

Climate Change as an Arena of Political Struggles During Violent Conflict in Post-Coup Myanmar

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Abstract

This article examines how climate change discourses and actions are appropriated by different actors during violent conflict, both as instruments of regime repression and as tools of resistance. Using the case of post-coup Myanmar - marked by conflict, high exposure to climate risk and widespread resistance to military rule – we show that ‘greening’ becomes enrolled into broader political struggles over authority, territorial control and international recognition. Our core argument is that wartime dynamics intensify competition over responses to climate change, but that they also open possibilities for alternative visions of stateness and environmental stewardship that challenge authoritarian rule. Drawing on interviews and digital ethnography of media and social media, we analyse three key cases of greening: the military junta, the oppositional National Unity Government (NUG), and the Karen National Union (KNU), an ethnic resistance organisation. We show how the junta performs a green image to consolidate authoritarian state power and conceal military violence, resembling ‘greenwashing’ in other contexts. The NUG and KNU’s greening agendas form part of contesting military rule and efforts to build alternative states by articulating federalism and people-centred approaches. The KNU further distinguishes itself by foregrounding Indigenous knowledge and practices, with its post-coup greening building off and expanding pre-coup Indigenous-led conservation initiatives based on civil society advocacy. While rooted in domestic contestation, the three sets of actors also deploy greening to seek international recognition. Conceptually, the article bridges studies from critical political ecology and anthropology on state greenwashing, climate interventions, and environmental activism. We extend this scholarship into contexts with conflict and competitive state-making projects. In doing so, the article nuances dominant understandings of the climate–conflict nexus by shifting attention from climate change as a cause of conflict to how climate discourses and actions become stakes of intensified political competition under conditions of violent conflict.