

The Predicaments of Exiled Activists from Myanmar

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Overview

- **Definition: Exiled activists**
- **The work of today's activists in exile**
- **Psycho-social consequences of working from exile**
- **Activists as 'insiders' or 'outsiders' – Revisiting an old dichotomy**
- **Conclusion and recommendations**

What is exiled activism?

- A global phenomenon that has only recently become recognized in its own right (McKeever 2021)
- The effect of a government or regime exerting pressure onto an individual or a group of people whom it has come to regard as a political opponent
- The activist, and often their families, are forced to leave their home country
- No one chooses exile voluntarily!
- Exiled activists are being targeted in their role as key actors with a significant impact on their society in a way that those in power consider threatening.

Exiled activists in neighbouring countries vs. in other countries

Activism from Thailand and India

- usually live together
- can communicate daily in their own language
- have time to engage with activist work
- often regarded as “unemployed” in the respective country’s official economic system

Activism from other countries

- work mostly from a position of solitariness
- obliged to contribute their time to work or study
- Activism becomes an additional duty
- Different time zones make participation in online events or communication with those in the country challenging

Differences between activism in 1996/98, 2007, and 2021

Exiled activist, wife of political prisoner, female, USA

“When my husband was very active [in 1996/1998/2007], the military drove the attention of the people to problems in the *economy or bad governance*. There was *fear*, one couldn’t unite. One couldn’t see *the one common enemy*. (...) But now, in 2021, all people know very well that the source of *all the problems* is the dictatorship. That’s why the people are *united*.”¹

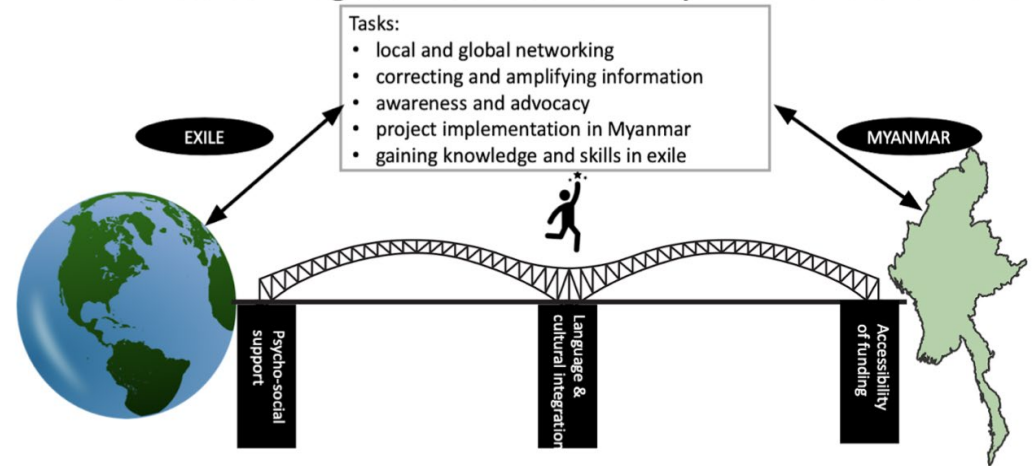
¹These interviews were conducted in Burmese and English. Phrases in English are therefore marked in Italics.

The work of today's activists in exile:

Activists as Bridgebuilders

- Advocacy
- Consultancy (e.g., NUG)
- Networking (within, between, and outside of Myanmar)
- Project implementation (in Myanmar)
- Knowledge (in exile)

Activists as Bridgebuilders between Myanmar and the World



**“Activists will lead the
future country.”**

Exiled activist, ex-political prisoner, male, US

**“I am scared when I see a police force
even though I know I am here, not in
Myanmar. Also, I am scared when I hear
noisy or loud sounds.”**

Exiled activist, male, Switzerland

Psychosocial consequences of working from exile

- Witnessing the military violence and terror against civilians
- Post-Traumatic Stress
- Survivor's guilt
- Constant worries

Worries about...

The immediate future in exile

personal standing, finding friends, navigating daily life, struggling with new languages, bureaucratic processes.

The immediate future in Myanmar

providing financial support for extended family, not fulfilling caring responsibilities, safety issues of family, friends, and fellow activists in prison.

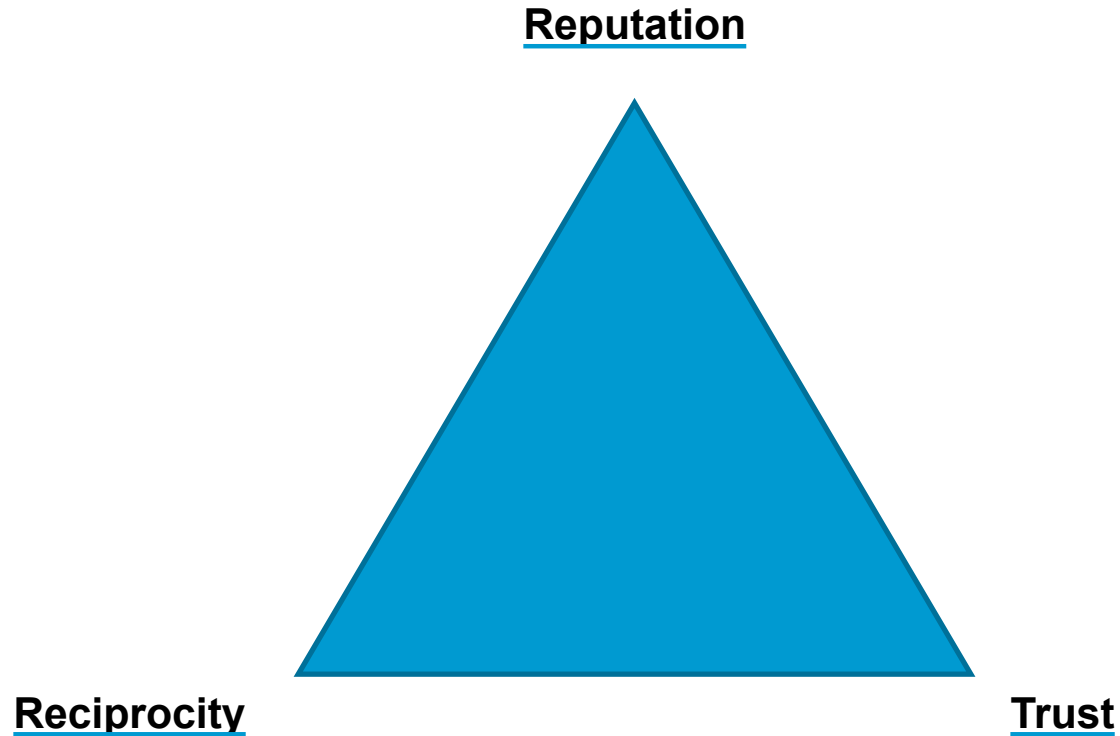
The distant personal future

pressure to meet perceived expectations, fear of disappointment, uncertainty of a return, and threats to continuing activism after return (Olivius, 2019).

The distant political future

the democratic development, economic opportunities, and how to meet basic needs, especially when the family is still in the country.

Re-establishing the “Golden Triangle“ from Exile



Ostrom, 1998

Activists as ‘Insiders’ or ‘Outsiders’ – Revisiting An Old Dichotomy

- “insiders” (pyi-twin) and “outsiders,” (pyi-pa)
- “insiders” or locals know the political and social contexts better
- a common way to reject the views of fellow Myanmar civilians based on their geographical residence

Recommendations

Scholarship programs

Need for de-bureaucratizing the process and lowering eligibility criteria

Increasing accessibility to scholarships by promoting free online trainings (e.g., English, CVs)

Increase number of language learning scholarships (to not overwhelm activists)

Funding for families who stayed in Myanmar (as activists are usually the main income source)

Facilitating local projects

Increasing funding for local “underground” projects

Promoting safe communication technologies (e.g., Signal)

Including exiled activists as experts in the Global North

Leveraging activists’ social networks in Myanmar for exerting diplomatic pressure and actual support (Huang et al, 2021)

Speaking up for activists who are at risk because of security issues

Recommendations

Helping transition in host country

Buddy programs (e.g., with networks of international activists)

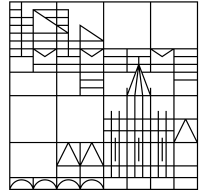
Giving activists a voice (e.g., presenting at roundtables or universities)

Scaling up mental health support

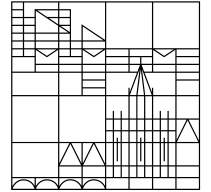
creating a common identity as “activists in exile” (Alfadhli et al. 2019)

supporting agency, sense of purpose, social support, and continued communication (Lemelson & Thein-Lemelson, 2016)

promoting mobile health counselling applications



In the end, supporting exiled activists will have a positive outcome for Myanmar, to which exiled activists wish to return.



**Thank you
for your attention!**

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