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## The politics of Myanmar's agrarian transformation

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### ABSTRACT



Myanmar is in a dangerous and uncertain moment following the military coup on 1 February 2021. The articles in this Special Forum provide timely contextual analysis. Written before the coup, the articles delve into the politics of agrarian transformation in the context of (what was then) an ongoing (but fragile) opening up of political space. This introduction outlines three themes that connect the articles and now also shed some light on what the future may hold: (1) the limited character of the 2010–2021 'democratic transition'; (2) the struggles around land and natural resources amidst a social reproduction crisis and (3) the responses of rural working peoples.

### KEYWORDS

Myanmar (Burma); democratic transition; rural working people; military coup; politics of agrarian transformation

This Special Forum on Myanmar's agrarian transformation concludes at a moment of great danger and deep uncertainty resulting from the military coup that took place on 1 February 2021. All the articles were written before the coup, and all the authors were keen to engage explicitly on the *politics* of agrarian transformation in the context of (what was at that time) a still ongoing (fragile) opening up of political space and the social-political challenges of working in such a context, including examining the changing political agency of the implicated differentiated rural peoples (along lines of class, gender, generation and in Myanmar the all-important question of ethnicity). Reading their analyses now may thus help to dampen any temptation to romanticize about what life and politics was like for many people before the coup. And it will put under a critical spotlight the call by some segments of the resistance movement for a return to where everyone/everything was before the coup, that is, to restore the NLD government to power under the military-crafted 2008 Constitution. Most of the authors who contributed insights and analysis to the six articles constituting this special forum are long-time social activists who have been working for many years outside the spotlight and under the radar, alongside many other veteran activists, grassroots organizations, issue-based associations and ethnic communities.

In the years before and since the national political cycle that began with the March 2011 handover of government by the military-run SPDC to the quasi-civilian Thein Sein

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administration, they have been in the trenches, so to speak, along with many others, accompanying ordinary people in doing the everyday politics of regime transition. Such efforts have involved the crucial but often intangible work of feeling for openings, testing limits, deploying razor-sharp political humour, calculating risks, calibrating interventions, reaching out and ratcheting up, building bridges, stepping up and stepping back, pushing with restraint, articulating hopes, managing fears, calling bluffs, etc. It's worth mentioning here too that this has also necessarily involved working to ensure the material conditions needed to enable these dynamics of activism to survive and thrive, despite increasingly bureaucratized and periodically politicized relationships with both government donors and international non-governmental donor agencies. While for various reasons and at various times government donors and donor agencies could become quite allergic to activism – especially activism taking extra-parliamentary form – this was not always the case, and despite what may have been risks involved in supporting social change activism during the post-2011 opening, some of these actors supported this work anyway.

Much of what the bulk of ordinary people actively trying to shape the transition underway have been doing has remained invisible and in the shadow of a still fairly draconian 'rule of law', while the international media spotlight has tended to focus on increasing space for elite politics and elite-driven economic reform, as if these were all that mattered in the regime transition underway. It was important that these 'invisible' politics remained so at times, in order to protect and shelter them, and at other times, it was critical that they surface, in order to try to propel more central political processes in a more radical direction. But while much of the social activism for meaningful agrarian change has resurrected and unfurled in the lingering shadows cast by past coups, past waves of resource grabbing, and past 'high politics' turning points, at the same time, a fairly clear set of major neoliberal-oriented economic reforms have been initiated and steadily pushed since 2011 as part and parcel of a 'rule of law' reform agenda aimed at creating the 'positive enabling environment' for big Asian, US and EU-based business interests itching to enter or do more business in Myanmar. Hitherto, earlier rounds of market liberalization following the then-military regime's response to political and economic crises in the late 1980s had mainly benefitted regional (especially Chinese and Thai) and local capitalists (with the exception of two infamous gas projects – one led by Total, one led by UNOCAL – see ERI 1996).

The consequences of these reforms have been hitting the ground hard, yet affecting different groups of people differently depending on class, ethnicity, gender, generation, and geographic region. And so here is one crux of the matter for many of the hardest hit people today: as huge masses of people from all walks of life spill currently into the streets to protest the military coup – how and to what extent will the broad anti-coup resistance movement be able to take on 1. the contradictions emerging from capitalist development and 2. the growing aspiration for a democratic federal union? Capitalism is not tied exclusively to any particular kind of political system: it can exist under outright militarized authoritarian conditions, and also under still-militarized, semi-authoritarian political conditions where participation in decision making is open to some segments of society to some degree, but many (if not most) remain excluded more or less completely (e.g. more akin to what the country had been experiencing in the decade prior to the coup).

Since 2011, capitalist development has wrought a new configuration of winners and losers, where a wider range of people found opportunities and breathing room to accumulate and have seen their living conditions improve, while many others have

seen their situation deteriorate significantly. The ranks of those engaged in '3D' migrant labour work abroad (e.g. dirty, difficult, dangerous) and the importance of migrant worker remittances to the national economy, for example, have increased dramatically since 2011 as a result partly of the new laws and policies put in place by the quasi-military Thein Sein government but then continued and even deepened by the 'democratically-elected' NLD-led government (Borras et al. 2020). The agrarian crisis that is pushing many people, from different walks of life (both ethnic Bamar and non-Bamar), further toward or deeper into landlessness and precarious labour conditions, has been deepening throughout the country. But its precise character has varied, shaped by complex social-historical and political-economic particularities, including politicized geographies of race/ethnicity, obtaining in different regions and subregions. To be sure, however, regions and subregions where various non-Bamar 'ethnic nationalities' (a term increasingly preferred nowadays by non-Bamar activists themselves, in a bid to put the term 'ethnic minorities' firmly into the past) are most concentrated, have been clearly targeted for 'accumulation by dispossession' via outright extra-economic coercion, in tandem with and alongside processes of commodification, as discussed below. The increasingly organized, multi-ethnic demand for abolition of the 2008 Constitution and building of a democratic federal union is therefore very much underpinned by the intensely racialized/ethnicised character of Myanmar political-economy historically.

These two questions – the one about economic development for who and what purpose, the other about what kind of political system for who and on what basis – have always been on the agenda in some way or another, but in varying and relatively understated degrees (perhaps especially since the late 1980s). One can surely argue that, prior to the 1st February 2021 coup, an elite pacted type of 'transition to democracy' had been unfolding – one where the opening and its benefits were still largely limited to the actors included in the 'class compromise between senior military personnel, private capitalists, and a rising political class' (Aung and Campbell 2016). But at the same time, to illustrate, if we look at the land politics that occurred during this time, the limits of this opening on the formal national land policy making stage were also partly self-inflicted as a result of tactical and strategic considerations by some of the actors engaged in land policy debates. While many land rights advocates and ethnic rights activists, confronted with a very limited 'public consultation' on a new national land policy in 2014–2015, were deeply dismayed by the government's original draft and could perhaps agree broadly on what was wrong with it, agreement on the terms of engagement with this process could not be taken for granted. For example, getting key civil society leaders of different ethnic land rights movements to be officially invited to speak in just one panel discussion during a two-day government 'national workshop on customary tenure' held at that time and co-organized by Myanmar government, donor governments, INGOs and one local NGO, required intense negotiations and pressure by the allies of these ethnic leaders (not the ethnic leaders themselves). This pressure included even those parties who were not in the Myanmar government, but who feared what the ethnic leaders might say and what the government reaction might be to them speaking. And meanwhile, as 'recognition of ethnic/customary tenure systems' as a general principle gained traction on public advocacy agendas, land redistribution did not. For various reasons some actors were resistant to giving 'too much' space to 'too many' or to certain kinds of grievances and framings around 'right to land' and were thus content to hold the

line in terms of separating and insulating 'national land policy making' from deeper issues of questions around the economic model and self-determination (the tensions between different political currents are discussed further by Ra and Ju [this issue](#); Sekine [this issue](#)).

Yet time has passed since the 2014–2016 national land policy making turning point, and no one steps into the same waters twice. As popular resistance to the February 1 coup grows, it is encouraging to see placards and slogans that go beyond simply 'Free Aung San Suu Kyi' to demand the release of all political prisoners, the abolition of the 2008 Constitution and the establishment of a democratic federal union (for contextualization on the significance of such demands, see Kramer [this issue](#)). But whether or not the movement more broadly will be willing to take these on as core planks remains to be seen. And while the call for federalism is there, calls for a rejection of capitalism or that even hint of a critique of capitalism are mostly absent from this political stage. To what extent will the differentiated and diverse forces currently coming together incorporate a serious critique of capitalism alongside a serious push for a democratic federal union?

The articles in this special forum provide key contextual analysis for anyone trying to grapple with what the future might hold in the country. In the remainder of this introduction, we outline what we see as three key themes (all relating to the above two questions) emerging from the papers: (1) the limits of the otherwise much-lauded 'democratic transition' from 2010 to 2020 and the enduring force of the military; (2) the entrenchment of struggles around land and natural resources amidst a social reproduction crisis and (3) how these conditions have shaped and are shaped by responses from rural working peoples across Myanmar. We close with a short note on the poem by K Za Win included as part of this special forum.

### **The limits of Myanmar's 'democratic transition'**

Following the military intervention, many mainstream commentators, international non-governmental organizations and donor agencies and donor governments who had supported the transition are busy getting on the right side of history, now emphasizing the limited nature of the democratic transition from 2011, the continuing instances of war against minority-ethnic populations and the continuing dominance of the military. Yet, such announcements are a far cry away from the jubilant approach that characterized especially Western observers and informed the actions of foreign investors as well as funding strategies and policy proposals of organizations like the IMF, World Bank and the Asian Development Bank until recently. This despite early warnings from many CSOs, especially from ethnic regions. This approach has primarily been about ensuring the opportunities for penetration of US and EU capital without disruption – irrespective of the continuing atrocities waged by the military – and expanding these opportunities through political-economic reforms. As noted above, until these reforms began and the lifting of sanctions against the country were introduced, the agrarian transformations characteristic of capitalist development under the military regime<sup>1</sup> had mainly benefitted capital emanating from neighbouring countries working in coalition with the military

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<sup>1</sup>Involving the '[e]xploitation of abundant resources' and 'exporting whatever surplus available' as the regime put it in the Foreign Investment Law of 1988.

and/or military-connected incipient capitalists. For US- and EU-based capital then, the 'opening up' of the country from 2011 onwards and particularly following Aung San Suu Kyi's rise to formal power represented new opportunities that had to be carefully safeguarded and deepened. For example, in the midst of how 'negative press about Myanmar and human rights ... could tarnish the country's image as an investment destination' the Myanmar European Chamber of Commerce's recommendations to the NLD-government in 2020 were 'to make efforts to deliver clear positive messages to the international community' on questions of human rights and labour affairs – not that anything needed to fundamentally change for the Chamber's members to continue their business operations (Eurocham Myanmar 2020, 43). In the same report, it is noted how the 'establishment of a clear set of guidelines' for foreign companies to acquire land has been 'partially tackled' through the controversial land policy changes of 2012 (see below), but that clearer guidelines are needed for 'foreign companies active in the agricultural sector who are looking for land in Myanmar' (Eurocham Myanmar 2020, 30, 55).

Collectively and individually, all of the papers in this special forum shed light on the stark reality that for people in rural areas and especially minority-ethnic areas, the military and their oppressive policies never left. In contrast to the notion that despite a few smaller challenges here and there, everything was on track and Myanmar was on the way to becoming Asia's next rising star (see e.g. ADB 2012), the articles therefore paint a very different picture.

In his wide-ranging examination of the successive rounds of ceasefires and their implications on rural peoples in minority-ethnic areas, Tom Kramer shows how the political economy of what he calls the 'neither war nor peace'-policy of the military over the past 30 years has facilitated the expansion of extractive industries into these areas leading to widespread dispossession of rural peoples. Developing earlier discussions and accounts of the role and implications of ceasefires between ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and the military in the borderlands (e.g. Jones 2014; Kramer 2009; Woods 2011) he distinguishes between two rounds of ceasefires, one from 1989 to 2010 and then from 2011 to the present. As he argues, in the second round of ceasefires, the tactics of coercion and military pressure used in the first round have been complemented with the adoption and use of a new legal framework – especially the controversial twinned Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Land Law and the Farmland Law from 2012. Together these two laws encourage the individual registration of land across the country with the central government under threat of it otherwise being deemed vacant, fallow and virgin and spur on the development of a nationwide land market (if not yet to a sufficient degree for the likes of Eurocham). Kramer shows how amidst the frustratingly slow and limited peace negotiations and the continuation of military confrontations in parts of the country, these reforms around land have effectively been a declaration of war by other means against EAOs for which the land question remains central. As he quotes the Karen Peace Support Network for putting it in 2018, 'Land tenure and resource access are also tied to opportunities for peace, as they are at the centre of all ethnic groups' long-standing struggles to secure equal rights and self-determination' (Kramer [this issue](#)). The implications of these combined tactics for entrenching the 'neither war nor peace'-policy have been a loss of land and related natural resources for peoples in these areas, while the central government and military's political and economic control has been strengthened vis-à-vis the EAOs.

This scale of analysis looking at ethnic borderlands across the country is complemented by the regionally focused discussions in a number of other papers. Yukari Sekine and Clara Park each examine dynamics of dispossession – and responses to them (see below) – under the neither war nor peace policy in the Southeastern region of Tanintharyi. As Sekine shows, a holistic examination of the multiple and intersecting challenges facing rural peoples in the current moment requires looking beyond agriculture to also examine the expansion of mining and conservation initiatives and how these fit into struggles over the land question between EAOs and the military. As Park elucidates, these multisectoral intersections become particularly challenging for rural peoples in areas of competing territorialization projects, between the central government and the Karen National Union. Moving to the other end of the country, Oliver Springgate-Baginski and Mi Kamoon discuss how customary tenure systems in Shan State have also become implicated in this declaration of war by other means. Here, struggles for recognition of production systems not based on individual property rights to land and commodified labour power are directly implicated in broader debates around sovereignty and territorial control. Similarly, Sai Lone and Renaud Cachia discuss how those engaged in planting poppy for opium production in Shan, Kayah and Kachin states are caught between (violent) suppression and tacit acceptance from dominant forces, whether the military, EAOs or militias – the guaranteed constant being caught in a vice-like grip of exposure to protracted armed conflicts and economic marginalization.

Far from the jubilant narratives particularly in the first half of the 2010–2020 period then, the picture that emerges from the collection, as summed up by Kramer ([this issue](#), 18) is one where this neither war nor peace entails ‘pushing millions of farmers in ethnic borderlands off their ancestral lands while facing unprecedented land grabs by the Tatmadaw, government cronies and foreign investors’. For ethnic peoples across the country then, as a Karen CSO representative is quoted, the previous form of ‘[p]eace is very dangerous’. In light of recent events, Kramer’s phrase of course takes on new meaning – the neither peace nor war-policy under the return to direct military rule has also proven to very dangerous.

### **The entrenchment of struggles around land and natural resources amidst a social reproduction crisis**

One of the key rural development policies to come out under the NLD-led government was the Agricultural Development Strategy (ADS) released in 2017. Along the lines of the vision laid out in the World Bank’s infamous 2008 report, the ADS similarly envisions development of the countryside through the integration of a minority of small-holders into global value chains, while the rest are expected to transition into other sectors (for critiques see Bello 2018; Vicol and Pritchard 2020).<sup>2</sup> The ADS should be seen in relation to the broader political-economic reforms and a slew of other agriculture-related strategies from 2011 onwards. For example, with reference to the Myanmar Investment Law (MIL) of October 2016, which ‘aims to promote foreign investment’, it is noted that the ‘ADS will align business investment with the safeguards for small holders under the

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<sup>2</sup>Several of the points that Tania Li (2009) raises in her critique of the World Development Report in this journal regarding the limited opportunities for such ‘exits’ remain prescient in Myanmar today.



MIL' (MOALI 2018, 26). With reference to other strategies related to agriculture and natural resources more broadly, '[t]hey share similar general views' regarding 'the need of modernizing the system, accelerating mechanization and achieving recognition in global markets through export growth' (MOALI 2018). The ADS thus follows a neo-institutional economics approach in terms of how best to harness the development of capitalist relations of production in agriculture – the point is to 'facilitat[e] the process of transforming the agricultural sector from a situation where a substantial proportion of farming is carried out primarily for subsistence or for local markets into a sector in which most farming is carried out for profitable commercialization and is connected to local, national, and international markets' (MOALI 2018, 67). Several of the papers in the special forum contribute to existing critiques of this approach to agricultural development. They emphasize that amidst the increasing penetration of capital into the countryside, processes of both dispossession *from above* and dispossession *from below* are unfolding with limited survival options for the dispossessed.

In terms of dispossession from above, all of the papers mention land and resource grabs with the military and/or local elites at the helm of the process. Doi Ra and Khu Khu Ju quote findings from a report by the national land CSO network, Land In Our Hands (LIOH), stating that 'in almost half of the cases, confiscation directly involved either the military alone, or the military in combination with other actors, including local authorities, government ministries and departments, and domestic business elites and companies' (quoted in Ra and Ju, 7). While all papers point out the earlier rounds of violent as well as technically legal (if far from legitimate) processes of dispossession prior to the 2011 opening up, they also all emphasize that a new round has been set off and entrenched following the transition to a quasi-civilian government. In their detailed examination of the circumstances in which LIOH took form, Ra and Ju outline how especially the Virgin, Fallow and Vacant (VFV) land law opens up for dispossession through legal means with reference to the significant amount of lands already granted for (re)distribution to new users and those that are identified but yet to be (re)distributed. The sentiment amongst rural peoples especially in the minority-ethnic areas of the country is well-captured by a Karenni activist, '[f]irst they grabbed our lands by military force. Now they grab it by using the law' (quoted in Kramer [this issue](#)). Reporting on findings from research in Shan State, Springate-Baginski and Kamoon similarly report that areas where customary tenure is being practiced are also under increasing threat with violent processes of grabbing at the hand of the military or armed militias now exacerbated by grabbing by actors with reference to the VFV law. However, as Ra and Ju ([this issue](#)) note, this dispossession dynamic cuts across questions of ethnicity and class and as a result, the 'VFV law impacts across regions, ethnicities and social classes. Most importantly, the impact will be the hardest on the rural working people whose lives and livelihood directly depend on access to land, and whose social safety net is embedded in having land'.

Compounding such processes of dispossession from above, several articles also highlight the 'emergence of capitalist relations in their routine but insidious form' (Li 2014, 8) leading to processes of dispossession from below resulting from social differentiation amongst rural peoples. This highlights how many people across rural Myanmar are already landless. As pointed out by Ra and Ju, one-third of the 54 million people in the agricultural sector are landless labourers and 54% own less than 5 acres of land. For



these many people, life in rural areas is increasingly precarious, forcing many of them to become what Ra and Ju ([this issue](#), 3) call 'super-workers – working long hours, taking on several jobs with small wages, living and working in "subhuman" conditions'. These more slow-moving but no less impactful processes of dispossession from below have spread far and wide in the country – also to minority-ethnic areas that historically have not been deeply integrated into capitalist social relations such as in Southeastern Tanintharyi. Based on fieldwork in a number of Karen villages, Park discusses the increasingly differentiated villagers' struggles to uphold communal practices of labour exchange and solidarity amidst increasing participation in capitalist social relations through cash-crops (Betel-nut). As she points out, 'increased pressure on land and conflicts pressures people to secure access to land through formalizing what once was customarily held land, promoting a transition towards capitalist property rights within the span of one generation' (Park [this issue](#)). Similarly, Springate-Baginski and Kamoon examine how the customary tenure systems in Shan State are also being undermined by the increasing penetration of capitalist social relations. Sai Lone and Cachia detail how crop substitution programmes exacerbate existing processes of differentiation within villages. Only those villagers with a certain amount of land qualify for support for the development, offering an exit opportunity (albeit an incomplete one, as they discuss) solely for the rich and middle-peasants in the village.

It is in this light amidst both dispossession from above and below that Ra and Ju identify a social reproduction crisis across the countryside. As they point out, those in the agricultural sector increasingly face what has been called the simple reproduction squeeze (Bernstein 1979). Struggling to survive, should people still be so lucky to cling on to any land amidst dispossession from above, they are increasingly pressured to also sell what remains, sometimes to better off neighbours through processes of dispossession from below. One of the few remaining options for people is to cultivate poppy for opium production (see Sai Lone and Cachia [this issue](#)). Another option is migration, either to the cities or across the borders especially to China and Thailand, where they often end up being the aforementioned 'super-workers'. It is estimated that five million Myanmar nationals are working outside the country, but as detailed vividly in a recent report through life-stories of migrant workers this number is probably much higher as 'migrant work is located somewhere in the grey area between legality and illegality' (Borras et al. 2020, 20). Both cultivating poppy for opium production and migration are strategies employed by people across the Northern regions discussed in this special forum (Sai Lone and Cachia [this issue](#); Springate-Baginski and Kamoon [this issue](#)), while migration is the main strategy in the South (Park [this issue](#)) of Myanmar.

## Responses from rural working peoples across Myanmar

As detailed by other Myanmar scholars, even under the harshest conditions of previous colonial and post-colonial military regimes, acts of solidarity and resistance in the face of oppression – to those willing to see them – were always there (see e.g. Aung-Thwin 2011; Malseed 2008). It is therefore no surprise that despite the challenging circumstances – indeed because of them – the rural working peoples in Myanmar conceptualized by Ra and Ju have responded with resistance, while advocating for alternative ways forward. Nonetheless, in discussing the different forms of responses by rural

working peoples across scales from the local to the regional and national, the papers in this forum also highlight a series of persistent challenges facing social forces claiming to carry forward the interests of these rural working peoples. The ones we want to touch on here are those of class, gender, relation to the state and visions for development.

Despite the clear signs of social differentiation and even class polarization across the countryside discussed above, Ra and Ju point out how Land in Our Hands (LIOH) at least in their advocacy have tended to not address the question of class. Most of the network's advocacy, mobilizing and organizing has been cast in terms of resistance to land and related resource grabs, echoing more agrarian populist analyses and visions. Reflecting critically on this in light of the significant amount of landless labourers in the countryside, they conclude that LIOH has as of yet not managed to incorporate the interests of this constituency – nor the many migrant labourers that straddle rural-urban divides. Developing a class-analysis of rural dynamics in order to better understand processes of social differentiation that are unfolding is paramount, they conclude. As they also note though, developing such class-analysis is a challenge in a context where ethnicity has been the primary lens through which to understand and strategise around the land question.

In her discussion of rural politics and different grassroots organization in Tanintharyi, Park ([this issue](#), 13) highlights how the impressive processes of 'community building and mobilization tends to overlook existing inequalities by not openly addressing gender, age, class and power differentials'. Park especially raises the question of gender and generation in the context of different Karen villages in the Southeast wrapped in the complex dynamics discussed above. Despite the gendered and generationed nature of the increasing pressure on land and conflicts impacting especially on younger women and men, girls and boys, she highlights how they currently have few meaningful ways of participating in decision-making processes to alleviate these grievances. Nonetheless, she emphasizes how the dramatic agrarian and environmental transformations and the resulting trans-local land politics also open up potentially gender-transformative politics as younger women and men break away from traditional roles where they are only recognized in terms of a vague 'future'.

The challenge of competing approaches amongst different social forces in the relation to the central government has of course been paramount ever since independence. As several of the papers point out, it remains so today. In Sekine's exploration of struggles for agrarian-climate justice, she notes how there is a need to 'close the gap' between those projects that focus on local community-building with those that primarily focus on strengthening national-level mobilizing and advocacy towards the central government. These are not mutually exclusive. Indeed they have to be combined for any project of agrarian-climate justice and a deepening of democracy to be successful. Nonetheless tensions have arisen amidst different forces that emphasize either one or the other. In part, these tensions also stem from competing understandings of the limits, or indeed merits, of appealing to the central government in the face of grievances. Beyond this closing the gap in what she calls vertical linkages, Sekine also highlights the need for closing the gaps in horizontal linkages, referencing a tendency to create a division of labour around different sectors. By contrast, she argues, it is necessary to build 'connections across disparate and sectoral resistances and organizations' (Sekine [this issue](#)).

As a result of the above then, across all the initiatives discussed, LIOH, the Myanmar Opium Farmers Forum (MOFF), Customary tenure struggles in Shan State<sup>3</sup> and the different movements in Tanintharyi, a challenge continues to be to form a coherent vision for an alternative to the current development model in Myanmar and one that is genuinely inclusive – in the sense of speaking to the material realities – of the constituencies brought together by Ra and Ju under Myanmar’s ‘rural working peoples’. Drawing on Borrás, Franco, and Wang (2013), Sekine discusses two competing political tendencies within struggles for agrarian-climate justice. These span those favouring regulation to mitigate negative impacts and maximize opportunities within the current development model to those that advocate more fundamental breaks with the current model and proposing some type of alternative vision. As Ra and Ju argue, the NLD-government coming into power was itself a demobilizing force, fragmenting previous political formations and alliances that until then spanned this spectrum, unified in their opposition towards the military regime. With the military once again taking direct control the opportunity for such alliances are once again opened up, the question is whether these changed conditions also lead to the development of a broader shared vision amongst these forces beyond their common opposition to the military power-seizure? Things are rapidly unfolding and it will be a challenge to see in which direction the current political contestations move and whether and how they deal with the foundational issues we raised above around the contradictions of capitalist development and aspirations towards a democratic federal union. Although past traditions also in moments like this one ‘weigh like a nightmare on the minds of the living’,<sup>4</sup> we hope the current moment and the actions of the brave and inspiring movements that are emerging will finally usher in a break from the patterns of the past.

### **A note on K Za Win’s poem: ‘a letter from a jail cell’**

We close on a more personal note and tone. We are honoured to include the poem titled ‘A letter from a jail cell’ by K Za Win. He bravely sacrificed his life in March during the ongoing spring revolution in response to the coup. In a different format, the poem picks up on several of the themes discussed by the other interventions in this special forum. His poem provides a compelling personal account of brutality and exploitation committed by the military regime, emphasizing the polarization between the elite ruling class and the rural working peoples. The poem shows that the crisis faced by the rural working peoples is both due to economic and extra-economic forms of dispossession, and has an impact across generations.

K Za Win himself was fully committed to social justice, and inspired other peers through his bold and thought-provoking poems. He was arrested in 2015 under the first so-called ‘democratic government’ for supporting the student movement. His family lives in one of the hotspots of land conflict between the local rural working peoples pitted against the state and a Chinese company over a mega-copper mining project.

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<sup>3</sup>Over the years, the Transnational Institute (TNI) has been providing various kinds of technical support to the development of LIOH, MOFF and the Shan Customary CSO network. Several of us in the editorial collective behind this special forum are also involved in TNI. For more info on TNI’s work in Myanmar, see: <https://www.tni.org/en/myanmar-in-focus>

<sup>4</sup>As Marx (2019 [1852], 480) evocatively put it.

Tragically, this is far from the only incident in which the life of a person like K Za Win has been taken by force. The country has lost so many young lives already under the rule of the new military dictatorship, both in the bamar and ethnic regions. Since the military coup took place on 1st February, 261 people have been killed by the soldiers and the police force, and over 2500 people have been arrested, charged or sentenced as of 22nd March. As their continued brave actions show, this time the people of Myanmar and especially the youth refuse to go back to the dark times of 1962 and 1988 that brought immense suffering to generations before them. They learn from the past, resist in solidarity at present, and act in inspiring ways to shape their future. This Myanmar Special Forum includes the poem by K Za Win in order to honour all the people that were and are willing to give up their lives and all others struggling throughout the history of Myanmar for a future determined by themselves – rather than by the dictates of the military and capital.

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