

Living with Dispossession: Social Suffering Among Delta Peasants in Post Coup Myanmar

COFFEE

Abstract

This paper examines land dispossession in post-coup Myanmar as an ongoing condition of structural violence that produces enduring social suffering among rural communities. Drawing on agrarian political economy scholarship and integrating Paul Farmer's concept of structural violence with Kleinman, Das, and Lock's notion of social suffering, it argues that dispossession should be understood beyond the moment of land loss to include the long-term insecurities generated through unequal legal and political structures.

Empirically, the study focuses on Palaung Village in Maubin Township, Ayeyarwady Region, based on qualitative fieldwork conducted under conditions of surveillance and political repression, including in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, participant observation, and informal conversations. It shows how the 2021 military coup intensified pre-existing land conflicts by further weakening legal protections, restricting access to dispute resolution mechanisms, and undermining civil society organizations that previously supported dispossessed farmers. In this context, legality functions less as a protective system than as a mechanism of exclusion that sustains authoritarian control over land and deepens rural insecurity.

The findings demonstrate that land dispossession is experienced not only as economic loss but also as chronic uncertainty marked by fear of criminalization, indebtedness, and unresolved claims. At the same time, dispossessed farmers actively navigate these conditions through informal cultivation of contested land, which sustains livelihoods while simultaneously asserting ongoing claims to legitimacy and belonging outside formal legal recognition.

By conceptualizing dispossession as structural violence embedded in authoritarian legality, the paper contributes to agrarian studies by extending structural violence to post-confiscation conditions, rethinking legality as an active mechanism of exclusion, and highlighting informal cultivation as a form of everyday agency under authoritarian rule.