

Broken Promises at the Crossroads of Development: Militarized Infrastructure, Customary Land Tenure, Human Rights and the Uncertain Future Since Military Attempted the Coup in Myanmar

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Abstract

This article examines the collapse of development governance in Myanmar through the intersecting lenses of customary land tenure, militarized infrastructure expansion, extractive resource economies, and systemic human rights violations following the February 2021 military coup. Building upon pre-2019 field research on Ta'ang tea-farming communities in Northern Shan State, the study situates the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) within the broader political economy of authoritarian restructuring that has unfolded since partial liberalization in 2011 and intensified under military rule after 2021. While infrastructure initiatives under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) were framed as vehicles for inclusive growth, regional connectivity, and poverty reduction, the post-coup military junta has reconfigured strategic corridors, rare-earth extraction zones, and energy projects into instruments of territorial control, counter-insurgency logistics, and coercive economic consolidation. Customary land systems—historically marginalized under overlapping statutory rules and an assemblage of legal land-grabbing tools, including the 1894 Law on Legal Land Acquisition, the 1991 and 2008 Constitutional Land Regulations, the 2012 (and 2020) Agricultural Land Act, the Virgin, Fallow and Vacant Land Management Acts, the Foreign Investment Act (Section 64), and the 2019 National Land Demarcation Act—have been further eroded by armed conflict, displacement, militarized land seizures, and the collapse of rule-of-law institutions. Since the coup, intensified airstrikes, village destruction, arbitrary detention, and restrictions on humanitarian access have produced a climate of structural violence that renders conventional development investment ethically untenable and practically unworkable. At the same time, expanding rare-earth mining in northern Myanmar, driven by transnational supply chains, has deepened environmental degradation and militarized extractivism. Integrating indigenous land rights analysis with post-coup human rights documentation (2021–2026), the article conceptualizes Myanmar's condition as “development deadlock” and argues for a rights-based development paradigm grounded in federal democracy, recognition of customary land tenure, environmental justice, and people-led reconstruction strategies.