

BOOK REVIEWS

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***Energy, Governance and Security in Thailand and Myanmar (Burma): A Critical Approach to Environmental Politics in the South*, by Adam Simpson. 2nd ed. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2017. Pp. 336.**

Since its publication in 2014 and subsequent revision and update in 2017, the interdisciplinary relevance of Adam Simpson’s work is demonstrated by the multiple perspectives through which his research findings have been reviewed and commented upon. Though primarily an exercise researching the two-way flow of information and interactions that inform decisions in environment and energy projects, the value of Simpson’s work lies in highlighting the complex relationships between voice and accountability issues surrounding investments in extractive industries in Thailand and Myanmar. In doing so, the author also highlights the agency of activists in environmental governance. The phrase “activist environmental governance” will be associated with Simpson in future analyses of democracy and development in the South.

Simpson’s choice of Thailand and Myanmar is apt. The two countries had an almost looking-glass situation regarding the space available to local activist movements for “political dissent and debate” (p. 2), with more dynamic domestic environment movement in Thailand providing the main voice for accountability of the country’s transnational energy project, especially in neighbouring Myanmar. Myanmar activists, whose voice was suppressed under a military regime until 2011, relied mainly on transnational modes of environmental governance, with participation and input from exiled activists providing the local contextual knowledge for such movements. This was not always a straightforward path. Thailand’s competitive authoritarian tendencies under the Thaksin regime (pp. 65–73) saw the environment as political (p. 72), and nationalist rhetoric against foreign interventions provided a cover for cracking down on activists opposing major development projects. Thus, state sensitivity to activism has prevented substantial advocacy to mitigate the social and environmental effects of infrastructure projects, especially in the energy sector. A strong symbiosis exists between business interests and political elites (p. 91), converging interests among the governments of the day, too.

These are some of Simpson’s key messages. Another is on the geopolitical connotations of outsourcing energy extraction (and the attendant social and environmental consequences) to states that are not in a position to assert or protect human security and development concerns. His decade and a half of research on environmental activism in Thailand and Myanmar eminently qualify him to make these arguments, and also give voice to the environmental activism born out of an “existential struggle” of contested identity and ownership over resources.

Simpson’s motivation to highlight the precarious nature of environmental security, and the “limited will or governance capabilities or both” (p. 2) in this area by the authoritarian or illiberal regimes governing resource-rich states in the South is, thus, timely. The continuation of a strong authoritarian streak and the long arm of the military in political and socio-economic life—albeit in different manifestations—in

Thailand and Myanmar today make his work a recommended reading for analysts, academics, activists, and investors who are seeking to understand the interests, institutions and individuals that influence the political economy in these countries.

Political analysts and investors will find Simpson's introduction chapter, his detailed and thoughtful discussion of the political landscape in Thailand and Myanmar in Chapter 3 (which provides the backdrop to environmental politics and activism in these countries), and the situation update provided in the additional Postscript chapter most relevant to their interests. Those who study environmental politics and governance will certainly find Chapter 2 an important point of reference. This is where the author presents his case for adding to or expanding on the Doyle and Doherty model (2006) of environmental governance, by seeking to fill the gap in geography and applicability for environmental politics of the South. As Simpson highlights, "illiberal governance and highly unequal resource ownership" (p. 32) mean that environmental movements are confronted with being branded as opposing development. However, environmental activism serves as the voice for marginalized communities, especially in the borderland areas, where transnational resource projects affect their lives and livelihood.

Simpson's impressive fieldwork is evident in his discussion of four such transnational projects (Chapters 4 through 6): the Yadana Gas Pipeline; the Thai-Malaysian Gas Pipeline; the Shwe Gas Pipeline; and the Salween Dams. Although the suspension of the Myitsone Dam has become a reference point as Myanmar's *cause celebre* of standing up to China, in a first-ever instance of environmental activism influencing policy decisions, it is useful for those watching Myanmar's political economy to cast an eye on the efforts of environmental activists regarding the Yadana, Shwe and Salween projects. The response to Myitsone did not happen out of the blue; and the suspended nature of its continued suspension today points to geopolitics as well as strategic political engagement of local communities. For example, Simpson's empirical experience of EarthRights International (Chapter 5) shows that international norms and principles—usually advocated by the North—can find some traction and expression in deeply local communities in the developing South.

However, challenges remain. Activists and local communities in Thailand and Myanmar today continue to find themselves mired in complex emerging situations influenced by geo-economics and domestic centrifugal forces. This well-structured and deeply researched work has laid important groundwork in exposing some of the transnational links that further complicate these evolving situations. Political elite in Thailand and Myanmar today seem to have both progressed and regressed in responses to activism in their countries; the two states are also hard-pressed for investment inflows to shore up flagging performance legitimacy. Simpson's incisive analysis illuminates how far back these problems go, and indicates how much farther the road ahead lies.

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***The State and the Transnational Politics of Migrants: A Study of the Chins and the Acehnese in Malaysia*, by Sheila Murugasu.** London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Pp. 228.

This book is a welcome addition to the literature on transnational migrant politics, refugee and migrant life in Malaysia and on two migrant communities—the Chin and the Acehnese. With the exception of a handful of studies, there have been few scholarly works on these two groups in the country.
