

Abstract

The politics of land rush in Myanmar

The existing literature on land rush primarily focuses on operational land deals, often excluding non-operational/failed deals and pin-prick land accumulation. This narrow focus has led to an incomplete understanding of the nature and impact of land rushes, particularly concerning labour. The gap in understanding becomes even more evident when considering all three categories of land rushes separately and collectively. Given the increasing conditions of precarity encountered by peasants and the rural working people, addressing the question of labour is crucial in the context of extractivism, climate change, conservation politics, and violent conflicts.

This study seeks to address the overarching question of how contemporary land rushes shape and are reshaped by the political economy of labour in Myanmar – in the context of closely linked issues of climate and environmental issues, extractivism, and conservation politics. To answer this question, the study first traces the political economy of historical evolution around land and labour relations under different regimes, starting from the pre-colonial era in the 1800s to the period of democratic transition and liberalization under the quasi-military/quasi-civilian government between 2011 to 2021. Second, the study analyzes the contemporary land rushes that emerged after the 1994 ceasefire era and the 2010 state regime change. By taking these specific conjunctures, the study examines how various features such as ceasefire capitalism, state territorialization, Burmanization, legacies of colonialism, geopolitics, and development schemes have come to form the “historical present” landscape. It also assesses the institutional shifts (formal/informal/customary) and political responses of different factions within society based on class, ideology, ethnicity, and territoriality. The study is anchored in a unified lens to examine the relationship between land and labour, recognizing their inseparability within both economic production and social reproduction spheres. Drawing upon a theoretical framework grounded in critical agrarian studies and related fields, it explores key concepts such as the global land rush, spectacle-making, social reproduction, class and intersectionality, the role of the state, and structural, institutional and political shifts to make sense of the realities on the ground. The methodology used to approach the research questions is grounded in critical realism in combination with historical methods, landscape approach, and scholar-activism. The study relies on a mixed-method approach that includes case study, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, archival method, participant observation, and household survey.

Firstly, the study found that the land rush, while fueled by responses to global crisis narratives, is significantly intensified when these narratives converge with violent conflict. It served the state's territorialization, legitimacy building, and capital accumulation agenda in the midst of ethno-territorial conflicts. Thus, violence has been integral to the production of the land rush, but it became normalized, muted and invisibilized by market-based development schemes, state narratives and economic liberalization. Secondly, the study found that the land rush has reshaped the labour regime, creating a growing number of working people through adverse incorporation and non-incorporation of labour in a rapidly changing landscape. Thirdly, peasant households who have been completely or partially dispossessed of their land have engaged in rural-rural migration in search of livelihoods, often ending up in the mining sites where they, along with migrants from

across the country, sell their labour cheaply to address their subsistence crisis. This phenomenon showed that the struggles of working people within the spheres of production and social reproduction are closely linked to the growing mining industry in Kachin State and the resulting ecological crisis. Fourthly, due to the spectacle-making nature of the land rush and political contestation from below, many land deals did not materialize as planned. The study found that such outcomes in the form of a "public victory" or "silent return" (of the land to the people; of the people to the land) do not translate into socially just outcomes for the rural working people. Land conflicts and struggles continue – in difficult political conditions due to the fragmentation of social forces behind the previous cycle of struggles and due to public indifference as a result of the routinization and invisibilization of these cases. Finally, the study argues that dominant narratives about land governance, or "governing" or "managing" land grabs, or demanding accountability, need to be reframed from the minimalist, official, policy-centered notion of governance to one that confronts the actual messy entanglements on the ground.

The study concludes that contemporary land politics must go beyond “merely environmental”, purely agrarian and localist perspectives to struggle for a socially just future for all rural working people.