

Navigating an Environment-Security Nexus

Risk, Care, and Emotions in Environmental Activism in Myanmar

Pernilla Nordqvist

Akademisk avhandling för filosofie doktorsexamen i Freds-och utvecklingsforskning
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Abstract

After the military coup of February 1, 2021, Myanmar returned to authoritarian rule, ending a decade of a fragile and contested democratic opening during which environmental activism had gained momentum. The coup transformed the security landscape, shifting activists' priorities from broader environmental protection toward urgent concerns for human safety. Building on research on environmental activism and security, this thesis deepens our understanding of environmental activism during periods of violent political upheaval by examining how activists in Myanmar navigate what it conceptualizes as an environment-security nexus. In other words, the entanglement of commitments to environmental protection with escalating human insecurities. The thesis asks: how do environmental activists navigate this nexus?

The thesis conceptualizes activism as relational, emotionally charged and contextually embedded. It draws on narrative interviews conducted with environmental activists between mid-2021 and early 2023. This approach moves beyond outcome-focused accounts of activism to center activists' lived experiences.

The analysis is structured around three interrelated dimensions: risk, care, and emotions. First, with respect to risk, the thesis explores how activists navigate safety concerns to human and more-than-human entities. Second, with respect to care, relational dimensions of activism are addressed. It analyzes how activists rely on and contribute to caring needs within families, communities, networks, and in relations to plants, water, and land. Third, the emotional dimension engages with how activists experience and express emotions when navigating an environment-security nexus. It shows how emotions influence everyday survival, well-being and underscores how they can be used to deal with personal changes and broader inequalities.

Together these dimensions reveal that navigating the environment–security nexus involves more than managing threats. They show how activists create spaces of care, solidarity, and alternative political possibilities even under repression. By tracing how activists negotiate risk, sustain care, and mobilize emotions, the thesis highlights not only the constraints imposed by violence and insecurity but also the practices through which activists reimagine environmental protection and social life.

Keywords: Environmental activism, navigation, risk, care, emotions, security, environments, human-more-than-human relations