Transnational Energy Projects and Green Politics in Thailand and Burma

A Critical Approach to Activism and Security

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Abstract

Most studies in environmental politics have traditionally examined three broad areas: the degradation of the environment; the regulatory regimes governing the environment; or environmental activism within the affluent North. This thesis provides an alternative perspective, exploring environmental activism in the less affluent South. In particular, while human rights and social justice perspectives have historically been largely absent from many environmental movements of the North, this thesis argues that, due to precarious living conditions and authoritarian governance, these issues are of primary importance for environmentalists in the South. As a result this thesis contends that most environmental movements in the South are part of a growing global justice movement and that important cultural diversities within this movement can result in novel forms of resistance and environmental governance. The focus here is on the emancipatory actors within these movements in the South who challenge existing power structures within society. Likewise, by adopting a critical perspective, this thesis argues that large business interests pursue energy projects in the South in the name of energy security and large scale industrial development that are often inappropriate for local development and security needs.

To test these hypotheses, four case studies were undertaken that examine transnational gas pipeline and large dam projects at various stages of their development which originate in either Burma (Myanmar) or Thailand. Empirical research, primarily in the form of interviews, undertaken in the countries hosting the various energy projects demonstrated that although environmental activists in the South were assisted by transnational activist networks there were also important local factors that impacted on the emancipatory philosophies, strategies and tactics of many activists in this region. These strategies have achieved some success, with environmental impact assessment (EIA) processes in Thailand now providing a potential opening for the political engagement of communities. Nevertheless, this thesis finds that the power of corporate interests in the international political economy often poses insurmountable barriers for activists to achieve both their short and long term aims. The findings suggest that despite the efforts of activists, local indigenous and ethnic minority communities continue to bear the brunt of the social and environmental costs of transnational energy projects in the South while receiving few of the benefits. Rather than safeguarding these communities from deprivation, these projects often exacerbate existing social tensions and conflicts, resulting in increased community insecurity.

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution to Adam Simpson and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Adam Simpson December 2009

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Other people who have helped me over the years include my parents, Ann and Graham, and my brother, Giya, who have provided constant support through some rocky times. Adam Smith and Alex Hannell in London, Anton van den Hengel and many other good friends have provided sounding boards during many years of solving the world's problems in late night philosophical discussions. Vic Beasley provided some minor grammatical and formatting assistance in the later stages of the thesis. Thanks are due to my colleagues in International Studies at the University of South Australia for the mid-corridor debates, particularly Lis Porter who as Head of School showed faith in me and an interest in my research.

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Notes on Language and Bibliography

Thai family names are often long and unfamiliar, even to other Thais, and both ethnic Burmans and most ethnic minorities in Burma (except the Chins, Kachins and Nagas) have no family name.

I have therefore followed the custom adopted by academics specialising in this region by citing Thai and Burmese authors in the text and bibliography by their first, rather than last, names (Brown 2004; Fink 2001, 270; Hewison 2005; Lintner 1999, 496; McCargo and Ukrist Pathmanand 2005; Warr 2005, xv).

Romanisation of Thai and Burmese names and words can result in several different spellings. I have endeavoured to maintain consistency throughout the thesis but where needed I have noted alternative spellings.

Acronyms and Key Terms

kWh is Kilowatt Hours (unit of energy consumption)
MWh is Megawatt Hours (unit of energy consumption)

Btu is British Thermal Units (unit of energy consumption)

MMBtu is 1 Million British Thermal Units (1,000,000)

(3412 BTUs = 1 kWh)
(1 BTU = 1,055.06 joules)

tcf is trillion cubic feet
mcfd is million cubic feet per day

1 acre = 2.5 rai

AASYC	All Arakan Student and Youth Congress
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AE	Accion Ologica (Friends of the Earth Ecuador)
AEPS	Alternative Energy Project for Sustainability
AGM	Anti-Globalisation Movement
ALD	Arakan League for Democracy
ALTSEAN-Burma	Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma
ANC	Arakan National Congress
ASSK	Aung San Suu Kyi
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ATCA	Alien Torts Claim Act
BLC	Burma Lawyers' Council
BRN	Burma Rivers Network
CNOOC	China National Offshore Oil Corporation
CSS	Critical Security Studies
DHP	Department of Hydroelectric Power (Burma)
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
EG	Emancipatory Groups
EGS	Environmental Governance State
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
EIR	Extractive Industries Review
EJM	Environmental Justice Movement

EMO	Environment Movement Organisation
ERI	EarthRights International
EU	European Union
FER	Foundation for Ecological Recovery (aka PER) (see TERRA)
FGS	Focus on the Global South
FoE	Friends of the Earth
FoEI	Friends of the Earth International
FTUB	Federation of Trade Unions Burma
GAIL	Gas Authority of India Ltd
GJM	Global Justice Movement
GMS	Greater Mekong Subregion
GSP	Gas Separation Plant
J18	18 June 1999 – 'Carnival Against Capitalism'
ICG	International Crisis Group
IFI	International Financial Institution
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IMT-GT	Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle
IPE	International Political Economy
IR	International Relations
IRN	International Rivers Network (now known as International Rivers)
IUCN	World Conservation Union
KCG	Kanchanburi Conservation Group
KDRG	Karenni Development Research Group
KESAN	Karen Environmental and Social Action Network
KHRG	Karen Human Rights Group
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army (military wing of KNU)
KNPP	Karenni National Progressive Party
KNU	Karen National Union
LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas
MAI	Multilateral Agreement on Investment
MDA	Militant Direct Action
MDB	Multilateral Development Bank
MYPO	Mon Youth Progressive Organization
NBA	Narmada Bachao Andolan (India)
NEB	National Environment Board (Thailand)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NHRC	National Human Rights Commission (Thailand)
NIMBY	Not-In-My-Back-Yard
NLD-LA	National League for Democracy – Liberated Area (Burma)
NOC	National Oil Company (China)
NSM	New Social Movement
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OEPP	Office of Environmental Policy and Planning (Thailand)

ONGC	Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Ltd (India)
PER	Project for Ecological Recovery (aka FER) (see TERRA)
PGA	People's Global Action
PPP	People's Power Party (Thailand – formerly TRT)
PT	Pheu Thai Party (Thailand – formerly PPP)
PSU	Prince of Songkla University
SAM	Sahabat Alam Malaysia (Friends of the Earth Malaysia)
SBPAC	Southern Border Provinces Administration Centre
SEM	Spirit in Education Movement
SGM	Shwe Gas Movement
SIA	Social Impact Assessment
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SNF	Sathirakoses-Nagapradeepa Foundation
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
TBBC	Thailand Burma Border Consortium
TERRA	Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance (see also FER/PER)
TNC	Transnational Corporation
TRT	Thai Rak Thai (Thailand)
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCED	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro 1992)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nation Environment Programme
US	United States (of America)
WCD	World Commission on Dams
WCS	World Conservation Society (US)
WSF	World Social Forum
WSSD	World Summit on Sustainable Development (South Africa 2002)
WTO	World Trade Organization
WWF	World Wide Fund For Nature