust[3]. When the leased land became eligible for demolition compensation, the two sides could never reach consensus on the compensation amount allocated for the land leases.

A second source of cadre-mass tension lies in demolition compensation standards, centered on comparisons between Village D and northern neighboring Village S. City P launched an urban renewal project involving land expropriation in Village S in 2020, with corresponding demolition compensation standards published sequentially starting October 2020[4]. Many villagers of Village D argued that their village sits closer to the urban center than Village S and should therefore receive higher compensation rates, yet the municipal government rejected their demands, stating that premature discussion of compensation standards was inappropriate given low public willingness for demolition in Village D.

Intra-village factional strife constitutes the most concentrated manifestation of cadre-mass conflicts in Village D. Factional competition has deep historical roots, with "slate elections" emerging as early as village committee elections in the 1990s. A slate election refers to a pre-election alliance formed by several villagers with aligned interests. Alliance members divide campaign roles, each running for a designated position, and compete against rival slates. A defining feature of slate elections is collective shared success or failure: if the slate's candidate for village director loses the race, the entire slate is deemed defeated. Even if other slate members win separate committee seats, they typically resign voluntarily.

Factional tensions in Village D remained low-intensity through the 1990s. Over the past two decades, however, City P entered a rapid urbanization phase driving steep land value appreciation,

[2] Response from the mayor's mailbox of City P regarding whether Village D is included in the demolition plan: http://govmail.qingdao.gov.cn/governmentNew/GovWebSite/ReplyInfosNew.aspx?type=1&guid={20220323-2034-4887-7277-FA163E60C32B}

[3] Legal documents regarding land lease disputes: https://aiqicha.baidu.com/nwenshu?wenshuId=547349c4c6be1a3d53694f8d9a7a32dff843f620

[4] Partial public notice on the land acquisition compensation and resettlement plan for Village S: http://www.pingdu.gov.cn/bmxxgkml_15/pdszrzyj_15/ywflxx_15/nzstdbcazfagg_15/202204/P020220422802995885868.pdf

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and impending demolition amplified competition over control of village demolition processes—an office promising immense prestige and financial gains. Factional conflict escalated to its peak, with vote-buying becoming an open campaign tactic. Villagers label the faction supporting the secretary who resigned in October the "Royalist Faction", and the opposing group the "Anti-Royalist Faction", alongside a neutral cohort uninvolved in partisan competition. The author conducted interviews with 15 villagers regarding intra-village factional strife.

3.1.2. Villagers' attitudes toward demolition

Royalist villagers support demolition primarily for its potential to improve living environments and household income.

Interview Respondent 1 (Royalist):

"Living in apartment buildings is far more convenient and comfortable—no more hauling coal to heat stoves in winter! I back the village secretary because I want us to move into new apartments quickly. Those Anti-Royalists are just greedy for money. They lost the 2020 village committee election, and now they're bitter about the demolition windfall, so they stir up endless trouble making all kinds of unreasonable demands. Does the government have unlimited funds to hand out? Their constant protesting will delay demolition for another ten years, and Village D's reputation is ruined across the whole city now."

Anti-Royalist villagers direct their grievances squarely at the former village secretary, demanding a clean, impartial new leader to oversee demolition and prevent village cadres from siphoning off most demolition benefits.

Interview Respondent 2 (Anti-Royalist):

"Village W on the east side of town had a smooth demolition process a few years back, so the developer gave every household an 80,000-yuan bonus. Word has it the Village W director pocketed over ten million yuan from the demolition. Village D is bigger than Village W—just imagine how much money our former secretary could line his own pockets with. Ordinary villagers won't see a penny of that profit as long as he's in charge… Even though XXX [the resigned secretary] stepped down temporarily, he'll come back once public attention fades. I'll refuse demolition entirely as long as he holds any village leadership post."

Interview Respondent 3 (Anti-Royalist):

"The village administers subsistence allowances here too. Only families close to the secretary qualify for support. The secretary decides who counts as poor. Some elderly childless amputees get denied benefits, while families with grown working children receive monthly subsidies. All welfare funds go to his allies. In today's world, ordinary people without connections get no fair treatment at all."

Neutral villagers avoid entanglement in the tangled intra-village conflicts while facing informal pressure from government authorities to accept demolition.

Interview Respondent 4 (Neutral Villager):

"The village is torn apart by constant fighting now. Look at the chaos around the village committee offices. I don't want to offend anyone—neighbors who once got along well won't even speak to each other over this demolition dispute. I have two daughters, one working at a hospital and the other as a school teacher. I can't risk being labeled a holdout. Back in Village S, a man's parents refused demolition, and municipal officials contacted his hospital administration. The hospital director told him: 'Go home and convince your parents to agree to demolition, and don't return to work until you succeed.' I disagree with the village committee and local officials on many things, but ordinary citizens have no real power. I'll just comply quietly and live my life peacefully."

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3.2. Villagers' tactics: disturbance as primary measure, petitioning as auxiliary measure

3.2.1. Disturbance: the dominant resistance tactic deployed by villagers

Organized public disturbance constitutes the primary resistance tactic adopted by Anti-Royalist villagers in Village D. Following the 2019 village committee election that secured the incumbent secretary's re-election, Anti-Royalist villagers launched comprehensive, multi-layered confrontational campaigns targeting the village secretary and director. They organized elderly faction members to take daily shifts monitoring the village committee office from morning until evening, relaying real-time alerts to other Anti-Royalist members whenever the secretary entered the building. Additionally, the faction repeatedly organized groups of middle-aged and elderly villagers to gather outside the committee office, verbally assault the secretary and obstruct routine village administrative work. In August 2022, protesters locked the secretary inside his office with a private padlock during a verbal confrontation; police were dispatched to the scene to unlock the door and secure his release. Local police responded to dozens of conflict mediation calls stemming from cadre-mass friction in Village D, yet no lasting resolutions were achieved, and partisan animosity remained irreconcilable. Sustained daily disruption paralyzed routine village governance, ultimately forcing the village secretary to resign in October 2022. All organized public disturbance ceased immediately following his resignation.

Interview Respondent 5 (Royalist):

"Every day those Anti-Royalists crowded the committee offices to stir up trouble. They stood outside the glass windows screaming vicious insults at the secretary. There were two close calls where physical fights nearly broke out… Society is far more restrained today. Twenty years ago, we would have hired local toughs to scare them off without police intervention. Even when officers arrive now, they can't take firm action—most protesters are elderly men and women. If police attempt arrests, any sudden medical emergency on-site would trigger a larger public incident for which no official can accept responsibility. Just recently, an elderly man from Village S suffered a medical episode during a protest and was hospitalized, with a full-time nurse assigned to monitor his condition to prevent further complications."

3.2.2. Petitioning: the secondary resistance tactic deployed by villagers

Petitioners in Village D are overwhelmingly drawn from the Anti-Royalist faction, whose core grievances center on electoral fraud and cadre corruption, reflecting clear partisan motivations. As demolition plans drew near, each village faction sought to seize control of the demolition process to capture substantial financial benefits. Defeated factions thus sustained persistent petition campaigns, including organized group petitions to Beijing. Leaders of these petition drives became key targets of local stability control efforts. One interviewed villager disclosed that during a major international conference hosted by the prefecture-level city governing City P in 2018, a police vehicle remained parked near the lead petitioner's residence around the clock.

Interview Respondent 6 (Anti-Royalist):

"Over the years, our faction has submitted petitions to provincial and central authorities countless times, yet nothing changes. Local government and village cadres collude closely; village and sub-district officials receive instant notification the moment we file a formal complaint, then send staff to intercept petitioners before they reach higher authorities. Petitioning carries lighter penalties today, but a decade ago villagers brought back from Beijing petitions were detained at police

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.35776

stations for two days before release. I fear a permanent record on my file will damage my children's prospects for Party membership or civil service employment, so I've never joined any petition trips."

4. Policy responses to cadre-mass conflicts and rural factional politics

In the book *Reconstruction of Rural China*, Fei Xiaotong shares his thought that the baojia management system took over well-working traditional self-ruling village groups, and it did not bring any practical replacement to carry out village work. Orders from the central government could spread to every local area without any block. But baojia leaders acted as government workers who must follow higher instructions. They stood for the central government's needs instead of local villagers, even if they held power over local regions. This situation caused long-term disagreements in thoughts between baojia managers and local village elites. If these elites did not choose to cooperate, the central government's rules could not be put into real use well, and the whole management work would become much less efficient [15]. We can see the same set of conditions in Village D. Village cadres are the leaders of village self-management teams, and they are supposed to unite all villagers and guard the shared benefits of the whole village. But real life in Village D is not like this. Its village cadres built small partner groups around the fight for limited resources, and they even had open competitions for power against other opposing groups inside the village.

4.1. Village cadres' institutional roles and cadre-mass conflicts

To figure out why village cadres act in such ways, we need to start our analysis from the official power they own. Erving Goffman put forward the stage performance theory to describe people's social acts. He thinks people's social positions and identities decide how they behave, and every person's daily actions show common social rules and official requirements [16]. Village cadres stand between national government and village people. They hold control over village resources and keep close personal connections with locals, and they also have to carry out official rules from the central government at the same time. If cadres give up their main duty to protect shared village interests and start sharp fights with some villagers, bad results will appear. Not only will the relationship between cadres and villagers break down, but villagers will also lose trust in government management systems. Regular civil servants can get higher positions through promotion, but village cadres in areas that will soon be rebuilt for city development do not run for office just for small salaries. They want to gain extra advantages by controlling village power and sharing out local resources. In Village D, cadres and common villagers grow more distant from each other. Most villagers believe village cadres and local government work as one group. This idea breaks the unity of the whole village, stops daily management work from running smoothly, and creates big troubles for basic government work.

4.2. Villagers' tactics and rural factional politics

The way villagers in Village D file petitions is totally different from common petitions based on citizens' legal rights, because these local petitions are clearly tied to competing village groups. Ordinary people who file normal petitions put forward specific troubles for themselves, small communities or the whole village. They will stop making appeals right after their exact requests are met. However, those who submit petitions for group competition in Village D only use real complaints as a way to fight for power against other village groups. They do not have clear personal interests to protect, and they nearly only hope official punishments will be given to leaders from

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.35776

opposing groups. This method of aiming attacks at group leaders matches the fact that every village group mainly relies on its head. It is similar to the rule in group elections that all members win or lose together. Whether one group can win village elections completely depends on how well its leader works. For this reason, weakening leaders from rival groups becomes the main aim of all fights between different village factions. This mindset of attacking people instead of solving actual problems makes conflicts between groups last forever. Every faction, especially the Royalist group, has secret support networks to look after its own members. So removing opposing groups turns into a slow, step-by-step process. Even if there is no real proof to show rival group leaders break rules, opposing sides can create official trouble for them. They send complaint letters to Beijing when the government pays close attention to social order. Higher government offices put keeping social peace as their top task. To calm down these petition events, they will give strict official punishments to village and sub-district officers. In this way, people who file petitions for group competition can drive rival leaders out of their positions. Competition between village groups almost never ends with small compromises. Each side keeps calling its members to take action until opposing groups lose all power. They worry that if rival leaders gain influence again later, those leaders will take revenge on them.

4.3. Policy suggestions to resolve cadre-mass conflicts and rural factional strife

Land expropriation and demolition brought transformative development opportunities to Village D while exacerbating entrenched cadre-mass tensions. Partisan mobilization of petitions and public disturbance tactics designed to eliminate rival factions erode village unity and severely damage villagers' perceptions of cadres and state governance. The sharp conflicts unfolding during Village D's demolition process represent a microcosm of tensions emerging amid national urbanization. China's land expropriation and demolition system operates under a top-down administrative contracting framework, with grassroots governments relying predominantly on administrative tools to advance demolition projects [17]. Demolition residents' demands frequently lack formal channels for meaningful consultation, and administrative coercion alone cannot guarantee smooth demolition implementation. To address systemic barriers in land acquisition and demolition governance, this paper proposes three targeted policy recommendations:

(1) Establish bottom-up consultation mechanisms with multi-stakeholder participation. Land expropriation and demolition directly impact every villager's vital interests and require inclusive public participation to integrate diverse stakeholder demands. Traditional top-down administrative enforcement cannot resolve such complex disputes. Bottom-up deliberative consultation frameworks must be constructed to meaningfully respond to villager grievances, mitigate partisan divisions and streamline demolition and other high-priority governance initiatives. Beyond multi-stakeholder democratic consultation assemblies, third-party neutral mediators should be introduced to facilitate constructive dialogue amid severe intra-village factional rifts, ensuring transparent, fair conflict resolution. Professional social workers may be retained to chair consultation forums, guiding all partisan groups to articulate grievances and negotiate viable shared consensus. Deliberation spaces should cultivate equal, collaborative dialogue centered on shared collective goals of improved living standards and village development, eliminating zero-sum partisan competition. All participants retain equal speaking rights to contribute to joint problem-solving regardless of factional affiliation.

(2) Formulate detailed regulations and standardized cadre recruitment criteria to enforce law-based cadre conduct. Village cadres occupy a dual institutional position: vested with delegated administrative authority to implement state policy while embedded within rural interpersonal networks as local residents. As Fei Xiaotong observed in *From the Soil*, formal legal institutions

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.35776

struggle to operate within traditional rural societies [18]. The long-standing rural norm of personal relationships overriding legal rules blurs boundaries between public administrative duty and private personal interest, creating fertile ground for cadre corruption and partisan faction-building. To address this institutional flaw, clear, granular regulations defining village cadres' power boundaries and standardized behavioral codes must be drafted to accommodate their dual identity. Cadre recruitment standards should prioritize candidates with moral integrity, formal legal education, professional knowledge and practical conflict resolution capabilities. Resolving the core problems of blurred public-private boundaries and unregulated cadre recruitment is foundational to advancing law-based village governance and replacing traditional personalized rural administration.

(3) Reform and refine the petition system. Petitioning in Village D diverges from standard citizen grievance submissions through its instrumental use as a partisan competition weapon. Petition work is integral to modernizing national governance systems and governance capacity; rigid mandates requiring full case closure or zero petition incidents conflict with core modern governance objectives. The *Regulations on Petition Work*, jointly issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council in February 2022, mandates source-based conflict resolution through comprehensive multi-pronged intervention, prioritizing early-stage mediation to defuse disputes at the grassroots before formal petitions emerge [19]. Accordingly, petition governance must move beyond isolated case resolution to analyze root structural causes of repeated partisan petitions, advancing a holistic governance model that targets conflict origins rather than discrete grievance incidents.

5. Conclusion and discussion

When the government takes villagers' land and pays them compensation money, local farmers can receive large amounts of cash. Many suburban villagers hold the idea that they can become rich because of house demolition, and this thought shapes how they view land collection for city building. This research looks at the slow-moving demolition work in Village D of City P, Shandong Province. It shows three closely connected elements: conflicts between village cadres and villagers, various ways villagers resist official work, and power fights between different village groups. The competition between these groups naturally leads to bad relations between cadres and villagers. Meanwhile, villagers use different resisting methods as tools to compete against opposing factions. Villagers mainly choose to gather together and create public trouble to put pressure on cadres from rival groups. As the fights between factions grow fiercer, the gap between cadres and local people becomes wider. Still, these actions are just ways for villagers to fight for their own benefits under relevant policies, instead of open opposition against government rules. On the surface, shouting at officials and making noisy public troubles seem unreasonable. In fact, villagers make such plans on purpose, since basic government departments must try their best to stop all large public conflicts. At present, the central government pays great attention to keeping stable society in villages, so stopping rural conflicts is the most important task for grassroots management [20]. By creating organized public trouble, villagers turn small village internal fights into big events that draw attention from higher government departments. Local officials have to deal with petitioners' requests first, because they fear the situation will get worse and break the stability rules. Villagers are in a weaker position when facing village cadres. Through public disturbance, they can push their benefit requests into official work plans and get satisfying results from the government. Although these disruptive acts look unreasonable, they actually bring the biggest possible benefits to villagers. People take such actions to ask higher authorities to step in. They only want to solve unfair problems in land policies, and they do not aim to fight against the whole government.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.35776

Factional power struggles inside Village D hold back demolition work, make the disagreements between cadres and villagers more serious, and bring huge troubles to basic government management. To solve these long-standing problems, government departments need to take active steps with three matching solutions. First, set up open discussion systems that let all related villagers give their ideas from bottom to top. Second, make stricter rules to select and watch over village cadres. Third, improve official systems to manage people' s petition requests. If the government carries out all three plans together, it can properly deal with villagers' complaints, ease the conflicts between different village groups, and make land collection and house demolition work follow clear legal rules all over the country.

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