

Between Precarity and Solidarity: Thai Local Responses to Burmese migrants after the 2021 coup

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Abstract

Following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, deepening economic collapse, intensified armed conflict, forced military recruitment, and political repression have driven millions of people to seek refuge and work in Thailand. More than four million Myanmar nationals now occupy labor-intensive jobs in fisheries, construction, manufacturing, and agriculture, sustaining key sectors of the Thai economy. While cross-border mobility has long been structurally embedded, post-coup migration is marked by heightened mobile precarity and forms of differential inclusion, whereby migrants are incorporated into the labor market but remain legally and socially marginal, including through precarious pay and working conditions and volatile housing arrangements.

By mid-2025, escalating armed conflict in Thailand's border regions, including rising tensions with Cambodia, fueled nationalist sentiment and intensified state-led politics of insecurity. Anti-migrant narratives—framed in terms of national security, economic competition, and social disorder—gained traction, particularly in provinces with high concentrations of Burmese workers. In response, political leaders called for tighter migration controls and intensified crackdowns on undocumented labor.

Drawing on over forty qualitative interviews conducted across five provinces with precarious Thai and Burmese respondents in 2025–2026 supplemented with recent secondary survey data, this paper examines how low-income Thai communities negotiate their relationships with Burmese migrants in this shifting socio-political landscape. Despite the growing circulation of rhetoric depicting migrants as sources of crime or job displacement, Thai employers and co-workers frequently describe Burmese workers as disciplined, resilient, and indispensable to local economies. These encounters reveal forms of everyday solidarity and workplace cooperation shaped by shared labor precarity, even as symbolic boundaries around citizenship and national belonging harden. By situating anti-migrant sentiment within the dynamics of a fractured precariat—in which Thai workers face rising insecurity and mixed sentiment towards migrants while migrants experience intensified legal vulnerability—this paper shows how solidarity and exclusion coexist within regimes of precarious labor.