

# **Agrarian Struggles in the Era of Climate Change, Populism, and Authoritarianism in Myanmar**

Studies on land grabs since the 2007-2008 crisis have looked at how appropriation of land by foreign and national elite actors have been connected to dispossession of marginalized populations, and how they in turn, have resisted.

In the era of climate change, land has been increasingly connected to climate change and as target of climate change mitigation politics. At the same time, the contemporary global rise in authoritarian and populist politics have shaped how struggles over land and resources are framed and fought.

The aim of this study was to investigate these dynamics by asking: How and under what conditions are contemporary land struggles in the era of authoritarianism, populism and climate change framed and fought? It seeks to answer the question by investigating the political economic, ecological, political regime and social movement conditions in Burma/Myanmar, historically and up to the period of liberalization under President Thein Sein and the NLD party (2011-2020). It looks at how authoritarian and populist dynamics in the reformist era relate to the wider political economy and have shaped land and resource struggles, as well as how newly arriving climate change mitigation politics intersect with historic dynamics of conflict and accumulation. The study draws on participant observation and ethnographic methods, interviews, personal conversations, and an engaged, scholar-activist approach. It also draws on secondary data and historical materials.

The study found that firstly, land struggles are embedded in a longer history of capitalist development, ecological transformations, state-building and ethnic-territorial conflicts in Burma/Myanmar since British colonial rule.

Secondly, struggles over land and resources are also struggles over the state, where the state and society are understood as arenas of struggle. Despite historically entrenched military dominance, authoritarianism, and populism as fluid features of the state actors and dynamics. Thirdly, mainstream solutions to resolving land conflicts, including titling and formalization based on transparency and multi-stakeholderism are insufficient in resolving longstanding conflicts over land and resources. Fourthly, struggles over land are also struggles of environmental and climate justice, referred to in this study as “agrarian climate justice” struggles, and are not only struggles over resources but also for recognition and representation, and about democratizing the state more generally. Political dynamics of scaling up struggles across large-scale palm oil concessions, extractivist mining projects and top-down conservation projects in the southern Tanintharyi region push windows of opportunity but are not without tensions and fault-lines. Finally, land struggles in peri-urban spaces contest forms of authoritarian and developmentalist dispossession and illustrate the commonalities between urban and rural land struggles, where underlying logics can provide the seed for cross-class alliances across these spaces.

The study concludes that contemporary struggles over land cannot overlook the environmental climate crises and struggle over other resources, the wider political economy and shaping the state. This means contesting historic entrenched power of military-linked elites and navigating spaces of contestation over territory. These become relevant to the contemporary struggles against continued and deepening violent authoritarianism under military rule since February 2021.