

Energy, Governance and Security in Thailand and Myanmar (Burma).
By Adam Simpson. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2017. Softcover: 271pp.

Southeast Asia is the fastest growing region in the world, and this growth needs energy to fuel it. The International Energy Agency's 2017 report sees the region's energy demand rising by nearly two-thirds by 2040. Efforts to meet this demand have led to environmental damage, abuse of local community rights, and the disappearance and death of campaigners opposed to energy projects.

In his latest book, Adam Simpson explores resistance to four energy projects: the Yadana, Shwe and Salween dams in Myanmar, and the Thai–Malaysian gas pipeline in Thailand. Drawing on detailed research and extensive fieldwork, he provides a “thick description” of local activist networks that have mobilized against these projects, and the transnational ties they have developed. As he notes, these two states, though neighbours, are politically very different. During the period covered by this study (early 1990s to 2013), Myanmar was the most repressive, and Thailand the most open country in the region. A major, if perhaps unsurprising, conclusion is that environmental activism proved easier in the latter. By contrast, in the more repressive conditions of Myanmar, resistance was sometimes feasible only through an activist diaspora working across or beyond borders.

While very different, the two countries are linked by energy. Simpson is onto something important when he notes that Thailand, where local opposition to energy projects can be vigorous, has been outsourcing some of its supply to more repressive states. This casts helpful light on an understudied theme of wider significance.

Simpson does a service in showing how activists have organized themselves under sometimes very difficult conditions. He adopts a familiar and engaged “critical” posture that is commendably committed to the welfare of the powerless and oppressed. But this perspective is, inevitably, a partial one, and gives rise to three reservations.

First, activist claims are accepted at face value. Yet not all are necessarily accurate, however strong the merits of their underlying grievances. For example, the author endorses a critique of the Thai–Malaysian pipeline on the grounds that Thailand should not export its energy resources (pp. 103–4, 197). But this pipeline is supplied by the Malaysia–Thailand Joint Development Area, whose gas is not only Thailand's to use. If Thailand did not share some of this production with Malaysia, the project would never have been

built, depriving Thailand of a significant source of energy. Similarly, Islamic villages in southern Thailand affected by the pipeline “identified their oppression with that of the global campaign being waged against Muslims” (p. 162). This “process of identification was expedited by ‘outside activists who brought greater awareness... of international/global aspects of anti-Muslim sentiment after 9/11’” (p. 105). Simpson does not consider whether this is a fair or an invidious construction, nor does he question the motives of the “outside activists” spreading it.

Second, the author rightly seeks to define the needs and interests of communities in the Global South in their own terms, rather than in terms of environmental agendas articulated by the North. So it is perhaps surprising that his analysis rests on a concept of “emancipatory governance” first developed in the early 1980s by a post-industrial movement, the German Greens, from the developed Global North. Local activism is fitted into emphatically non-local categories, and the fit is not always tight: as the author acknowledges, “emancipatory inclinations of movements or groups may be qualified by the cultural and political milieu in which they arise” (p. 21).

Third, while charting its four case studies of activist campaigning in detail, this study acknowledges that none achieved its goals. A social scientist might say that, without variation in outcome, no explanatory work is being done. Simpson might reasonably respond that his purpose is rather to chronicle and bear witness. But his optimistic insistence that “[e]ngaging in activism was itself a transformative process that stimulated the pursuit of justice” (p. 198) seems a frail consolation. At the very least, it might prompt activists and their supporters to ask how they might be more successful in future.

A welcome postscript notes changes in both countries that have impacted energy politics. In particular, even before the historic 2016 elections that ushered in a democratic government, Myanmar suspended the Myitsone dam project and signed up to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) process. The latter has brought civil society groups into a key international mechanism for energy project scrutiny — perhaps their biggest breakthrough, and one achieved (though Simpson does not say so) partly to encourage Western companies to invest. Since this book was published, protests against a proposed coal plan in Krabi have shown how Thailand’s military government has been forced to change course in response to energy activism.

These are signs of things to come. The energy-environment nexus will only become more significant as Southeast Asia continues to develop. Future work in this area might usefully focus on upstream and power generation projects as well as mid-stream ones (three of the four cases in this study are pipeline projects). It could consider, too, the experience of additional countries, notably Cambodia and Laos, and the linkages between them. And it could explore a wider range of international factors, including western activist pressure — which is now raising corporate ethical standards, and causing major financiers like the World Bank to reappraise large hydro projects — as well as the impact of China's growing influence. Overall, this book offers insights into activist methods and strategies on issues of the utmost importance, which future studies may build on.

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