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Article

Exiled Activists from Myanmar: Predicaments and Possibilities of Human Rights Activism from Abroad

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Abstract

In this article, we put forward the concept of the 'exiled activist' to highlight the predicaments and the possibilities that practicing human rights activism from abroad bring with it. Human rights activists from Myanmar struggle to continue their work after the military regime forced them to flee their home country over four and a half years ago. Since the attempted military coup on 1 February 2021, 30,074 citizens have been imprisoned and 7,517 killed (as of December 2025). Although exiled activism has a long tradition in Myanmar, the current situation is unprecedented. Not only have many activists left the country, but those who are still in Myanmar have been forced into hiding or have joined the armed resistance. This brain drain has impacted NGO work as well as different education sectors, including the formal education sector and online education formats in which many human rights activists were previously employed. This article takes account of these dramatic changes and focuses on the actual work that exiled activists from Myanmar currently carry out, as well as on the psychosocial predicaments they face.

Practitioner Points

- Develop trauma-informed support systems for exiled activists by integrating psychosocial care and peer-based mental health resources into human rights programming and diaspora organizing.
- Adapt partnership models to accommodate the shifting positionality of exiled activists, recognizing their need for secure digital platforms, flexible funding, and shared decision-making across borders.
- Acknowledge and navigate political divisions within diverse groups of exiled activists—such as differing views on the National League for Democracy, the military, or the Rohingya—by avoiding assumptions of unity and instead fostering inclusive collaboration that respects diverse activist trajectories and lived experiences.

Keywords: loneliness; mental health; migration; military coup; social engagement; Scholar-Activist; Southeast Asia

This is a collaboratively written article which integrates the complementary contributions of each author. We have decided to order our names alphabetically.

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1. Introduction

On 1 February 2021, the military regime under the leadership of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing arrested the country's acting President Win Myint as well as State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and declared a one-year state of emergency that has been continuously extended ever since. The seizure of power was based on claims of 'election fraud' during the November 2020 parliamentary elections, which saw a clear win for the New League for Democracy (NLD) headed by Aung San Suu Kyi. Upon the announcement of the military take-over, civilians took to the streets in millions across the entire country. A true bottom-up movement was formed—the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)—that grew almost organically and that has, until today, no formalized or institutionalized leadership. In the early months of 2021, the atmosphere at the protest sites was cheerful, hopeful, and often carnivalesque. People came out into the streets, often in costumes, many with creative slogans, banners, and always new ideas on how to disrupt the everyday in order to highlight the urgency of the matter: saving democracy. In the evenings, people were making loud noises across entire townships by banging pots and pans in their homes to protest against the nationwide curfew. Even as the mass protests were fueled by public sector employees who simply stopped going to work (Aung 2021), it was particularly the young adults who were on the forefront of these protests—the generation who had enjoyed a decade of partial democratic freedom and who knew of the previous military regimes mostly from the stories of their parents and grandparents (Thant 2021; Jordt et al. 2021). They were advised by senior activists and supported by people across age groups, occupations, social strata, and religious affiliation (Beyer 2021). The 'revolution', as Myanmar civilians unequivocally refer to the aim of their movement, has gained further impetus because many of the protestors see in it a chance to come to terms with 'the structural inequalities and exclusions built into Myanmar society' (Prasse-Freeman and Kabya 2021). This could be seen, for example, in the way voices of ethnic Rohingya, most of them stateless and confined to the very margins of Myanmar society or surviving in refugee camps in Bangladesh, were not only heard in public for the first time in decades but even amplified by the movement (Prasse-Freeman and Sebro 2021).

After a couple of months, acts of mass civilian resistance became increasingly fraught as the military began killing protestors. Country-wide protests of millions were thus reduced to a few impromptu 'flash' protests where protestors met and dispersed within minutes. Even short demonstrations became dangerous as the military and the police often waited in hiding for protestors to appear. Both national forces have been filmed as they were driving cars into crowds; we have seen photographic evidence of people who were burned alive as well as detailed documentation of torture that arrested civilians have suffered and often died from.[1] Currently, the death toll of those killed by the regime stands at 7,517 civilians.[2] Yet, until today, the military State Administration Council (SAC) has not been able to take control over the country. The resistance is ongoing, although less visible in international media. The de facto elected parliamentarians who escaped arrest subsequently formed the National Unity Government (NUG) and declared a defensive war against the country's security forces in September 2021. Many civilians, including many activists, have joined either an ethnic armed group in the border areas of Myanmar or the newly formed People's Defense Force (PDF), escalating the struggle initiated by the CDM. Consequently, many human rights activists needed to escape the country entirely.

While Myanmar has always been a politicized academic field with blurred lines between research and activism, the attempted coup has only made the division more artificial: local and foreign scholars who are working in and on Myanmar are supporting the so-called

1 We have been sent photographs and videos by protestors directly. Other information was also distributed on social media (Facebook) and published by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) (https://aappb.org).

2 Updated numbers can be found on the AAPP website: https://aappb.org (referenced 4 December 2025).

CDM that refuses the military's orders.[3] Many scholars working on Myanmar are by now 'expert activists' (Beyer 2022) in that they combine their disciplinary expertise in fields such as human rights, interfaith dialogue, legal anthropology, or mental health with applied work such as consultancy, advocacy, or other forms of awareness-raising. As 'hyphenated activists'[4] (i.e. scholar-activists), they seek to balance academic rigor with solidarity, and responsible judgments with a receptiveness to the various viewpoints and experiences of the people currently living in Myanmar or exiled from it.[5] When we speak of 'exiled activists', we aim to bring two phenomena into correspondence: exile, which is usually conceptualized individually, and activism, which is mostly conceptualized collectively. By talking about 'exiled activists' we explicitly do not center a regime that has issued a banishment of an individual but instead portray individuals first and foremost in their self-understanding as activists who are forced to operate from exile. Although this article focuses on exiled activists from Myanmar, we have written about predicaments and possibilities of exiled activists in a manner that we hope will contribute to further developing the theoretical concept of exiled activists and speak to global developments. Currently, authoritarian governments are strengthening their grip onto outspoken individuals and oppositional groups all over the world, not only in the Global South. The creation of new funding schemes and stipend programs that aim to accommodate activists and scholars who had to flee their country of origin testifies to this.

In this article, we illustrate the positionalities of exiled activists by highlighting the difficulties these individuals face, but also the potentials they have to inform others and impact the overall political situation in Myanmar. We also highlight exile as an existential situation of in-betweenness in which a person becomes not only alienated from their country, but potentially even from themselves. As we expect more people to self-identify as exiled activists in the near future, our articles' central aim is to analyze the complexities that go along with such a life-altering development. Specifically, we want to ask what exiled activists are struggling with, personally and structurally, and how a deeper understanding of these struggles can help overcome them. We do this by illustrating the realities of exiled activists from Myanmar.

2. Positionality and methods

Two of us, Nickey Diamond and Demo Lulin (pseudonym), are well-known human rights activists from Myanmar, and have thus personally gone through the experience of forced exile themselves. They have been standing up for ethnic and religious minorities in their home country for many years. Their human rights-focused work documents and collects evidence on the military's commissioned crimes. Because of their work, they have been targeted by the military, intelligence agencies, and extremist groups. Moreover, their personal religious background and their own inter-faith marriages have made them targets of Buddhist nationalists. Their lives were already subjected to surveillance and intimidation while living in Myanmar, but—as many people in Myanmar have—they learned to navigate and live with imminent danger and constant insecurity. Following the attempted military coup of 1 February 2021, both were forced to leave Myanmar and are now based in the Global North where they are pursuing higher education while continuing their activist work. They thus write about their recent experiences from both an informed and affected perspective, while contributing to current academic debates that address activism as a field of inquiry and an arena for action. The three non-Myanmar scholars support them in this endeavor: two are anthropologists and one is a psychologist, all with extensive ethnographic fieldwork experience in and personal connections to Myanmar. We intend our article to

3 Among Myanmar activists (within and outside of Myanmar), there is a consensus that the military coup was not successful and thus is referred to as an 'attempted' military coup throughout our article.

4 The expression is Tharaphi Than's who used it in a personal communication with Judith Beyer.

5 On the overlap between activism and expertise, particularly in the realm of human rights, see, for example, Beyer (2022, 2025), Good (2007), Kirsch (2018).

serve as an example for an interdisciplinary and *trans*-sectoral collaboration on Myanmar, without the voices of foreign scholars dominating the academic discussion while those of local scholars are mostly heard as 'activists'. While these fields are often kept separate by the actors themselves (Beyer 2022), we argue that for ethical reasons, events such as the attempted military coup require us to rethink the boundaries of our engagement (Beyer and Diamond 2023).

Methodologically, we draw on autoethnographic accounts (Nickey Diamond and Demo Lulin), semi-structured interviews and conversations with around forty exiled activists currently residing in Thailand, the US, the UK, Austria, and Switzerland (Samia Akhter-Khan and Judith Beyer) and extensive ethnographic work with exiled activists in Thailand (Sarah Riebel).[6] Our sample is a convenience-based sample and participants were identified using a snowball sampling strategy. Participants were eligible to be interviewed when they self-identified as exiled activist, that is, were residing outside of Myanmar and were not able to return for safety reasons, given their activities or political engagement. In addition to these semi-structured interviews, more informal conversations have been held with other Myanmar exiled activists and scholars whom we know from our previous ethnographic fieldwork in Myanmar. Moreover, Nickey Diamond and Demo Lulin take part in regular online meetings where exiled and non-exiled Myanmar activists meet under heightened security conditions to discuss urgent issues such as the Myanmar earthquake of 2025 or scheduled elections under military rule. All of these conversations inform our argument as well, but were not specifically held for the purpose of this article.

Our paper is structured in five parts. First, we develop the concept of the 'exiled activist' from both the literature and from activists' personal accounts. Second, we distinguish previous exiled human rights activists' forms of engagement from those of the new generation. Third, we document the actual work of activists from Myanmar by drawing on the experiences of Nickey Diamond and Demo Lulin as well as others who currently live in the Global North or in the Thai–Myanmar border region. Fourth, we highlight the overall psychosocial consequences of working in exile by focusing on the hardships and worries that activists face in their daily lives. Fifth, we contextualize a current debate on social media that centers on the question whether activists who no longer reside in Myanmar can continue to speak for those 'left behind'. We hope that a broader appreciation of the diverse positionalities we have found among exiled activists could ideally inform policies and programs in streamlining better support efforts for them.

3. Establishing the 'exiled activist'

The literature on exiled activists is scarce and has only recently been recognized in its own right (McKeever 2021).[7] This is surprising since we are dealing with a global phenomenon: forced displacements across the world have increased in the last century, brought about by wars, state collapses, climate change and the reign of authoritarian regimes. So far, the encompassing field of migration studies mainly focuses on the trajectories of those fleeing and the challenges of integration in so-called host countries. The equally well-established field of diaspora studies centers on ways of 'community-building' abroad and second- and third-generation migrants' often essentializing view of their parents' country of origin (Glick-Schiller and Fouron 2001). There is literature on diaspora activism that engages

6 Throughout the research for this article and during the writing process, we have adhered to the ethics guidelines as laid out by the German Association for Social and Cultural Anthropology (DGSKA; https://www.dgska.de/en/ethics/). We have anonymized all our interlocutors' names with the exception of those who wanted their real name to be mentioned. We also used encrypted ways of online communication with all our interlocutors and offered the possibility to withdraw from the conversation at any time. We also ensured that all data is stored safely and will not be shared with third persons. In the Appendix, we provide a table with pseudonyms and further information without jeopardizing our interlocutors' safety.

7 For an early usage of the term, see Beinin (1992); for the only usage in the Myanmar context, see Duell (2015).

with identity formation, political mobilization, or second-generation activism (Adamson 2012; Hess and Korf 2014; Ho 2023; Koinova 2013; Sökefeld 2006). While there is certainly overlap between the concepts of 'diaspora' and 'exile' in regard to activist engagement, we find it important to distinguish the concepts, based on how our interlocutors and our two Myanmar authors identify themselves. We understand diaspora as a more general term. Individuals may become part of a diaspora for various reasons. Some may have left their country of origin voluntarily, for economic opportunities, education, or personal reasons such as marriage. Some have been forced out of their home country. Usually, all new generations who were born outside their parents' home country are included in the concept as well. Activism may emerge as a particular form of diasporic engagement, however, most often after relocation, not as its precondition. Rather, it is shaped by the diasporic experience itself (see also Duell 2015: 111). Exiled activists, however, have been forced to leave Myanmar explicitly because of their previous activism. Their political engagement preceded and often directly caused their displacement. In those cases where they were not already activists before, the attempted military coup and their subsequent flight from Myanmar have fueled their decision to become activists.

While there is an established body of literature on exile in anthropology (see Malkki 1995 for an earlier and Ferreira 2020 for a more recent overview), there is little to no explicit mention of exiled activists. The general literature on activism is growing, but as the *-ism* ending indicates, it mostly deals with social movements, many of them transnational. To speak of 'exiled activists' rather than 'activism from exile' or 'exiled activism' emphasizes the perspectives and practices of these individuals instead of stressing a particular location (exile), a collective identity (being activists) or an exclusive contribution to the theoretical development of an abstract concept (activism). Similar to Edward Saïd's account of exile, as described in his famous memoir *Out of Place* (1999), we consider exile to be more than an experience; It can become the symbolic source of one's deepest values that may fuel activities such as activism (Barbour 2007). In what only seems like a paradox, this stance allows for 'repression and liberation opening on to each other', as Saïd put it (1999: 212). On the one hand, Saïd characterized exile as 'an anguish' and those exiled as having 'broken lives' (Saïd 2000: 177). On the other hand, he described exile as a stance in which 'there are things to be learned: he or she must cultivate a scrupulous (not indulgent or sulky) subjectivity' (184).[8] Drawing on our experiences from Myanmar—both as nationals and as 'ex-pats'—we understand exile as the effect of a violent practice by which a government or regime exerts pressure onto individuals, a group or a category of people whom it has come to regard as political opponents. Such violence does not have to be physical but can also be discursive as in the case of hate speech (Diamond and MacLean 2021). When individuals perceive the threat to their or their family's lives to have become so terrifying that they must flee their home country, they have effectively been forced into exile, even when an official banishment has not been issued.

Instead of relying on already established concepts such as 'migrants' or 'members of the diaspora', our concept of the 'exiled activist' captures that the social change these individuals seek is first and foremost intended for others, whom they wish to support. It is also motivated by wanting to return home. In our work, we have encountered a wide range of positionalities from which activists work out possibilities for themselves and for others. While they theoretically *do* form part of a wider diaspora, their experiences, their sense of belonging, and their goals might not align with those who have left in an earlier period or who were born abroad (Gruß 2017). This is why being an exiled activist can be an isolating experience, even more so when it is also challenged by those who have 'stayed behind', an aspect discussed in this article. In summary, it cannot be expected that activists speak 'with one voice', or that the voices of exiled activists in the Global North match those speaking from other countries in the Global South. What is thus required is to listen closely and allow for a

8 See Lumsden (1999) for a similar argument from an anthropological perspective.

plurality of positionalities and ways to deal with the predicaments of their situation to manifest in the stories they tell and the activist practices they engage in.

4. Exiled activists from Myanmar: then and now

Historically, forced exile of activists from Myanmar to the Global North or neighboring countries is not a new phenomenon. Nevertheless, there are key differences between the location and organization of exiled activists in the last decades and following the 2021 attempted military coup. After the student-led uprising that had tried to end the regime of General Ne Win was suppressed in 1988, many activists fled to border areas in Thailand and India. There, they resided in refugee camps or jungle bases, forming student unions, political organizations, and advocacy offices. Some later resettled in the United States, Australia, and Europe through United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) programs, which provided them with more security but also meant their activities were often carried out in small exile communities abroad. Following the attempted coup in 2021, many activists first escaped to neighboring countries like Thailand, India, Malaysia, and Bangladesh, and some are now seeking asylum or resettlement in high-income countries through UNHCR. However, compared to 1988, exiled activists today are more geographically dispersed and less tied to formal organizations. They often operate online, using social media, exile media platforms, and digital fundraising, and they connect with broader international networks. At the same time, many face uncertain legal status and weak refugee protection in the region, which shapes how they can organize and survive.

Previously, exiled activists in India received support from the Indian government. International conferences were hosted from exile by pro-democracy activists in India such as the 'International Conference for the Restoration of Democracy in Burma' in 1996 in New Delhi.[9] The student organization 'All Burma Students League' even had an exiled students' office in the home of the Indian politician, George Fernandes, in New Delhi (Mirante 2021). In Thailand, the Burma Lawyers' Council, based in Bangkok, is composed of members who are experienced in the legal field and also key participants in other vital organizations fighting for democracy and human rights in Burma. Since the late 1990s, it has published the *Law Ka PaLa: Legal Journal on Burma* formerly known as *Legal Issues on Burma* journal which features articles by 'practising lawyers, academics, and experienced Burmese opposition activists' (Burma Lawyers' Council 2009: 4). The overlap between human rights work and activism is explicitly addressed in the self-definition of this organization. In 2000, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) was founded in the border town of Mae Sot on the 11th anniversary of the arrest of Min Ko Naing, 'a student leader and prominent figure during the 1988 uprising who spent nineteen years in prison'.[10] Nowadays, scholars, the international media, human rights organizations, and others rely on the AAPP's diligent work in keeping track of political prisoners. Since the attempted military coup in 2021, the AAPP provides daily updated figures on civilians charged with a warrant and evading arrest, those killed by the regime as well as those already sentenced, often in absentia. The AAPP also has a museum in Mae Sot where they provide insights into the lives of political prisoners in Myanmar and trace a chronological history of protests and revolutions, from the 1962 military coup to the ongoing revolution (Fig. 1).

Visitors can also talk with former political prisoners about their experiences and learn more about the work of AAPP. Those who are not able to visit the museum in person can go on a virtual museum tour.[11] The museum and the work of AAPP is one example of how past and present protests and revolutions in Myanmar are intertwined with the daily activities of exiled activists operating in the Thai–Myanmar borderlands.

9 Burma was the country's name before it was renamed (Union of the Republic of) Myanmar in 1988, which is a more formal or literary version of the same word.

10 See 'History of AAPP' at https://aappb.org/?page_id=5628 (referenced 12 September 2025).

11 See 'Virtual Museum Tour' at https://aappmuseum.wixsite.com/museum (referenced 12 September 2025).

Figure 1. Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) Burma Museum, Mae Sot, Thailand. Photograph: Sarah Riebel.

Research on activism at the Thai–Myanmar border highlights long-standing and diverse civil engagement that responds to ongoing political repression in Myanmar. More than ten years ago, Adam Simpson already described 'the activist diaspora' in Thailand, noting that 'Myanmar expatriate activists escaping authoritarianism under the Myanmar military are distributed throughout the world but particularly active in Thailand and the "liberated area" of the Thai–Myanmar border region, beyond the reach of Myanmar's military' (Simpson 2012: 205; see also Norum et al. 2016). Moreover, in the Thai–Myanmar borderlands, Mary O'Kane has interviewed displaced women and revealed how the blurring of boundaries between political struggle, everyday survival, and identity roles such as mother, activist, or refugee may lead to a transformation in their political awareness and engagement (O'Kane 2005; 2007). Linnea Beatty (2010) has highlighted the border area as a crucial site of resistance where 'democratic activists' produce media and political documents that challenge the regime. These documents are being circulated both in the borderlands and inside Myanmar. At the same time, she emphasized the limits of resistance: many activists live as undocumented refugees, making their safety dependent on maintaining good relations with local authorities, which restricts their ability to be openly critical (Beatty 2010: 630).

Kerstin Duell provides a comprehensive historical overview of different types of Myanmar opposition in exile, differentiating between 'exiled movement[s]' with established membership and more dispersed initiatives by politically active diaspora members (Duell 2015). Elizabeth Olivius has more recently demonstrated how specifically Myanmar women living in Thailand acquire new knowledge and skills with the explicit wish to apply these once they are able to go back home (Olivius 2019a). Sarah Riebel is currently finalizing her doctoral dissertation 'Activism Beyond Borders—Encounters with Myanmar Exiled Activists in Thailand' which will expand this body of literature. While most research on exiled activism is focused on the Thai–Myanmar borderlands, Seng Bu and Maaike Matelski's recent study focuses on the 'Myanmar diaspora community' in the Netherlands with a particular emphasis on the younger generation who had to flee after 1 February 2021 (Bu and Matelski 2025). Our article is in line with this body of literature in that it also focuses on current exiled

activists, yet we do not limit ourselves to a particular geographical region, instead, have rather followed our interlocutors with whom we have been in touch over the last years.[12]

When it comes to Myanmar, it can be argued that 'the arts of resistance' (Scott 1992) are not only a culturally established practice inside the country, but also in exile. However, each 'wave' of exiled activists faced their own predicaments. In 2021, both the young generation as well as those who have experienced exile in the past highlighted what they saw as a break with how things used to be done. The main rallying cry on the streets across Myanmar in 2021 was 'You messed with the wrong generation', thereby emphasizing difference rather than continuity when it comes to the previous era of protest: 'The message of the accompanying slogan "No! Not 88 anymore!" is clear: This time, there shall be a revolution, not just a rebellion. The young will finish what the old could not' (Beyer 2021).

An online conversation that Samia Akhter-Khan held with Ye Win, a 44-year-old activist who had been a political prisoner in Myanmar from 2007 to 2009, and who recently applied for asylum in the US, emphasized this difference:

> In the 2007 revolution, mostly monks and students participated and once they were arrested, the revolution stopped. There was nobody to continue the revolution. … But in 2021, all classes—not only monks and students—but all classes of people were against the military, every class participated in demonstrations, and many people were being killed, even children, disabled, older adults, and pregnant women. … We have a high level of revolution. That's why this dictatorship takes all measures to end it. … The military cannot create democracy, people's power can![13] (Ye Win, interviewer SA, 11/2021)

Another female human rights activist currently based in Boston, whose husband was incarcerated in Yangon's infamous Insein prison at the time of the conversation, spoke about the differences in human rights activists' work as follows:

> 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. (Khin, interviewer SA, 11/2021)

These two quotes clearly illustrate the contrast between the previous and current revolution, showing how every population in the country is now unifying against the military, providing a stronger foundation for structural change.

When Judith Beyer spoke to human rights activist Khin Zaw Win, director of the civil society institute Tampadipa and a former political prisoner (1994–2005), he emphasized that the majority of those currently engaged in the resistance movement will not return to a status quo ante:

> We all have to understand that in the future Myanmar shall be a totally different and unprecedented entity compared to anything in the past. Among the resistance there will be the 'old guard' who will want to return to a pre-2021 setting. There is no more room for that I'm afraid. (Khin Zaw Win, interviewer JB, 07/2024)

12 There are also many exiled Rohingya activists who had to flee Burma/Myanmar during one of the many ethnic-cleansing operations against this group in the last decades. Since their individual trajectories are different from those who had already been engaging in activist work before and since most of them have been living abroad for a longer time already, we acknowledge their important human rights-centered activist work, but do not draw on their experiences for comparison in the frame of this article. Similarly, in the last years, many Myanmar journalists were forced to flee into exile. The journalists we know personally do not identify as activists. We thus do not include their views in this article.

13 These interviews were conducted in both Burmese and English.

Khin Zaw Win has consistently made the point that a new generation of democratic leaders will be needed and that these should cover a plurality of voices.[14] But he also expected challenges in terms of the overall decision-making capacity: 'there will certainly be challenges as to the diverse visions of the future among the resistance, and addressing these cannot start too early', he told Judith Beyer. All activists we spoke to clearly stated that they would not go back to Myanmar as long as the military is part of the ruling political system, including conditions they labeled 'fake democracy'. Under this term they also included the decade of rule by the National League for Democracy (NLD) between 2010 and 2021, usually understood as a 'transitory' period (Girke and Beyer 2018). Nevertheless, in both public social media and in private activist circles, we are witnessing heated debates over what a post-dictatorial Myanmar should look like, as even human rights activists have very diverse expectations regarding proper democratic forms of governance. Given the complexity and multiplicity of Myanmar's regional, ethnic, and religious set-up, the desired new polity will require a broader and more solid basis than the military as common enemy. The diverse positionalities that activists have come to take on as well as the wide range of possibilities that they see emerging from such diverse outlooks might well inform the eventual nation-rebuilding process. In addition to emphasizing differences to the past, we would thus highlight that there are differences in the way Myanmar exiled activists envision the future. And while this plurality certainly is challenging, there are advantages in negotiating such diverse viewpoints rather than advocating a somehow given 'shared vision'. To understand how these positionalities and expectations are negotiated, it is important to examine Myanmar human rights activists' activities in exile and their role in the revolution.

5. The everyday life and work of Myanmar exiled activists

In this section, we present a wide range of different activism-related activities that exiled activists from Myanmar engage in. Their varied types of engagement illustrate that there is no single definition of 'activism' that unites all activists. Rather, we have identified several areas of engagement and traced the ways in which these are shaped by personal experience, mostly related to previous forms of activist engagement or professional ties the activist had while still residing in Myanmar.

In exile, Myanmar activists raise awareness about the attempted military coup and the deteriorating situation in their home country. While many advocate for other states to officially recognize the NUG, others engage in public debates about a new federal multi-ethnic form of governance altogether. Their awareness-raising occurs via various channels, ranging from everyday conversations to attending workshops, trainings, giving interviews, opening Myanmar-related film screenings or art installations or giving speeches at academic conferences. These efforts not only help a general audience understand and remain interested in the current political situation in Myanmar, but usually include concrete suggestions on how to contribute to the democracy movement and set new ground rules for international relations.

Whereas efforts to raise awareness largely pertain to local or regional audiences in their new country of residence as well as to the so-called international community, activists also advocate for their causes with institutions and people inside Myanmar. Some remain in direct contact with police and military officers with whom they have established personal long-time connections. It is with their support that they can directly negotiate the release of political prisoners or the improvement of carceral conditions. In some cases, they aid police and military personnel to leave their job or even defect (on defection, see Kyed and Lynn 2021).

14 See, for example, his 2023 interview 'Time for a New Generation of Democratic Leaders in Myanmar' with the Australian Radio Company ABC Radio National https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/sundayextra/myanmar-khin-zaw-win/102662016 (referenced 12 September 2025). For another opinion piece, addressed to 'all democrats in Myanmar', see Maung Zarni (2023), a senior activist human rights scholar, living in exile in the UK.

By communicating directly with the NUG, some activists are involved in politics on a governmental level, drawing on their professional backgrounds and field of specialization. As NUG representatives are mostly from the country's ethnic Bamar majority, most of whom are Buddhist, the NUG now seeks expert advice from members of ethno-religious minorities. This concerns policies for ethnicity and citizenship, or reconciliation with the Rohingya by way of an official national apology for the crimes that have been inflicted upon them by state actors since the 1970s. Likewise, state relations to other ethno-religious minorities, many of whom have suffered from discrimination and marginalization for a long time (Beyer 2024; Prasse-Freeman 2023; Sadan 2013; Walton 2012), are being discussed and renegotiated.

Organizations such as the AAPP, and even more so international agencies such as the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Independent Investigative Mechanisms on Myanmar (IIMM) rely on the work of Myanmar activists and their networks within the country to document abuses committed by the military and the police. Activists in exile strive to tap into their network 'on the ground' and share information with these agencies and large-scale actors. Moreover, they distribute information and correct those of others in the local and international media, with social media playing a key role in their work. Exiled activists work closely with journalists and through various social media pages, including their personal ones, which often have tens of thousands of followers such as in the cases of Nickey Diamond and Demo Lulin, thereby counteracting fake news and military propaganda (see also Mette-Starke 2021). Although exiled activists have thus managed to retain their network at home, physical distance is known to cause disruptions (Graf 2018). For example, it is often no longer easily possible to verify information with trusted sources inside the country due to high costs for international mobile calls and the fact that the military has banned secure communication such as Signal. Other common social media are also compromised by military intelligence. Most recently, Star Link technology has become available in the border regions to which different resistance forces provide access. But the coverage is not extensive and people have to rely on connections via Thailand's telecommunication network.

Furthermore, activists put their network to use in order to help other activists leave Myanmar. Some activists in Thailand stated that their activities in exile are far more diverse than their activist engagements in Myanmar had been. They now take part in donating food, medicine and clothes to migrant schools and internally displaced persons (IDPs), set up online (or on-site) education for children and youth of all ages, or found small organizations where they produce and sell T-shirts, buttons, artwork, and food at markets and self-organized events. Since living costs are low and accommodation is usually shared, the profits are mainly redirected to fund the revolution, to support activists and their families in Myanmar, as well as IDPs in the border areas (see also Hirsch 2021; Rizky 2021).

In addition, with the help of local and (inter)national organizations, they raise funds from foreigners who care about Myanmar. Some even go back and forth across the border between Mae Sot and Myanmar to fight in the PDF. One activist began to rent land outside of Mae Sot to build a farm where he provides work and safe housing to people who recently had to flee the country. In the last two years, a lot of Myanmar restaurants, bars, and cafés opened in Mae Sot. These places provide leisure and networking opportunities: 'We don't have a home anymore, but we have each other, our second family', an interlocutor told Sarah Riebel.

These competences may include learning a new language, finishing an apprenticeship, or getting a university degree. A recent study has shown that 'rebel leaders' were more likely to receive foreign financial support in times of imminent conflict or war underway when they had prior international experience or had themselves already spent some time abroad, thus being able to tap into an already-existing network of their 'host' country (Huang et al. 2021). This finding also applies to exiled activists. Networks, social status, skills, and education highly influence their impacts and activities as well as their physical and psychosocial well-being. Or as one activist phrased it: 'Educated people will lead the future country'.

As activists work towards occupying these positions, funding them and their education and supporting their cause and overall well-being is an investment into the future of a democratic Myanmar. But the gain that their relative freedom in exile brings has come at a high price. The following section illustrates how being exiled challenges an individual's self-perception and self-worth and creates a feeling of powerlessness if not supported socially and professionally.

6. The psychosocial predicaments of exiled activists

In this section, we focus particularly on what we call psychosocial predicaments of Myanmar exiled activists. With this term, we mean the psychological social costs that exile brings with it. Be it the alienation from family and friends, the experience of now being a foreigner, often even with an undocumented status, the feeling of not (yet) belonging in a host country and especially having to work through traumatizing memories of military violence which exiled activists witnessed or even experienced themselves directly.

Border crossings from Myanmar into Thailand are not a novel phenomenon (e.g. Bowles 1998; McConnachie 2022; Dannecker and Schaffar 2016), but most studies of Myanmar refugees have taken place in one of the many refugee camps. Sarah Riebel accompanied Myanmar exiled activists in the border town of Mae Sot during her year of ethnographic fieldwork. She encountered activists who suffered from culture shock, a lack of belonging, loneliness, and burn-out after arriving in Thailand (see also Chen and Gorski 2015). Sarah Riebel's interlocutors called the attempted military coup 'a turning point' in their lives and 'a fall into darkness'. They also directly acknowledged that 'this is our life as activists these days' and that 'we have a lot of trauma'. One interlocutor, a 22-year-old from southern Myanmar who goes back and forth between Mae Sot and Myanmar to support the resistance, described his life as 'living in hell' and explained his emotional state as follows:

> Sometimes I think I can never live on this planet again after seeing all these dead bodies. I will need a lot of time to recover my nerves. I cannot go home. I still cannot describe the feelings I had seeing them [dead neighbors]. I see them at night, I hear my colleagues cry, and I cannot get these images out of my head. (Htet, interviewer SR, 10/2022)[15]

Such testimonies reflect the complexities of exile, where physical safety does not necessarily bring psychological relief. Instead, many activists remain caught in ongoing cycles of grief and heightened alertness, shaped by past violence, and deepened by an uncertain future. Many activists had to flee through the jungle on foot and entered Thailand illegally, experiencing anxiety as well as general deprivation on their way. Thandar, a 23-year-old female activist, who now works as a journalist and translator in Mae Sot, recounted the events that led to her escape and her subsequent struggles with mental health:

> When I first arrived to Mae Sot in September 2021 I was traumatized. [In Magway, Myanmar] I hid under a bridge from the military, while I saw them shooting at my friend and dragging him away. I was so scared; I crawled all the way home and my arms and legs were scraped. Later the parents of my friend told me, that he is in prison and lost one eye and his arm. … I had to take pills for my anxiety, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat, I lost 20 pounds due to my mental health—now I stopped taking them and feel like I healed, but I needed to work with my therapist a lot. (Thandar, interviewer SR, 09/2023)

The fact that she sought therapy and spoke openly about it reflects subtle shifts in mental health discourse, especially among politically engaged youth. Sarah Riebel's interlocutors

15 All conversations with Sarah Riebel's interlocutors were conducted in English and the quotations are quoted verbatim (notes and transcriptions).

emphasized that on different occasions people still get judged as 'weak' or 'unnormal' for seeking help from a therapist, clearly illustrating the stigma relating to mental health (see also Nguyen et al. 2018). Zeya, a 31-year-old former teacher, recalled her flight across the border as follows: 'We crossed the river to Thailand, only three of us, but the water was up to my chest, I was so scared because I can't swim' (Zeya, interviewer SR, 04/2023). Others had to use a leaky rubber boat. Most of the activists paid smugglers to take them over the river and were handed over to other activists who provided safe houses in Mae Sot, trying to evade Thai border patrols. Upon arrival in Thailand, they were first taken to a small shelter in the forest close to the border. One 32-year-old male activist, who was formerly a business owner and musician, vividly remembered his arrival:

> It was really dark when we arrived, we were really scared, but also excited. They brought us to a small wooden one-room house in the nowhere and we all slept together on the floor with many other people. Later they transferred some of us to another house close to the bazar,[16] they told us to not leave the house in the first few weeks unless it is absolutely necessary. (Nandar, interviewer SR, 09/2023)

This quote reflects a mix of fear and excitement: the emotional ambiguity of arrival, capturing both the relief of escape and the unsettling uncertainty that defines life in exile. Others gave detailed examples of situations where it was especially hard to endure being apart from family and friends. A woman in her late thirties explained that she missed a family member's funeral and had to deal with the grief alone. Many activists experience post-traumatic stress, which may manifest itself in nightmares and restlessness (Nah 2021; Stitou 2021). Zeya spoke openly about her recent mental breakdown:

> I didn't want to leave my room anymore, I felt I couldn't breathe, I didn't want to talk to anyone, I didn't want to drink with my friends anymore, so I decided to get help. … People in Myanmar don't talk about mental health, they think only weak and crazy people need it, but it changed with the coup, but it's still hard to go somewhere and talk, it's not easy. (Zeya, interviewer SR, 04/202)

Some other activists who were listening to the conversation on that day, nodded, suggesting a shared but often unspoken emotional terrain. When Riebel asked about seeking counseling opportunities, her interlocutors told her about several organizations that now offer mental health workshops in Mae Sot and that there was also the possibility of online counseling for psychological and medical issues. In addition to the traumatizing experiences back in Myanmar and to the threats they face as undocumented immigrants in Thailand, their unknown future plays a big part in their narrations. An activist already staying in Mae Sot for two-and-a-half years said: 'I don't know when I will see my family and friends again, if my country will be ok, if I can go back someday'. Others phrased it more figuratively: 'Our dreams and future [were] ripped from us'. Another even said: 'I don't have a future anymore'.

Lilly, a researcher originally from Kayah State, was not allowed to leave the perimeter around the university and her flat in Bangkok for almost one year while waiting for her education visa. Although she received a scholarship to study on a Thai PhD program, she had to wait for many months for the issuance of her documents. There is also a lot of waiting time for other sorts of ID cards, passports, certificates, and visas in Thailand. Most of the recently exiled activists go through a registration process with the hope of getting asylum in the United States. The waiting times for their cases with the UNHCR is experienced as too long. One former teacher stated: 'I'm waiting for the UNHCR about 1–1.5 years now, I feel useless here [in Mae Sot]. I don't know what to do here and I don't understand why

16 Bazar refers to the biggest market in Mae Sot, which is downtown.

I'm here'. This quote illustrates how out some activists feel out of place in Thailand and struggle to not lose hope. Another activist said: 'The UNHCR process took place more than a year ago; I think they are busy with their blabla'.

Waiting and boredom has become a big part of the daily life of activists in Thailand and gives them a feeling of being passive and useless. These accounts indicate more than individual feelings of despair; they point to a disruption of temporal orientation experienced in exile. Time is often perceived as stalled, with political engagement continuing under conditions marked by loss, prolonged uncertainty, and a diminished sense of continuity and belonging. As we know from a study with Thai older adults and Myanmar migrants in Thailand (Akhter-Khan et al. 2023; 2024), a lack of meaningful activities or having nothing to do can be related to the experience of loneliness. Heath Cabot (2012), who worked on the dynamics of waiting and boredom for asylum-seeking processes in Greece, has argued similarly. Doing 'nothing' in the sense of not being able to do anything leads activists to classify their lives in Mae Sot as 'meaningless', which is similar to the experiences of activists exiled in the Global North.

In addition to these psychosocial predicaments, activists also face financial insecurity, due to inflation in Myanmar, the freezing of their bank accounts, the loss of their support network in Myanmar, and unemployment. Their access to formal employment and their opportunities to generate income are limited by their often irregular or undocumented status and the lack of legal work permits. Furthermore, some got caught by the Thai authorities and had to pay a bribe of up to 20,000 Thai baht to get released. Yet others donated all their money for the cause of the revolution. Nyein, a 35-year-old former engineer from Yangon, said:

> You know, I was kind of rich before the coup. I was an engineer. I had a good life, but now I lost everything, I can't find good work here [Mae Sot], and I donated all the money I had to the revolution. Now I'm broke and I'm selling beer. But I must accept it, I have no other choice. (Nyein, interviewer SR, 04/2023)

Nyein's account reflects a broader pattern among exiled activists: the experience of a dramatic shift in social and economic status, which is not only perceived as personal loss but also interpreted as a deliberate contribution to the revolutionary struggle. Exiled activists also ruminate to make sense of their survival and feel inadequate about their privileged position of being safe, not having to worry about their basic needs being met, not having to fight on the ground, and even being able to gain higher education in some cases. In addition, some of the interlocutors talked about having difficulties concentrating on studying or working due to concerns about friends and family and feeling guilty about having left them behind. This feeling, commonly referred to as 'survivors' guilt', may lead to more severe post-traumatic stress.

Even when having secured a legal status in a safe third country, many activists are still in dire conditions as our two Myanmar authors' own stories highlight: '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' said Demo in an online conversation with Samia Akhter-Khan. Demo Lulin had to leave his entire family behind in Myanmar. He is the father of small children and can no longer support his wife in taking care of them:

> After the attempted coup, I published anti-military statements and was active in the underground movement. In response, the Myanmar military began arresting members and staff of my NGO which I led and I had to flee. My charity work was destroyed and so was our farming business. Our life savings were completely lost. Everyone in my family, my parents, wife, children, and my aunt were left in a precarious situation. (Demo, SA, 11/2021)

His children miss their father and face hostilities from their neighbors who blame him for having left them alone. In exile, he too began to have nightmares and became anxious when hearing loud noises. The language barrier complicated his navigation of the local bureaucracy, leading him to nearly give up on life. He sought psychotherapy which supported him a bit, but he only began to feel better after he managed to reunite with his family in a third country during his children's school holidays.

Nickey Diamond took his wife and his two children along with him to Germany. While this helps him tremendously in not feeling isolated, it also puts a lot of pressure on him. Back in Myanmar, he and his wife owned an apartment, his wife headed a company and his work as a human rights activist was not only recognized internationally, but also enabled them all to live a decent life. All this changed overnight:

> After we fled, the military seized our condo apartment and my wife's company. We had supported the CDM with our savings and donations. The junta also seized our bank accounts and other property and my siblings faced security issues and had to temporarily go into hiding from the military who came looking for them. (ND, JB, 11/2021)

In Germany, housing and living expenses are costly. As long as his wife is learning German to qualify for the local job market, his stipend has to cover all of the family's expenses. Both of Nickey's parents and his wife's father died while they were out of the country. They were neither able to say goodbye to them nor bury them.

7. 'Insiders' versus 'outsiders' in Myanmar human rights activism

In addition to existential strokes of fate as discussed in the previous section, exiled activists also face accusations and prejudices from fellow activists who have remained in Myanmar. We deal with this predicament in the final section of our article, highlighting that just because exiled activists are in safety, this does not mean that they are able to speak freely.

Roughly a decade ago, people in Myanmar, including many Myanmar activists, began to employ a distinction between 'insiders' (*pyi-twin*) and 'outsiders' (*pyi-pa*). At that time, one of the major debates had been around a possible international intervention against the Myanmar military that had pushed through with a constitutional referendum, despite the fact that a cyclone had just hit the country, causing the deaths of approximately 150,000 people. The debate centered around the question of whether 'insiders' or locals knew the political and social contexts better than people who were part of the diaspora. This dichotomization was a common way to reject the views of fellow Myanmar civilians based on their geographical residence. Many activists in Myanmar assumed that 'outsiders' simply could not see or feel the situation 'on the ground' the way 'insiders' could; that since they had been enjoying freedom and a better life, their views were somehow tainted and effectively illegitimate. Even though outsiders could speak a lot more freely about the situation in Myanmar (to the media or foreign governments) than those in the country, the 'insiders' did not wish to be 'spoken for' or 'spoken about'. In other words, these 'insiders' did not want 'outsiders' to use their liberty 'to promote ours', as Aung San Suu Kyi once famously asked them to in 1997.[17] Alienating critiques and concerns of 'outsiders' over those people inside Myanmar continued after the 2008 Myanmar Constitution was adopted on 8 May 2008.[18] Both the 2008 Constitution as well as the subsequent general elections of 2010 had set in motion a period of democratic consolidation that allowed for various political

17 See Aung San Suu Kyi, 1997. 'Please Use Your Liberty to Promote Ours', *New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/1997/02/04/opinion/IHT-please-use-your-liberty-to-promote-ours.html (referenced 12 September 2025).

18 See the 2008 Myanmar Constitution. http://www.myanmar-law-library.org/spip.php?page=pdfjs&id_document=64 (referenced 12 September 2025).

and social debates to emerge. Many people living in exile at the Thai–Myanmar border contemplated whether they should return and participate in Myanmar's so-called democratic transition (Olivius 2019a; see also Girke and Beyer 2018). However, the military always remained involved in political affairs. The 2008 constitution enshrined their vast power, only to now encroach it in quasi-democratic form and language. Questions about activists' meaningful participation in politics and how best to continue their activism arose among those living in exile. Civil society groups already operating in Myanmar encouraged activists to return and help support the Myanmar democratization process within the framework of what the 2008 constitution has come to define as 'disciplined democracy'. Many activists in Myanmar had previously largely ignored exiled activists' efforts or demanded that prior to speaking to others, they should consult with them first.

It is crucial to focus on the usage of the term 'right/s' in this context as it has been employed in a double sense by the 'insiders': 'Right/s' in Burmese language is *a-kwin a-yay*, which can also be translated as 'opportunity'. Whoever was forced to leave the country after the 1988 uprising and settled in a third country was considered an 'opportunist' (*a-kwin a-yay thamar*; lit. a 'rights person') in the eyes of the 'insiders'. Elliott Prasse-Freeman discussed the double meaning of this term (i.e. right/opportunity) and argued that the concept 'tend[s] to index an appeal to power rather than a demand for a restoration of what one already "has"' (Prasse-Freeman 2015: 96). He also argued in an earlier publication that 'rights don't exist without the opportunity to realize them' (Prasse-Freeman 2013), thereby showing that there is a direct relationship between the two meanings of *a-kwin a-yay*. While locally the concept has been used to assail the practices and experiences of 'outsiders', including exiled activists, any normative ideal (such as human rights in itself) is dependent upon an opportunity to realize it (see also Doffegnies and Wells 2022). This opportunity had been easier to seize in the past by those residing 'outside' and even more so nowadays. We argue that if Myanmar does not want to rely exclusively on foreign observers, it must rely on and learn to listen to the voices of exiled activists *and* find new ways to amplify those coming from inside Myanmar. One of Sarah Riebel's interlocutors acknowledged:

> The revolution is like the hand: it needs more than one finger to be successful, for example not only people who kill. We need soldiers, fundraisers, medical staff, activists, politicians and so on. … I live in Chiang Mai because here I can make money and support my people. (Kyaw, interviewer SR, 05/2023)

This striking metaphor expresses the idea of distributed responsibility with the revolution and challenges narrow conceptions of activism that prioritize only direct participation in armed resistance.

Another activist residing in Mae Sot elaborated:

> Sometimes when I talk to my brothers and sisters still in the country or fighting in the liberated areas, I feel really guilty and useless living in Mae Sot. But they always tell me that my work is important for them, and they need people fundraising, advocating, and providing safe houses. So, I always try my best to find ways to make sacrifices for my country. (Thura, interviewer SR, 04/2023)

Thura's account reflects a common sentiment among exiled activists: the feeling that distance from the frontline equates to diminished contribution. Yet, his ongoing connection with those inside Myanmar offers moral affirmation. These accounts show that activism in exile is not peripheral but a vital component of the wider revolutionary network.

Demo Lulin faced criticism from activists within the country after members of his charity organization had been arrested by the military. Their families accused him of having used their children (his staff members) for political purposes. When he had the opportunity to seek political asylum in the United States, he declined, fearing further criticism from the

Myanmar activist scene who might have suspected him to fake his political engagement in order to be granted asylum. He was also aware of more military-affiliated spies in the US than in Europe and thus concerned for his safety. After arriving in Europe, his whereabouts were disclosed, and the military began threatening his family. He entered into negotiations with a colonel who guaranteed that his family would be safe if he abstained from engaging in any sort of political activity, including social media. This, in turn, led to further misunderstandings among local activists who accused him of having betrayed the cause as they did not know the circumstances that had pressured him to remain silent. Despite continuing essential documentation and advocacy work discreetly, Demo Lulin continues to face criticism and social ostracization among activists in both Myanmar and Thailand.

Thus, acknowledging the privilege of being able to speak openly (about human rights or any other matter) does not solve another problem activists currently face: the very possibility of 'raising one's voice for others' is no longer only of concern to foreign scholars carrying out empirical research in Myanmar with parts of the local population; it is also an ethical issue exiled activists contemplate in regard to their fellow comrades back home. Demo Lulin's case shows that exile itself may not always be sufficient to be able to speak openly.

8. Conclusion

In this article, we have introduced the concept of the exiled activist that is characterized by the predicaments and the possibilities that practicing human rights activism from exile bring with it. We have traced the development of this positionality throughout Myanmar's recent history and then focused on both the possibilities that living in exile brings for their activist work, as well as the psychosocial hardships activists face. Although exiled activists have been inspiring and shaping activist movements within the country long before the attempted coup (e.g. the women's rights movement; Olivius 2019b), we have described why many are uncomfortable speaking out right now since they do not share the same physical danger as activists in Myanmar. Moreover, activists might become divided along the lines of who has actively fought the military and therefore consider themselves 'better' or more 'worthy', compared to those who 'only lent support' for the revolution through awareness-raising, fundraising, networking, collecting evidence, or trying to get fellow activists out of the country. To prevent such falling out among activists, exiled activists we spoke to try to maintain a balance between respecting the fact that their comrades on the ground are suffering on a much more fundamental level than they are, and acknowledging that the decisions they have taken might have been born out of necessity. But, at the same time, they continue to caution all parties when it comes to the excessive use of force: 'We must be better than the military', as one activist put it. Another political challenge that recently exiled activists face is that when they begin to engage with the general Myanmar diaspora in an effort to tap into these established networks for further support, they sometimes get judged for criticizing Aung San Suu Kyi, her party, the NLD, or the NUG. For instance, to expand his network in exile, one activist met people from the Myanmar diaspora, but they became upset when he began to stand up for the Rohingya. Even though many in the diaspora despise the Myanmar military, many who have been exiled long ago or were born abroad are still in favor of the country's 'Burmanization' (Holmes 1967), for example, by viewing Myanmar as a country of Buddhists and not acknowledging that Myanmar is home to diverse ethnic groups and religions, including the Rohingya. These different political perspectives between formerly and recently exiled people pose a challenge to all activist work that is being carried out at the moment. We would like to suggest that a way to transcend the dichotomizing debate is to conceptualize exile as a condition of in-betweenness that is neither defined by being inside or outside, but rather by an inherent instability: 'Exile is to be in any fixed place, not inside or outside, but suspended in the leap; exile is the leap itself from the inside to the outside', argued the exiled Chilean philosopher Eduardo Carrasco (Carrasco 2002: 203–61, cited in Silva Rojas et al. 2015: 2). Moreover, as we have shown with our

emphasis on the psychosocial challenges exiled activists face, the experience of inner exile—a condition where 'the foreign' becomes an issue 'both within and outside ourselves' (Stitou 2021: 168)—might be even more challenging. Exile needs to be understood as an existential threat, as one might become not only alienated from one's home, but potentially even from oneself.

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Ethical approval

Throughout the research for this article and during the writing process, we have adhered to the ethics guidelines as laid out by the German Association for Social and Cultural Anthropology (DGSKA; https://www.dgska.de/en/ethics/). We have anonymized all our interlocutors' names with the exception of those who wanted their real name to be mentioned. We used encrypted ways of online communication with all our interlocutors and offered the possibility to withdraw from the conversations at any time. We also ensured that all data is stored safely and will not be shared with third persons.

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