

Extractive Imperative of Resistant State-Making Actors in Myanmar: A Continuum for Survival and State-Making

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Abstract

Since the British colonial era, Myanmar has experienced intensive resource extraction. Successive military authoritarian regimes have systematically exploited the country's natural resources, often to the detriment of local populations and the environment. For decades, the civil society of Myanmar have anticipated a transition away from an economy dependent on extractive revenues, hoping that such a shift would be realised under the leadership of democratic forces resisting centralised authority. Similarly, ethnic communities have expected that their armed resistance organisations would eventually implement democratic, systematic, and environmentally sustainable approaches to natural resource governance upon assuming political power.

However, these aspirations have largely remained unfulfilled. Even when resistance armed groups succeeded in establishing highly autonomous administrative structures and extending territorial control beyond the reach of the Myanmar military—particularly following the widespread popular armed uprising in response to the 2021 military coup—the anticipated reforms did not materialise. On the contrary, both newly formed armed authorities and long-established ethnic armed organisations, in the course of engaging in state-making, armed struggle, and processes of reterritorialization, have reproduced extractivist trajectories similar to those of earlier Myanmar authoritarian regimes.

Drawing on a Critical Political Economy perspective, this paper analyses how global capitalist structures and processes of resource frontier making shape the reproduction of extractive state-making by revolutionary authorities in Myanmar, with particular focus on Karenni (Kayah State). The paper introduces the concept of the extractive imperative of state-making actors during periods of revolutionary armed struggle. It argues that the capitalist logic of resource cheapening benefits directly from the “distress sale of nature” undertaken by many armed resistance groups in Myanmar, which are in urgent need of revenue to finance revolutionary state-building and military operations. Processes of accumulation, resource cheapening, and extractive state-making thus operate within the same global capitalist circuit.