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Homeland Activists Without a Home: the Ecosystem of Exile Politics

When repressive regimes shut down political expression and opposition within their borders, people flee, and homeland activism frequently emerges in other locations. This book examines the ecosystem of exile politics, paying particular attention to the phenomenon of precarious homeland activism – that is, individuals who are working to reform the government of the country from which they have fled, but who remain precarious in their country of refuge.

In this book, I focus primarily on ethnic Nepalis from Bhutan who fled in large numbers following repressive measures in Bhutan in the 1990s. In Nepal and India, refugees worked to highlight the abuses of their home country at considerable personal risk, including the possibility and reality of detention and deportation. What explains this phenomenon?

Relying on literatures from migration, social movements, transnationalism, and precarity, I offer two propositions. First, the *spatial model of contention* proposes that when repressive regimes stem activism and oppositional voices within the country, key bases for activism emerge in countries that are physically proximate to the home country. This power of proximity is more likely to occur under the following conditions: when borders are *porous*, when there is a *volume* of people who have fled with *immediate* claims to abuse, when the cost of activism is low relative to the resources available (*relative resources*), and when homeland activists can rely on *strong networks*.

Second, the *proximity-precarity proposition* advances the notion that the international protection community is structured such that countries physically proximate to repressive regimes are politically precarious for homeland activists. I define political precarity along two axes: 1) the absence of enduring forms of protection in the host country for those who fled as refugees (i.e., the inability to procure citizenship); and 2) a discourse of discouraging homeland activism by those charged with protecting the refugees. I assert that the international refugee regime favours distance and delay over proximity and immediacy, and that oppositional work directed toward home countries is discouraged (if not outright banned) in proximate host countries.

This combination – the impetus of homeland activists to remain in physically proximate countries that are, by nature, structurally politically precarious – explains the phenomenon of homeland activists without a home.

The book expounds on these two propositions theoretically and empirically. It demonstrates that the conceptual work on proximate populations is thin, despite the fact that most refugees remain near their home countries. This book thus rehabilitates physical distance as an important consideration in thinking about refugee protection and mobilization. Examples of proximate and distant diasporas are woven into the early chapters, including activists focused on countries as varied as Syria, Venezuela and Chad. The book then draws empirical attention to the case of Bhutan, where responses to repressive government action took place in Bhutan in a limited form, and then in Nepal and India, and eventually expanded to the distant diaspora – in places like the United States and Australia. The ecosystem of exile politics is thus explored in-depth, across space and time.

The book's conclusion points to a paradox: people who flee repressive countries may want to remain nearby in order to broadcast the abuses of their home country, but the pull of proximate activism sits in tension with its politically precarious nature. When activists become the distant diaspora, they lose the power of proximity. The book concludes with a call to end political precarity in countries physically proximate to repressive regimes.