"Land Reform amidst Legal Debris: Learning Risky Rights in Myanmar"

Dr. Hilary Oliva Faxon, UC-Berkeley

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Register for lecture: https://bit.ly/3A38Jby

Abstract: Land reforms were central to Myanmar’s precarious project of democracy in the 2010s. After decades of violent dispossession and everyday suffering, elites touted property rights as a solution to conflict and a vehicle for development. But on the ground, farmers experienced land reform as risky rights. Drawing on ethnographic and participatory research in grassroots land mobilizations and high-level policy-making, I show how legal and lived histories of land control shaped the prospects for reforms. Rather than quietly accepting land titles, farmers stretched their acreage, shifted land use categories, and leveraged the language of the law to make new sorts of claims. In so doing, they negotiated risky rights in ways that built on the longstanding practices of cultivation and connection that I call “surviving the state.” In the aftermath of Myanmar’s 2021 military coup, understanding the limits of land reform is essential not only to evaluating the decade of democracy, but also to imagining revolutionary futures.