

Repression and Displacement: A Case of Karenni Internal Displacement in Post-Coup Myanmar

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Abstract

Since the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, Karenni (Kayah) State has experienced some of the country's highest proportions of internal displacement relative to population, yet the mechanisms driving this displacement remain underexplored. Existing research on state repression and forced migration is often separated as repression studies mostly focus on repression–dissent relationship while displacement research tends to treat violence as generalized background factor causing flight. This study bridges these literatures by proposing a repression–displacement nexus, examining how distinct forms of state repression employed by the Myanmar military junta produce distinct forms of internal displacement in post-coup Karenni.

Conceptually, the study develops a framework that distinguishes between blanket and targeted repression, and between collateral and strategic displacement. Blanket repression refers to indirect and often. indiscriminate violence and restrictions, whereas targeted repression consists of face-to-face, interpersonal coercion directed at particular individuals, households, or communities. Correspondingly, collateral displacement is defined as sudden, reactive flight from increasingly uninhabitable environments, while strategic displacement reflects more directly coerced movements linked to explicit efforts to expel civilians from specific areas. Empirically, this study draws on qualitative fieldwork conducted inside Karenni State, utilizing key informant and in-depth interviews, complemented by secondary sources.

The findings show that blanket repression functions as structural coercion that primarily generates

collateral displacement while targeted repression drives strategic displacement through interpersonal domination. At the same time, the lived experiences of Karenni civilians reveal grey zones and overlaps between these conceptual distinctions, suggesting a continuum of coercive processes in which displacement emerges both as a consequence and a mechanism of state repression.