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Challenging hydropower development in Myanmar (Burma): cross-border activism under a regime in transition

Adam Simpson

Abstract Although general elections in Myanmar (Burma) in November 2010 have transformed the political landscape, many of the characters remain the same. While there is evidence of incremental domestic political openings many of the political constraints that existed during military rule remain in force. As a consequence of decades of military authoritarian governance and civil conflict, it is Myanmar’s contested ethnic borderlands that have been the important locales for the development of environmental movements, despite increased recent domestic activity. This article analyses a case study of the largely cross-border campaign against hydropower dams on the Salween River in Myanmar and finds that through the suppression of opposition and dissent at home the regime has stimulated the creation of an ‘activist diaspora’, a dynamic transnational community of expatriates who engage in environmental activism beyond the reach of the regime. Due to their relative freedom on the border and in Thailand this community has developed expertise and international networks that have proved crucial in communicating the social and environmental impacts of hydropower development in Myanmar to the international community. Through increased cooperation with an expanding domestic civil society this established activist community is stimulating improved environmental governance of hydropower development and simultaneously assisting in the creation of a more open and democratic Myanmar.

Keywords Myanmar; hydropower; dams; environmental governance; democratisation; activism.

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Introduction

For much of the last 50 years Myanmar (Burma) has been ruled by authoritarian regimes. Despite elections in 2010 that have brought renewed optimism of a transition towards more democratic governance, long-standing attempts by governments in the North, or the affluent world, to encourage democratisation through international isolation were effectively stymied by foreign direct investment in transnational energy projects by foreign corporations and significant economic and political support from neighbouring countries, particularly China (Haacke 2010; Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2009; Simpson 2007). While attempts by governments to use state-to-state leverage to promote democracy and the development of civil society in Myanmar met with little success, there were few linkages – economic, social, communication, intergovernmental and transnational civil society relationships – tying Myanmar to the North, which Levitsky and Way (2006: 396) argue would be the more potent contributors to reform. By focusing on the connections between domestic and Northern actors, however, the framework by Levitsky and Way tends to underestimate the significant role played by the exiled activist community in neighbouring countries. While domestic environmental activism opposing hydropower energy projects in Myanmar has been extremely limited, and those that have engaged in it have done so covertly, there has been significant environmental activism and dissent by exiled or displaced communities, particularly those of ethnic minorities, based in Myanmar’s contested border regions and in northern Thailand. These environmental movements can be understood as potentially important components in a broader political movement promoting democracy, human rights and environmental security in Myanmar.

Environmental activism in Myanmar’s displaced ethnic minority communities takes many forms and is epitomized by the Ei Tu Hta camp for ethnic Karen internally displaced peoples (IDPs) in Karen National Union (KNU) controlled Myanmar. It sits between the proposed Dar Gwin and Wei Gyi Dam sites on a remote stretch of the Salween River where it forms the border between Thailand and Myanmar. The family of Hsiplopo, the leader of this camp, live only three hours walk away, but he is unable to visit them because the camps of the Tamadaw, the Myanmar military with which the KNU is engaged in the world’s longest running civil war (Fink 2008; Maung Aung Myoe 2009), lie in-between. The camp is also built on steep hillsides, denuding the forest cover in the limited area available, and is unable to grow its own rice, relying instead on regular donations from the UN and NGOs shipped upriver by longtail boat (interview: Nay Tha Blay 2009). This type of insecurity colours the daily existence of both the Karen people in this camp and many other ethnic minorities in Myanmar. Despite these conditions, Hsiplopo’s commitment to the campaign against the proposed nearby dams is resolute: ‘We don’t want dams … the military
cannot build the dams because the KNU will not let them while the people do not want them’ (interview: Hsiplopo 2009).

Hsiplopo’s stance reflects the opposition to the dams of many environmental activists and groups who inhabit the nebulous and dangerous borderlands of eastern Myanmar. The dams are opposed for many reasons: they are likely to require forced labour from local ethnic minority communities; they will submerge villages and large areas of pristine forest and arable land; they will adversely impact food security and fisheries; they will cut off a major route for refugees fleeing repression into Thailand; and they are unlikely to even provide improvements in energy security for the local ethnic communities. While the campaign against the dams emphasizes the universal human rights of the affected ethnic minority communities in Myanmar it also promotes their culturally specific identities and is emancipatory in its outlook (Doyle and Doherty 2006: 881). This cultural particularism extends into the ecological realm where the importance of indigenous knowledge of biodiversity is highlighted, making a direct connection between environmental and political concerns (KESAN 2008: 5).

Despite the civil conflict in these areas, or perhaps because of it, activists often operate beyond the remit of the Myanmar military undertaking perilous work with the KNU and other insurgent groups to promote human and environmental security for ethnic minorities. It can be difficult for environmental activists in the North, for whom this precarious existence is entirely foreign, to fully comprehend the existential struggle that dictates much environmental activism in the South particularly in states such as Myanmar, which has been dominated by the military since 1962. As a result, many Northern environment movements, and the American environment movement in particular, have been historically apolitical with the issues of ‘human health, shelter, and food security’ traditionally absent from their agendas (Doyle 2005: 26).

This relative lack of focus on the issues of central importance to survival in the South and the movements they spawn is also reflected within many academic writings on environmental politics. Despite increased attention on the environment in the last two decades, most approaches to environmental politics still examine predominantly ecological issues or regulatory regimes and focus particularly on the affluent states of the North (Kutting 2000; Paehlke and Torgerson 2005). Although there has been increased attention on environmental movements in recent years, much of the material also focuses primarily on movements within the North (Doyle 2000; Dryzek et al. 2003; Gottlieb 2005). There has been some analysis of environment movements in the South (Doherty and Doyle 2006), and various studies of transnational activism more generally (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Reitan 2007; Tarrow 2005), but few comparative studies examining how authoritarian regimes in the South impact on environmental activism or policy (Doyle and Simpson 2006; Fredriksson and Wollscheid 2007). There are
numerous studies that examine civil society under authoritarianism more broadly but these tend to focus on more traditional and formalized civil society organizations (Jamal 2007; Liverani 2008; Sater 2007). There also exist some studies that have demonstrated the importance of domestic environmental movements in undermining authoritarian regimes, particularly in the former Communist countries in the Soviet bloc (Galbreath 2010; Kerényi and Szabó 2006: 805), but the role of exiled environmental movements remains understudied. This article adds to this body of literature by delving into environmental politics under the military in Myanmar, using as its case study the environmental campaign against several proposed hydroelectric dams on the Salween River in eastern Myanmar.

Myanmar currently relies on domestic hydropower for over 70% of its electricity (International Energy Agency 2010), but as transnational projects these dams are primarily driven by foreign corporations and are designed to export most of their electricity to either Thailand or China for foreign exchange, despite critical shortages in Myanmar itself. In the past much of the revenue from these sorts of projects has been simply siphoned off by senior ranks of the military and that which is used for state purposes has been funnelled back into purchases of military hardware for use in the civil conflict (Simpson 2007: 546; Turnell 2010: 30–1).

Despite national elections in November 2010 which returned Myanmar to nominally civilian rule the 2008 constitution, on which the elections were based, provides for a continuing central role for the military in the country’s governance (Williams 2011), with Holliday arguing that the main effect was ‘to entrench Tamadaw power behind a façade of democracy’ (2008: 1047). Although the election process was flawed, fraudulent and tightly controlled, with many generals from the former military regime, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), merely stepping out of their uniforms to take up senior positions in the new government, there is little doubt that incremental changes toward civilian rule are occurring and the potential for political discourse in Myanmar may well improve over time. While many exiled or human rights groups rightly point out that civil conflict and human rights abuses continue largely unabated, particularly in the eastern border regions (interviews: Aung-Thwin 2011; Human Rights Watch Staff 2011; Quigley 2011), some analysts, such as the former International Labour Organization (ILO) Liaison Officer in Myanmar are more optimistic about the ‘new level of scrutiny’ that has accompanied the new parliament (Horsey 2011: 4). His successor, Steve Marshall, who is possibly more intimately involved with the new government than any other Westerner, likewise argues that ‘there is no doubt that the political landscape has changed’ (interview: Marshall 2011).

Accompanying the new parliament a détente has gradually taken place between the new government, led by President Thein Sein, and the National League for Democracy (NLD) and its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. Following her first meeting with the president in August 2011 photos of Suu Kyi were
finally permitted to grace the covers of Myanmar’s weekly newspapers and
the NLD re-registered as a party, with Suu Kyi winning a parliamentary seat
in the April 2012 by-elections. In response to these reforms senior Western
politicians lined up to visit Myanmar, it was given the ASEAN chair for
2014 and multilateral development banks prepared to re-establish links and
lending programs after an absence of a quarter of a century (Simpson 2013).

Regardless of broader political changes, however, the local environmen-
tal movement, despite recent progress, remains embryonic with limitations
in experience and expertise. Over the last decade it has been the transna-
tional environment movement occupying Myanmar’s borderlands that has
provided the most fertile and important outlet for environmental activism
and civil society governance of hydropower development in Myanmar.
Following the formation of the new ‘civilian’ government, however, it is
a particularly opportune moment to assess the impacts of authoritarian
rule on this civil society activism. This article therefore proceeds with an
analysis of the campaign against the Salween Dams and presents some
general conclusions in relation to authoritarianism and activism. With
the likelihood of persistent authoritarianism in much of East Asia in the
near future (Beeson 2010: 277), this article provides a revealing case study
of how authoritarian governance in Myanmar has stimulated an ‘activist
diaspora’ and therefore ‘transnationalized’ environmental activism, leading
to a better understanding of how non-traditional forms of activism and
governances operate across borders.

State–society relations in Myanmar

In many countries of the South human and environmental security are
closely intertwined (Barnett 2001; Doyle and Risely 2008; Floyd and
Matthew 2013). In Myanmar the disregard for human rights and the
rapacious exploitation of natural resources and the environment through
the pursuit of large-scale development projects has had dire implications
for human and environmental security and has prompted significant
transnational civil society activism. For over two decades after Ne Win
took power in 1962 Myanmar experienced what he termed ‘the Burmese
road to socialism’, in which state authoritarianism and incompetence
depleted ecosystems while running down the economy. With a precipitous
fall in foreign aid leaving the economy on the verge of collapse following
the crackdown in 1988 the military offered attractive incentives for foreign
investment through its Union of Myanmar Foreign Investment Law. This
created a market economy that opened the door to joint ventures with
foreign companies that were interested in exploiting Myanmar’s natural
resources, resulting in a variety of transnational energy projects. McCarthy
argues that particularly since the SPDC came to power in 1988 there has
been a ‘hard sell’ of the country’s natural resources with no evidence of
this money being redistributed among Myanmar people nor any evidence

Despite the daily restrictions on the general population it is the ethnic minorities in Myanmar’s mountainous border regions, including the Karen, Karenni, Kachin, Shan, Mon and Rakhine (Arakanese), who have been the particular targets of repression (Lintner 1999; Pedersen 2008; South 2009). The multiplicity of individual security challenges facing the people of Myanmar means it is extremely difficult to differentiate between those that are linked to ‘the environment’ and those that aren’t as rampant logging and environmental destruction together with a lack of legislated environmental impact assessment (EIA) in the country have been intrinsically linked to non-democratic governance and authoritarian military rule.

A national environmental law to establish environmental institutions and standards was drafted with the assistance of the UN in 2005–2006 but even if this law is passed during the current five-year parliament it is unlikely to be addressed, according to prominent environmentalist Win Myo Thu, until its final year (interview: Win Myo Thu 2011). The government’s failings in environmental governance were most evident in its inadequate response to Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, which killed 140,000 people, destroyed 800,000 houses and left millions of Irrawaddy Delta residents homeless and facing disease and malnutrition. Despite the then Director General of the Bureau of Meteorology arguing that he gave five days of warnings before landfall the government made little attempt to evacuate residents from the low lying and heavily populated delta region (interview: Tun Lwin 2011). Its immediate response following the cyclone was to hold up visa applications for foreign journalists and aid workers and to deny entry to Western aid deliveries, leading to a massive build-up of food, medicine and disaster response expertise in Bangkok in the crucial days following the event (Fink 2009: 108–10; Larkin 2010: 8–10; Paik 2011; South 2009: 227; Vicary 2010: 214–18). While Sabandar (2010: 202) suggests that the governance of the relief and recovery process led by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Tripartite Core Group was ‘good and strong’ Vicary (2010: 208) adopts a more critical approach arguing that the government’s overall response was characterized by its hallmark ‘policy incompetence, neglect and brutality’.

The role of the state has been central to ethnic minorities’ insecurity, both through assaults on their person and on their environment through the ‘four cuts’ campaign that aims to restrict ethnic insurgents’ access to food, funds, intelligence and recruits (Smith 1999). Ethnic communities who have been forced from their homes by the military and whose crops have either been burned or expropriated are obliged to engage in environmentally destructive practices such as ‘slash and burn’ cultivation methods rather than their more sustainable traditional techniques. Forced clearing of vegetation by the military for energy projects and the construction of military camps may result in unsustainable rates of harvest for timber and non-timber products, such as bamboo, rubber, betel nut and rattan, and result in erosion and
monsoonal flooding (Simpson 2007: 545–6). These communities therefore face challenges to their human security, whether considered from a narrow (freedom from fear), or broad (freedom from want), school perspective.

The state’s security apparatus usually ensures that public displays of dissent are quickly extinguished but in September 2007, for the first time since 1988, widespread opposition to the regime overflowed onto the streets across the country before being brutally suppressed by security forces and pro-military militias (McCarthy 2008; Selth 2008). In August the SPDC had announced enormous increases in fuels prices, which increased the cost of living and transport, further reducing already precarious human security for many people in Myanmar. Compressed natural gas, which is used by public buses, was reportedly increased 500%. Myanmar exports vast amounts of natural gas to Thailand through the Yadana and Yetagun pipelines, which could have otherwise been used to maintain lower gas prices (Carroll and Sovacool 2010; Simpson 2007). It is often the inability of local communities, particularly those in ethnic minority regions, to exercise their natural resource rights that has contributed to the growth of transnational environmental campaigns against Myanmar’s energy projects.

After five decades of authoritarian rule in Myanmar an independent domestic civil society critical of the state is embryonic. By the end of the 1990s Steinberg contended that the regime had ‘attempted to divide the opposition, both ethnic and political, and … eliminated all vestiges of civil society in Myanmar … independent NGOs do not exist beyond village temple societies’ (Steinberg 1998, p. 275).

South (2009: 180) later argued that this view was overly pessimistic and his research suggested that in the subsequent decade vast numbers of local groups or community based organizations (CBOs) had emerged throughout Myanmar although the majority were centred on religion and worked at the ‘primary’ level of welfare activities. A few CBOs had expanded to the ‘secondary’ level working on community development but almost none worked at the ‘tertiary’ level of rights-based activities and conflict resolution supporting Cleary’s assertion that organizations in the South, and particularly under authoritarian regimes, are more often service providers than lobby groups (Cleary 1997). These CBOs found it difficult to cooperate openly with international groups as many domestic activists received three year prison sentences simply for contacting ‘unlawful’ (exiled) associations (interview: Phyo Phyo 2012). Barriers to the free flow of information into Myanmar and a stifled media ensured that Myanmar’s borders were more than mere ‘speed bumps’ for the transnational sharing of activist strategies, tactics and philosophies (Doyle and Simpson 2006: 758). In recent years further growth in service-oriented civil society has centred on humanitarian assistance as domestic NGOs such as Network Activities Group (NAG) delivered emergency relief following natural disasters such as Cyclone Nargis in 2008 and Cyclone Giri in 2010 (interview: Bobby Maung 2011).
Since the middle of 2011, however, the reforms by President Thein Sein and the new parliament have increased the visibility of domestic civil society’s activities. Although the current outlets for social mobilization are unlikely to represent a threat to the dominance of the military ruling class in society (Brownlee 2007: 217–18), the presence of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD in parliament should encourage a continuation of the relaxation of political constraints. In a test for the new political openness a ‘Save the Irrawaddy River’ art exhibition, focusing particularly on the US$3.6 billion Myitsone Dam hydropower project, was opened in central Yangon on 22 September 2011 by Suu Kyi and other pro-democracy environmental activists. This public display built on a growing opposition movement in Kachin State, where the proposed dam was based, that cooperated with exiled Thailand-based groups such as the Kachin Environmental Organization (Yaw Na 2011). It contrasted, however, with the largely covert activities that domestic activists opposing the dam had previously undertaken (interview: Founder of Myanmar-based Environmental NGO 2011).

These actions were followed by the new president’s unprecedented decision on 30 September to suspend the Myitsone Dam for the remainder of his five-year presidency. With Chinese state-backed corporations providing much of the financing and construction for the dam and planning to buy most of the electricity, the decision, which Thein Sein claimed was a response to community concern, challenged enormous vested interests in the domestic military and business elites as well as straining relations with the Chinese state. Despite the emergent promise of more responsive governance from this decision, however, there are still no formalized processes for public consultation in relation to these large-scale projects and any consideration of community or civil society concerns remains subject to ad hoc and arbitrary decision-making. Furthermore, the plans for the series of hydropower dams on the Salween River remain unchanged despite similar social and environmental issues. Regardless of recent reforms and an easing in the tone of political discourse the military, with a legacy of repressive policies, remains firmly in control of the country and the exiled activist community is therefore likely to continue its important role in the governance of large scale energy projects for the foreseeable future.

**Building an ‘activist diaspora’**

As a result of the historical restrictions and insecurities at home Myanmar activists have often removed themselves from the Myanmar government’s sphere of influence, either to the ‘liberated areas’ independent of government control such as Ei Tu Hta IDP camp at the border with Thailand, or, where possible, across the border to less authoritarian neighbouring countries to facilitate their operations. These activists have become the transnational agents who direct the campaigns against transnational energy projects in Myanmar. These activists may be in the environmental
movement but their concerns are also directly related to human rights abuses and they experience a parallel process to one described by O’Kane for women in the area: ‘for those trapped in the unsettled and ambiguous Burma–Thailand borderland space, distinctions between public/private, politics/survival, mother/activist, freedom fighter/illegal alien collapsed and become inseparable experiences’ (O’Kane 2005: 15).

It is the displaced communities of these borderlands that have been most vocal against the Salween Dams in Myanmar with many of the exiled civil society groups either ethnically based or staffed by ethnic minorities as these have been the sections of Myanmar society traditionally most oppressed by the ruling military. These struggles also parallel the opposition against the Narmada and Tehri Dams of India, where Vandana Shiva notes local communities do not just struggle to preserve their homeland, they struggle against the destruction of entire civilizations and ways of life (Shiva 1989: 189). Despite the dangers these activists often re-enter Myanmar incognito to undertake research for NGOs that are based outside Myanmar’s borders (interview: Ka Hsaw Wa 2009).

This exodus from Myanmar to escape authoritarian repression, much of which occurred as a result of the 1988 crackdown, has resulted in what can be considered an ‘activist diaspora’. The inclusive domain of the term ‘diaspora’ has, at times, been stretched to render it almost meaningless with academic literature on, for example, liberal or queer diaspora leading Brubaker to argue that ‘if everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so’ (2005: 3). Myanmar’s expatriate activists, however, fulfill not only traditional aspects of the term based on dislocation or ‘the dispersal of a people from [their] original homeland’ (Butler 2001: 189), but also on what Søkeleyfeldon argues are ‘imagined transnational communities [each of which is a] transnationally dispersed collectivity that distinguishes itself by clear self-imaginations as community’ (2006: 267).

Additionally, his focus on social movement theory and forms of mobilization dovetails with the concept of an activist diasporic community. This concept, deriving as it does from a largely democratic and emancipatory activist community, also avoids the pitfalls that Anthias (1998) considers afflicts some diasporic communities, such as a lack of trans-ethnic solidarity and gender awareness. It is true that there remains significant friction between some ethnic communities of Myanmar but this is largely absent in the environmental activist community, resulting in a more unified and effective voice.

Despite the potential difficulties it poses for activists, such as language difficulties and occasionally precarious citizenship status, this activist diaspora also provides many opportunities. Training that would otherwise not be accessible in local settings is often made available by aid agencies or Northern NGOs. Improved accessibility to other transnational activists and the media in cosmopolitan environments also creates opportunities for developing activist strategies and tactics and facilitating communication.
of messages to a wider audience, particular through increased proficiency in English. Historically, most activists haven’t actively petitioned the Myanmar regime directly as their experience suggested there was little to be gained. They therefore focused their energies primarily on transnational activities and facilitated linkages and communication with other transnational activists, based predominantly in Thailand, that helped convey their campaigns on both cross-border development projects and democratisation in Myanmar to a more spatially dispersed transnational audience. While it is well established that authoritarian regimes suppress opposition and dissent at home in this case it actually appeared to stimulate transnational linkages and activism through the activist diaspora, indicating that authoritarian regimes may actually be stimulating the growth of nodes and networks of transnational activists.

As a consequence of civil conflict between the Myanmar military and insurgent ethnic groups, Myanmar’s borderlands are particularly important in the development of the activist diaspora and other transnational networks. Insurgent groups often specifically target border regions for their ‘intrinsic, tactical and material importance’ (Acuto 2008: 33), which are in a continuous state of flux; ‘numbers of border arrivals and crossings fluctuate in relation to military operations, economic deterioration inside Burma and the continued possibility of sanctuary in Thailand’ (O’Kane 2005: 14–15). These borders and the populations in the surrounding regions are, therefore, relatively ‘fuzzy’ rather than hard and well defined (Christiansen et al. 2000; Dean 2005; Gleditsch et al. 2006; Vaughan-Williams 2009). Borderlands are ‘grey zones’ that, particularly in times of conflict, acquire several meanings beyond that of mere legal boundaries (Acuto 2008: 32), and are in themselves central to the forming of identity, being ‘central nodes where the intersections of power, place and identity are made visible’ (Kaiser and Nikiforova 2006: 952). The Thai–Myanmar border area epitomizes these ‘zones of contestation’. Due to authoritarian rule and precarious livelihoods in Myanmar environmental campaigns are leavened with concerns over democratisation and human rights and the complexity on Myanmar’s periphery provides a useful case study on the impacts of authoritarianism on multi-scalar civil society activism.

The campaign against the Salween Dams

The case study for this article is the campaign against proposed hydro-electric dams on the Salween River in Myanmar including the Wei Gyi and Dagwin Dams along the Thai border, the Hat Gyi (or Hutgyi) Dam in Karen State and the Tasang Dam in Shan State (see Figure 1). The dams, which are scheduled to export most of the electricity either to China or Thailand, are at various early stages of their development but all face campaigns over the issues of environmental degradation, lack of ethnic sovereignty over natural resources and military repression of the sort that
Figure 1 Proposed Salween Dam map

has accompanied many other transnational energy projects in Myanmar such as natural gas pipelines (Simpson 2008).

The Salween River passes through Shan, Karenni and Karen states in Myanmar before emptying into the Gulf of Martaban at Mawlamyine.
(Moulmein) in Mon State. The proposed Salween Dams therefore precipitated a multi-ethnic dimension to the campaign, which echoed the campaign against the Shwe Gas Pipeline that has provided an opportunity to unify both exiled and domestic Rakhine, Bamar (Burman) and Shan activists (interview: Phyo Phyo 2011). Nevertheless, facilitating local activism in Myanmar is difficult as activists face problems of access to Salween riverine communities due to the Myanmar military. As a central organization within the Salween campaign the Karenni Development Research Group (KDRG) is a coalition of nine Karenni civil society organizations and a member of the two larger coalitions, Salween Watch, formed in 1999, and Burma Rivers Network (BRN), formed in 2007. It undertakes research within Karenni State in Myanmar, which it has published transnationally (KDRG 2006), but it has faced extreme difficulties in accessing the region due to Tatmadaw restrictions and its research and activities, such as distributing information CDs on the dams, are undertaken incognito (interview: Eddie Mee Reh 2010).

The KDRG highlights the potential ecological impacts of the dams but these concerns are raised within the context of the long-term systematic human rights abuses faced by the Karenni. In one report it argues that the large-scale forced relocation of ethnic communities near the Salween River has occurred since 1996 when 212 villages in an area thought to be sympathetic to the opposition Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) were relocated as the area became progressively militarized (KDRG 2006: 15). The Shan Sapawa Environmental Organization (Sapawa) suggests that similar repression occurred at the same time upstream in Shan State where, as part of a wider anti-insurgency campaign, 60,000 villagers from areas adjoining the Tasang Dam site and flood zone were forcibly relocated (Sapawa 2006: 20–24). Sapawa is the first Shan organization dedicated to the preservation of the environment in Shan State and they have been particularly active over the Tasang Dam project. Two of the Shan founders of Sapawa, Sai Sai and Khin Nanda, were graduates of the 2001 EarthRights Burma School for activists run by EarthRights International (ERI), an NGO founded by Karen exile Ka Hsaw Wa (interview: Khin Nanda 2009). Sai Sai became the Sapawa spokesperson and worked with ERI between 2001 and 2003 and later, as a coordinator, with Salween Watch and the BRN. Despite undertaking research on the Myanmar side of the border Sapawa, as with KDRG, have been unable to organize significant public activities in the Salween region (interview: Sai Sai 2009).

Downriver from both Shan and Karenni States the Salween River forms part of the border with Thailand in Karen State, the sites for both the Wei Gyi and Dar Gwin Dams, with the Hat Gyi Dam further downriver entirely within Karen State (KRW 2004). Displacement has also been rampant within Karen State with the Karen founder and director of the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN), who grew up near the Wei Gyi Dam site, repeatedly displaced downriver with his family each
time there was an attack by the Tamadaw until finally leaving Myanmar permanently in 1995 after the fall of Manerplaw (interview: Paul Sein Twa 2009). Such visceral personal experiences influence the issues focused upon by these groups, ensuring that the protection of ethnic communities’ human rights is intimately intertwined with broader environmental concerns. These experiences, and the role played by ethnic insurgent groups in promoting these rights, can result in a level of cooperation between NGOs and the insurgents; as another KESAN activist notes, ‘KESAN’s programs are in the KNU area [in Myanmar] so we have a close relationship with the KNU leaders’ (interview: Alex Shwe 2009).

While access to the dam areas for these groups is always difficult the proximity of Thailand, where the Salween River forms the border, has made organizing some actions possible. Karen Rivers Watch (KRW), a coalition of Karen organizations, has organized protests with activists and villagers along the river near the dam sites for the International Day of Action Against Dams on 14 March every year since 2005. The events have transnational elements but there is also a large local component with local activists raising local awareness about the projects through the dissemination of knowledge that is intended to empower villagers. As an activist from KRW notes: ‘we ask local villagers to share their feelings and knowledge; we mobilize the community from the Karen side’ (interview: Nay Tha Blay 2009).

Although these actions have occurred inside the official borders of Myanmar the locations where they have taken place can be defined as politically fuzzy as they are not part of Myanmar controlled by the Myanmar military. Giddens argues that in Weber’s definition of a state the territorial element of a claim to a monopoly of violence over a given territory may be ‘quite ill-defined’ and that this ‘claim’ may well be contested (1987: 18–19). The areas where protests have taken place are areas of Karen State largely controlled by the KNU, like the area surrounding Ei Tu Hta IDP Camp, considered by the ethnic Karen as ‘liberated areas’, contesting the Myanmar military’s claim of sovereignty over the area (interview: Myint Thein 2004). Absolute control over these areas may be fluid but security considerations are paramount with activists reticent to discuss the location of the protests to avoid unwanted military attention.

Due to the tenuous control by the Myanmar military in many of these regions the dams, once built, may prove valuable for the Tamadaw in the repression of insurgent groups. The reservoirs behind the dams will flood large areas that provide either shelter or transit zones for insurgent groups. Around the Tasang Dam the Shan State Army South (SSAS) still has sporadic battles with the Myanmar military while the Dar Gwin, Wei Gyi and Hat Gyi sites provide security for the KNU and are also the busiest routes for Karen refugees fleeing Myanmar into Thailand (KHRG 2007: 38–9). The Wei Gyi Dam will also flood most of Karenni State’s two river valleys that lie upstream where the KNPP is active (interview: Eddie Mee Reh 2010).
Due to the restrictions on local activism inside Myanmar the transnational aspects of the campaign against the Salween Dams have taken on much greater significance. The exodus of activists from Myanmar-proper since the 1988 protests and a series of subsequent environmental campaigns, such as opposition to the Yadana gas pipeline in the late 1990s (Doyle and Simpson 2006: 755–6), assisted in the establishment of Myanmar’s exiled environmental activist community, providing ready-made activist groups for the transnational Salween campaign. There existed, however, a key difference between much of the existing pockets of activism in the 1990s and the Salween campaign as it has developed over the last decade. During the 1990s many exiled activist groups were heavily influenced by the insurgent groups from their own ethnic community and therefore the activist community maintained a largely fractured and segregated existence but the cross-regional nature of the dams along the Salween River and the gradual maturation of the activist community has led to the much greater levels of cooperation across ethnic lines.

The transnational Salween Dams campaign has demonstrated the depth and vitality of the Myanmar activist diaspora, particularly within Thailand and the Thai–Myanmar borderlands. The ability to tap into global communications and networks has been an important determinant in the development of transnational activism in general (Castells 2003: 187; Saiz 2005: 163–4), but this access is particularly important for Myanmar exiles given the limitations in Myanmar itself. In the Thai–Myanmar border region this has often resulted in the movement out of the jungles, villages and refugee camps to towns and cities where this access can be expedited. The environmental activism of these exiled communities can be generalized from O’Kane’s study of women in this area: ‘Intersections between globalization processes and women’s activism occur in border locations via INGOs, communication technologies and resources attracted to the borderlands for economic, political, military and humanitarian reasons’ (O’Kane 2005: 20).

O’Kane’s findings are particularly relevant for women activists such as those who attend the EarthRights Burma School in Chiang Mai, which sets aside half its positions for women as well as ensuring a diversity of ethnicities (interview: Khin Nanda 2009).

A key element of the activities of the activist diaspora is the formation of transnational coalitions with their ability to pool their resources and form strong organizational ties. These coalitions are staffed primarily by expatriate ethnic minority communities of Myanmar and operate mainly from Chiang Mai and towns in the Thai–Myanmar borderlands. There is a relative paucity of studies on the nature of coalitions in the literature on environmental activism although some studies have demonstrated their growing importance in transnational campaigns (Bandy and Smith 2005; Tarrow 2005). Yanacopulos (2005a: 259) has argued, however, that coalitions afford economies of scale, and the anti-dam, or pro-river, coalitions of Myanmar have worked effectively with individual groups exploiting
the growing availability of inexpensive communications technologies and pooling their minimal resources to produce, for example, coalition websites of much greater sophistication than any individual group could generate.

Burma Rivers Network (BRN) brought together organizations working across Burma to ‘protect the health of river ecosystems and sustain biodiversity, and to protect the rights and livelihoods of communities’ (BRN 2011). The pooled expertise from the various component organizations was particularly useful in the launch of the comprehensive BRN website in 2009. It examines dam issues related to six rivers, including the Salween, and particularly highlights the suspended, but not yet cancelled, Myitsone Dam. Yanacopulos (2005b: 95) asserts that coalitions ‘have broader strategic aims than single-issue thematically focused networks’, which is reflected in the BRN by long term strategic aims based on environmental, social, cultural and economic concerns.

Karen Rivers Watch (KRW), a more localized coalition of Karen organizations including Chiang Mai-based KESAN and Mae Sariang-based Karen Office of Relief and Development (KORD), was formed in June 2003 and has undertaken protest actions on the Salween River along the border although it is largely based in Thailand. As well as activities along the border KESAN has cooperated with domestic organizations from Myanmar such as ECODEV, founded by Win Myo Thu, through ‘knowledge sharing’ sessions in Chiang Mai about what they can collectively achieve within Myanmar’s domestic ‘legal space as far as securing resource rights and farmers’ land tenure’ (interview: Win Myo Thu 2011). This sort of cooperation between exiled and domestic groups is also evident in other environmental campaigns with a member of the exiled Shwe Gas Movement (SGM) entering Myanmar incognito to do field research in Rakhine State and give seminars on the campaign to ethnic youth organizations at the American Centre in Yangon (interview: Phyo Phyo 2011).

KORD was formed a decade prior to KRW and brought in expertise in both emergency relief and community development. KORD’s director, Nay Tha Blay, argued that the organization took this two-pronged approach in both its fieldwork – ‘we give them fish but we also teach them to fish’ – and also in the development of both local and international networks (interview: Nay Tha Blay 2009). Most of the international protests against the Salween Dams were organized through these international networks of online activists. In a study of a similar campaign against a mine in Peru Haarstad and Fløysand argue that the same connections existed, specifically: ‘the way in which resistance strategies against the agenda of a multinational corporation were enhanced by, or were even dependent upon, the processes of globalization’ (Haarstad and Fløysand 2007: 304). These results are consistent with evidence drawn from broader environment and justice movements that the internet has revolutionized movement development and tactics (Curran 2006: 75; Doherty 2002: 172).
Regardless of the benefits of forming coalitions there are also great advantages to these transnational contacts remaining as loose networks rather than becoming a single organization with a central authority. These types of networks, often ‘greatly facilitated by the internet, can … enable relationships to develop that are more flexible than traditional hierarchies’ (Routledge 2003: 335). Keck and Sikkink (1998: 30) argue that the motivation to form these transnational advocacy networks are primarily shared principled ideas or values, which in this case are founded on justice and the protection of human rights and the environment in Myanmar. International organizations engaging in the Salween campaign, such as the Thailand-based TERRA and the US-based International Rivers, may be focused on the health of rivers but like Myanmar’s activist diaspora their support is also couched in the terms of justice for riverine inhabitants (International Rivers 2007; TERRA 2011). In addition to this justice focus the recognition by TERRA of the intimate local knowledge of the activist diaspora results in a modus operandi in which they ‘acknowledge the local expertise by working in the background and supporting the local actors’ (interview: Premrudee Daoroung 2011). The activist diaspora is, therefore, not necessarily more dynamic than other environment movements in the region but the personal histories it embodies, which incorporate cultural immersion, political repression and exile, grants it greater legitimacy in its campaign against the Salween Dams.

**Conclusion**

From this examination of the campaign against the Salween Dams in Myanmar this article suggests some general conclusions in relation to authoritarianism and activism, which additional comparative case studies could test further. While there appears to be an inverse relationship between authoritarianism and activism at a local level, with more authoritarian regimes resulting in less local activism, there also appears to be a direct relationship between local authoritarianism and activism at the transnational level, with more authoritarianism resulting in greater transnational activism. In addition, unlike hybrid regimes that offer domestic spaces for political competition and therefore foster domestic civil society (Diamond 2002; Jayasuriya and Rodan 2007), traditional authoritarian regimes such as that which has ruled Myanmar are more likely to create an ‘activist diaspora’, a dynamic transnational community of expatriates who engage in environmental activism beyond the reach of the regime. As a consequence of civil conflict between the Myanmar military and insurgent ethnic groups Myanmar’s mountainous borderlands provide important locales for the development of this activist diaspora and other transnational networks. This situation is exemplified on Myanmar’s eastern border where the activist diaspora extends from contested Myanmar territory deep into Thailand.
There appears to be three significant aspects to an activist diaspora that distinguishes it from diaspora in general and often from other types of activist communities. First, an activist diaspora actively establishes linkages and provides specialist knowledge and otherwise unavailable expertise to broader campaign networks or coalitions in foreign or ‘outsider’ – from the North or Thailand – communities, which contrasts with the often isolationist approach of other members of diasporic communities. The importance of exiled activists to the outside groups lies in their specific linguistic and cultural knowledge together with a local political understanding, often sharpened by intense personal experiences, which outsiders are unlikely to ever acquire or fully comprehend. This ‘insider’ knowledge by Myanmar exiles allows them to undertake covert research back in Myanmar-proper that would otherwise be unachievable and also to provide the expertise to outside or transnational civil society groups and movements which is inaccessible to other activists. In this way the activist diaspora can publicize and highlight issues of particular concern to their communities, which draws the attention of outsiders to their campaigns. The close proximity of border-based groups to Myanmar may also provide insights into more achievable goals than some Northern-based exiles who, through their immersion in the Western political centres of North America or Europe, may focus more on political outcomes that have proved ineffectual at best. As Pederson (2011: 65) argues, attempts at democratic change in Myanmar should be ‘realistic, but not without ambition’.

Second, the contribution of this expertise by the activist diaspora to broader campaigns and their engagement with activists outside their community plays an important role in bolstering the confidence and skills, such as increased proficiency in English, the lingua franca of transnational activism and media, of exiles who may otherwise feel isolated in a foreign country. The delicate balance of emotions that exist in exile communities between ‘hope [and] resistance’ on the one hand and ‘helplessness, suffering and apathy’ on the other suggests that those who establish strong links both to their own diasporic community and the outsider community are those most likely to successfully adapt to their new lives (Mavroudi 2008: 70).

Third, this study also suggests that an emancipatory oriented activist diaspora is more likely to transcend the ethnic divisions that can exist within broader exile communities. Despite ongoing cooperative arrangements between ethnic minorities such as the United Nationalities Alliance and other alliances formed to contest the 2010 elections, friction between ethnicities in Myanmar has often been successfully cultivated and exploited by the Tatmadaw. Even when ethnic minorities achieve some unity there remains an element of distrust between the ethnic minorities and the dominant Bamar majority, including the largely ex-Tatmadaw leadership of the NLD, although Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD’s Bamar leader, remains the only national figure genuinely trusted by ethnic minorities across the country (interview: Thein Oo 2010) (see also Callahan 2009; South 2004:...
236–7). In the exile community the cross-regional nature of the Salween Dams and other major energy projects in Myanmar has reinforced the necessity in the minds of activists for cooperation and coalition building amongst groups drawn from all ethnicities. It is well established that weak authoritarian regimes can still survive and prosper in the face of a ‘strong but divided civil society’ (Cavatorta and Elananza 2008: 578), and as ‘divide and conquer’ has traditionally been one of the Tatmadaw’s main strategies in neutralizing opposition by ethnic minorities, coalition building has become an essential activity for Myanmar’s under-resourced exiled activists. Myanmar’s activist diaspora may, therefore, through increased collaboration with domestic activists, form the basis of a more potent future movement in Myanmar focused on democracy, human rights and environmental security; one which is characterized by multi-ethnic unity.

These three distinct features of activist diasporas suggest that not only can environmental and political activism provide tangible benefits for both exiled individuals and the diasporic community as a whole but that this locally informed activism plays a crucial role in the development of transnational campaigns opposing authoritarian governance. In addition to the general repression meted out by the Tatmadaw, Salween activists oppose this authoritarian governance because the natural resource rights of local, and often ethnic, communities are not respected with their water, food and other environmental resources depleted without local consultation or benefit. The campaign is therefore emancipatory in its outlook, tending to focus on issues of human rights and social justice for ethnic minorities. Ecological issues are significant but not of primary importance above and beyond the pursuit of justice. Nevertheless, achieving justice for communities is intimately linked to issues of ecological health. As well as impacting on the level of activism, therefore, authoritarian governance, in conjunction with precarious living conditions, appears to impact on the issues focused upon by environment movements in the South.

In conclusion, the multi-ethnic character of Myanmar’s activist diaspora, and its emphasis on cooperation across ethnic boundaries, sets it apart from much of the exiled community, which is often characterized by segregation. In addition, there is increasing cooperation over hydropower developments between exiled and domestic activists although the latter are still constrained by some limitations on their political activities. Central to the long-term success of the Myanmar military in maintaining control of Myanmar has been the promotion of divisive policies that have played ethnic minorities off against each other and although the military is likely to play a central role in the governance of Myanmar for the foreseeable future, multi-ethnic cooperation and increased networks amongst domestic and exiled environmental movements may provide a stimulus for both improved environmental governance and a more open and democratic Myanmar in the future.
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