

Liberty, Criminality, Violence, and Resistance: Dualities of 'Lawlessness' in the Myanmar Borderworld

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Abstract

Emerging conversations on the borderlands of Myanmar have largely zoned in on the criminality and the lawlessness of the region, focusing on the criminal industries rampant on the Myanmar-Thai border. Such framing, however, does not pay adequate attention to the role of the Myanmar borderlands in fostering and reproducing resistance against authoritarian repression in Myanmar. Revisiting James Scott's concept of Zomia, I argue that 'lawlessness' caused by the diminishing state influence in its peripheries is inherently dualistic. On the one hand, it fuels criminality as diminishing state capacity aims to negotiate and regulate criminal actors. On the other hand, diminished state influence in the peripheries allows refuge for resistance and dissidence to take shape at the penumbra of the state. The two developments are not mutually exclusive and are deeply interconnected. I forward this argument by examining the political development in the Myanmar borderlands before and after the 2021 Military Coup, focusing on the political economy of war on the Myanmar-Thai border.