

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rural resistance under a golden dictatorship, part 2: the suspended villages

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Abstract

Few village-born social movements have influenced international relations as much as the campaign against Myitsone Dam in Burma (Myanmar). This village-born resistance led in 2011 to the suspension of a major Burmese and Chinese infrastructure project. This suspension became a symbol of democratization in Burma and a much-discussed setback of Chinese development-investment abroad. However, research literature on the Myitsone Dam has tended to conflate the local rural resistance with the broader ethnic Kachin and Burmese anti-dam movements. In contrast, this study focuses specifically on the local villages directly affected by the project, exploring their diverse stories and responses to the mega-project. Combining diverse published sources with ethnographic fieldwork and interviews done since 2010, it tells a story of displacement, resistance, social divisions, and complex relations with outsiders. This is a two-part article series. Another article – Part 1 – explores the Myitsone Dam’s rural story from its earliest days until the mega-project’s fall. This article – Part 2 – examines what has occurred *after* the mega-project’s suspension. It explores local village experiences after most residents had been resettled into relocation villages, from 2010 until now. This story begins with a bomb attack against the project and traces the village struggles until a post-coup gold mining boom.

Keywords: Gold mining; infrastructure development; Kachin; land and resource grabbing; mega-projects; Myitsone Dam; rural village activism

Introduction

The Chinese state company could not build the seven mega-dams. This was the result of the Burmese social movement to “save the Irrawaddy River,” of the ethnic Kachin movement to “save Myitsone,” and of the local residents’ movement to save their homes, farms, and villages. Yet, most villagers never got their homes or lands back. Moreover, Myitsone – the revered confluence of rivers – has now been dug up. How come?

This article is about what happened to the Myitsone area’s local villages and their residents *after* most were resettled away from the dam’s planned reservoir area but then left “suspended” – now already for more than a decade – after the mega-project itself was suspended. Telling this story of a mega-project and rural displacement, the article contributes to a growing ethnographic literature on infrastructure suspensions and “suspended” communities worldwide (Gupta 2018; Carse and Kneas 2019; Marrero-Guillamón 2020; Baumann and Manal 2021; Xiang 2021; Baumann and Zimmerer 2022; Chatterjee et al 2023; Kovač 2023; Oakes 2023; Ramella et al 2023; Chung 2024; DiCarlo 2024; Gambino and Reboredo 2024).

This article is Part 2 of a two-part article series on the rural history of the Myitsone Dam mega-project. Earlier, Part 1 (Kiik 2025) showed that the rural history of Myitsone Dam began much earlier than the widely known Burmese public outcry and official suspension in late 2011.

As Part 1 of this article series already reviewed the existing research literature on the Myitsone Dam controversy, here is merely a recap. Much literature focuses on the Myitsone controversy's connection to the rise of China – to Beijing's international politics and investments abroad, especially in hydropower (Chan 2017; Foran et al. 2017; Freeman 2017; Jones and Hameiri 2021; Jones and Zou 2017; Hennig 2016; Kiik 2016, 2020b, 2024; Kirchherr 2018; Kirchherr et al. 2016, 2017a, 2017b; Mogensen 2017; Sun 2012; Transnational Institute 2016; Xue 2017; Yeophantong 2016a, 2016b; Zhu et al. 2016; Zou and Jones 2020). In Burma-focused literature, the suspension of the Myitsone Dam project is often explored as a pivotal moment during the early 2010s when the Burmese military regime was democratizing the country (Chan 2017; Egretreau 2024; Foran et al. 2017; Kempel 2012; Kiik 2020a; Kirchherr 2018; Min Zin 2012; Mostafanezhad et al. 2023; Su Mon Thazin Aung 2017; Yay Chann and Chamchong 2024; Yeophantong 2016a; Zhu et al. 2016). Several scholarly and activist studies have situated the controversy in the social, political, and military context of the Kachin ethnic nation – in whose lands the Myitsone Dam was to be built (Foran et al. 2017; Hedström 2019; Hkawn Ja Aung 2014; Hong 2019; Kiik 2016, 2020a, 2020b; Kim 2021, 2024; O'Connor 2011). In contrast, this study shifts from broad national and international perspectives to explore the more local roots of the Myitsone conflict – to those few rural villages which first encountered the mega-project (see also Aung and Limond 2015; Lin and Yao 2024; Hkawn Ja Aung 2014; Hong 2019, 2023; Hpauna 2006; Kachin Development Networking Group [KDNG] 2007, 2009; Kiik 2024; Kim 2021; Transparency and Accountability Network Kachin State [TANKS] 2020).

This article tells a rural history of the later, post-suspension years of the Myitsone mega-project. It thus builds on the ethnographic and political-economic literature in Burma Studies on agrarian change, land grabbing, rural resistance, and rural compliance – specifically during the 2010s' decade of democratization (Aung Naing 2024; Belton and Mateusz 2019; Boutry et al 2017; Faxon 2020, 2021; Franco et al 2015; Huard 2020; Land in Our Hands Network 2015; Mark 2016, 2023; San Thein et al 2018; Takahashi 2023; Vicol et al., 2018; Wittekind 2024; Woods 2020). Ethnically and regionally more specifically, this article builds on and contributes to the literature on agrarian change, land grabbing, rural resistance, and rural compliance in ethnic Kachin areas (Dean 2023; Doi Ra 2024; Doi Ra et al 2021; Faxon 2015; Faxon and Khine Zin Yu Aung 2019; Forsyth and Springate-Baginski 2022; Kramer, Woods and Armiente 2012; Htung 2018; Lahpai 2016; Roi Nu 2009; Sarma, Rippa, and Dean 2023; Seng Li 2024; Wah Wah and Aung Naing 2023; Wanasanpraikhieo 2008; Woods 2010, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020; Zaw Ban 2018; Zung Ting 2010).

Doi Ra (2024, 178) puts the Myitsone case among land deals or projects in Burma's Kachin areas that have “failed” but have nonetheless been “successful in grabbing land away from the villagers.” Moreover, Doi Ra (2024, 178) notes that the media, civil society, and researchers tend to report widely on state–society conflicts, such as around the Myitsone hydropower project, but they report more rarely on the longer-lasting land conflicts in those same places because those “occur between villagers or within the same ethnic group, which can be very sensitive.” The article below tells one version of such a longer-term and more local story.

The rural history of Myitsone Dam is much longer than the national and international histories that are often told. Village-level opposition to the Myitsone mega-dam project has persisted for over two decades now. Moreover, the project's aftermath plays out in people's everyday lives in these “suspended villages” – in the many lost homes and lands, in efforts to build new lives and livelihoods, in a boom of gold mining, and in the accumulation of local lands in the hands of a few tycoons.

Exploring this story of land grabbing and rural defiance led me to several observations: 1) The village history of the Myitsone project began long before its international prominence, and it continues until now; 2) The village-level narrative includes violence, social divisions, fear, compliance, and life-in-suspension, which contrasts with the often-told story of local and national unity, resistance, and success; 3) Locally, the hydropower project entered a broader and longer wave of land and resource

grabs – in the Myitsone area, especially for gold mining; 4) At the village level, people's land and livelihood concerns were primary, compared to national or environmental concerns; 5) Histories of resistance, repression, and compliance varied greatly across different villages and across different groups of people; 6) Rural resistance and compliance can be quite disconnected from urban politics and may easily be misread through the ideological concerns of urban elites; and 7) The experiences of these villages reflect the broader history of dictatorship and democracy in Burma.

This study combines diverse methods and sources, to highlight some less-known stories from a specific, rural, and repressed place. I have done ethnographic research among Kachin people since 2010, focusing on ethnonational and environmental struggles, and have lived in Kachin areas altogether for about three years. Partly due to the repressive conditions during fieldwork, I could not spend long periods of time in the Myitsone area itself. To overcome such limitations, this study combines diverse sources: tens of interviews, participant observation, informal conversations, academic publications, theses, activist reports, and journalist coverage. My goal has been to build in my articles a kind of archive of narratives and sources. I did field research, interviews, and media analysis in Kachin Jinghpaw, English, and Chinese languages, without an interpreter.

The article cites interviewees at length, not for claiming that any interviewee has “the correct view,” but for understanding the diverse and contradictory thoughts, experiences, and visions of different people. All interviewees have been anonymized to protect people's safety and privacy when discussing sensitive topics. The text avoids gender pronouns and contextual information because these social circles are small, and people might otherwise be recognized.

This article begins with a bomb attack against the project and the subsequent resettlement of local residents into company-built “model villages.” Then, it explores the ongoing life in these villages after the project's suspension, marked by displacement, social divisions, struggles, and improvements. The article explores village encounters with Kachin activists, the World Bank, and mining tycoons. It concludes by reflecting on suspensions at Myitsone and in Burma.

Bombing and displacing

As described in the beginning of this two-part article series (Kiik 2025), fourteen bombs exploded by the Myitsone Dam construction offices in early 2010. After several years of peaceful anti-dam resistance, someone tried to stop the dam construction by violence. The Burmese military-state leaders responded by speeding up the forced resettlement of the project area residents.

Villagers on both the western and eastern sides of the large Irrawaddy River experienced the bombing and its immediate violent aftermath – as part of the dangers of life under a dictatorship and in an armed conflict area. A Western bank youth told me:

My mom heard first when we were asleep and shouted: “A bomb exploded! War has started!” We put on our long clothes. My mom was a Kachin soldier, so she knew and told us: “A bomb sounded already, but no small guns yet. Listen carefully!” The next day, Burmese troops came down and called the village leaders and interrogated them about their opinions on the dam.

After the bomb blasts, the military arrested, beat up, and interrogated villagers, tens of youths, and anti-dam leaders, including local church leaders, assuming that the bombs could not have been placed without local villagers' help. The police announced large rewards to anyone who provided information. Military intelligence took a village leader and his wife “into investigation” for two weeks, torturing them. Eventually, the military-state acknowledged that they could not find who had put the bombs. No one was ever charged. In line with Kachin nationalists' broader conspiratorial analyses (Kiik 2020b), some Kachin media and activists have kept suggesting – without evidence – that the bombing was a pro-dam conspiracy to justify relocating the villages. According to knowledgeable local accounts that I have heard, that claim of conspiracy is false.

At the time of the bombing in early 2010, a Kachin news site reported four deaths among the project workers. Many other news sites and research publications repeated this claim in the following years. However, actually, only one injury has been confirmed (O'Connor 2011, 13). Reportedly, “in the panic, a Chinese worker was injured as he fell from a building” (Yang 2012). Project offices and vehicles were damaged; a few hundred project workers were evacuated. A video from the site documented the destruction.¹

In response to the bombing, the authorities and companies sped up the forced resettlement – becoming more coercive about resettling a few of the area’s villages into two new company-built “model villages,” to make way for the planned dam’s water reservoir. Kim (2021, 179) describes this:

Local militia, military intelligence, and the Special Branch of the police were stationed in the village and constantly harassed the villagers. One activist stated that the entire village was ‘under house arrest.’ [...] One village activist recalled that the CPI representative told the villagers, ‘If you go now, we will move your things and support you... If you move later, we won’t support you.’

Most directly in response to the bombing, junta authorities told the residents of a small village – Mazup – that they must move immediately; around 60 households were told to pack up and move the next morning. People were allegedly “chased like animals by the Burmese Army, and sent onto the [Burmese-military-allied] Asia World company’s truck” (Zuo 2012, 35; Kyi Phyo Wai 2012). A village activist described:

At 9 o’clock in the morning, they grabbed anyone still present in the village. People were mixed with chickens, pigs, babies, and everything in the car. No one could look back.

In the next weeks, the authorities resettled two villages on the eastern riverbank to a yet unfinished relocation village where people faced much difficulty. A local resident recalled:

Houses were only partially completed—no ladders, no kitchen, and so on. It was rainy season, so we could not do swidden farming. For one month, Asia World cooked breakfast and dinner for us. After that, they just provided rice. We did not know what to do—should we keep building the houses or get income? Finally, many of us did labor at Asia World Company.

In contrast, the largest local village – the western riverbank’s Tanghpri (Tang Hpri) – was relocated more gradually, in 2010–2011. A Tanghpri village religious leader described:

One of the smaller villages was forced to move at gunpoint. We heard someone was killed. We expected the same and prepared to resist if the Army uses violence against us. We would have united and resisted! But instead, they used a cleverer tactic.

The regime began pressuring Tanghpri residents more indirectly. It bulldozed the Tanghpri school and closed the clinic. By contrast, at the resettlement village, the project companies gave out free rice bags and new houses on a first-come, first-serve basis. Trust among residents eroded, as families worried about others taking the best spots in the relocation village, and increasingly decided to relocate.

A village anti-dam activist recalled:

Some people went to look at the resettlement site and booked a spot. After that, a group of forty families moved first. Then, they told villagers: “If you also want to get a good place, move quickly.” A few times like this, group by group, people moved. Once half of the villagers had moved, they

¹This video is online here: <https://youtu.be/EyEBxHgiJc8>.

did not have to try so hard because Tanghppe people no longer had neighbors, and psychologically started feeling alone and scared. Later, the war came in 2011. So, the Burmese soldiers arrived in that area and scared the rest of the villagers. So, more people moved. And then, they told the remaining villagers: “Since you have to move soon, you should not do agriculture, build a house, or renovate. It would be a waste of money.”

Finally, gold mining companies seemed to seal Tanghppe’s fate. A resident described:

The Dam did not arrive suddenly—because first came the gold company. They scared the riverside people into selling their farms and lands to them: “Soon the government will take your land without compensation anyway—the government can take it anytime!” Also, they made the community distrust and compete with each other—by telling people that “if you resettle early, you will get the best new spot and house.” So, people started selling their lands.

Many complain that they were never properly compensated. China Power Investment (CPI) released compensation funds, but the Burmese business conglomerate Asia World took charge of calculating and distributing the money (Kachin Development Networking Group [KDNG] 2009). Locals have often alleged that officials from the regional government and Asia World stole compensation funds. A villager detailed:

This compensation money was very little compared to what we owned: gardens, fruits, teak trees. I had a tea garden, nearly ten thousand plants, and oranges, and five hundred small teak trees. Now I have nothing.

Families faced difficulty after running out of the compensation money, while also having lost their livelihoods. For example, a middle-aged resident listed her worries to me: “What will happen without the money that my family members send from working in the jade mines? What if the dam breaks? What’s the future of schooling for my children?”

Some residents turned to mining more gold. This was described, for example, by a journalist (Larmer 2011) who spoke with a gold panner at Tanghppe:

Down on the bank of the Ayeyarwady, she peers into a deep pit of sand and rock. Her mission today is not to pray or protest but to join the search for gold. ‘Try over here,’ she instructs a Kachin teenager blasting the sand bank with a hose, as youngsters shovel the loosened sand onto an inclined ramp. Over the past few months villagers have noticed more boats full of Burmese and Chinese workers heading upriver to dredge for gold. She wonders if Tang Hpre’s forced resettlement is a ploy to let the Chinese control another of the Kachins’ precious resources. ‘We don’t want to lose our home,’ she says. ‘But we need to get as much gold as we can before the Chinese come and the waters rise. This is ours.’

Despite being resettled, some people on the western riverbank kept resisting, at least mentally. In mid-2011, prior to the Myitsone mega-project’s suspension, a relocated villager told me:

No matter what the government gives us for our living, I feel like our country has been sold to China for hydropower. I will never accept the dam.

On the eastern riverbank, too, resistance soon strengthened, ironically because people from its relatively smaller villages had been combined into one bigger relocation village. A local resident recalled:

After being gathered into one village, we felt that we are not alone. We got more connections. Before, Tanghpree and the eastern side's villages almost never communicated. Soon, some NGOs and CSOs came and gave us awareness-raising about our rights. So, more people joined to oppose the dam.

Thus, local villages experienced the Myitsone mega-project as a land grab or a semi-forced resettlement scheme. Even after almost all the residents had been resettled, some anti-dam resistance continued to simmer, despite the military-state's repression.

Suspending the villages

The Myitsone mega-project was soon suspended – but so too were the local residents left “suspended”. Life in their “suspended villages” has continued with both old and new divisions and struggles.

The project's fall in late 2011 – when the Burmese regime one-sidedly decided to halt the Myitsone Dam's construction – coincided with other dramatic changes in Kachin and Burma. Burma moved forward with democratizing reforms, alongside widespread economic and livelihood improvement. The Kachin nation struggled with the resumed war between Burmese military and the Kachin Independence Organization. This war displaced a hundred thousand villagers – a large fraction of the less-than-a-million Kachin people in Burma.

Despite halting the Myitsone Dam's construction, the authorities and companies did not allow the two thousand relocated residents to return to their home villages and ordered them to remain in the two new company-built “model villages.” Most residents live in these two relocation villages until now.

The two resettlement villages are on opposite shores of the Irrawaddy River. The relocation village on the *western* riverbank is Aung Myin Thar. Currently, over two thousand residents live there, mostly relocated from the relatively large Tanghpree (Tang Hpre) village and from the smaller villages of Mazup (Mali Zup) and Lahpye (Lahpre, Kahpre, Padang (Pa)). On the *eastern* bank is Mali Yang, with several hundred residents, resettled from Dawng Ban (Tawngban), Awng Ja Yang (Shwe Bar), and Nhtan Yang (In Htan Yang), living alongside the site's original village, Ding Ga Zup (Mali Yang). Figure 1 shows a map of all these villages. (Mungchying Rawt Jat [MRJ] 2013; Hkawn Ja Aung 2014; Transparency and Accountability Network Kachin State [TANKS] 2020).

Both “model” relocation villages have tight rows of identical wooden two-room houses, built without much care. A resident described: “They cut the wood from nearby forests but only used low-quality wood to build these houses. They took good-quality wood elsewhere.” Another villager described: “We keep repairing these houses. So much water, wind, and cold come through. When the winds come, the roof falls off.” Straight streets divide the rows of fenced house compounds, as shown below in Figure 2.

Before the relocation, resident families relied on farming, gardening, and mining gold. They had hillside shifting-cultivation farms, growing rice. Many earned income by gardening corn, tomatoes, bean, and watermelon, and raising pigs and cows. Many sold bamboo from their plantations. A major income source had long been mining gold. Children, too, mined to help pay school fees. Especially when food and money ran out, women harvested forest vegetables, fruits, and mushrooms (Hkawn Ja Aung 2014, 36). Sometimes, people fished. One villager recalled living as a child in Tanghpree:

Financially, it was difficult because we did not have money, but nature gave us a lot, so we lived a happy life. We had very good soil. So, we farmed and grew animals. We gathered herbs and other traditional medicine ingredients, and food like bamboo shoots. The forest was like a food store for us.

The relocation disconnected residents from their agricultural livelihoods (MRJ 2013; Hkawn Ja Aung 2014; TANKS 2020). Asia World company built Aung Myin Thar on rocky wasteland, where a few years earlier a small hydropower dam had flooded and flushed away topsoil and nutrients. Thus,

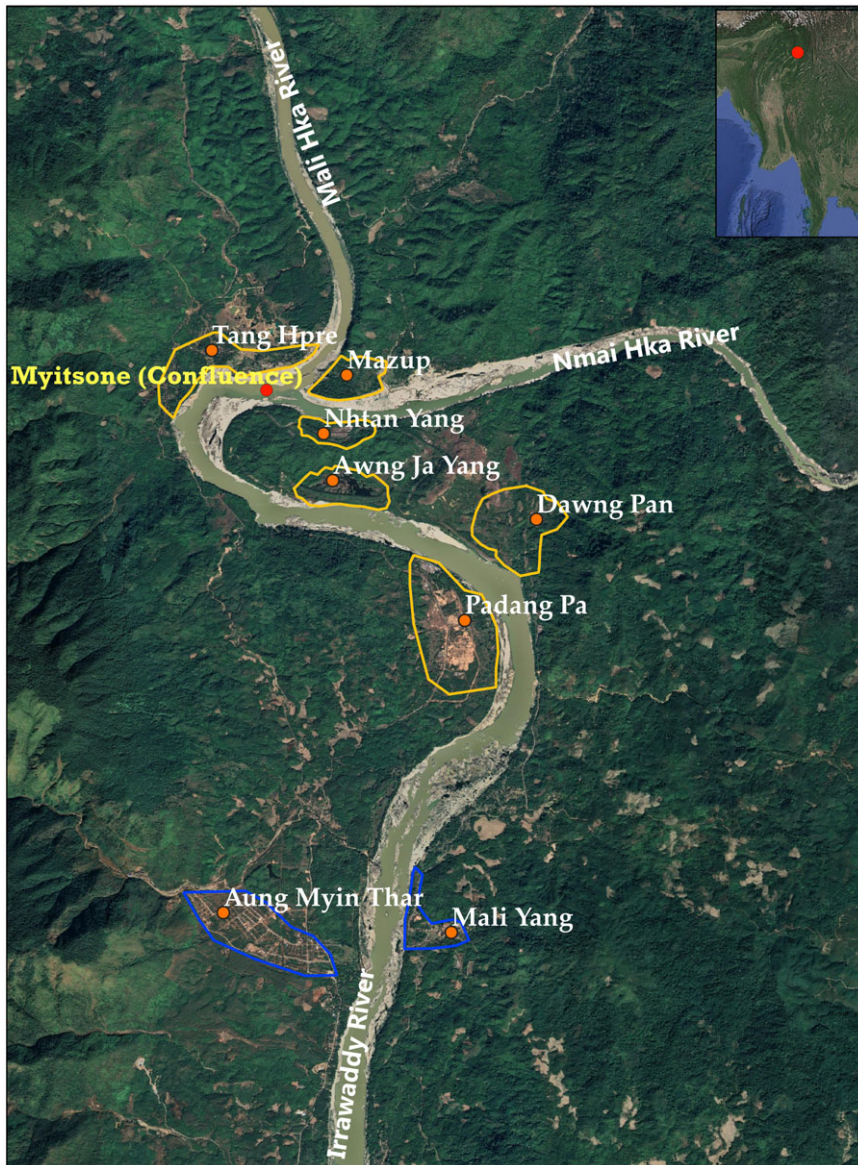


Figure 1. Map of Myitsone villages. The six original villages are upstream, while the two “model” relocation villages are downstream.

Source: TANKS 2020, 32; modified by an anonymous colleague and the author.

growing food was almost impossible. Residents were made dependent on the Chinese company’s rice donations. The new house compounds had too little space for growing vegetables and fruits. Thus, one had to start buying everything with money. Having no space for cattle to graze, people returned their cows and buffaloes to old pastures near the dam construction. Residents lost their bamboo plantations, with little or no compensation. Moreover, when the people of Aung Myin Thar relocation village cut wood or did shifting cultivation on nearby mountain slopes, they clashed against the Forest Department, especially because, in 2016, the government created a new nature conservation area around the nearby N’hkai mountain.



Figure 2. A street in a Myitsone Dam resettlement village.

Source: Motlagh 2012.

The relocation divided the village populations in both old and new ways. For example, the relocation preserved the ethnic and religious patterns in village society. The local-minority ethnic Bamars and other Buddhists tend to live in a separate part of the resettlement village from the Christian Kachins, who make up the majority of the local population. Among the Christians, in turn, the Catholics and the Baptists, as well as smaller groups such as the ethnic Lisu Christians, all settle around their respective churches. As in any other village or town, Sundays continue to bring local Kachins together, church-by-church. The dam project financed the building of altogether four Christian churches and two Buddhist monasteries in the two resettlement villages.

A new division among local people stemmed from the junta setting up the two relocation villages on lands that the nearby villages' residents were already using. This led to land disputes between the original landowners and the relocated people (TANKS 2020). One resettled person described how she felt like "an invader herself" when arriving in Aung Myin Thar, because locals were resisting relinquishing their farmlands, which the Myitsone project had confiscated for the new resettlement villages. In Mali Yang, some original residents whose land had been given to the relocated people proceeded to sell that disputed land to gold mining businesspeople. This led to a land conflict that still continues now. Tensions also remain over the dam project having compensated the relocated people more than the resettlement sites' earlier owners and residents. For example, in an activist video report (Environmental and Resources Concern Group—Kachin State 2022), an original resident of Mali Yang complains that the resettled people got new houses built for them, with TVs and more, but the earlier residents got nothing; even the land taken for the Chinese worker dorms was not properly compensated. A village activist described such new communal tensions:

The resettlement village was built over locals' bamboo fields. This created misunderstanding and discomfort among people. Bamboo was "a bank" for those villagers—their children's future,

livelihood, food, and other things were based on these beautiful bamboo trees. So, the resettled people felt guilty for having no choice but to live on land that local villagers once owned.

A minority of Tanghpri villagers soon began moving back-and-forth between Aung Myin Thar and Tanghpri, despite the government having designated most of the construction areas as off-limits. In 2012 and later, the authorities sometimes briefly arrested and evicted those people. Some residents even began to reoccupy their Tanghpri homes, even though the Burmese military would sometimes harass them. By contrast, the former residents of Lahpye village have continuously been blocked from returning to their original homes. At Tanghpri, people could eventually return, but much original property had degraded or been taken, often uprooted by gold mining companies, for whom locals were working as laborers (Springate-Baginski et al. 2016, 7; KDNG 2011). A local activist report (MRJ 2013) bemoans that people turned to “sifting through toxic slurry of cyanide laced gold sludge.”

Torn between these two villages, kin were sometimes drawn apart. For example, some older women returned to Tanghpri, including when their husbands had died, and the offspring stayed in the resettlement village, especially with children needing to stay for school there. When parents needed to return to Tanghpri to farm, they sometimes left their children alone in Aung Myin Thar. A church elder blamed both the people themselves and a junta conspiracy for breaking the community:

After they got the compensation money, first they bought motorcycles for their sons. Some women bought necklaces and a new dress. And they made some parties. In six months, everyone's money was spent. Moreover, the government did not ban drugs and gold mining in Myitson. So, some villagers no longer wanted to live in Tanghpri, because there was so much “pollution”—socially and economically. Their children were spending time with drug addicts. I think the government had already planned to make villagers feel like that. Later, when the money was gone, parents went back to Tanghpri to dig gold, like in the past. But their children stayed in Aung Myin Thar, so, no one was controlling them . . . And our church also is not stable anymore, so it cannot manage all the households. The community has been broken.

Alongside the dam project, the junta authorities gave out gold mining concessions, leading to the use and sale of narcotics, with growing addiction hurting the families and villages (Aung and Limond 2015). A church elder recalled: “Before, we only had a few drug users—mostly old men used opium as medicine. But gold mining brought a flood of drugs. People got to buy easily, and our youths got addicted.” A village activist added:

Many companies and people with money came to do gold business. Villagers became their laborers. The bosses feed them drugs, so that the workers could stay up working through the night. The drug dealers themselves are police, so nobody can arrest them.

Narcotics have become widely available on both riverbanks. A Mali Yang resident told me: “Because our area is [the Burmese-military-allied militia leader] Lasang Awng Wa's territory, there is no police. Opium is sold in the banana plantations, in the villages . . .” A visitor to Aung Myin Thar described: “People kept offering me amphetamine, black opium. Some girls put it inside their drinks to feel good.” An Aung Myin Thar resident recalled:

The drugs problem started in Tanghpri, from gold mining. People thought that the dam project is coming, so they will lose their lands. So, they sold their lands to gold mining businessmen. Gold mining got big and popular. And people went to sell things as vendors there, and there was much gambling, many karaoke dens, and a night market. Some people sold “Number 4” [heroin]. It spread . . . Now, some drug users are already dead. Some moved to Aung Myin Thar.

A village activist described a broader social crisis:

Some people got trauma. They got depressed and drank alcohol or got into drugs and ruined their lives. Before, we used to share food with our neighbors. We had strong practices: “If you need help, I will help you. If I need help, you will help me.” But now it is all about money: “If I help you, how much will you pay me?” People are also more jealous when someone is getting rich. Our mindset has been destroyed. No more taking risks, only thinking about what we can get. This affected the churches also, especially when collecting donations.

Many social impacts cannot be described in words or measured financially. Relationships between grandparents and their grandchildren, between parents and children. Rich people buying up people’s land is not right. This land is the people’s life and dignity. Natural resources were traditionally communally owned and shared. However, in the new settlement, even friends and neighbors are fighting over farmland. Because resources are scarce.

However, as years have passed, people have also increasingly adapted to the life in Aung Myin Thar. Among improvements, permanent water supply began when the dam developers built water storage tanks and pipelines. Residents often point to having a high school, better healthcare, and permanent electricity (Hkawn Ja Aung 2014, 46). Children fall ill less. A minority of residents opened little eateries at the nearby creek-side leisure spot, popular among Myitkyina townspeople. Some have built new stone houses. People from elsewhere have migrated to live in Aung Myin Thar. A church elder summarized: “At first, we Kachins did not know how to live here, on this stony land; now we know.” However, because local farmland and job opportunities remain limited, a minority have returned to Tanghpri to farm, and some have left to earn money in the Kachin area’s famous jade mines or across the border in China.

Compared to Aun Myin Thar, the *eastern* riverbank has remained more strictly repressed – just as before. The eastern riverbank’s Mali Yang relocation village has better land for farming than Aung Myin Thar does, but unlike the Tanghpri people, its resettled households never got to return to their original villages for farming or mining (TANKS 2020, 26). Their village areas became dam construction sites, with concrete structures still protected by armed guards and a military checkpoint. Having lost grazing pastures, people had to sell their cattle (Hkawn Ja Aung 2014, 42). Residents needed to buy new land plots to farm, and walk a few hours to get there.

Moreover, the eastern riverbank remains less connected and poorer. For example, Mali Yang has weaker road connection to the capital city Myitkyina. Students go to school by passenger boat across the Irrawaddy River to the western riverbank (TANKS 2020, 5). Hkawn Ja Aung (2014, 45) notes the “struggling” of Mali Yang residents, citing some of them:

We can [look] at the results of weekly worship service’s donation. The money is much less than one old village even [though] all three [resettled] villages gather now.

Thus, everyday livelihood struggles and social disruptions have shaped lives in these “suspended” villages, while debates over the future of the mega-project have continued on the national and international levels.

Caught between nations

Just as the original villages had before, the two new relocation villages have remained somewhat disconnected from various outside forces, including during Burma’s decade of partial democratization. These outside forces include the Chinese state-owned company, the Burmese government, inter-governmental organizations, and the nonresident Kachin activists.

After the sudden project suspension, the Chinese state company remained a presence in the resettled villages, trying to both charm and divide the residents. For years after the project's suspension, the company has continued distributing free rice, water, and electricity, renovating buildings, organizing clinics, and giving students scholarships. Sometimes, they would come to churches, bringing presents. A local anti-dam campaigner told me: "CPI was doing great organizing: They would donate for or join every village activity, from soccer games to church events." When delivering the rice, they would give speeches, alongside the village chief. Another anti-dam campaigner recalled:

While we were organizing protests, the Chinese company organized some village officers and church leaders to come to China for excursions—they focused on who have power. The Chinese showed them how China got great development after building a big dam [at the Three Gorges]. So, the tour participants came back, and some started telling villagers how great the dam would be.

Diplomacy by the Chinese state and company grew stronger but did not replace violence, fear, and resistance. For example, after two Tanghphe women who had led local anti-dam resistance gave an interview to local media, the company cut their rice rations. A resident told me: "People worry that if they speak up against the dam, their rice supply will also be cut." A village activist herself has complained that her fellow villagers do not help by sharing rice (Hong 2023).

Because the project has only been suspended – not stopped forever – the worry and rumors about whether dam construction might resume have kept occasionally resurfacing in Burmese and Kachin media. Rumors have repeatedly surfaced that the project is about to resume, setting off public alarm. For example, in mid-2012, anti-dam activists and media published "a leaked government document" that revealed that the dam project was to resume. Supposedly, the local Chinese authorities requested the Kachin State government to provide temporary ID cards for "500 road construction engineers" and to permit the import of "1,000 tons of diesel, 200 tons of petrol, 10,000 tons of cement, 5 bulldozers, 6 excavators, 8 trucks, and 20 cars". This news was widely re-published, but the Kachin State government stated that this "leaked document" was a forgery.

In this uncertainty, the resettled Myitsone residents, too, have been left to observe and speculate. For example, ethnic Kachin staff of the mega-project have often relayed to the villagers whether the Chinese company seems to be giving up on the dam or not. By 2017, a leading Tanghphe anti-dam campaigner concluded to me: "The Chinese gave up." But then, a closely aligned campaigner expressed surprise at such a statement: "They are still trying to build the dam. See, they restored the military checkpoint here!" In 2019, Myitsone residents noted that the Chinese staff have stopped coming to the church – perhaps the company finally gave up? Rumors spread that the Chinese companies had taken down all their signs at Myitsone. An educator wondered: "Maybe this means that they have given up and are leaving?"

The project's opponents were hoping that Burma's beloved "Mother" and democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi would cancel the dam project fully, once her party came to power in 2016. She had spoken out against the dam since 2011 and during her 2015 election campaign. Indeed, there was broader faith in her leadership, and some local anti-dam activists voted for her party. Speaking in 2013, a local church elder told me: "If after coming to power, Aung San Suu Kyi still does not speak about the Kachin war, she will have betrayed us." Right after the historic 2015 election, where the democracy icon's party won a landslide, another local church elder rejoiced: "Now, the Myitsone Dam cannot be resumed. Aung San Suu Kyi knows that if she resumes it, the 88 Generation [Burmese political activists] will rise up."

However, the limbo situation continued after Aung San Suu Kyi's victory. Apparently, Burma's leaders did not want to clash with Beijing – and face its compensation demands – by outright canceling the project. The Kachin war also continued, with the new government staying largely silent.

Such disconnect from the Burmese central government and its undertakings was seen when a Western-led international development organization entered the Myitsone controversy. Namely, in

2016, the World Bank began a two-year “strategic environmental assessment” of Burma’s hydropower sector (International Finance Corporation 2020).

This international assessment’s final consultation in Myitkyina took place in early 2018 at an upscale riverside hotel. As I arrived in the morning, I saw around twenty Tanghpri village and other protesters standing at the gate of the hotel compound, condemning this workshop for supporting the Myitsone dam project. Security and police did not let them in. In the social-media feeds of Facebook, I saw that some Kachin anti-dam activists had been inviting everyone to come protest.

Workshop participants were largely people who were close to the Burmese government, but a few Kachin nationalist voices dominated the discussion sessions. Across Burma, much civil society had been boycotting this national hydropower assessment, calling it merely greenlighting for big business and government, rather than a real consultation. There was no one from among the Myitsone village leaders or anti-dam activists. The meeting was in Burmese language. The World Bank project staff gave slideshow presentations on the assessment’s objectives and results: biodiversity, river ecology, socio-economics, food security, transportation, climate, and beyond. During discussion times, most participants stayed silent, while only the few outspoken Kachin participants commented. For example: How much hydropower do we, in Kachin State, actually need? Big dams *versus* small dams. Hoover Dam *versus* Three Gorges Dam – US federalism *versus* Mao’s dream. Burma needs Federalism – power-sharing and resource-sharing between the central government and the ethnic States.

During the tea break, the workshop facilitators invited the protesters in. A leading Kachin activist walked in smiling, followed by a few protesters and their videographers, accompanied by a group of Burmese police officers. The protesters spoke and read out Burmese-language letters against the Myitsone Dam at some length. Most workshop participants stayed quiet. At some point, several people left, including a few government staff. Finally, the workshop’s female facilitator gave a female village protestor close hugs and thanked her loudly. The protesters left and the meeting continued.

Some of these village protesters later expressed confusion about what the World Bank was doing. One village activist recalled: “Some people asked us: ‘Why do you protest here? This is not CPI [China Power Investment Company].’ We answered: ‘Because the World Bank is the main funder for CPI.’” A leading Kachin activist had told the village activists so. However, this idea about some “funding” was a misunderstanding. Discussing such disconnects, a Kachin civil-society staff summarized:

I feel that the protesters’ and the workshop organizers’ messages were not connecting. The protesters are against the Myitsone Dam. But sometimes the activists are misinformed. They should study the [World Bank] project better. But the [Bank’s] strategy is also weak. They should approach the Myitsone residents better. But they only focus on the government and people close to the government. Did you look around at their consultation meeting? Besides the government staff, there were many people who are close to the government.

This workshop was an example of how the new, democratizing, and internationalizing Burma still kept much distance between the Myitsone residents and the central state discussions – albeit this distance was not as violently created as during the previous military regime. It also showed some continuous distrust, disconnect, and lack of communication between village residents and more distant outside and international forces.

Villagers *versus* activists

Living in limbo after the project suspension contributed to tensions between the Myitsone residents and outside Kachin activists.

A key point of contention among the diverse anti-dam activists has long been over who is “more grassroots” – who does or does not “talk with the villagers.” Both the local village-based and the outside

Kachin activists have been contesting among themselves who was organizing and networking truly based on the villagers' own plans *versus* whose activities were merely bringing "outside designs" into the villages.

This contention stems from criticisms emerging from village residents. For example, a Myitsone elder told me that certain organizations and activists are "good, because they support us in our own community made plan," but criticized others:

But some NGOs come, want us to adopt their own plans. They do not respect our plans. They do not help us when we need material support. Or, when we need headache medicine, they bring stomach medicine. Luckily, now we get to choose between different groups—whom we want to work with.

A Myitsone-area village activist similarly recalled:

Now, some people come here with projects. So, after they do an activity, they need an attendance list, make documents, show indicators, and provide them to the donors or to media. Their head is always thinking about that. We become just a participant.

Residents' attitudes toward lowland Burmese anti-dam campaigners have been mixed, just like they have been toward the Kachin activists and leaders. I document elsewhere (Kiik 2020a, 260–261, 264) both thankful and distrustful views. In contrast to the critical comments toward some outside Kachin activists, a village activist once praised to me a group of lowland Burmese activists who helped the village anti-dam resisters to network widely in Yangon city and beyond:

They understand that the local community is like the house owner—who has long-time tradition, values, and system for managing the environment. That's why the way they approach us is, "How can we help you?" Not "You should do like this."

A few years after the project's suspension, a Myitsone elder told me:

Now, all these Kachin organizations are blaming us and telling us to move from the relocation village back to our old homes: "Go, live there—as a protest!" But it is impossible—because the police would come and arrest us. If those organizations really love our people, they should help us and offer us ideas, even though we have resettled. But they are just spitting on the villagers.

Interviewing local residents, Kim (2017, 11), too, found some disconnect from outside activists. Only "a handful of villagers" knew personally a prominent city-based Kachin activist. Moreover, some expressed distrust:

Some villagers illustrated an incident, when the activists fled the scene of public protest and left the villagers with the military soldiers. This was a reminder for some villagers that activists would not take any responsibility during a risky collective action. After two days of [interviews], I realized that [a Myitkyina-city-based] renowned activist might not be so popular or well-connected with the local people [...].

Among reasons for such gaps between local residents and outside Kachin activists have been socioeconomic and city–village divisions. For example, Kim (2021, 293) discusses how one young Tanghphe village activist helped bridge such socioeconomic class, activist–villager, and city–village disconnects:

The activist described her role as [...] 'listening to the villagers and assisting them with whatever they needed,' and she and her colleagues were 'dependent on the information and cooperation

from the villagers.’ This humble self-description differed from that of other activists, who perceived their role as experts, organizers, and sometimes leaders of the movement. Unlike many female Kachin high-profile activists, who are daughters and nieces of Kachin Christian and military elites, this particular female activist was a farmer’s daughter who grew up like the villagers she worked with.

Village anti-dam activists have observed how, in the years after the suspension, Kachin politicians wanted to be seen as if leading the anti-dam movement. One village activist criticized: “Some Kachin CSOs want to take the leading role, but not the high risk.” Another village activist recalled a protest in Myitkyina city:

Some [prominent Kachin] people came and stood to the front of our protest and posted their photos on Facebook as if they were the leaders. Our own photos were not published in the newspapers... But it’s OK, not important.

A Myitsone elder described to me the change of attitude from Kachin leaders, compared to the early 2000s when the leaders ignored Tanghpri villagers’ pleas for help. Speaking, this elder’s eyes filled with tears, voice increasingly expressing contempt:

Only after the Bamars came—the 88 Generation [Burmese anti-junta activists] and some NGOs—and spoke up loudly, then these Myitkyina Kachin people changed and started saying that the Dam must be stopped. That is why today, I am laughing when these leaders declare: “Save Myitsone, our confluence!” Ha-ha-ha-ha! Before, we had already given them information, but nobody... That is why I am crying in my heart. Nobody cared. Why do they care today?!

The above gaps between villagers and outsiders show social divisions beyond ethnicity, such as spatial distance between city and villages, and some continuous differences in priorities between village residents and outsiders.

A golden dictatorship

Reversing a decade of democratization, Burma’s military coup in early 2021 pushed the Myitsone confluence area and its people deeper into a countrywide wave of natural-resource extraction and grabbing, especially into a gold mining boom. This new wave of struggles, resistance, compliance, and divisions has been reshaping the Myitsone villages.

Already before the coup, powerful Kachin business people were gaining more influence in the Myitsone area. Leading tycoons with military-political connections bought up land along the river, road, and confluence. Their activities and stated plans include rubber plantations, ecotourism, and industrialized gold mining. An early grabber of land was a junta-allied Kachin tycoon, Hka Mai Tang, whose company has long dominated in the gold and other mining industries across Kachin areas. A Myitsone resident told me:

The company got land title on fertile land and built a big fence—it blocked our people from going farming. So, some villagers secretly destroyed the fence. The boss came to the village chief, but he told him: “Oh, I do not know who did it.” Nationality does not matter—whether Kachin, Chinese, American, or other—if they hurt our villagers, we have the right to defend ourselves.

The 2021 military coup started a new era of dictatorship, economic decline, and natural-resource grabbing, contributing to a boom of gold mining in Burma – including around the Myitsone confluence. For example, a Kachin activist report (Myanmar Mining Watch Network [MMWN] 2022, 24–25) cites a Myitsone-area resident on why locals turned to mining:



Figure 3. Gold mining at the confluence.

Source: 74 Media.

Because there are no proper jobs after the coup most villagers rely on gold mines. [...] The gold price has increased, so everyone is happy to mine for gold. And we do not need to go far away from the village so that it is accessible for men and women. Young people [...] usually follow [...] their parents and help them [...] carry water pipes and hoses [...]. [...] Gold mining is supportive to temporarily settle the financial difficulties of the family.

Since the coup, various Kachin, Chinese, Burmese, and mixed-ownership companies have expanded and industrialized dozens of gold mining operations across Kachin areas. As has been the case since the 1990s, the Burmese military, military-allied militias, and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) all tax such mining. The mining has become more intense than before, with companies using backhoes to dig up large areas of riversides, both around the Myitsone confluence and beyond, often employing impoverished workers coming from lowland Burma. The companies tend to destroy riverbanks and fill river water with dug-up soil and toxic waste. Workers use toxic mercury, often with their bare hands, to glean the gold from the soil. Just like happened in the previous few decades, narcotics use has spread among workers, including local youths (MMWN 2022). Figure 3 shows gold mining at the confluence.

The junta-allied companies have sidelined local residents from the mining. A Kachin activist report (MMWN 2022, 26) cites a local female leader:

We are very angry when heavy machinery comes in and exploits our territory so, we feel disadvantaged from gold mines since we just use a shovel, generator power, and suction pipe hose, a tray, and sluice.

Resisting the resource grabs or the environmental destruction became harder again since the coup restored military dictatorship. A local resident explained:

Before the coup, people would have protested, stopped it. Now, people cannot speak, do not even dare to speak about the news. Cannot organize a movement. Also, people are not paying attention to environmental issues—everyone is focused on the [anti-coup] revolution. Gold mining is huge but becomes only small news in the media.

Around the Myitsone confluence, gold mining spread on all riversides. On the Irrawaddy's eastern riverbank, the leaders of the local Burmese military-allied Kachin militia began mining with large machinery. They have continued to block the dam project's resettled residents from accessing their old homes (KSPVN 2023). Elsewhere, some businesspeople have been mining gold on land that they reportedly bought under the guise of digging fishing ponds.

The Kachin activist and media outcry has focused especially on a prominent Kachin jade-mining tycoon – not least because his company has been mining right next to the confluence. Some Aung Myin Thar and Tanghphe residents, alongside some Kachin activists and critics, have tried to oppose this operation – saying that nature is destroyed, the river might get diverted onto the village, and people's lands are being grabbed (Fishbein et al. 2022; Myanmar Mining Watch Network [MMWN] 2022).

Critics say that this tycoon grabs lands and resources through violent threats. For example, an anti-mining activist report (Myanmar Resource Watch 2024, 15) claims that the company seized “Tanghphe villagers’ horticultural land at a lower price than its current value by threatening to commence mining in those locations.” A local resident has told journalists that the tycoon came to his land to negotiate a purchase price only after the company had already started digging on his property one month earlier (Fishbein et al. 2022). One local opponent of gold mining was beaten up by a group of people at knife-point.

Supporters of the tycoon dispute such criticism. For example, a local supporter of the tycoon rejected the claim that the tycoon is mining in large areas beyond his official concession:

He has a permit—already from before the coup, unlike what people think. He only mines in his small concession plot. Not elsewhere. The activists do not know. They never visited. They just see satellite photos—“all the soil is yellow!” Actually, that is not his mining but dumped soil from other companies. The activists say that everything is him. Also, unlike the other mining companies, he listens to us and our requests.

The tycoon himself promises to restore the landscape after the mining, by filling the pits and planting trees. A supporter of his affirmed: “He is not destroying the confluence the way that the dam reservoir would have.”

The controversy extends beyond gold mining, because this tycoon has accumulated large areas around Myitsone, logged forests, blocked roads, and built fences. He declared some lands his own nature protection area. One opponent of this businessman's land accumulation described:

He took all those lands from the village. He scares people. If he wants someone's land, he destroys it with a backhoe and then asks for the price. Many households did not get any money for what used to be a public area. He said that he would buy it but had already built a fence. So, there is no more public area. Since he took control, there is no wildlife left, not even a single fish. When villagers reported this to the media, he got the KIO to arrest the reporting villager. One time, his employees beat up a local guy. At the same time, he donated money to churches and to the public to show that he is a good person. So, if we seek justice, we cannot find it in the church. Now everyone just keeps quiet.

As the above quotes suggest, village residents have become divided over the tycoon's land accumulation and the gold mining rush. Some Myitsone-area Baptist and Catholic church leaders have turned silent or defended the tycoon. One Kachin person observed: "After a few church leaders shut up, the people also distanced themselves from the resistance. Because in Kachin villages, the people always follow the church leaders." Moreover, "some of our villagers became brokers for the mining companies," a local village activist condemned. Another local resident described a split in their community:

Now the big conflict is among the villagers. Because the supporters of mining have many more people. The public opponents are only several. The supporting people have many connections and power. The village leaders are organizing people in favor of gold mining.

Opponents of this tycoon's mining operation have been facing not only the pro-mining local residents and the Burmese military-state but also Kachin business, political, and religious leaders. All Kachin mining tycoons rely on close ties to both the Burmese military and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO). The KIO has officially approved this tycoon's concession. Some central Kachin church leaders and other ethnonational leaders, too, have defended the tycoon. He is seen as a fellow Kachin, a cultural patron, and an ethnonational hero. He has donated much to the churches, funded cultural, educational, and humanitarian activities, and donated land to the Baptist convention's theological college. One Kachin observer claimed: "Villagers want to criticize him but are afraid to make such a powerful enemy."

While unique, this tycoon and Myitsone are also only a part of much wider land and resource struggles across Kachin areas and further across Burma. Well-connected businesspeople have used the post-coup opportunities to grab lands and resources – for mining, logging, plantations, and so on – accumulating wealth mostly only for themselves. Just like at Myitsone, amid the economic decline since the coronavirus pandemic and the coup, countless village communities have split internally over whether to seek much-needed livelihoods from selling and leasing their lands for the resource extraction projects or to resist and protect one's home and farmland. One Kachin critic summarized:

Everyone is doing it. The Chinese, Kachins, Indians [of Burma]—everyone. Many locals, as well as people from outside. Of course, those people who have money work together. Rich Kachin businessmen, rich Chinese people, Burmese rich people, and Burmese military, too. And the KIO, too. They all work together.

Thus, Myitsone has become engulfed in a broader wave of gold mining, land and resource grabbing, and ecological destruction in Burma under the new dictatorship. Despite being in a unique and "sacred" (Kiik 2024) location, the Myitsone villages now remain part of broader patterns of rural struggle, resistance, compliance, and division.

Suspensions

Ever since the Myitsone mega-project was suspended, the project area's resettled rural residents, too, have lived in "suspension." For over a decade now, the Burmese authorities and Chinese companies have not permitted the two thousand relocated people to return to their original homes and have left them in limbo in the two newly built resettlement villages.

Certain disconnects have been at the heart of this life in limbo. Most broadly, local residents were uprooted and thus severed from their land, home, and long-term livelihoods. Other disconnects were created when residents were pitted against one another during the resettlement process. Around the two "model" resettlement villages, lands were confiscated from original owners to give to the relocated people, creating tensions. Kin were further torn apart after the mega-project's suspension, when some

older residents returned to farm in their original village, while children stayed in the resettlement village for schooling.

Ethnicity matters – but does not define this story of rural repression, resistance, and compliance. For two decades now, the ethnic Kachin village resisters have allied with Kachin nationalist activists to resist the mega-project but have also had their frustrations and different priorities. Some local village residents and elders have appreciated certain lowland Burmese activists more than the fellow Kachin organizations. Moreover, some of the tycoons who have grabbed lands and are mining gold around Myitsone are ethnic Kachins, dispossessing and repressing fellow Kachins. These Kachin tycoons collaborate and ally not only with the Burmese military-state but also with the Kachin revolutionary military-state, diverse church leaders, and other Kachin national leaders.

The experiences of the Myitsone villages are emblematic of military-ruled Burma's broader history. The violent natural-resource grabbing at Myitsone is only one case among countless such cases across the Kachin areas and across Burma. Under decades of dictatorship, millions of villagers have dealt with fear and a sense of powerlessness, as the Myitsone residents expressed in their quotes in Part 1 (Kiik 2025) of this article series. Despite the autocratic repression, some village residents at Myitsone started anti-dam organizing, laying the foundation for all of the later and much broader Kachin and Burmese anti-dam resistance. The resistance eventually spread widely but could not halt the project amid a repressive military dictatorship. Only Burma's democratizing reforms, especially since 2010, eased the violence and fear, while creating enough political freedom to create a countrywide outcry and to direct anti-dam lobbying toward senior regime leaders. Thus, the Myitsone mega-project's suspension became a symbol of the country's democratization.

The Myitsone villages have remained “suspended” alongside broader Burma. Life in Burma improved greatly for most people thanks to the reforms of the 2010s but, at the same time, many effects of the Burmese military's repression and resource grabs remained. The Myitsone residents – and a hundred thousand Kachin war refugees – were left waiting. After one decade of partial democratization, the dictatorship resumed. Since Burma's military coup in early 2021, the Myitsone villagers and their activist allies have found it again much harder to resist the resource grabbing, such as by gold mining tycoons. The gold mining and other resource extraction projects have led to internal conflicts inside villages across Burma, including at Myitsone, amid broader economic desperation. The current Burmese junta's leaders have talked about resuming the Myitsone mega-project – but the Kachin Independence Organization has recently conquered most territories around where the seven mega-dams were to be built. As with Burma's long wars, the struggle over the future of Myitsone continues.

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