

10 An 'activist diaspora' as a response to authoritarianism in Myanmar

The role of transnational activism in promoting political reform

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Introduction

On a remote stretch of the Salween River, between the proposed Dar Gwin and Wei Gyi hydropower dam sites and where it forms the border between Thailand and Myanmar (Burma),¹ sits the Ei Tu Hta camp for ethnic Karen internally displaced peoples (IDPs) in Karen National Union (KNU) controlled Myanmar. The family of Hsiplopo, the leader of this camp, live three hours walk away but he is unable to visit them because the *tatmadaw*, the Myanmar military with which the KNU has been engaged in the world's longest running civil war, have camps that are only two hours walk away. The camp is also built on steep hill-sides, 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 other NGOs shipped upriver by longtail boat.² This type of human and environmental insecurity colours the daily existence of both the Karen people in this camp and many other ethnic minorities in Myanmar. Nevertheless, despite these conditions, Hsiplopo's commitment to a 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.'³

This stance reflects the opposition to the dams of many environmental activists and groups who inhabit the nebulous and dangerous borderlands regions of eastern Myanmar. It also represents a form of activated citizenship although the concept of citizenship for ethnic minorities in Myanmar is itself problematic as their relationship to the Myanmar state is often little more than one of oppression and conflict. Despite the civil conflict in these areas, and perhaps because of it, these activists often operate beyond the remit of the *tatmadaw* undertaking perilous work with the KNU to promote human and environmental security for ethnic minorities. As an activist from the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN) explains: 'KESAN's programs are in the KNU area [in Myanmar] so we have a close relationship with the KNU leaders.'⁴ 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 under authoritarian regimes such as that of 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 lack of political analysis 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 an increased focus 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 (Howes 2005; 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 (Carter 2007; Doherty 2002; Doyle 2000; Dryzek *et al.* 2003; Gottlieb 2005; Hutton and Connors 1999; Rootes 2007; Sandler and Pezzullo 2007; Shabecoff 1993). There has been some analysis of environment movements in the South (Doherty 2006; Doherty and Doyle 2006; Doyle 2005; Duffy 2006; Dwivedi 1997, 2001), and various studies of transnational activism more generally (della Porta *et al.* 2006; Eschle and Maignuashca 2005; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Reitan 2007; Routledge *et al.* 2006; Rupert 2000), but only limited studies on how authoritarianism in the South specifically impacts on environmental activism (Doyle and Simpson 2006) or policy (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 formalised civil society organisations (Jamal 2007; Liverani 2008; Sater 2007). This chapter adds to this literature by delving more deeply into environmental politics under the military in Myanmar and examines the transnational campaigns against several proposed hydroelectric dams on the Salween River in eastern Myanmar. As transnational projects these dams are being undertaken by governments and transnational corporations (TNCs) but, as with most large energy projects in Myanmar, they are designed to export most of their electricity to either Thailand or China.

Despite national elections in November 2010 that 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 (Holliday 2008). 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),⁵ merely stepping out of their uniforms to take up senior positions in the new government, there is little doubt that incremental change towards civilian rule is 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, particularly in the eastern border regions, continue,⁶ some analysts, such as the

former International Labour Organization (ILO) Liaison Officer in Myanmar, Richard Horsey, are more optimistic about the 'new level of scrutiny' (Horsey 2011, 4) that has accompanied the new parliament. The current Liaison Officer, 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'.⁷

This top down political change has accompanied a less visible but nonetheless significant increase in domestic civil society activism in recent years and particularly since Cyclone Nargis in 2008 (Sabandar 2010; South 2004). The main beneficiaries of this opening have been humanitarian NGOs that have focused on emergency relief to natural disasters such as Nargis and Cyclone Giri in 2010,⁸ but there has also been increased activity by environmental groups and NGOs. These groups, as with all those actors who wish to avoid sanction or imprisonment in Myanmar, engage in a certain amount of self-censorship to avoid overtly political critiques of the government but there is increasing space available for pursuing third sector environmental governance. This increased domestic activism has improved the prospects of collaboration between domestic and exiled groups with prominent domestic environmentalists running trainings on the border or in Thailand for exiled groups such as KESAN.⁹ Regardless of recent changes, however, after five decades of authoritarian rule the local environmental movement remains embryonic with significant limitations in experience and expertise. It has, therefore, been the transnational environment movement occupying Myanmar's borderlands that has provided the most fertile and important outlet for environmental activism and governance of large-scale hydropower projects in Myanmar.¹⁰

This case study therefore suggests that, whereas hybrid regimes offer domestic spaces for political competition and therefore foster domestic civil society (Diamond 2002; Jayasuriya and Rodan 2007; Levitsky and Way 2002), traditional authoritarian regimes such as that which has afflicted Myanmar are more likely to create an *activist diaspora*, a dynamic transnational community of expatriates who engage in environmental activism in borderland regions or neighbouring countries. As this case study demonstrates, an activist diaspora tends to transcend ethnic divisions and therefore provides a multi-ethnic cohesion which is often absent from the broader exile community. As 'divide and conquer' has been one of the *atmadaw*'s main strategies in neutralising opposition by ethnic minorities, Myanmar's activist diaspora may contribute to more potent domestic social movements that promote democracy, human rights and environmental security in Myanmar.

Environmental politics in Myanmar

Myanmar, more than most other countries, epitomises the interdependence of human and environmental security (Barnett 2001; Doyle and Risely 2008). The blatant disregard for human rights and rapacious exploitation of the country's environment and natural resources by successive military dominated regimes has

had dire implications for human and environmental security and prompted significant transnational civil society activism. Despite the 2010 election the US State Department's human rights report for that year suggested that little improvement had been achieved in Myanmar:

Government security forces were responsible for extrajudicial killings, custodial deaths, disappearances, rape, and torture. The government detained civic activists indefinitely and without charges. In addition regime-sponsored mass-member organizations engaged in harassment and abuse of human rights and prodemocracy activists. The government abused prisoners and detainees ... and imprisoned citizens arbitrarily for political motives. The army continued its attacks on ethnic minority villagers, resulting in deaths, forced relocation, and other serious abuses. The government routinely infringed on citizens' privacy and restricted freedom of speech, press, assembly, association, religion, and movement. The government did not allow domestic human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to function independently, and international NGOs encountered a difficult environment.

(US Department of State 2011, 1)

Likewise the Myanmar government and its select few business associates have pursued large-scale development projects with little concern for the environmental consequences. In Myanmar's early decades during the period of 'the Burmese road to socialism', 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 (Lintner 1990, 165; MacLean 2003, 16; McCarthy 2000, 235; Myat Thein 2004, 123). In the subsequent two decades the energy sector, including hydropower, was the primary recipient of FDI and accounted for more than 98 per cent of all foreign investment in Myanmar for the 2006–2007 fiscal year.

McCarthy argues that particularly since the SPDC military junta 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 of long term planning guiding foreign investment projects being approved by the Myanmar Investment Commission (MIC) (McCarthy 2000, 260–261). Other studies have also demonstrated that development projects in Myanmar have not benefited the majority of the Myanmar people with environmental problems linked inextricably to human rights abuses, particularly of ethnic minorities (Skidmore and Wilson 2007). Despite the daily restrictions on the general population it is these ethnic minorities in Myanmar's mountainous border regions, including the Karen, Shan, Kachin and Mon, who have been the particular targets of repression (Fink 2008; Khin Zaw Win 2010; Lintner 1999; Smith 1999; 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 total lack of environmental impact assessment (EIA) in the country are intrinsically linked to non-democratic governance and authoritarian military rule. A national environmental law to establish environmental institutions and standards has stood dormant since being drafted with UN assistance in 2005/6 and even if this law is passed during the current parliament it is unlikely to be promulgated, according to Win Myo Thu, an influential domestic environmentalist, until its final year in 2014.¹¹ The government's failings combined in its inadequate response to Cyclone Nargis in May 2008 that killed 140,000 people, destroyed 800,000 houses and left millions of Irrawaddy delta residents homeless and facing disease and malnutrition. While some authors argued that the governance of the relief-and-recovery process led by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was 'good and strong' (Sabandar 2010, 202) others argued that the government's response was characterised by its hallmark 'policy incompetence, neglect and brutality' (Vicary 2010, 208). Aid delivery eventually improved under the ASEAN-led Tripartite Core Group but the government's immediate response to the disaster was to hold up visa applications for foreign journalists and aid workers and deny entry to Western aid deliveries, leading to a massive build-up of food, medicine and disaster response expertise in Bangkok in the crucial early days following the event (Fink 2009, 108–110; Larkin 2010, 8–10; Vicary 2010, 214–218).

The role of the state has also been particularly central to the insecurity faced by Myanmar's ethnic minorities, both through assaults on their person and on their environment through the *four cuts* campaign that aims to restrict insurgents' access to food, funds, intelligence and recruits (Smith 1999). Displaced ethnic communities, whose crops have been burned and who have been forced from their homes by the military, are obliged to engage in environmentally destructive practices such as 'slash and burn' or 'shifting agriculture' cultivation methods rather than their more sustainable and traditional rotational techniques, and their constant movement may result in unsustainable rates of harvest for timber and non-timber products, such as bamboo and rattan (Doyle and Simpson 2006, 756). These peoples therefore face challenges to their human security, whether considered from a narrow (political violence by the state), or broad (freedom from want), school perspective (Kerr 2007, 95).

Although restrictions are most severe in the ethnic minority areas open dissent against the government is not tolerated throughout Myanmar and an independent 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 Burma ... independent NGOs do not exist beyond village temple societies.

(Steinberg 1998, 275)

A few years later South argued that this view was overly pessimistic with his research from the early 2000s finding that various civil society actors were re-emerging in both conflict zones and ceasefire or government controlled areas (South 2004, 244–249). Although domestic civil society activism has increased significantly in recent years it is from an extremely low base and the limited outlets for social mobilisation are unlikely to represent a threat to the military ruling class (Brownlee 2007, 217–218). The absence of both media freedom and the opportunity for public protest in Myanmar limits outlets for dissent although, despite steep penalties, attempts to block access to internet sites are not always effective. Nevertheless, barriers to the free flow of information into Myanmar and a stifled media mean that Myanmar's borders are more than mere speed bumps for the transnational sharing of activist strategies, tactics and philosophies (Doyle and Simpson 2006, 758).

The authoritarian security apparatus in Myanmar 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 (AFP 2007; *BBC News* 2007b; ICG 2008). In August the SPDC had announced enormous increases in fuel prices that increased the cost of living and transport, further reducing already precarious human security for the peoples of Myanmar. Compressed natural gas, which is used by public buses, was reportedly increased 500 per cent (DPA 2007; Human Rights Watch 2007). 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 (Simpson 2007). Initially the protests were led by Buddhist monks, with attacks on lay activists thought to be more likely than on the revered *sangha*. A brutal crackdown nonetheless ensued including the close range murder of a Japanese journalist by the military caught on video during the protests (*Times Online* 2007). The Myanmar state media announced that nine people had been killed in the crackdown but foreign ambassadors and observers suggested the death toll could have been 'many multiples of that' with hundreds of monks also detained and ransacked monasteries littered with 'pools of blood' (*BBC News* 2007a).

Despite the military's brutal suppression of the protests activists employed certain globalising technologies which the regime had difficulty in containing. One group used its listserve to email out a link to a *MySpace* video of the violent arrest of activist Suu Suu Nway, which was viewed over 14,000 times in a week (Aye Mi San 2007b). The same site showed a video of veteran activist Min Ko Naing making a democracy speech to a large crowd of people before his rearrest (Aye Mi San 2007a). In another exemplar of the twenty-first century globalisation of information-sharing the *Wikipedia* site for the protests was set up on 21 September, only three days after the protests commenced (*Wikipedia* 2008). Although this speed of publication would now be considered almost lackadaisical, with the social media, *Twitter* and *Facebook*, having revolutionised citizen activism once again during the 2011 Jasmine Revolutions, it allowed for the rapid distribution of information on the protests. At their height on 29 September, however, the

military took the extraordinary step of shutting down all international links to the internet and temporarily suspending most mobile phone services throughout the country (Ball 2008, 78; Chowdhury 2008, 13).¹² Despite such heavy-handed attempts at control, these technologies remain crucial in their ability to expedite communication linkages between activists within Myanmar and those in exile.

Building an activist diaspora

As a result of restrictions and multiple insecurities at home activists from Myanmar often remove themselves from the military's sphere of influence, either to the 'liberated areas' independent of tatmadaw control such as Ei Tu Hta IDP camp at the border with Thailand on the Salween River, or, where possible, to less authoritarian neighbouring countries to facilitate their operations. These activists become the transnational agents who undertake the campaigns against large-scale development projects in Myanmar. These activists may be in the environmental movement but their concerns are related directly 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. The collapse and/or significant restructuring of how these binary categories of relations are lived in the transversal spaces resulted in transformations in [their] political awareness.

(O'Kane 2005, 15)

Hsiplopo, the Ei Tu Hta camp leader, epitomises this complexity. Having grown up in Yangon he joined the KNU in 1973 and thereafter lived in the forest and the camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. His multiple identities change over time and have included KNU member, father, husband, camp leader, and IDP and anti-dam activist. This experience echoes the arguments of Kaiser and Nikiforova that,

[b]orderlands are not marginalized spaces ... but rather ... central nodes of power where place and identity across a multiplicity of geographical scales are made and unmade.

(Kaiser and Nikiforova 2006, 940)

It is these displaced communities of these borderlands that have been most vocal against the Salween Dams in Myanmar. These struggles 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 civilisations 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.¹³

These activists create networks between displaced communities inside Myanmar and the exiles across the border. Some of these networks were initiated by Dr Cynthia Maung, a Karen doctor who founded the Mae Tao Clinic (MTC) in the border town of Mae Sot after being driven into exile in Thailand after the 1988 protests (Cynthia Maung 2008).¹⁴ Mae Sot is now the busiest entry port for Myanmar migrants and refugees and has become a crucial centre of operations for exiled NGOs (Smith and Piya Pangsapa 2008, 202). Although the MTC is based in Mae Sot and provides health services and education to refugees in Thailand it also provides these services covertly for IDPs in Myanmar itself through Back Pack Health Worker Teams (BPHWT).¹⁵ Its activities within Myanmar are characteristic of Cleary's assertion that organisations in the South, and particularly under authoritarian regimes, are more often service providers than simply lobby groups (Cleary 1997). Although initiated to provide emergency food relief and medical assistance the programme has also been supplemented by a longer term Community Development Programme that focuses on developing self-reliance within displaced communities by encouraging participatory decision making and community needs assessment. The programme started in Karen State, then moved on to Karenni, Mon, Shan, Kachin and now Chin and Arakan States, covering many of the border states that host transnational energy projects. The underground movement that these efforts developed provides ready-made networks for other NGOs and groups to use to undertake research and activism over the projects.

The exodus from Myanmar to other countries to escape authoritarian repression, particularly following 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 '[i]f everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so' (Brubaker 2005, 3). Myanmar's expatriate activists, however, fulfil 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 Sökefeld argues are

imagined transnational communities [each of which is a] transnationally dispersed collectivity that distinguishes itself by clear self-imaginings as community.

(Sökefeld 2006, 267)

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

community examined, resulting in a more unified and effective voice. Indeed a long-time Myanmar activist from the North observed its development:

When I first came to the Thai-Burmese border region with [my organisation]¹⁶ in 1994 I noticed that political parties and ethnic armies were driving the opposition but it now seems that NGOs and civil society are making the running.¹⁷

An activist diaspora is created when activists leave their local authoritarian environments for transnational settings, creating transnational networks of exiled activists. In the case of Myanmar expatriate activists escaping authoritarianism are distributed throughout the world but are particularly active in the Thai-Myanmar border region, which is the focus of this chapter. This activist diaspora, despite the potential difficulties it poses for activists with regards to language difficulties and sometimes precarious citizenship status, also provides many opportunities. Training that would otherwise not be accessible at home is often made available by aid agencies or human rights groups. 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, particularly through increased proficiency in English. In addition, in the case of Myanmar most activists don't actively petition the Myanmar regime directly as their experience suggests there is little to be gained. They therefore focus their energies primarily on transnational activities and facilitate linkages and communication with other transnational activists, based predominantly in Thailand, that help convey their campaigns on cross-border energy projects in Myanmar to a more spatially dispersed transnational audience.

While it is well established that the Myanmar regime, as with other authoritarian regimes, suppresses opposition and dissent at home (Brownlee 2007; ICG 2008; Lintner 1999; Smith 1999; South 2009), it actually appears to stimulate transnational linkages and activism through the activist diaspora, indicating that authoritarian regimes may actually be stimulating the growth of transnational activism by creating nodes and networks of activists encircling the regimes. 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.

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, particularly as the boundaries between Myanmar's insurgent groups and activists can sometimes be blurred. 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. Each location has its own historical, cultural and geographical characteristics and people's semi-permanence there has complicated and re-constituted the borderlands in various political, social, economic, cultural and environmental ways. In this way Burmese political opposition groups have also become established components on this complex human milieu.

(O'Kane 2005, 14–15)

Similarly, in Myanmar's western border regions adjoining Bangladesh and India refugees and insurgents populate both sides of the mountainous borders although expatriate activists tend to congregate in the major cities of Bangladesh and India. These borders and the populations in the surrounding regions are, therefore, relatively 'fuzzy' rather than hard and well defined (Chaturvedi 2003; Christiansen *et al.* 2000; Gleditsch *et al.* 2006). 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. As both zones of contestation and spaces of becoming, borderlands are fundamental sites in the multiscalar reconfiguration of the sociospatial imaginary, and far from disappearing in a borderless world, their number and significance are increasing markedly ... in the increasingly fragmented, ruptured place-identities of contemporary timespace.

(Kaiser and Nikiforova 2006, 952)

The Thai–Myanmar border area epitomises 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 compelling case study on the impacts of authoritarianism on multiscalar civil society activism.

The campaign against the Salween Dams

The main case study for this chapter is a set of proposed hydroelectric 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 10.1). The dams are at various early stages of their development but all face campaigns over the issues of environmental degradation and military repression of ethnic minorities that have accompanied other transnational energy projects in Myanmar (Simpson 2008). One of the main beneficiaries of electricity will be the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) while water will be diverted from Myanmar into Thailand's

Proposed Salween Dam Map

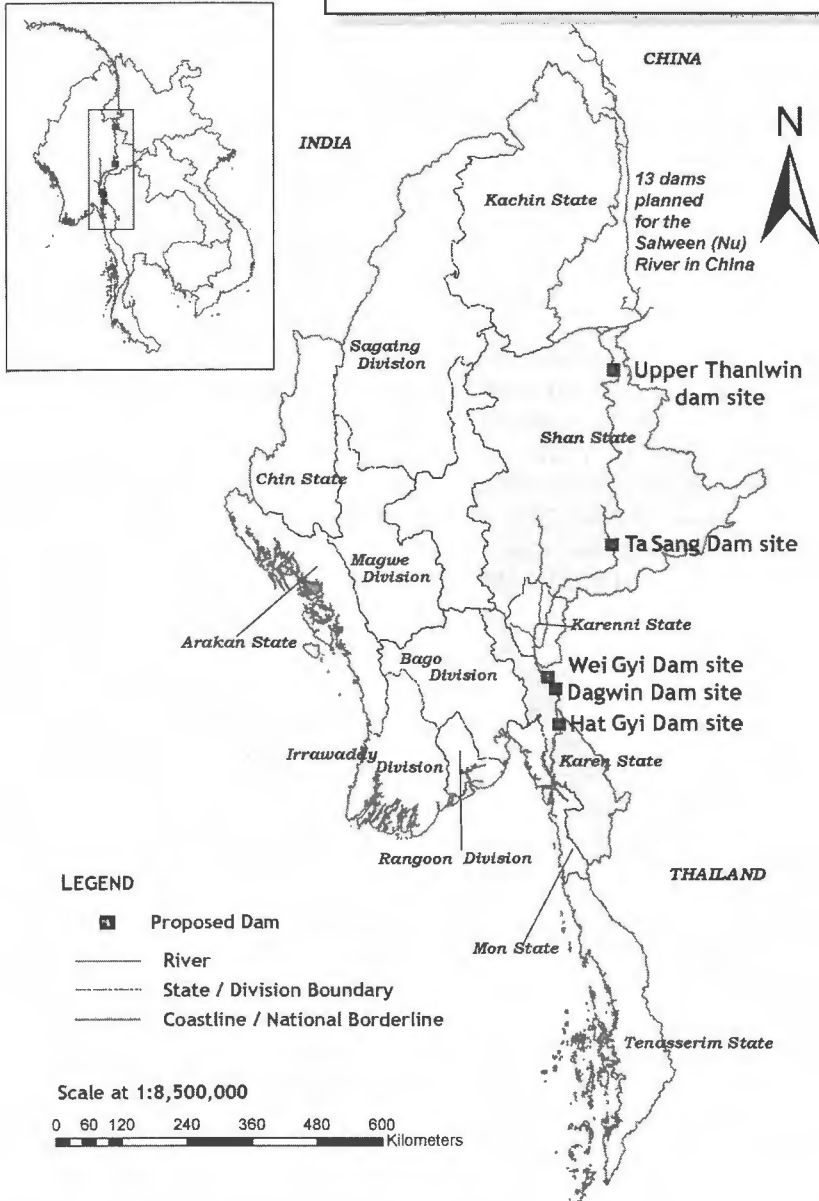


Figure 10.1 Proposed dam sites on the Salween River (source: EDesk/Salween Watch 2007).

Bhumiphol and Sirikit reservoirs (Piya Pangsap and Smith 2008, 493). In June 2006 China's largest hydropower company Sinohydro Corporation agreed to partner EGAT and build the \$1 billion 1,200 MW Hat Gyi Dam Project (Corben 2006; Osborne 2007, 11). The previous December Myanmar's Department of Hydroelectric Power (DHP) had signed a MoU with EGAT for the 'development, ownership and operation' of the Hat Gyi Hydropower Project (EGAT and DHP 2005).¹⁸ In April 2006 the Thai construction company MDX Group formed a \$6 billion joint venture with (DHP) to build the 7,110 MW Tasang power plant and in March 2007 China's state-owned Gezhouba Group announced that it had won a contract for the diversion tunnel as part of the dam construction (AP 2006; Sapawa 2007).

The campaigns against these projects are representative of broader campaigns by activists and ethnic minorities against environmental devastation and political repression in Myanmar. The Hat Gyi Dam, slated as the first dam to be built, reflects these issues, being in an area still prone to civil conflict between the KNU and the tatmadaw. Despite attempts to continue work on the Hat Gyi Dam security is still tenuous in the region with EGAT suspending the project in September 2007 following negative publicity from NGOs and the media after two employees died from wounds associated with the civil conflict. Ethnic conflict in the area has already displaced 500,000 ethnic Karen, with 140,000 refugees registered in Thai refugee camps along the border (Corben 2007). Various estimates suggest between 75,000 and 100,000 further ethnic minorities will be displaced by the Hat Gyi and other dams (DPA 2006; McLeod 2007; Pianporn Deetes 2007). In a pattern common to most transnational energy projects in Myanmar the impacts on local communities are often detrimental while the benefits are accrued further afield. As the World Commission on Dams (2000) made clear it is always the marginalised who are most adversely impacted by large dams with a World Bank funded ecologist arguing 'many large dams exacerbate poverty by damaging the fisheries and wetlands on which the poorest people depend most' (Pearce 2006, 10).

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, similar in nature to the campaign against the Shwe Gas Pipeline in Myanmar which provided a unifying opportunity to bring together Arakanese, Burman – from central Myanmar – and Shan activists (Simpson 2008).¹⁹ As an indicator of this emerging multi-ethnic cooperation Sai Sai, the Shan coordinator of Salween Watch and Burma Rivers Network (BRN) – two of the coalitions campaigning against the Salween Dams – began attending meetings with the Arakanese-dominated Shwe Gas Movement in Chiang Mai from 2008, indicating increased cross-campaign cooperation as well.²⁰

Environmental groups had been aware of the proposed Salween Dam projects in Myanmar since the 1990s,²¹ but it wasn't until 2003 that the campaigns began to reach beyond the activist networks. In December 2003 the *Bangkok Post*, whose environmental writers were networked with Salween activists, ran a

prominent front page story with the headline 'China plans 13 dams on Salween' (Kultida Samabuddhi and Yuthana Praiswan 2003).²² Although concentrating on the upper Salween in China (the Nujiang or Nu River), it also drew widespread attention to the impending Salween Dam projects in Myanmar and became the first of many articles on the topic.

Facilitating local activism in Myanmar is difficult as activists face problems of access to communities in the Salween region due to the authoritarian rule of the Myanmar military. Nevertheless, the issues relating to the Salween Dams and, indeed, dams throughout Myanmar resulted in a sprawling network of groups and umbrella organisations producing a plethora of websites and detailed reports. Following the experience of previous campaigns, environmental groups involved with the Salween campaign were aware of the need for creating networks early on between local communities and activists to harness local knowledge but access to the areas was always a problem. Recent technologies such as the internet, mobile phones and desktop publishing have resulted in greater coordination and publicity for a wider transnational audience but direct contact with local communities in Myanmar often still requires face-to-face communication, resulting in high-level security risks for activists.

As a central organisation within the Salween campaign the Karenni Development Research Group (KDRG) is a coalition of nine Karenni civil society organisations and a member of both Salween Watch and Burma Rivers Network (BRN). It undertakes research within Karenni State in Myanmar, which it has published transnationally (KDRG 2006), but faces extreme difficulties organising any public activities in the region and its research is undertaken incognito. The manifold problems for activists and local communities in this region are set out by Aung Ngyeh, a Karenni activist with the KDRG and BRN:

[The] people inside Burma, they didn't know about the plans of dam construction on the Salween. Therefore, the first thing that we have to do inside Burma is to raise awareness of dam's construction.... To organise public action inside Burma, it's very hard as Burmese people [are] subjected to living under [an] oppressive regime. Most dam construction plans are located in ethnic lands ... where long run civil war [is] found. So, the villagers who are staying in those dam construction sites have suffered from various kinds of human rights abuse for long time and they have to struggle for their [survival]. The people who will be affected from the dams ... have to live in their own lands as internally displaced person [IDPs]. Their lives is full of risks and ... their lives can be destroyed [at any time] so they have to hide in deep jungle for their safety. So when, we have tried to deliver the messages of dam construction plans to [them], we have also faced difficulty to [reach] them.²³

Large-scale relocation in Karenni State near the Salween River has occurred since 1996, the year when 212 villages in an area thought to be sympathetic to the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) were relocated as the area

became progressively militarised (KDRG 2006, 15). According to the Shan Sapawa Environmental Organization (Sapawa) this also occurred upstream in Shan State, in a pattern common along the Salween, where, as part of a wider anti-insurgency campaign, 60,000 villagers from areas adjoining the Tasang Dam site and flood zone were relocated in 1996 (Sapawa 2006, 20–24). Sapawa is the first Shan organisation dedicated to the preservation of the environment in Shan State and it has 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵ Despite undertaking research on the Myanmar side of the border Sapawa, as with KDRG, has been unable to organise significant public activities in the Salween region.²⁶ In contrast the Myanmar military, as part of its public relations campaign, forced over 400 villagers, many of whom have worked on projects as forced labour, to attend the official launch of the Tasang Dam in March 2007 with Thai construction company MDX and high-ranking Myanmar military officials (Sapawa 2007).

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 (see Figure 10.2), with the Hat Gyi Dam further downriver



Figure 10.2 The Salween River in the dry season between the Wei Gyi and Dar Gwin Dam Sites (source: author).

entirely within Karen State (KDRG 2006, viii; KRW 2004; Salween Watch n.d.). 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, moving downriver with his family each time there was an attack by the tatmadaw until they finally left Myanmar permanently in 1995 after the fall of Manerplaw.²⁷

The proximity to Thailand has, however, made organising some actions possible on the river. Karen Rivers Watch (KRW), a coalition of Karen organisations formed in June 2003, organises 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 (Cho 2008; KRW 2007; Saw Karen 2007). 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, which is intended to empower villagers (see Figure 10.3).²⁸ As an activist with KRW and Karen Office of Relief and Development (KORD) noted: 'we ask local villagers to share their feelings and knowledge; we mobilise the community from the Karen side'.²⁹

Nevertheless, although these actions have occurred inside the official borders of Myanmar the locations where they have taken place can be defined as politically fuzzy to the extent that they are not part of Myanmar totally controlled by the Myanmar military or government. 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 (Giddens 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.³⁰ 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 recriminations. An ERI activist suggested that the protests happened at 'safe areas for ... activists and villagers',³¹ while a KESAN activist later disclosed the location on condition it not be divulged.³² The protests inside Myanmar are, therefore, not undertaken to appeal to the military regime that controls most of the country. Indeed they would probably be violently suppressed. Rather, they are undertaken in areas over which the military has little influence, for both local peoples and an international audience, which may change over time according to military operations making it difficult for activists to predict locations far in advance.

Due to the tenuous control by the Myanmar military in many of these regions the dams may provide a potentially valuable role for the tatmadaw in the repression of insurgent groups. Once the dams are built 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, 38–39). The Wei



Figure 10.3 Anti-dam poster by Karen River Watch at Ei Tu Hta IDP Camp in KNU-held Myanmar (source: author).

Gyi Dam will also flood most of Karenni State's two river valleys that lie upstream where the KNPP is active (Kusnetz 2008). One Northern activist with extensive experience in the region argues that as a result of these projects ethnic IDPs in these areas are effectively 'held hostage' by the Myanmar military in the negotiations between themselves, ethnic insurgents and the Thai state.³³

The Hat Gyi Dam has been slated as the first Salween Dam to be constructed in Karen State being the only one out of the lower three dams to be entirely within Myanmar's borders and therefore lowering the level of external scrutiny (Noam 2008; Pianporn Deetes 2007; Tunya Sukpanich 2007). While security is generally more tenuous for activists deeper in Myanmar there are also tatmadaw garrisons on the Myanmar side of the river near the Dar Gwin and Wei Gyi Dam site (KRW 2004, 13), and in February 2008 ten tatmadaw soldiers were injured after being shot by Karen insurgents while crossing the river along the border (Saw Yan Naing 2008).³⁴ The attack occurred near Ei Htu Tar IDP Camp on the Myanmar side and the villages of Mae Sam Laep and Ban Ta Tar Fung on the Thai side where local villagers oppose the dams.³⁵ It was less than a month later when the villagers gathered on the river near the Wei Gyi Dam site secured by the KNU for their protest. Although there was little confidence that the protests would influence the Myanmar government Karen villagers on the Thai side also felt a sense of powerlessness in relation to the Thai government:

if the govt wants to build [the dams] it will as we are only poor people but, still, we and other villages send ... representatives to meetings in Mae Hong Son, Chiang Mai and Bangkok.³⁶

Despite the increased opportunities for public participation in the political process in Thailand compared with Myanmar it is not without its authoritarian characteristics (Simpson 2004, 32).

On the Myanmar side of the border the protests at insecure sites are the only outlet for Myanmar villagers to voice their concerns over the dam projects. As with other projects in Myanmar there has been no formal public participation in the Salween Dam projects. Initially, under the Thaksin government in September 2006, a senior official from EGAT announced that it would not be undertaking EIAs for the projects at all (Markar 2006; Piyaporn Wongruang 2006). In November 2006, however, following the coup that ousted Thaksin and intense public pressure in Thailand, Chulalongkorn University's Environmental Research Institute was commissioned by EGAT to conduct an EIA for the Hat Gyi Dam. It was not a transparent procedure, however, as public participation was not to be part of the process and the report was to remain confidential with only EGAT having disclosure rights (Pianporn Deetes 2007; Tunya Sukpanich 2007). According to an activist with KESAN the EIA was finished in December 2008 with the group endeavouring to get access to it through the *Freedom of Information Act*.³⁷

Security in the Hat Gyi area was tenuous, however, and in May 2006 an EGAT geologist lost his leg to a mine while surveying the area and, according to

later reports, died from his wounds (KRW 2006; KRW and SEARIN 2006; Kultida Samabuddhi 2006; Tunya Sukpanich 2007). In response to this and ongoing concerns Thailand's Human Rights Commission recommended that the Hat Gyi Dam be abandoned (*Watershed* 2007). In July 2007 30 EGAT engineers and other workers began a three-month feasibility study of the Hat Gyi Dam but encountered opposition from local Karen villagers. According to one activist the immediate area is a *brown* area,³⁸ largely controlled by the DKBA, which generally supports the tatmadaw, but contested by the KNU.³⁹ As another activist put it, 'the DKBA have the upper hand but the KNU can go in anytime'.⁴⁰

Nevertheless the KNU controls much of the area to the east towards the border and, as a result of opposition among villagers, has banned the EGAT team from the reservoir site, a position KRW supported: 'The KNU will reach a decision based on the interests of the people ... [they] should listen to the people and work with them to stop these dam projects because they will have a long term impact' (Cho 2007).

After talks with EGAT in the border town of Mae Sot the KNU later relented and gave the team permission to conduct a two-day survey but the KNU and local villagers remained opposed to the dam project (Saw Yan Naing 2007). In September 2007 another EGAT employee surveying the Hat Gyi site died from an artillery shell and the remaining 42 EGAT staff were evacuated to Thailand (AP 2007; TNA 2007). No one took responsibility for the attack but it highlighted that these are highly insecure sites for major projects. As an activist from ERI pointed out, 'even if [the tatmadaw] crush the KNU [in the Wei Gyi and Hat Gyi area] they will melt into the forest and continue their fight'.⁴¹ Another activist noted that even if the tatmadaw controlled the area it would always be easy for insurgent groups to covertly take in a hand-held RPG.⁴² The role of the KNU in these negotiations highlighted that in these dam projects, where official channels of public participation are effectively closed, it is largely through a militant insurgent group that local villagers and activists are able to influence the development project.

While security considerations for ethnic Karen communities in the region become part of the precarious daily existence both inside Myanmar and sometimes in the Thai-Myanmar borderlands they are entirely foreign to the Northern activists who are only practiced in organising protests in their own countries.⁴³ While intelligence agencies in the North have been known to target environmental groups and security responses to protests have been over-exuberant, activists generally have civil liberty protections unheard of for ethnic minority communities in Myanmar. As a result, in contrast to many environment movements in the North, the focus of these protests in Myanmar is one of simply survival for the communities.

Transnational activism – creating an activist diapsora

Due to the restrictions on local activism inside Myanmar the transnational aspects of the campaign against the Salween Dams took on a much greater

significance. The exodus of activists from Myanmar-proper since the 1988 protests and a series of subsequent environmental campaigns assisted in the development of Myanmar's activist diaspora, which provided ready made activist networks for the transnational Salween campaign. A key element of this activity was the formation of transnational coalitions that pooled their resources and formed strong organisational ties. While the transnational campaign emphasised the universal human rights of the affected ethnic minority communities in Myanmar the campaign also promoted their culturally specific identity. This cultural particularism extended into the ecological realm where the importance of indigenous knowledge of biodiversity was highlighted (KESAN 2008).

The transnational Salween Dams campaign demonstrated the depth and vitality of the Myanmar activist diaspora, particularly within Thailand and the Thai-Myanmar borderlands. Salween Watch, Karen Rivers Watch and Burma Rivers Network were all formed in the last decade as coalitions of smaller environmental groups to oppose large dams in Myanmar. They are staffed primarily by expatriate ethnic minority communities of Myanmar and operate mainly from Chiang Mai and towns in the Thai-Myanmar borderlands. These three organisations are all actually coalitions, rather than networks, with even the Burma River Network noting on its website that

[t]he new *coalition* ... is comprised of [ten] civil society groups representing communities from different regions of Burma being impacted by at least 20 large dams planned by the military regime [emphasis added].

(Burma Rivers Network 2007)

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; Carter 2007, 162). Yanacopulos has argued, however, that coalitions afford economies of scale (Yanacopulos 2005a, 259), and the anti-dam, or pro-river, coalitions of Myanmar have worked effectively by pooling their minimal resources and exploiting the growing availability of inexpensive communications technologies. They have all worked closely with ERI, although ERI has maintained a low profile in the campaign, preferring ethnic organisations to drive the operation.⁴⁴ The Salween Watch coalition was formed in February 1999, drawing in activists such as Sai Sai and Pipob Udomittipong who had previously worked for ERI (Salween Watch 2007).⁴⁵

Karen Rivers Watch (KRW), a coalition of Karen organisations including Chiang Mai-based KESAN, and the Mae Sariang-based NGOs, Karen Office of Relief and Development (KORD) and Karen Women's Organization (KWO), undertook protest actions along the Salween River in Karen State although it is largely based in Thailand (KRW 2007; Saw Karen 2007). KORD was formed a decade earlier and brought expertise to KRW in both emergency relief and community development. KORD's director, Nay Tha Blay, argued that it 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.⁴⁶

Burma Rivers Network (BRN) was formed more recently in May 2007 and brought together organisations working across Myanmar with its mission being to

protect the health of river ecosystems and sustain biodiversity, and to protect the rights and livelihoods of communities affected and potentially affected by destructive large-scale river development.

(Burma Rivers Network 2007)

The pooled expertise from the various component organisations was particularly useful in the launch of the comprehensive BRN website in January 2009 which examined dam issues related to six rivers (Burma Rivers Network 2009). Despite the assertion from Yanacopulos that coalitions 'have broader strategic aims than single-issue thematically focused networks' (Yanacopulos 2005b, 95), these coalitions are relatively specific in their aims, although with different geographic foci. The secretary and coordinator of BRN, Aung Ngyeh, outlined the rationale for the formation of the BRN when other, more localised, coalitions such as Salween Watch already existed:

The plans of dam construction are not only found on Salween River but the plans are also found on the other rivers in other ethnic lands such as Kachin, Arakan, Chin. Therefore, it's very important to have a network group of Burmese civil society organizations which are working on environmental issues. At a result, initiated by Salween Watch, Burma Rivers Network (BRN) is formed to carry our advocacy campaigns against dam construction inside Burma.⁴⁷

These coalitions have made particular attempts to create networks with activists and NGOs in China who oppose dams on the Nu River in Yunnan Province.

The emergence of affordable desktop publishing has allowed many ethnic minority groups to publish professional reports on the dams and their potential impacts to maintain their campaign's momentum. Most reports have been published in English in Thailand and aimed at transnational audiences but some have also been published in Burmese and ethnic languages such as Karen, with the aim of importing them into Myanmar covertly and disseminating them within communities.

The first of these professional reports appeared in 2004 in which KRW and Salween Watch provided the first detailed analysis on the plans for the Salween. KRW published *Damming at Gunpoint*, written mainly by Law Plah Min (KRW 2004),⁴⁸ while Salween Watch co-authored *Salween Under Threat* with the Southeast Asia Rivers Information Network (Salween Watch and SEARIN 2004; SEARIN 2007), which both argued that environmental damage and human rights abuses would flow from construction of the dams. In *Damming at Gunpoint* the

dams are regarded as projects that will cause oppression of Karen communities while providing huge revenues for the Myanmar military:

It can be seen that the regime's plans to exploit the water resources in the Salween River, by building dams and selling hydropower to Thailand, fit into its ongoing strategy of subjugating the ethnic areas and exploiting the natural resources there.

(KRW 2004, 10)

Salween Under Threat provides a central rationale for the transnationalisation of the campaign. Not only are TNCs and governments from various countries involved with the projects but activists from outside Myanmar have more chance of voicing their opposition without violent retribution and are better able to influence their governments:

There is an urgent need for people to speak out, as local potentially-affected people face dangers in they choose to protest ... because dissidence is met with fierce and often fatal retaliation. Those who are able to express concerns, including indigenous communities and international NGOs working outside of Burma, should therefore challenge these projects. This challenge is likely to appeal to the deepest conscience of [foreign] governments, financial institutions, the Thai public and concerned parties from the US, Japan, and Europe.

(Salween Watch and SEARIN 2004, 12–13)

The vulnerable political and social environment in which these communities live ensures that the focus of these reports is on issues of human rights and social justice in Myanmar rather than simply ecological issues, while still emphasising nonviolent solutions: '[Salween Watch] and BRN, have practiced nonviolent means as we thought that we can achieve our activities eventually by practicing [nonviolence]'.⁴⁹

As a result the organisations' reports analyse the projected damage to forest and wetland ecosystems along the Salween, but the effects are couched largely in terms of the adverse impacts on livelihoods of riverine communities (Salween Watch and SEARIN 2004, 15–22). When dealing with ecological issues, however, there is also a focus on the importance of indigenous knowledge. In *Khoe Kay: Biodiversity in Peril*, a report by KESAN on the biodiversity of the western side of the Salween River at the Wei Gyi Dam site in Myanmar, the anonymous primary author makes connections between their Western university scientific knowledge and their indigenous heritage:

Because many plants are toxic to humans, the local people need to know the species well before using them. Local species identification methods are based on humans' five senses.... Since I was young my parents have taught me how to identify plants and animals so I can survive in the forest. They

taught me to make a fire when there is not lighter by using bamboo chits or stones, and how to extract water from plants... This knowledge is important and useful ... when travelling deep in the forest.

(KESAN 2008, 5)

While written by a Karen team and extolling the virtues of indigenous knowledge the report's centrality to the transnational campaign is emphasised by it being only available in English and therefore inaccessible to most Karen communities in Myanmar.

The vulnerability of these communities to ecological crises is emphasised in the response of BRN to Cyclone Nargis, in which it argued that the military regime's energy policies together with its forest and mangrove destruction would only exacerbate climate change and its impacts (Burma Rivers Network 2008). Even nominally ecological concerns in the campaign are, however, infused with implicit democratising perspectives. In the first paragraph of *Khoe Kay* the aim of the report is stated: 'to document and expose the severe threats faced by this stretch of the Salween, both from large dams and ongoing militarization' (KESAN 2008, 6). More focus is, however, given to specific human rights concerns such as the impact on internally displaced peoples (IDPs) in the Salween region as a result of both clearing the reservoir zone and through village relocations forced by the military as part of its *four cuts* campaign against insurgents (KRW 2004, 42).

The two 2004 Salween publications provided the stimulus for various other groups to publish reports on their particular areas of interest (KRW 2004; Salween Watch and SEARIN 2004). In 2006 the Karenni Development Research Group (KDRG) published *Dammed by Burma's Generals*, drawing parallels between the proposed Salween Dams and the experience of Karenni communities impacted by the Moby Dam and the Lawpita Hydropower Project in the west of their state (KDRG 2006).⁵⁰ In the same year the Shan Sapawa Environmental Organization (Sapawa) published *Warning Signs*, examining development in the upper reaches of the Salween in Shan State (Sapawa 2006).

At the other end of the Salween River, Mon State hosts the Salween delta so the exiled Mon Youth Progressive Organization (MYPO) has its office in Sangkhalaburi in Kamchanaburi Province, near where Mon State borders Thailand. The office was raided by the Thai police in 2002 when Thaksin Shinawatra's government was putting all Myanmar NGOs under pressure but it continued operations and in 2007 published a report entitled *In the Balance* that called for a halt to investments in the Salween Dams (MYPO 2007). Although these individual reports are important, more critical for the campaign, according to Aung Ngyeh, are the networks that grow out of parallel campaigns, such as that against the Myitsone Dam on the Irrawaddy River in Kachin State.⁵¹ These networks are sometimes facilitated by relatively well resourced North-South organisations such as ERI but often personal relationships in expatriate communities provide the links that connect organisations, even if assistance is also provided by Northern funders such as the Open Society Foundation.⁵²

As well as published reports there are a number of websites dedicated to the campaign against the Salween Dams and listserves are regularly used to keep activists and interested people around the world informed of recent events (Salween Watch 2007; SEARIN 2007). As Reitan notes in her study of Jubilee 2000 these forms of electronic activism can create multiple forms of information diffusion that stimulate growth of transnational networks (Reitan 2007, 80). This provides further evidence that confirms Castells' assertion that environmental movements employ these new communications technologies as mobilising and organising tools (Castells 2003, 187). Saiz sees such developments particularly positively, using the technologies of globalisation to provide the possibility of thinking and acting locally and globally at the same time (Saiz 2005, 163–164). Most groups in the Salween campaign have therefore ensured a prominent online presence but, as della Porta and Diani find in other cases, many who have signed up for the listserve are already either part of the campaign or have other links to activists in the campaigns (della Porta and Diani 2006, 133).

The ability to tap into global communications and networks – access that is strictly limited in Myanmar – has been an important determinant in the development of transnational activism for exiles from Myanmar. 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 generalised from O'Kane's study:

Intersections between globalisation 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.⁵³ As a graduate herself Khin Nanda, the School Training Coordinator, noted that although it was initially difficult to fill the eight women positions the demand had gradually increased until applications outstripped the positions available.⁵⁴ She further argued that this sort of empowerment had challenged established norms within ethnic communities, which were often conservative, with respect to the promotion of women into prominent or influential roles.

As a result of the influx into the Thai-Myanmar border region Myanmar exiles inhabit many of the Thai towns along the border roads such as Mae Sot and Mae Sariang with a vast congregation of activists in Chiang Mai. In addition to the publications and online activities, therefore, the congregation of Myanmar exiles in this borderlands region also provides a conduit for transnational actors from outside the region to become involved. Unfortunately for NGOs in the region, however, the conduit also operates in the reverse direction. Many

Myanmar exiles on the Thai side of the border are awaiting resettlement in third countries and this can act as a 'brain drain' for NGOs. Throughout 2007–8 this exodus was particularly acute with NGOs losing up to half their staff with highly trained activists being resettled in Northern countries such as the US, Canada and Australia. Although this could present an ideal opportunity for transnationalising the campaigns, in reality the difficulty in refugees finding work and adapting to their new lives often means they lose touch with the campaigns.⁵⁵

Most of the international protests against TNCs' involvement in the Salween Dams were organised through a network of online activists although as della Porta and Diani note, these virtual networks operate best when initiated by real social linkages of the sort described above (della Porta and Diani 2006, 133). In their 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 revolutionised movement development and tactics (Curran 2006, 75; Doherty 2002, 172; Eschle 2005, 21; Klein 2001). While these technologies can be used for activism and seeking out alternative media perspectives, high internet penetration in a society does not necessarily reflect greater activism or social awareness. As Lewis notes in his examination of the internet in Southeast Asia, Thais are much less comfortable with the English language than their neighbours in Malaysia and Singapore and, partially as a result, much of the internet use in Thailand is for game playing rather than engaging in activism or searching out alternative media (Lewis 2006, 115). With limited English literacy in Thailand the campaigns face difficulties in the Thai language press, which, although relatively open compared with neighbouring countries, rarely covers the transnational campaigns in Myanmar that are featured in the English language press:

Thais depend on vernacular dailies for the news about Burma. But neither the high-circulation papers nor the specialist dailies print much Burma news. When they do, however, it is usually negative [and] not supported by concrete evidence.

(Wandee Suntivutimete 2003)

Despite these obstacles Thai environment groups such as TERRA have played key roles in supporting exiled Myanmar activists in the Salween campaign (TERRA 2008).⁵⁶

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 organisation with a central authority. These sort 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 argue that the motivations to form these transnational advocacy networks are primarily shared principled ideas or values (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 30), which in this case are founded on justice and the protection of human rights and the environment in Myanmar. International organisations engaging in the Salween campaign, such as International Rivers, may be focused on the health of rivers but like the Myanmar activist diaspora their support is also couched in the terms of justice for riverine inhabitants (International Rivers 2007).

Conclusion

Through an examination of a case study of the campaigns against the Salween Dams in Myanmar this chapter finds that the extent of *local* or *transnational* activism in environmental campaigns against projects can be linked to the degree of authoritarianism of the political regime in the home country where the projects occur. The evidence from this case study suggests four interrelated conclusions regarding the relationship between the extent of activism and the nature of political regimes in the South. First, there appears to be a *direct* relationship between authoritarianism and the extent of human rights abuses and environmental destruction linked to development projects, particularly transnational energy projects, in the South. Under traditional authoritarian regimes, such as in Myanmar, these adverse impacts are therefore likely to be greater than under democratic or hybrid regimes. Second, there is an *inverse* relationship between authoritarianism and the ability of local activists to voice their concerns through protest and various media, with increasing authoritarianism resulting in fewer outlets for dissent.

Third, these local restrictions under traditional authoritarian regimes increase the importance of developing transnational networks and coalitions to undertake transnational campaigns. These regimes are therefore likely to stimulate the creation of activist diasporas comprised of expatriates who engage in activism transnationally from outside their home country. Activists leave their local authoritarian environments for transnational settings, creating transnational networks of exiled activists. In the case of Myanmar expatriate activists escaping authoritarianism under the Myanmar military are distributed throughout the world but particularly active in Thailand and the 'liberated area' of the Thai-Myanmar border region, beyond the reach of Myanmar's military.

This activist diaspora, despite the difficulties it poses for activists, also provides opportunities. Training that would not be accessible in local settings may be available. 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, particularly through increased proficiency in English, the lingua franca of transnational activism and media. In addition, in the case of Myanmar most

activists don't petition the Myanmar regime directly as previous experience demonstrates they are unlikely to influence its policies and decision-making processes. They therefore focus their energies primarily on transnational activities, hoping to influence international businesses, governments or publics to support their cause. Although in countries such as China they face severe impediments to changing the behaviour of these various actors this form of activated citizenship has still experienced limited success in delaying progress on construction of the Salween Dams. The transnational networks that contribute to the development of this activist diaspora may also form under more liberal or competitive regimes but the greater opportunities and outlets for dissent at home generally focus activists into local modalities.

Fourth, the evidence therefore suggests a distinctive relationship between the level of authoritarian governance and the predominance of local or transnational activism under authoritarian regimes. There appears to be an *inverse* relationship between the level of authoritarian governance and the level of *local* activism but a *direct* relationship between the level of authoritarian governance and the level of *transnational* activism, with increasing authoritarianism resulting in greater transnational activism.

This relationship arises because although the desire to express dissent increases as authoritarianism increases, so do the personal costs from expressing that dissent. If there are few sites of competition such as in a traditional authoritarian regime local protests are limited as increasing repression results in the costs of activism becoming too great in terms of personal sacrifice. In Myanmar the regime has been traditional authoritarian for much of the time since 1962 resulting in minimal local activism. Public displays of defiance are therefore extremely rare and when this has occurred, such as during 1988 or 2007, it has resulted in a violent and brutal response from the military that has eventually suppressed dissenting voices. This authoritarianism, while suppressing opposition at home, actually appears to stimulate transnational linkages and activism through the activist diaspora, indicating that authoritarian regimes may actually be fuelling the growth of transnational social movements in the South by expanding transnational networks of activists.

While authoritarian governance tends to impact on the level of activism this chapter finds that, in conjunction with precarious living conditions, it also impacts on the issues focused upon by environment movements in the South. The campaign against the Salween Dams tended to focus on issues of human rights and social justice and was therefore emancipatory in its outlook. Ecological issues were also significant but not of primary importance above and beyond other issues. Nevertheless, achieving justice for communities, primarily for ethnic minorities in Myanmar, was intimately linked to issues of ecological health. In general, however, traditional authoritarian rule and more precarious living conditions result in a greater focus on human rights and justice. As Doherty notes, environmental struggles in the South are often 'struggles for democracy and against the unequal distribution of power' (Doherty 2007, 80). Environmental organisations and movements in the South therefore see no

conflict in pursuing human rights in conjunction with environmental justice. As a result of these concerns, democracy and justice are key philosophies and practices within these movements.

Activists in these movements also perceive, sometimes through their experience in violent conflict, that nonviolent activism is the only likely path to achieving their goals. Although nonviolence takes a pre-eminent role in the environmental campaigns the repression faced by ethnic minorities in Myanmar means that exiled activists often remain networked to ethnic minority insurgent groups within Myanmar as they are seen as the only institutions both willing and able to provide protection and security for ethnic minorities.

In conclusion, although Myanmar's activist diaspora is simply comprised of those Myanmar exiles engaged in the transnational environmental activism described above its multi-ethnic character, and its emphasis on cooperation across ethnic boundaries, sets it apart from much of the exiled community, which is still riven by ethnic friction. The increasing level of cooperation between ethnic-based green groups over projects such as the Salween Dams highlights a level of cross-ethnic collaboration rarely seen either inside or outside Myanmar. 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. Myanmar's 2008 Constitution provides for a continuing central role for the military in the country but by stimulating transnational activism that unites ethnic minorities the Myanmar military has created an effective international movement that promotes environmental justice and security for the long-suffering people of Myanmar.

Notes

- 1 Although many transnational activists and foreign governments still use the country name 'Burma' many activists within the country now use the officially recognised 'Myanmar'. As the name is unlikely to ever revert to Burma I have used Myanmar throughout this chapter.
- 2 Nay Tha Blay (2009, 7 January). *Interview with author*. Director of Karen Office of Relief and Development (KORD) and activist with Karen Rivers Watch (KRW). KORD Office, Mae Sariang, Thailand.
- 3 Hsiplopo (2009, 6 January). *Interview with author*. Ei Tu Hta Camp Leader/Chairman. Ei Tu Hta Camp, KNU controlled Myanmar on the Salween River.
- 4 Alex Shwe (2009, 8 January). *Interview with author*. Activist with KESAN (aka Ko Shwe). Chiang Mai, Thailand.
- 5 The SPDC was effectively in power from 1988 to 2011, although under the name State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in its early years. Between 1962 and 1988 Myanmar was ruled by General Ne Win through the Revolutionary Council and Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) (Charney 2009).
- 6 Human Rights Watch Staff (2011, 22 March). *Interview with author*. Washington DC; Open Society Foundation Staff (2011, 25 March) *Interview with author*. New York; US Campaign for Burma Staff (2011, 22 March). *Interview with author*. Washington DC.
- 7 ILO Liaison Officer (2011, 9 May). *Interview with author*. ILO Offices, Yangon, Myanmar.

- 8 Bobby Maung (2011, 7 January). *Interview with author*. CEO, Network Activities Group (NAG). Yangon, Myanmar.
- 9 Win Myo Thu (2011, 5 January). *Interview with author*. MD and Founder, ECODEV. Yangon, Myanmar.
- 10 This book was going to press soon after the new 'civilian' government was formed in 2011 when it was still too early to discern the resultant impacts on domestic environmental activism. As a result, most of the research undertaken for this chapter analyses environment movements in the context of Myanmar's years under direct military rule. Updates on both the domestic and transnational implications of the reforms undertaken by the new government can be found in Simpson (2013a, 2013b).
- 11 Win Myo Thu (2011, 10 May). *Interview with author*. MD and Founder, ECODEV. Yangon, Myanmar.
- 12 The military was able to shut down these international links because since 1999 it has controlled the only two Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in the country. At the time the only other occasion in which similar action was taken was in Nepal in February 2005 when the now deposed King declared martial law, although since this time it has been repeated particularly throughout the Middle East and North Africa in several uprisings.
- 13 Ka Hsaw Wa (2004, 14 January). *Interview with author*. Co-Founder/Executive Director ERI. Chiang Mai, Thailand. Catherine (2005, 10 January). *Interview with author*. Pseudonym for Assistant Director, Southeast Asia Office of ERI. ERI Office, Chiang Mai, Thailand.
- 14 Cynthia Maung (2004, 18 January). *Interview with author*. Founder of Mae Tao Clinic. Mae Sot, Thailand.
- 15 In 2005 there were 70 Back Pack Teams in eastern Myanmar comprising three to four health workers each that also provided food support for IDPs, carrying 5kg bags of rice deep into Myanmar. Patrick (2005, 11 January). *Interview with author*. Pseudonym for activist with Myanmar NGO based in Chiang Mai with Thai and foreign employees. Chiang Mai, Thailand.
- 16 Withheld on request for security reasons.
- 17 Patrick (2009, 2 January). *Interview with author*. Pseudonym for activist with Myanmar NGO with Thai and foreign employees. Chiang Mai, Thailand.
- 18 The Thai and Burmese governments had been attempting to keep their plans for the project concealed and the MoU was not made public. A copy of the MoU was later leaked to the journalist Richard Lloyd Parry and posted on *The Times* website (Parry 2006).
- 19 Phyto Phyo (2011, 7 January). *Interview with author*. Pseudonym for activist with Shwe Gas Movement. Yangon, Myanmar.
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