

Confluences amid Conflict: How Resisting China’s Myitsone Dam Project Linked Kachin and Bamar Nationalisms in War-Torn Burma

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Introduction

On September 30, 2011, Burma’s President Thein Sein one-sidedly halted the construction of the multibillion dollar Myitsone Dam, derailing China’s (then) largest-ever hydro-power project abroad. This unilateral suspension, which publicly rebuffed Beijing, unleashed a diplomatic scandal and widespread speculations on geopolitical shifts in the Asia–Pacific region. Moreover, because the president’s decision was responding to a popular antidam campaign, many welcomed it as proof that the new Burmese government planned for genuine democratic reforms. Indeed, halting Myitsone Dam heralded Burma’s globally noted transition from military dictatorship to a military–civilian partial democracy. Yet, accepting the story this way misses key dynamics behind both the response to the Myitsone project and a changing Burma: nationalism and ethnic conflict.

Burma is an ethnically diverse country. Its Bamar ethno-nationalist military-state has, since independence in 1948, clashed with more than a dozen minority peoples’ armed ethnonational movements. After Burma’s 2011 partial democratic reforms and up until the Burmese military’s 2017 large-scale

ethnic cleansing against Rohingya people, worldwide media and policy discussions have tended to focus more on the country's political transition and foreign policy than its enduring ethnic repression and conflict. Indeed, the trope of "transition" itself has overshadowed Burma's historical continuity (Rhoads and Wittekind 2018; Girke and Beyer 2018). The Myitsone Dam suspension, too, has more often been told as a story of democratization, geopolitical rupture, environmentalist triumph, or hydropower controversy than as a story of ethnic relations. However, narrating the Myitsone Dam suspension or a changing Burma without considering ethnic conflict and disparate nationalisms inevitably reinforces the ethnic Bamar majority's privilege and domination (Walton 2013).

From the perspective of competing nationalisms, the Myitsone popular antidam movement was an encounter between people from two ethnic groups: northernmost Burma's Kachins, numbering below a million, and Bamars (Burmans), comprising around two-thirds of the country's more than fifty million residents. This interethnic civilian movement coincided with rising military-political tensions and war between Burmese and Kachin forces. This article investigates how resistance to the Myitsone megaproject grew since the mid-2000s until the 2011 suspension—often stalling at, yet sometimes crossing, the barriers of military repression, geographical remoteness, and Burma's interethnic conflicts, Bamar domination, and widespread distrust. As such, the article's story expresses the potentials and difficulties for *interethnic* mobilization in Burma, whether for social and economic justice, environment, peace, or human rights. The article treats Bamars as an ethnic group, rather than as Burma's "default" or somehow "nonethnic" people. Indeed, Bamar *ethno*-nationalism defines Burma's state nationalism.

This article draws on extensive interviews, discourse analysis, and more than two years of ethnographic fieldwork in Burma done on-and-off between 2010 and 2019, mostly in Kachin State, especially its capital Myitkyina. It is largely an oral history that lets people's voices tell the story, especially

the voices of Kachin and Bamar people who led antidam resistance. I did fieldwork, interviews, and media analysis in English, Kachin Jingpho, and Chinese languages. The article draws on my participant observation in the 2010s, but most of the events discussed took place before my fieldwork.

Importantly, this article cites interviewees at length—not for claiming that any interviewee has “the correct view,” but for understanding the diverse persons who met within the Myitsone resistance, with their nuanced and contradictory thoughts, experiences, and visions. All interviewees have been anonymized to protect people’s safety and privacy when discussing sensitive topics. The text avoids gender pronouns and contextual information, because these social circles are small, and people might otherwise be recognized.

The article proceeds by first discussing literature on the Myitsone controversy and on Burma’s interethnic relations. Then, the story starts in the mid-2000s, as antidam resistance was spreading from local Myitsone villages to broader ethnic Kachin society, and continues until 2009–2011, as ethnic Bamar antidam resistance emerged. Finally, various Kachin and Bamar interviewees reflect on the Myitsone resistance as an interethnic encounter.

Many Myitsone Questions

Prepared since the early 2000s and launched in the mid-2000s, the Irrawaddy River hydropower megaproject envisions constructing seven large dams on the N’mai and Mali Rivers in the subtropical Himalayan foothills of northernmost Burma. The seven dams would altogether have a generating capacity of around 18,000 megawatts, nearing the world’s largest dam, China’s Three Gorges Dam. These dams would culminate with the largest one shortly downstream from the two rivers’ confluence—known as *Myitsone*—which marks the beginning of Burma’s great river, the Irrawaddy (*Ayeyarwady*). This confluence lies forty kilometers upstream from the capital of Burma’s northernmost Kachin State, Myitkyina. If completed, the Myitsone

Dam would be one of the world's largest, with a reservoir of over 700 square kilometers, thus displacing more than 10,000 people.

This multibillion dollar project began as a joint venture between China's state-owned China Power Investment Corporation as the main investor, the Burmese junta's ministry of electricity, and a junta-allied Burmese narcotics cartel's conglomerate, Asia World. Ninety percent of the electricity generated was to supply southern China's power grid, while the Burmese government would receive billions of dollars in revenue and some badly needed electricity. The project's full terms were never publicly negotiated and remain secret. As was common in authoritarian Burma, the project allegedly advanced through payoffs to junta leaders who used their military power to execute land grabs, taking the required land from the local residents. When Burma's president announced that he is one-sidedly suspending the construction of Myitsone Dam at least until his government's term ends in 2015, he stunned Chinese, Burmese, and worldwide observers. Construction has not resumed since.

Why has this ambitious project stalled so spectacularly? The next paragraphs review several contrasting approaches to this question.

China-focused studies explore the Myitsone project's 2011 suspension as a prominent setback among China's growing outward development investments. My previous article suggests that China's "anti-ethno-political" development approach failed to consider or overcome how the project clashes against both Kachin and Burmese nationalisms (Kiiik 2016b). Jones and Zou (2017; cf. Freeman 2017) show how the project's leading state-owned company defied the Chinese party-state's own regulations, while seeking profit, eventually damaging Beijing's diplomacy in Burma. Transnational Institute (TNI, 2016) and my previous article (Kiiik 2016b) review how China's domestic scholarly and policy literatures often discuss Myitsone as a lesson, including for China's global infrastructure megaproject, the Belt and Road Initiative. The Myitsone setback led the Chinese regime to shift in Burma from

exclusively government-to-government relations toward strategic public outreach (Chan 2017; Zou and Jones 2020).

Simultaneously, the Myitsone case has attracted sustained attention in studies of hydropower policy (Foran et al. 2017; Freeman 2017; Hennig 2016; Kirchherr 2018; Kirchherr et al. 2016, 2017a, 2017b; Mogensen 2017; Yeophantong 2016a, 2016b; Zhu et al. 2016). Situating Myitsone as a notable stumble amid China's many large dam projects in Southeast Asia, such studies often explore how the Chinese government and Chinese energy companies approach or should approach the development of dams abroad, state-to-state relations, and social opposition.

Looking from the Burmese side, though, the question remains: why did President Thein Sein halt building this mega-dam?

Much commentary has focused on United States–China geopolitical rivalry over Burma's foreign policy direction. Lintner (2011) and other analysts argue that Burma's new post-junta government sought to signal that Burma was not China's client state and wanted to improve relations with the West, ASEAN, and/or other countries. Sun (2012) shows that Beijing miscalculated by assuming that the Burmese regime would remain loyal to China. Claims of "international conspiracy" fueled widespread controversy around Myitsone—as I explore elsewhere (Kiik 2020).

Geopolitical interpretation of the Myitsone suspension, however, tends to overshadow key context. It tends to assume that the Burmese regime is always consistent and well planned. It downplays the president's domestic motives. Moreover, as Chan (2017) notes, Burma's president did not need to risk Beijing's revenge by halting the project, in order to shift Burma's foreign relations—not least because Burma and Western countries had already begun normalizing their relations. Finally, overly geopolitical interpretation sidesteps the fact that the popular Myitsone antidam movements arose and grew independently from the Burmese government.

Thus, some researchers instead highlight how the snowballing antidam outcry impacted the president's decision.

For example, advisers persuaded the president against the megaproject by forwarding him dam opponents' messages (Kempel 2012; Su Mon Thazin Aung 2017; Yeophantong 2016a; Chan 2017; Foran et al. 2017; Zhu et al. 2016). It is likely that Thein Sein partly tried to prevent an antidam uprising from disrupting his military-controlled reform process, as also asserted by his spokesperson several years later (Ye Htut 2019). Having interviewed then-government's ministers and staff, Su Mon Thazin Aung (2017) argues that the government's "reformist" faction used the Myitsone public outcry to consolidate their power and legitimacy against a "hardliner" faction that supported the dam.

Notwithstanding the president's motives, his decision originally stemmed from the popular antidam movement. Thus, we should ask: why did resistance against the Myitsone Dam spread so widely?

Previous research highlights how the Bamar and other lowland Burmese activists framed Myitsone Dam as a national concern. Kempel's pioneering unpublished report documents how small circles of leading lowland Burmese activists loosely mobilized diverse networks to save Burma's "mother-river" (Kempel 2012; also Kirchherr 2018). Min Zin (2012) shows that the campaign channeled Burmese society's anti-Chinese sentiment. This article will draw on these key studies further below.

However, the Burmese antidam mobilization was "not predestined," but rather "hinged on the critical arguments of Kachin villagers and leaders, amplified and reframed by lowland Myanmar advocates" (Foran et al. 2017:628; also Zhu et al. 2016). Researchers who focus on ethnic Kachin society, where antidam resistance first began, situate the hydropower project and its resistance movement in the Kachin military-political conflict (O'Connor 2011; Hkawn Ja Aung 2014; Kiik 2016b; Foran et al. 2017; Hedström 2019). Teera-Hong (2019) shows how Kachin underground and cross-border political organizing kick-started the Myitsone antidam movement. A few Kachin-authored studies explore local Myitsone village perspectives, showing how people's livelihood concerns and suffering

motivated their antidam activism ([Kachin Development Networking Group \[KDNG\] 2007, 2009](#); [Hkawn Ja Aung 2014](#)).

Notably, the broader literature and public discussion on Myitsone sometimes suffers from relatively shallow context and factual errors about the Myitsone story's Kachin parts. One especially frequent oversimplification has been to blame the dam project for why war resumed in the Kachin region in 2011—thus neglecting the war's decades-long political drivers and history (see [Sadan 2016, 2013](#); [Brenner 2015](#)).

By foregrounding the dam opponents' own voices and social context, this article contributes to explaining why the Myitsone resistance spread so widely, first among Kachin, and then among lowland Burmese people. Moreover, the article discusses how resisting this Chinese mega-infrastructure project led to fraught Kachin–Bamar encounters, and how Burma's countrywide antidam outcry, which caused the project's suspension, emerged partly from such interethnic encounters.

Burma's Interethnic Worlds

Why is Myitsone a story of interethnic relations? First, the Irrawaddy hydropower megaproject is located in a conflict region. Since the early 1960s, people in ethnic Kachin areas have lived amid a grinding war between the Bamar nationalist military-state and the insurgent Kachin Independence Organization's army (KIO/A), now roughly 10,000 strong. The KIO has evolved into an ethnonational protostate that governs certain territories and populations, especially since its 1994 ceasefire with the Burmese military ([Dean 2005](#)). The relative peace, which the ceasefire created, led to an era of expanding military-corporate logging, mining, monocropping, and damming, amid which the Myitsone project began in the mid-2000s.

Second, both the planned Myitsone Dam project and its resistance movement coincided with growing tensions between the Burmese military and the KIO, which culminated with war resuming in 2011 ([Brenner 2015](#); [Sadan 2016](#)). The Burmese

military troops have regularly committed war crimes against civilians and launched offensives with heavy artillery, helicopter gunships, and fighter jets. Since 2011, around 100,000 people have fled their village homes and continue to live in crowded and impoverished camps. The displaced make up a large fraction of Burma's Kachin population. Because of this war, Kachin popular distrust against ethnic Bamar people has deepened. These interethnic tensions amid war have also impacted the Myitsone controversy.

Various literature may help situate this article and its aim to advance the study of interethnicity in Burma. Recent decades have seen nuanced literature on modern Burma's militarized ethnic conflicts (Smith 1991; South 2008; Gravers 2007). Smith's 1991 book examines interethnic relations by weaving together both Bamar and ethnic minorities' histories of grinding war, battlefield lives, and militarized politics. Yet, as civil wars, political conflict, and military repression have continued over several decades, less research has explored interethnic relations beyond armed conflict or official politics. How about non-governmental and non-military relations between Burma's many nations? Or, amid the decades-long wars, how do civilians handle interethnic conflict, distrust, and negotiation?

Various disparate studies have tackled Burma's civilian interethnic and interreligious worlds. Notably, Lehman has considered interethnic relations across various Burmese highlands, for example, exploring how Tai/Shan society and Buddhism mediate interethnically between upland and lowland societies, including in the gem trade (Chit Hlaing 2009). Various recent studies foreground common people's lives and voices to explore such topics as how twentieth-century Chinese migrants interacted with native residents in Burma's Kachin and Shan states, especially in the jade and opium trades (Chang 2014); how Burmese Buddhists fear, justify violence against, and remember living alongside Muslims (Schissler et al. 2015, 2017); how ethnic Bamar and Chin civilians dispute a settler-farming valley's border between Sagaing Region and Chin State (Faxon, forthcoming); how labor

solidarity sometimes crosses ethnic differences among Thailand's Burmese migrant workers (Campbell 2012); and how Bamar migrants integrate with the Myeik archipelago's sea-nomadic Moken people (Boutry 2016). Echoing previous scholarly efforts to surpass ethnonationalist narratives in ethnic Karen studies, Campbell (2014) calls for studying local-level interethnic relations, arguing that personal experiences and local contexts shape whether a Karen or other ethnic minority person would voice grievance against Bamars. This article seeks to contribute one particular interethnic story—in which Kachin and Bamar civilian nationalisms intersect, while activists negotiate across an escalating conflict.

Specifically, this article focuses on cross-ethnic civilian engagement with nature and natural resource politics. Studies on Burma's civil wars often highlight the importance of a lucrative and corrupt narcotics trade and natural resource economy, including large-scale logging, hydroelectricity, monocrop plantations, natural gas pipelines, jade mining, and gold mining. Indeed, the Burmese military-state, the minority nations' military protostates, and various smaller progovernment militias have both competed and cooperated in natural resource grabbing and trade (Woods 2011; Bryant 1997). Research also shows how widespread dispossession of land and natural resources tilts minority nations' publics toward supporting military resistance, including among Kachins (Sadan 2016). Simultaneously, civilian environmentalism has emerged as part of Burma's ethnonational movements, including in Kachin society.

Throughout Burma, various civilians from different ethnicities evaluate and struggle over nature and natural resource business, including over rivers, farmland, jade, natural gas, wildlife, narcotics, and the climate crisis. Studies show that Burma's growing social movements against dispossession grapple with diverging notions of "politics," as we will see below, and differences between activists and farmers (Prasse-Freeman 2016; Aung 2018).

My research found that civilians may view struggles over nature and resource-extraction projects from clashing

nationalist perspectives. The planned Myitsone megaproject provoked widespread civilian nationalism and environmental activism among both Kachin and Bamar people, despite their relative social and political distance. Ongoing pressure from China on the Burmese government to restart the megaproject means that resistance to Myitsone Dam will symbolize and shape China–Bamar–Kachin relations for years ahead. How did this unique cross-ethnic struggle emerge?

Saving Kachin Land

In 2006, in military-surveilled Burma, an underground youth activist drove two hours on motorcycle from Kachin State's capital, Myitkyina, to Myitsone. The activist had come to research a final paper for a land rights training program, EarthRights, based in Thailand's transnational and exile Burmese dissident scene (Simpson 2014). The paper explored how a planned mega-dam threatens local livelihoods. "At that time, not many people, not even Kachin leaders, knew about the Dam's impact," the activist told me in an interview. Some Myitsone residents had discovered three years earlier about a secretive hydroelectric project, but almost nobody heeded their warnings. Moreover, the project had appeared abandoned since.

As the dam project began advancing more publicly in the mid-2000s, alarm spread across Kachin activist, religious, and political networks. Various Kachin actors began circulating antidam messages—mostly quietly and underground, risking the junta's violent repression of dissent, and struggling with geographical remoteness and poor infrastructure. Thus, some Myitsone area church leaders—almost all Kachins in Burma are Christians—had to help this visiting youth activist interview villagers who feared discussing such a sensitive topic with a stranger. These Myitsone church elders and other village people were the original antidam resistance leaders—protecting their communities' livelihoods, dignity, and safety (KDNG 2007, 2009; Hkawn Ja Aung 2014; Teera-Hong 2019; Kiiik 2016b). Nonlocal activists, in turn, informed and further

mobilized the Myitsone villagers ([Kempel 2012](#)). The activist described:

It was military dictatorship time, and this topic was so sensitive. So, I organized a training in Myitsone, starting with local youths. We went to a small stream where I demonstrated, as if on a map: “This is the village, this is the dam, your home will disappear under the water.” Later, I did many workshops about Myitsone for church youth in Myitkyina.

In Thailand, this activist worked with an exile underground Kachin organization, a few environmentalists, and a Thailand-based transnational Burma humanitarian NGO. Together, these activists funded, researched, and wrote an advocacy report, “Damming the Irrawaddy” ([KDNG 2007](#)), which details the scale of potential displacements, actors involved, and risks to river health, livelihoods, and Kachin heritage sites. At the time, this exile-based Kachin organization had few staff and relied on an informant network. One member explained: “Our people, farmers, are everywhere. When something happens, they contact us.” While the junta’s censored media would not publish critical antidam messages, the activists continuously forwarded information to exile media. Some Kachin people told me that they first heard about the Myitsone Dam on Western broadcasters’ Burmese-language radio programs, based in exile, such as BBC, VOA, and RFA.

Unlike such exile and KIO-area civil society, those Kachin activist organizations that worked aboveground in junta-controlled territories, such as Myitkyina, targeted the mega-project more discreetly. Although they had to censor their discourse, they did inform an expanding network of community workers about the dam. One activist explained:

Back then, oppression was very high—a lot of arrests—so no one really dared to say whether Myitsone Dam was good or bad. Even the international media had not announced the project yet. So, all we could do was environmental awareness raising and other trainings. We called

them “development” and “community forestry training,” for example. Sometimes we organized in Myitkyina and did excursions to Myitsone, so that we could include information about the dam’s impacts.

Continuing their decades-long role as leaders in Kachin society, the Baptist pastors, Catholic priests, and other church elders led the mobilization against Myitsone Dam. Several Kachin people told me that they first heard about the dam project during church service. One person imitated such anti-dam sermons for me: “The Chinese and the military—what are they doing here in Kachinland!? We are getting nothing, but they do whatever they want! For example—Myitsone Dam.” The otherwise largely separate Baptist and Catholic communities cooperated to resist the mega-dam, not least in the Myitsone area itself.

Small circles of underground youth activists defied Burma’s atmosphere of fear. In late 2007, they spray-painted antidam messages in public places and, two years later, put up handwritten protest flyers in Myitkyina and elsewhere. Covertly, both Myitsone residents and Myitkyina activists collected signatures against the dam. Soon, military authorities began clamping down and arresting people.

Tensions became high on April 17, 2010, when a series of small bombs exploded near the Myitsone construction sites and offices. Despite various accusations, the persons responsible have never been publicly identified. Reports are conflicting, but it seems that one Chinese worker was injured (O’Connor 2011:13). Hundreds of employees were evacuated. In response, the military arrested and beat up tens of local youth, and began forcibly resettling people from a few villages into two project-built relocation villages.

The Kachin Independence Organization, too, came to oppose the Myitsone confluence’s mega-dam, only accepting the project’s six other, smaller dams (Foran et al. 2017). In 2007, the KIO wrote letters to both Burmese and Yunnan authorities (included in KIO 2011). Certain KIO leaders also expressed opposition privately and helped the activists. Yet,

the KIO's opposition went unheeded, and the organization continued generally compromising with the Burmese regime on various issues beyond Myitsone. In March 2011, however, the KIO's Chairman wrote an open letter to the Chinese President, asking China to stop the mega-dam's construction. The letter also warned that the project could lead to civil war, if the Burmese military invaded KIO territory to secure the six other upstream dam sites (KIO 2011). This stronger and more public antidam stance reflected how the KIO's seventeen-year ceasefire was steadily collapsing, especially since the Burmese military began coercing the KIO to submit under its control.

Eventually, Burma's militarized ethnic conflict derailed the megaproject. The resumption of war between the Burmese military and the KIO in June 2011—for reasons beyond Myitsone—marked the Myitsone project's "first suspension." Access bridges were blown up, landmines were widely planted, and the transport of construction materials was blocked. Dam construction paused, and workers were evacuated. Nonetheless, the project leaders intended to continue construction when possible.

Why Resist?

As described, many actors raised public alarm over Myitsone Dam among Kachin people. Resistance expanded from local villages to broader Kachin society because activists, church elders, and social leaders framed the mega-dam construction as a Kachin national emergency. Throughout fieldwork, I heard various Kachin people from beyond the Myitsone area talk about opposing the dam for reasons of nationhood—to pursue justice, survival, and self-rule for "our besieged nation." When I first arrived in Kachin State in 2010, some politically active circles discussed Myitsone Dam daily.

A National Issue

In the evolving context of modern Kachin nationalism (Sadan 2013), many Kachins do not sense "our Kachinland"

as a marginal, volatile borderland of a country, but as the existential homeland—the natural center of world affairs. They claim sovereignty over this territory, its resources, and future. Throughout my fieldwork, I learned that many nationalist Kachins are committed to building up their nation for a homeland yet-to-be—an independent Kachin country or an autonomous state within a federalized Burma (Kiik 2016a). They see their nation as existentially threatened by Bamar takeover.

For concerned Kachins, the Myitsone megaproject emerged as one major case within a broader complex of massive natural resource grabs, Burmese military-state expansion, and threats to the Kachin nation. Namely, after the 1994 ceasefire, the Burmese military, the KIO, and junta-allied militias cooperated with Chinese and Burmese companies to open northernmost Burma's contested territories for industrialized jade mining, gold mining, logging, and monocrop plantations. These developments profited Bamar, Chinese, and Kachin elites, but devastated countless local lives through land grabs, environmental destruction, and an epidemic of narcotics abuse and HIV (Woods 2011; Kiik 2016a). The Myitsone villagers' suffering—their largely forced displacement, scarce compensation, and years of uncertainty in shabby relocation villages, where livelihoods became more difficult—belongs to this broader pattern.

By the mid-2000s, when the Myitsone project's companies arrived in Kachin State, some actors were ready to resist. Kachin civil society and ethnonational activism had strengthened, using the opportunities of the ceasefire era and exile civil-society networks, while responding to ongoing suffering, violence, dispossession, and repression under the Burmese junta (Sadan 2016). Various leaders were organizing people for political action, including saving their homeland's nature.

Ancestral Heartland

The pioneering youth activist mentioned above was also initially drawn in by such nationalist mobilization.

An influential Kachin Baptist pastor encouraged this young person to investigate the Myitsone project:

He always talked about how culture is important, and also biodiversity. He told me about many rare plants and animals at Myitsone. He said the dam is unacceptable, because this area has our ancestors' footprints.

The phrase “ancestors' footprints” expresses the notion that Myitsone belongs to a Kachin cultural heartland, through which their ancestors migrated. This triangular region between the Mali and N'mai Rivers, joining at the Myitsone confluence, hosts deep rainforests, sparse Kachin villages, and a KIO stronghold. Moreover, it is a historically significant area for Kachin Catholics.

During my fieldwork, various Kachins persistently brought up how important the two rivers' juncture is in Kachin culture. One elder recounted: “N'mai Hka means ‘impatient river’—starting from Mount Hkakaborazi, fast and restless. But Mali Hka is very quiet, like a bride. We give young couples the example of N'mai and Mali—once they meet, they become the finest waterway.” An educational activist told me: “The Myitsone area is in every Kachin movie, song, ancient story, legend. Losing Myitsone would hurt. Knowing that Myitsone could be ruined unsettled us.”

The antidam struggle raised the confluence's symbolic value in society. Hence, the activists argued that the mega-dams and their reservoirs would reshape rivers and landscapes at the Kachin homeland's heart, without even seeking the Kachin public's permission.

National Dignity

Nationalistic Kachins often treat resource extraction projects, such as Myitsone, as an “international” affair between three equally legitimate nations: the Kachins, Chinese, and Bamars (Kiik 2020). They thus expect that any resource development be agreed upon by Kachin leaders, serve Kachin national interests, and ultimately stay under Kachin control.

Affirming national ownership of the dams' territory, Kachin observers wanted their nation to benefit more. One small-scale jade trader told me that his second biggest concern—after the local villagers' suffering—was profit sharing: "It's no good, if the electricity goes 98% to China and only 2–3% will be used in Kachin." When I told a school headmaster that the project offers Burma 10% of the electricity and much income, he laughed. "That means that local people will get nothing! Not even one watt of power."

Additionally, many people heard activist reports that the seven dams' sites were being logged and mined for gold. Imprecise rumors circulated that "the Chinese" are looking not only for electricity, but also rare earth minerals. In 2010, a radio program joked about "the Chinese" first mining all the gold out, before flooding the land.

I met some people who said that they could support the project if Kachins would benefit more or if the largest dam was built further from the cherished confluence. One young Kachin person reflected:

I dislike that we are powerless—we cannot stop China from doing Myitsone Dam. Still, we Kachins are too selfish. We shouldn't oppose the Dam. The Chinese will build roads, and then connect us to India and other nations. Especially Myitkyina will have more commercial trade. We would benefit.

Disaster

Resistance to Myitsone Dam was boosted—among both Kachins and the other ethnic groups living in the region—by the widespread belief that it threatened hundreds of thousands of lives. Namely, Kachin activists warned that the construction site is close to a geological fault line where an earthquake could break the mega-dam, causing a deadly flood over Myitkyina city downstream (KDNG 2007). Dam opponents sometimes referred to a nearby smaller dam that had broken and killed people. One Myitkyina elder told me, "Myitsone Dam would be our Myitkyina people's time-bomb pillow, because each

night, we would have nightmares wondering ‘When?! When will this time-bomb explode?’” At a 2011 training event that I attended, young people from across the Kachin region discussed their fear (Kiik 2016a:222). According to one participant:

The Chinese companies are only looking for their business interests here. They don’t offer our community any guarantee. How long will this dam last? If the dam breaks, Myitkyina will be wiped off the earth.

Junta Strategy

Finally, some Kachin activists saw resisting both Myitsone Dam and other resource grabbing projects as their patriotic duty because they viewed such projects as a strategy by the Bamar regime to destroy the Kachin nation. One leading anti-dam campaigner told me how the Burmese military-state uses resource-extraction projects across the country to make the non-Bamar peoples’ military organizations “weaker and weaker, until they give up armed struggle.” The government’s goal is “to make everyone into Bamars who speak Burmese.” Drawing a map of Kachin State on paper, this activist coupled the Irrawaddy dams to another vast land grab—by a Burmese junta-allied company in the Hugawng (Hukaung) Valley:

Look at the map. First is Myitsone. Second is Hugawng. Many Kachins live and historically come from these two areas. The seven dams would flood the Kachin heartland, maybe half of Kachin State. If they finish their dams, their strategy will be very successful. And then Yuzana Company occupies Hugawng. Finally, Kachin territory disappears! The government can control cities like Myitkyina, so, no need to confiscate land there.

The activist added that the regime-allied tycoon Tay Za is now capturing Kachin State’s northernmost Putao area. Tapping on Myitsone, Hugawng, and Putao on the map, the activist concluded:

No more Kachin—finished! When people have land, they have confidence. If they lose their land, their mindset suffers. Landowners living in relocation camps will feel upset and suffer. KIO also . . . How can the KIO survive in a flooded area, or the Hugawng and Putao area? The KIO will have no more place to stay.

My research has found that such claims of a massive territorial takeover can be inaccurate or overly conspiratorial, but do reflect decades of experience. This resembles some Bamar claims, discussed below. Kachins have experienced decades of the Burmese military's brutal counterinsurgency tactics and widespread military-state repression. Thus, some politically active Kachins claimed that the Myitsone Dam and other large-scale resource grabs advance broader junta plans against the Kachin nation or China's takeover of Kachinland (Kiiik 2016a). I also met Kachin people who doubted or disagreed with such views (Kiiik 2020). Such views, however, made some people further treat the Irrawaddy hydropower megaproject as a Kachin national emergency.

Stalling at the Kachin–Lowland Gap

From 2007 to 2010, Kachin antidam activists kept monitoring Myitsone, but felt powerless. As one activist recalled, "Even some Myitsone villagers were fed up and didn't want to be involved anymore." Almost no one besides concerned Kachins seemed to care.

Beyond interethnic divisions and distrust, Burma was under violent military repression and media censorship throughout the 2000s, which hindered underground Kachin activists from reaching the lowland public or democratic opposition. Thus, the activists instead advocated for Kachin rights—at Myitsone, in Hugawng Valley, and elsewhere—to the exile Burmese opposition media and organizations in Thailand and the West. Those organizations then forwarded the information to some urban publics and activists inside Burma. Yet, as this exile resistance framed Myitsone largely

as a Kachin issue—reflecting the concerns discussed above—the reaction from non-Kachins was limited. No antidam movement emerged in lowland Burma. One Kachin activist recalled:

We felt upset. Our Kachin people are already suffering, forced to move, but other people besides Kachins don't get involved. Same with the Hugawng Valley issue. All our work has no effect. We see more and more Chinese people coming, and hundreds of trucks, backhoes, bulldozers, big new machines, carrying supplies non-stop from China. We cannot sleep with the noise, day and night: "woo-woo-woo-woo." Kachin people are merely watching on the roadsides. We cannot do anything, and nobody helps. That's why, then, most Kachins blamed the KIO, our political party, the international community, the UN—all are useless!

Another activist speculated that the Kachins got so little help because people from Burma's disparate ethnic nations and regions care so little about each other:

Since Burma's independence, we separate "Bamar issues," "Kachin issues," "Shan issues," "Chin issues." Several years ago, when monks and other Bamar people killed each other in the Saffron Revolution, we felt sad, but we didn't get involved. During the 1988 Revolution also, only some Kachin students studying in Rangoon or Mandalay participated, but most people from other parts of Burma didn't participate.

Such interethnic distance shaped the antidam resistance among exile activists, too. One activist recalled how almost only Kachins protested during the early 2000s in Chiang Mai, Thailand, where many Burmese exiles live:

When we organized demonstrations in front of the Chinese Consulate, we didn't get support from even 10% of the rest of the Burma community. Other ethnic groups hardly joined. They saw this as only a Kachin issue!

Some residents of Kachin State—including both ethnic Kachins and other people—quipped to me ironically that Burma’s downstream *lowlanders*, not the upstream Kachin State people, should be worrying about the Myitsone Dam’s impact. One Myitkyina mosque elder asked:

Do we, Kachin State people, use the Irrawaddy River to cultivate? No, we hardly use it. And we have plenty of other rivers. Do we benefit from fishing in the Irrawaddy? Not really, very few people. We have many other livelihood options. Do we travel on the Irrawaddy? Not really, only a few small boats come from Mandalay to Kachin. We have no seaports here. Look logically—if the Irrawaddy gets blocked, the downstream people will suffer much more. So, why are only people from Kachin State protecting the river?! Why doesn’t the rest of the country join us?

Saving Burmese River

Only after 2010, when Burma began partly democratizing, did the Myitsone Dam issue skyrocket to the whole country’s attention. A few lowland Bamar activists read the project’s announcement in a Burmese junta newspaper in the mid-2000s, but openly questioning the junta’s projects would have been dangerous. During 2009–2010, however, small circles of Bamar activists began cautiously spreading indirect antidam messages in mainland Burma ([Kempel 2012](#)). These leading activists were mostly not established environmentalists, but rather “groups of like-minded people with connections to the artist and literary community” ([Kempel 2012](#)). A new lowland antidam movement emerged, centered in Burma’s largest city, Yangon, and largely separate from the earlier Kachin resistance.

The lowland Burmese activists organized small-scale events and publications about the Irrawaddy River’s overall health, importance, beauty, and its ecological destruction, especially by gold mining. They mobilized journalists, photographers, filmmakers, and writers by taking them on boat trips to the

river's upper reaches in Kachin State and organized several photo and art exhibitions. Military intelligence officers and plainclothes informants monitored these events; local authorities, especially beyond Yangon, followed and interrogated the activists (Chan 2017). One Yangon-based activist described inventing roundabout tactics:

The only freedom then was to publish a book. Still, you had to pass censorship. So, we collected articles, interviews, photos related to Myitsone and the Irrawaddy, and submitted these to the Censorship Board as a book about "the beautiful river." We got approved. Once this book was published, unexpectedly, it became a hit! It was in the bestsellers' chart for a month. So, we thought: if we disguise our events as book promotions, we don't need to apply for permits. Book promotions were uncharted water—nobody knew what the government's response would be.

At those "promotions," we started talking about the Dam. We invited key media, influential intellectuals. We planned nine expert speakers for these "promotions," he-he-he. It became like mini-protests: intellectuals, retired government officials from the Irrigation Department, and those who know about dams, all spoke on the stage.

Simultaneously, a few writers began touring the country, holding public literary talks in larger towns, often attracting hundreds of people (Kempel 2012; Chan 2017). One writer explained, "The literary talk is a unique Burmese system where intellectuals and ordinary people talk about issues in our politically sensitive and restricted environment. Our literary talks were actually mostly about the Irrawaddy." A few senior speakers from those events later told me proudly how they declared opposing the Dam. According to one speaker, "People in the audience were thrilled, surprised, and shocked, because usually nobody dared to talk against the government." Immediately following some of the events, video CDs of the talks were produced and circulated. This was a common tactic

during this era of scarce Internet access and a repressive censorship regime. As Burma's reforms gradually relaxed the media restrictions, journalists began publishing unprecedentedly direct and critical articles about the hydropower project, raising public alarm.

The leading activists did not coordinate the movement, but rather let it develop as an open-ended process that responded to ongoing events. They gave individuals and groups space to work independently, while connecting personal networks among media circles, cultural elites, environmentalists, political campaigners, and people in government (Kempel 2012). They convinced then-opposition icon Aung San Suu Kyi to publish a letter on the dam project, helping raise attention. Several participants expressed to me their praise for how such initiators involved diverse people, despite the danger and fear. One leading campaigner recalled:

Once, one activist and a writer arrived back from a literary talk. It was early morning, so they took a taxi. Suddenly, the taxi driver asked: "Are you this person and that writer?" He showed them a Myitsone talk's video CD and said: "I am an ordinary taxi driver, but I copied and distributed your CD." So, this driver felt involved in the movement.

It was the same when we organized talks in Buddhist monasteries—the monks felt involved. Religious channels are an unofficial distribution channel: every ward and quarter has distribution channels for the monks' religious teachings, so our CDs passed through these.

Public outcry culminated in August 2011. Some participants predicted another popular uprising—an "Irrawaddy Uprising." A leading activist worried: "When we organized a conference with four speakers in a village, two thousand people showed up! What if these people went onto the streets, what would happen? What if there is killing?" As the public outcry grew, a few leading mediators helped

campaigners quietly connect with government officials, ministers, and the president's advisors (Kempel 2012; Zhu et al. 2016; Foran et al. 2017; Chan 2017). Burma soon witnessed public splits among military-state leaders. While the regime's leaders debated Myitsone amid their internal power struggles (Su Mon Thazin Aung 2017), on September 30, President Thein Sein made worldwide headlines by suddenly announcing that he was unilaterally suspending the Chinese mega-dam's construction.

Why Resist?

Similarly to the preceding Kachin movement, the lowland anti-dam resistance was mainly driven by nationalism. Activists consciously turned the dam into a Burmese national affair, not least by expressing widespread Bamar nationalist fear of foreign domination.

For some activists, the "Save the Irrawaddy" movement was less about the natural environment than about defending Burma, pursuing democracy, and resisting the junta. A Yangon-based Kachin activist observed how the seemingly apolitical topic of "environment" helped conceal such varied agendas:

The Myitsone issue has different meanings to different people. For Kachins, the issue is political: domination by Bamars. The dam deal was signed by Bamars and China without involving Kachins; and it will disadvantage Kachins. But for some opposition Bamars, the issue is the government's irresponsibility. Some Burmese civil society don't truly care about the environment. Actually, they want community mobilization—for people to become aware. The environmental cause was used as a tool, because it is safe. That's why so many former political prisoners joined. Some even said: "This is the second Revolution!"

The National River

The lowland campaign spread so widely because it enabled diverse people to feel a patriotic duty. When I asked various Bamar campaigners about their own or other participants'

motivations, they often described wanting to contribute their skills to defend Burma's "national river" and the Burmese nation from foreign destruction and exploitation, especially from China.

Activists convinced people of this patriotic duty by using "both emotive and scientific arguments" (Kempel 2012). A leading initiator explained:

When we started talking about the Irrawaddy, it was easy! People's emotions arose. Everybody knows the Irrawaddy River—our lifeblood. People felt ready to agree with us. All they needed was information about what would happen after the dam's construction. So, we brought in the experts, international NGOs, scientific facts and figures.

The movement's object of concern—the Irrawaddy—itself embodies Bamar nationalism. The movement's discourse, photography, and art depicted the river as Burma's lifeblood, uniquely "ours," nationally uniting, and sacred, and lamented its demise. One campaigner reminded various audiences: "In primary school, we all had to draw our Myanmar map, with the Irrawaddy and Chindwin Rivers, so every Burmese knows and loves the Irrawaddy." One environmentalist introduced audiences to photos of Myitsone by saying: "Here is our Great Wall, Taj Mahal, our heritage. Nobody should touch it." Leading campaigners later bemoaned how difficult it was, comparatively, to bring Burmese public attention to the country's eastern Salween River, even though an even larger mega-dam is planned there. Indeed, the smaller Salween River does not feed the Bamar heartlands.

Ecological Concerns

Professional conservationists and environmentalists worried for the country's nature and livelihoods—they worried that the dam's downstream effects would devastate Burma's future. For example, if the river flow weakened, they suggested, the Indian Ocean's saltwater would intrude into the Irrawaddy

delta, where Burma grows much of its rice. These professionals also worried about the country's central and populous Dry Zone. One expert recalled:

When I first heard about Myitsone Dam, I felt so upset. Our country's population, development, culture, old cities—everything is located along the Irrawaddy. But our precious Irrawaddy already faces trouble from climate change. So, we can't accept such a dam. If the Irrawaddy dries up, Burma's Dry Zone will become a desert. Agriculture, livelihoods, culture, health—all will face problems. Many people will leave the area and become refugees.

National Dignity

Some activists called for fighting corruption and thus ensuring both Burma's ecological safety and national dignity. "We should not blame only the Chinese companies," one environmentalist told me.

When I tour the villages, I can't give talks with data and big words. Villagers wouldn't understand. Instead, I tell them: If your house is clean and smells sweet, a visitor whose slippers and feet are dirty will feel embarrassed and ask: "Where can I wash before entering your house?" But if your house is dirty, smells bad, and has rubbish, the visitor won't care. Even if his feet are clean, he won't care for tradition—he won't take off his slippers. So, before Myanmar welcomes foreign companies, we must have strongly enforced laws. We need development, but must first clean our house with firm laws and regulations, international standards.

Chinese "Colonialism"

The campaign against Myitsone Dam attracted much support by channeling widespread anger in Burma against China and Chinese people. As Kachins had before, many Bamars saw Myitsone as merely one more prominent example within

a broader exploitative resource economy, dominated by Chinese companies. Popular Burmese complaints against China and Chinese people are many: plundering Burma's forests, jade, gas, and other resources; immorally supporting the junta; migrating illegally into and "colonizing" Mandalay and northern Burma; trafficking Burmese women to Chinese men; and dumping low-quality and counterfeit products into Burma (Fan 2014; Min Zin 2012). Min Zin (2012) finds that the Irrawaddy movement's continuous undercurrent message—its articles, speeches, religious sermons, cartoons, art exhibitions, book sales, interviews with experts, and especially the hundreds of angry Internet and social-media postings—decried how China worked with the junta to exploit Burma. Some dam opponents claimed that the Chinese government was trying to control Burma by controlling the Irrawaddy River's flow through the Myitsone mega-dam. As with some Kachin views above, my research has found that some Burmese claims about Chinese takeover can be inaccurate or overly conspiratorial, but do reflect widespread concerns and experiences.

Amid our discussions of ecology and politics, many of my interviewees raised this theme whereby China dangerously dominates Burma. A leading activist told me, "Already before the Irrawaddy movement started, people worried about China's ambition, investments, and political influence on the country's affairs." Some campaigners warned the public about China gradually "colonizing" Burma—for example, by sending many Chinese workers to Myitsone for building and later maintaining the dam. Indeed, both lowland Burmese and Kachin antidam activists feared a massive arrival of Chinese people (Kiiik 2020).

Myitsone Dam thus resonated with Burmese Buddhist nationalist fears of besiegement—by former British colonists, Chinese, Muslims, and other "outsiders." Lamb and Dao (2015, 2017) discuss the Myitsone movement to show how singling out China as the enemy drew attention away from the fundamentally unjust practices of such dam projects and worsened Burma's anti-foreigner fears. The Myitsone issue

may have neared violence against Burma's native Chinese residents (Min Zin 2012). One activist—who during the campaign gave speeches against Chinese domination and immigration—told me about such concerns, referring to Burma's 1960s anti-Chinese riots and the post-2012 anti-Muslim pogroms:

If we talk about China, or the Chinese immigration problem and demographic influence, we must be cautious, especially now when we are talking about Muslims, immigrants. These topics are toxic; people might stop thinking clearly. We must know the problem of illegal immigration, but not enflame anti-Chinese sentiment. So, we focus instead on specific issues—Myitsone Dam or the Chinese oil-and-gas pipelines, corporate social responsibility, the Chinese investors' predatory practices—not Chinese people generally.

Thus, the Myitsone resistance united diverse people across Burma not only through defending the Irrawaddy but also through sensing a national threat, especially from Chinese "colonialism."

Kachin–Bamar Confluences

Two separate civilian nationalist movements—Kachin and lowland Burmese—drove resistance against Myitsone Dam. However, the lowland resistance, which eventually caused the project's official suspension, emerged partly from specific Kachin–Bamar encounters.

The Leaked Report

In the first half of 2011, someone anonymously leaked an environmental impact assessment report (Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association [BANCA] 2009). The Irrawaddy hydropower project had buried and ignored this report, despite having itself commissioned and paid for an environmental assessment. The English-language report surveys and

details across 500 pages the dam construction sites' river and land biodiversity. It warns against damaging valuable ecosystems and livelihoods and asserts: "If Myanmar and Chinese sides were really concerned about environmental issues and aimed at sustainable development of the country, there is no need for such a big dam to be constructed at the confluence" (BANCA 2009:42).

Lowland Burmese concerns over Myitsone Dam surged when people heard about this leaked report—partly because it was slightly misrepresented. Namely, antidam activists widely misrepresented the report as if coauthored by both Chinese and Burmese researchers. This made for striking headlines, picked up by Burmese and worldwide media: "China's assessment calls for Burma's Myitsone Dam to be scrapped." Actually, the Burmese researchers authored this report alone. The Burmese and Chinese sides wrote two separate reports, because the Burmese researchers refused the Chinese company's request to merely provide ecological data without assessment or suggestions (Foran et al. 2017:627; Kiiik 2020).

Remarkably, the report highlights Kachin perspectives. It calls for social equity, negotiations, and benefit-sharing, with "Kachin people in particular" (BANCA 2009:63). It cites a Kachin conservationist, stating that "in Kachin state majority people of local races oppose" the dam project (p. 41). It decries the "forever loss of the cultural heartland of Kachin people" (p. 22). In conclusion, the report calls to abandon Myitsone Dam's construction and suggests building instead two smaller dams upstream from the confluence (see Foran et al. 2017), because "respecting the Kachin cultural values [surpasses] any amount of the overall construction costs" (p. 42).

Such Bamar concern for Kachins shows how the Myitsone issue brought together people across ethnic divides. The report's authors were Yangon-based Bamars—who are usually distant from Burma's minority nations. Their field survey brought these Bamar researchers into Kachin countryside, as the team's only ethnic Kachin member, a young biologist, explained to me in 2010:

They lived together with local Kachins for months. They went to faraway villages and saw how the local people work, cultivate, and appreciate the natural environment. They walked, slept, and ate together with locals in the forests, mountains, and along the river. They interviewed the locals. So, although they were Bamars, they started understanding Kachins.

In Kachin State, the research team's Bamar people encountered the Kachin ethnonational movement. They realized how much Kachins resented them as Bamars. In Myitkyina, the team leaders met with a few Kachin elders, including the mentioned conservationist, who told them that the Myitsone area is Kachin cultural heritage and should be preserved. In the KIO's capital, Laiza, the researchers met KIO leaders who opposed the confluence dam. One Bamar scientist described the fieldwork to me as eye-opening:

Before, we didn't know about Kachin State, Kachin people, Kachin environment. The media were not free. We could only learn from the VOA or BBC. But when we did the field research, we got to experience the Kachin living standard in tiny villages. I didn't know about that. . . . We witnessed the Chinese logging. Then, I felt the feeling of Kachin people.

However, the Kachin national perspectives, which the environmental report highlights, faded when the lowland Burmese activists, public, and media debated the Myitsone project. Only few among the Yangon antidam campaigners would mention Kachin concerns when explaining their own advocacy (Kempel 2012:10). As discussed above, the lowland Bamar public became concerned only after hearing about threats to downstream ecology and livelihoods. Standing for Kachin national rights was unlikely to mobilize the Bamar majority, instead perhaps raising sensitive questions about non-Bamar autonomy.

This way, the Burmese researchers' damning report helped turn Myitsone Dam from a small and distant "Kachin issue"

into a scientifically credible “disaster” for lowland Burma. The leaked report influenced Thein Sein’s decision to suspend the project (Foran et al. 2017). The antidam movement triumphed by framing Myitsone as a Burmese national emergency, while shifting away from Kachin nationalism and ethnic minority rights.

Reaching Out

Putting Kachin perspectives aside resulted from campaign strategy, but did not necessarily express leading Bamar activists’ own views. My conversation with two leading Bamar activists revealed their contradictory feelings, with one activist explaining:

Don’t misunderstand us! During the campaign, we always said that Myitsone is a holy area for Kachins. We even tell friends that the Kachins, Karens, and others have the right to secede from Burma. They were never under Burmese kingdoms; they have their own history. When discussing federalism now, we should negotiate from this standpoint. But for the Irrawaddy campaign to succeed, we had to frame it strategically to arouse the Burmese sentiment.

So, actually, Myitsone is about the Irrawaddy. We were not talking about the Dam, but about the River. We were not talking about “Save Myitsone,” but about “Save the Irrawaddy.”

These leading Bamar activists partly used the Myitsone issue to improve Kachin–Bamar relations. “Another key objective of the movement was peace,” one told me, suggesting that they consciously reached out to Kachin activists. Some Yangon-based Bamar campaigners had already connected with ethnic minority organizations at trainings in Thailand or at joint workshops run by international organizations, before hearing about the Myitsone Dam (Kempel 2012). Other contacts happened when Myitkyina-based civil society

actors reached out to Yangon. Some Bamar–Kachin activist interactions happened unplanned. One leading Bamar activist recalled first connecting with Kachin antidam activists:

We were already very aware of the anti-Bamar sentiment among different ethnic groups. So, we always sought ways to connect, build trust, and learn together—to show them that the regime is not the same as the Bamar people.

So, the first responders on the Myitsone issue were Kachins. They treated the issue as a Kachin issue, so they never collaborated with any outside actors. Their movement was cracked down on—some Kachin students were arrested, some ran away, and some came here to Yangon. We connected here. That’s how we got involved.

Such encounters laid ground for a tiny, but historic, interethnic peace movement. The Myitsone controversy’s height from June 2011 onward happened to coincide with war resuming between the Burmese military and the KIO. One Bamar activist explained the consequences:

Some people involved in the Myitsone movement now work in the peace movement. Myitsone was the first time that they connected directly with Kachin leaders, like KIO General Gun Maw. The ‘88 Generation former political prisoners and influential Kachin leaders visited Myitsone to commemorate six months since the project’s suspension. And ordinary Burmese youths organized a peace march from Yangon to Myitsone—to show their support to Kachins.

Myitsone is how many of us first met Kachin activists. Kachins, as I see, are very nationalist. But through Myitsone, we ended up together, arguing against Chinese about the Dam.

Both for some Bamar dissident democrats and some illiberal Burmese nationalists, resisting Myitsone partly meant

solidarity with Kachins. As Bamars, they argued that ignoring Kachins' opposition to the dam would increase "disunity" among Burma's official "national races," especially amid the renewed war.

Distrusting

During fieldwork, I met many Kachins who had heard only little about the lowland Burmese antidam campaign. Some Kachin antidam activists had never communicated directly with Bamar campaigners. One Myitsone elder explained why the Kachin and Bamar antidam activists had so little contact:

In our Kachins' mind, we never believe the Bamars. Even if some Bamars from Yangon came shouting: "We will die for you, Kachin people!" We do not believe it. We remember a long history of Bamars lying.

Throughout my fieldwork, I witnessed widespread distrust of all Bamar people across Kachin society, especially since the horrors of the post-2011 war, but also due to decades of experiencing Bamar leaders "breaking their promises" (Sadan 2016). For example, one KIO-area teacher told me: "Kachins will never believe Bamars. They will promise us many years of ceasefire, but they will start war again."

Thus, some Kachins dismissed the president's Myitsone Dam suspension as "fake"—a "typical" Burmese regime's deceit. Many predicted that the construction would resume soon, especially as the Burmese regime had otherwise continued "attacking" the Kachin nation. Some activists dismissed the official suspension as irrelevant, because the resumed Kachin war had disrupted the construction three months earlier. They condemned both the Burmese president and the then-opposition leaders for falsely "taking credit."

Kachins often dismissed the lowland antidam campaign as political opportunism. One activist suggested to me that because the junta had imprisoned and terrorized NLD members and the '88 Generation dissidents into silence, Aung San Suu Kyi and others used the Myitsone issue to reinvigorate

their political movements and regain people's support. Once in Parliament, Aung San Suu Kyi "stopped talking" about Myitsone, land grabs, and violence against minorities. A few Kachin activists added that the '88 Generation and other Burmese campaigners opposed the dam and came to speak at the Myitsone confluence, because they hate the government and China's domination, "not because they love Kachins."

Many Kachin activists emphasized that the lowland resistance aimed to save Bamar livelihoods, not to help Kachins. "For years, many Bamars ignored this little 'Kachin issue,'" one activist told me, and speculated:

That's why the dam project was able to proceed so far. But then, Sagaing Division had a drought during planting season; their cows got skinny and grass burnt red. Next door, Mandalay Division suddenly flooded. So, lower Burma faced water problems and started caring about Irrawaddy. It's like when you hear about some distant person dying, you feel sorry, but maybe won't cry. But if your brothers or sisters die right in front of you, you will cry—and take action.

Some Kachins tied the initial Bamar indifference to Bamar chauvinism. A small-scale businessperson explained: "The Bamar opposition understands human rights and war crimes, but not ethnic rights. Bamars see minorities as inferior barbarians. So, they don't care about Myitsone or the Kachin war." A Myitsone elder laughed:

The Bamar protesters talked only about the Irrawaddy—maybe water pollution, how water will become shallow, and ships cannot come up to Mandalay. Not concerning us here, but concerning their side. That's why I doubt them. Maybe they love Irrawaddy . . . but not Myitsone!"

Some participants told me that as the campaign succeeded and got worldwide attention, they felt bitter that most recognition went to a few lowland campaigners. One Kachin activist complained: "We were arrested and suffered for the

Myitsone cause, long before those Bamars joined.” Another added: “Until now, many people use data from the Kachin organizations’ reports, but don’t mention us. They think they are more educated than us” (also [Kirchherr 2018:173](#)). More broadly, many Kachin activists and leaders argue that the worldwide public attends too little to the Kachin war and suffering.

Hiding the Politics

During the 2009–2011 countrywide antidam resistance and later, both Kachins and Bamars wrestled with distrust, especially over perceived Bamar chauvinism and Kachin pursuits of national independence. Some activists worked consciously to calm the two sides’ tensions. One Kachin activist explained:

For me, the main problem was: who should decide whether to build dams in our Kachinland? But the Burmese civil society would not go as far as to contemplate Kachin sovereignty, of course. During the campaign, sometimes, Bamars came to me and asked, “Will Kachin separate from Burma?” I had to be very diplomatic in answering, ha-ha! Now I’m still good friends and work together with them.

Coming to such encounters from the Bamar side, one person recalled meeting resettled Kachin villagers near Myitsone:

When I asked Kachins whether they want independence, they never answered. They gave me an “oh-I-don’t-know-anything” face. That time on Facebook, my Bamar friends—who hate the Army—were writing that “in this Kachin war, we must support the Myanmar Army.” They don’t view even Karens that way, but they see the Kachins and the Was as enemy. They don’t understand Kachins, because Bamars never learn about ethnic issues. They just think ethnic minorities are lower.

Overall, the lowland movement’s Bamar campaigners were from diverse backgrounds, but usually distant from

ethnic-minority societies and politics. Some scientists and environmentalists told me that they were motivated by Burmese patriotic duty and distanced themselves from “politics,” including the Kachin conflict. A Yangon-based scientist said: “I am not a politician. What is happening in Kachin State, nobody here knows much. As scientists, we talk about biodiversity.” Another Bamar scientist suggested:

Myitsone is an environmental issue. But most activists are trying to draw Myitsone into political issues. We can solve Myitsone only as an environmental issue. Politics will become endless argument with everlasting complaints.

Some Bamar campaigners told me that they felt frustrated with Kachin nationalism and Burma’s decades-long ethnic divisions, while seeing themselves as neutral. One person called for compromise between the two “extremes” of Burmese military’s destruction and the Kachin independence movement. Upset, another Bamar elder dismissed Kachin nationalism, while expressing certain Bamar perspectives:

Don’t be so narrow-minded! Irrawaddy is not only for Kachin people; it’s the national river of the whole Myanmar, north to south. Any separation between the Kachin campaign and the Yangon campaign comes from the history of war—Kachins see us, Bamar people, as if Burma soldiers.

But why is the war so long? Because it relates to business, like jade or the gold in Myitsone. War is created by both sides! And by those who want to sell weapons. So, the government leaders and KIO negotiating is not enough. CSOs talk on behalf of people who are really suffering—the civilians. The civilians’ view is simple: We don’t want war. Not only in Myanmar, but the whole world.

Seeking Allies

In contrast to the common distrust toward Bamars, a few Kachins praised lowland Burmese campaigners and celebrated

the Myitsone–Irrawaddy movement as a Kachin–Bamar alliance. One leading Kachin campaigner expressed gratitude to Bamar activists, adding: “Because we started this movement, we are satisfied, we are proud!” For this campaigner, the fact that lowland publics mostly neglected Kachin perspectives called for more outreach:

It means we must explain to the Bamars more about our people’s situation. One day, they will understand. During the antidam movement, our organization was underground, so it was difficult. But now, we’re free to cooperate with the Bamar movement.

Another Kachin activist praised Bamar journalists for risking their safety, recalling especially one reporter: “She kept going to Myitsone and writing articles, even though she got stopped by Chinese officials and sometimes by disguised Burmese government officials.” A Kachin educator appreciated Bamar campaigners’ feelings:

I attended an environmental talk here, in Myitkyina, where most speakers were activists from Lower Burma. They spoke so passionately—they seemed to care more than us, local Kachin people. They were writing poems about Irrawaddy River, how people depend on the River, and the effects of Myitsone Dam. . . . I could see that these people were Irrawaddy People.

Moreover, a Myitsone elder appreciated that Bamar activists helped the relocated villagers:

There are many Bamar organizations who speak for us. When we heard that the military was coming to threaten our people who returned to live at our original village, we messaged these organizations. They immediately phoned the authorities, making the military stop. They also advised us to petition the president to let our people return home. So, it’s important to network. If we stay silent about our suffering, other people will also be silent.

A few Kachin activists led collaboration between Bamars and Kachins. Sometimes, these persons were already close to Bamar society but approached the collaboration strategically for Kachin interests. During the lowland campaign, one Kachin activist cultivated Bamars' empathy:

When giving speeches to Bamar audiences, I gave them an analogy: "Kachins didn't have ancient kingdoms, so we don't have ruins. The natural environment, like Myitsone, is our heritage—like your ancient Bagan temples. So, consider if somebody was trying to ruin Bagan, just because there was a gold mine underneath, would you let it happen?" The Bamars were moved by this kind of message.

This activist felt happy that "thanks to Myitsone, Burmese civil society later had sympathy" for Kachins amid the war, including by donating to the war-displaced people's camps.

Another Kachin activist wished that Kachins would stop blaming Bamar people for the Burmese military's crimes and instead unite with Bamars against the regime. This person struggled with other Kachin activists who saw the Myitsone Dam as a Bamar attack against Kachin people and who did not emphasize the dam's downstream effects:

Those Kachin activists' ideology just gives us more isolation. We're fencing ourselves in. After sixty years of war, we must be realistic—without involving the downstream people, we can't save Myitsone or the resettled villagers, and we'll never have peace.

How could these Yangon people automatically understand how Kachins suffer?! They have their own suffering. The same injustice is happening every day, everywhere—not only at Myitsone, but also at Letpadaung, Chindwin, Dawei, Kyaukpyu, Thilawa [big development project sites]. What will Kachin activists say about the people in Letpadaung?! The government hurts those Bamars no less than it hurts the Kachins in Myitsone. During Cyclone Nargis, the Delta and Yangon people hurt so much. How many Kachins reacted?

This activist suggested that resisting Myitsone Dam could uniquely unite Burma's peoples:

The "Save the Irrawaddy" campaign was not only Bamars. Almost all civil society joined, including Karens, Shans, all ethnic groups. The government is intentionally dividing us, so that in Kachinland, people would talk only about Kachinland; in Shan, only about Shan nation; and Karen, Mon—all separately. Only Myitsone can unite Burma. If the government crushes even this, it crushes the people forever—not just physically, but morally.

Thus, resisting a common enemy—Myitsone Dam—led some activists to strategic interethnic collaboration.

Conclusion and Discussion

Most Kachins and Bamars opposed the Myitsone Dam mainly for the security, dignity, and interests of their own ethnic nations and envisioned homelands. After the Myitsone Dam suspension, these two peoples' political movements have continued to pursue separate visions, with few Bamars standing up for other ethnic nations and few Kachins cooperating with such Bamars. When it comes to Burma's many Bamar-minority conflicts, the mainstream Bamar public has largely sided with Bamar ethnonationalism and the Burmese military against the non-Bamar political and military movements. Nationalistic Kachins have mainly committed to building their own self-governing homeland, distancing Kachins further from Bamars and Burma.

However, Kachins and Bamars did "meet" at Myitsone—symbolically, politically, emotionally, and sometimes physically. Most Kachin and Bamar dam opponents neither met in person nor planned a transethnic movement, but a few activists did mediate Kachin-Bamar relations face to face, often in the city of Yangon. Such activists are a minority inside Bamar and Kachin society. For broader publics, the Myitsone interethnic encounter happened mainly through mass media from where people could discover that Kachins and Bamars were

fighting on the same side. Many people never heard much more about any of this.

The Myitsone controversy has inspired many debates: about civil society and Burma's partial democratic transition; ecological destruction and environmentalism; hydroelectricity and energy policy; Chinese investment and natural resource economics; and China–Burma relations and geopolitics. This article showed why discussions of both Myitsone and Burma's political reforms need to consider the war-torn country's many clashing ethnonationalisms—such as of majority Bamars and minority Kachins—and ethnic Bamar privilege. Myitsone Dam attracted two largely separate nationalist antidam movements: the Kachin resistance, since the mid-2000s, and the lowland Burmese resistance, since around 2010. Kachins tend to talk of the “Myitsone issue,” focusing on saving the cherished confluence region, whereas lowland Bamar activists tend to speak of “Saving the Irrawaddy,” this Burmese lifeblood. Bamar fears of Chinese domination resembled Kachin fears of Bamar takeover. Both viewed Myitsone Dam as a national emergency where an outside power threatens their ethnic sovereignty and homeland (Kik 2020). This is how two clashing nationalisms—Kachin and Bamar—reached a rare, fragile interethnic “confluence.”

The Myitsone–Irrawaddy resistance shows how interethnic political collaboration in Burma can be both effective and difficult. Its civilian encounters and strategic collaboration briefly evaded growing Kachin–Bamar tensions amid a resuming war. When some Bamars and Kachins united—against the military regime, Chinese and Burmese companies, and the Myitsone megaproject—they negotiated their separate concerns, identities, and visions; felt distrust and frustration; and struggled amid Bamar notions of supremacy and Kachin pursuits of national independence. The Myitsone issue did not unite Kachin and Bamar nationalisms, but did link them.

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