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How Legislators Frame Contentious Megaprojects: Insights from Parliamentary Debates on Letpadaung Mines and Myitsone Dam in Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

Little is known about how legislative actors engage with social movements in framing contests over conflictual policy issues. This article investigates the case of Myanmar and enquires into how such framing activity can play out in a resurgent legislature. It focuses on two megaprojects that generated intense public debate during the country's decade of liberalisation (2011–2021): the Letpadaung mines and the Myitsone dam. It builds on the analysis of the Union legislature's plenary records across two legislatures to uncover how legislators contextualised and framed such large-scale infrastructure projects and the social conflicts they have caused. The findings reveal that legislators sought to position themselves as informed policy actors, eager to highlight the misconduct of past regimes, while deploying three major frames involving good governance, environmental damage, and injustice related to land expropriation. Yet legislators addressing such megaprojects largely avoided emotionally loaded narratives and nationalistic tropes that other social actors in Myanmar typically mobilised. The findings make a threefold contribution: they enhance our theoretical understanding of how public officials engage in competitive framing processes, advance knowledge of how issue framing was deployed in policymaking during Myanmar's decade of democratisation, and provide evidence of how its political elites construed controversial megaprojects.

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Introduction

Large-scale energy and infrastructure projects tend to trigger intense debates within society, worldwide. Megaprojects have faced significant public opposition in several countries and a large body of work has investigated the multifaceted nature of the social resistance they have faced (Sovacool & Cooper, 2013). Across Asia in particular, a vast literature has explored the dynamics and complexities of social conflicts between local communities and the organisations developing airports, hydroelectric dams, pipelines, power plants, or Special Economic Zones (Apter & Sawa, 1984; Chheat, 2022; Mendoza et al., 2018; Nilsen, 2010; Simpson, 2016; Werner, 2015). In Myanmar, the decade of

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political and economic liberalisation that ended with the coup d'état of 1 February 2021 saw an unprecedented upsurge of protests and social movements opposed to the development of such megaprojects (Kiik, 2020; Prasse-Freeman, 2016; Simpson, 2013). Multiple studies have documented how the media and transnational activism in particular have shaped public opinions and perceptions of the construction and development of several large dams, deep seaports, oil and gas pipelines, and mining facilities (Chan & Ngai Pun, 2022; Foran et al., 2017; Zerrouk & Neef, 2014). The role of civil society has proved essential in communicating data about the social, economic, environmental, and even cultural impacts that such megaprojects could have in the country, or on a particular social group (Kirchherr, 2018; Tang-Lee, 2017; Zerrouk, 2016). NGO reports and policy analyses have also provided a broader, evidence-based picture of the detrimental effects of such large-scale investments, calling for better governance and a more favourable and democratic environment minimising their adverse impacts (Amnesty International, 2017; HRW, 2018; KDNV, 2007; 2010; KHRG, 2015).

The viewpoints of Myanmar's institutional elites (as planners and decision makers) and project developers – usually foreigners – have attracted less scholarly attention (Chan, 2017; Kirchherr et al., 2017; Luo, 2016). Before the 2021 coup, much of the public debate on megaprojects in Myanmar had been carried out in mainstream and social media, in the streets or in public meetings conducted by civil society and concerned citizens. Missing were empirical observations of the perspectives, policy narratives, and frames developed by its new lawmaking elites. A partially elected legislature re-emerged in the country after elections were held in 2010, only to be shut down 10 years later by the military. The complex and hybrid nature of Myanmar's presidential system defined by the 2008 constitution allowed the legislative branch significant autonomy and influence. A recent body of work has illuminated how the national-level parliament developed across two legislatures as a startling site for airing political and democratic grievances against top-down, military-led authoritarianism (Egreteau, 2022; Fink, 2015; Kean, 2014). The *Pyidaungsu Hluttaw* (Parliament of the Union), comprising a 330-seat House of People's Representatives (*Pyithu Hluttaw*) and a 224-seat House of Nationalities (*Amyotha Hluttaw*), became a public venue where open, sometimes candid, discussions of such contentious issues as communal violence and police impunity could strikingly unfold, even if not in effective ways (Chit Win, 2016; Egreteau, 2021).

This article enquires into how the Union parliament publicly discussed and shed light on megaprojects and large-scale investment projects over the course of two legislatures (2011–2016 and 2016–2021). It investigates how legislative elites contextualised and framed such large-scale projects and the social conflicts they have generated. Building on the corpus of framing theory, the research aims to better grasp how institutional elites in a fragile post-authoritarian setting made sense of, and mobilised narratives about, major controversial policy issues. In social theory, framing is a technique that emphasises certain aspects or features of a policy issue over other elements, thus shaping how that issue is construed by others (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Frames and policy narratives are routinely subject to intense contestation within a particular political environment (Benford & Snow, 2000). Research on social movements has drawn attention to how the framing activity of protestors can often be met with powerful strategies of counter framing and frame displacement by state officials and institutional elites (McAdam, 1996; Noakes, 2000). Collective and individual actors seek to mobilise different audiences

behind their agendas and encourage others to consider policy issues along particular lines or frames (Ryan & Gamson, 2006). In doing so, activists, political elites, and public officials engage in what scholars have coined ‘framing contests’. How did newly elected lawmakers in Myanmar mobilise around conflictual large-scale investment projects? What frames and policy narratives did they deploy when addressing the social conflicts fostered by such megaprojects? What does the emergence of such framing contests in parliament tell us about the role of elected officials in shaping competitive policy narratives?

This set of questions is probed through a paired-comparison study of Myanmar’s Myitsone hydroelectric dam project (located in Kachin State) and Letpadaung copper mining project (Sagaing Region). More than other similar megaprojects developed in Myanmar since the 1990s, both have generated heated, often emotional, public debates. The research is grounded in a thorough analysis of all the legislative records of the plenary debates of two successive legislatures: the first dominated by the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) between January 2011 and January 2016, and the second controlled by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) between February 2016 and January 2021.¹ The article proceeds as follows. The first section contextualises the two megaprojects and reviews existing studies on the social resistance both have generated since the late 2000s. The second section describes the research material and methods of data collection and analysis. The empirical analysis follows, in which I have distinguished three major framing devices and strategies deployed by legislative actors during plenary debates: *transparency*, *land grabbing*, and *environmental* frames. Emotionally loaded and nationalistic claims against megaprojects have been commonly made in public forums during Myanmar’s decade of tentative reforms, but my research shows that this was not the case in the Union legislature debates. The next section thus interrogates why lawmakers largely avoided such mobilisation of emotions when addressing megaprojects in the house. The last section discusses the general insights revealed on how legislative officials – as institutional elites – engaged in competitive framing processes, as they borrowed, refined, and countered narratives generated by social movement actors, the media, and other state officials in Myanmar. The findings advance our scholarly knowledge of framing and the devices and strategies used by policy elites and lawmakers to address contentious policy issues. They also provide evidence of how Myanmar’s political and legislative establishment construed controversial megaprojects in the 2010s. Finally, they contribute to a better understanding of how issue framing was deployed in policymaking during Myanmar’s decade of democratic experiments.

Two Megaprojects of Myitsone and Letpadaung in Context

In the early 2000s, a China-funded megaproject envisioned the development of a string of seven hydropower dams along the Mali and N’mai Rivers, in Myanmar’s northern Kachin State. Located at the exact confluence of both rivers, the Myitsone hydroelectric station was to be the biggest of the seven-dam cascade. Myanmar’s then ruling junta reached a Memorandum of Understanding with the state-owned China Power Investment Corporation in December 2006. Three years later, then Chinese Vice-President Xi Jinping endorsed the agreement worth some US\$3.6 billion during an

official trip to Naypyitaw. Despite censorship and stringent coercive measures in place under the junta, various social actors and protest movements emerged in Kachin-dominated areas (KDNG, 2007). From the late 2000s, civil society and community-based organisations started to mobilise around issues of land confiscation and forced displacement of villagers in the Myitsone region, as well as concerns about potential environmental impacts of such a megaproject.

Multiple studies have analysed the dynamics of such protest mobilisation. In addition to detailed NGO reports, scholars have investigated the strategies and discourses adopted by different networks of opponents to Myitsone. Laur Kiik (2016; 2020) has shown how a movement first fostered by Kachin civil society and ethnonational activism morphed into a wider transethnic protest against the project. For Kirchherr (2018), the framing by activists of Myitsone as a project threatening the national cultural heritage of Myanmar, combined with post-junta political change unfolding after the 2010 elections, explains the popularity of the social mobilisation against it. The confluence of the Mali and N'mai Rivers at Myitsone marks the symbolic and physical beginning of the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy in English) River, Myanmar's emblematic and most important waterway. A powerful oppositional frame deployed by activists had thus clearly been driven by cultural nationalism, with strong Sinophobic undercurrents pervading the narratives against the China-funded project (Chan, 2017; Kiik, 2023; Min Zin, 2012; Tang-Lee, 2017). In the 2010s, the Myitsone project was routinely portrayed in local media and civil society reports as a project designed by, and in favour of, neighbouring China, not for local communities or Myanmar as a nation. Counternarratives developed by Chinese developers and proponents of the project failed to gain traction (Luo, 2016; Kirchherr et al., 2017). Another dominant frame mobilised by local and transnational civil society organisations has focused on the threat to the livelihoods and lifestyles of hundreds of thousands of people inhabiting the areas downstream of the proposed dam (Foran et al., 2017; Simpson, 2013). Little is known, however, about the narratives deployed by political and legislative elites under the two governments elected in 2010 and 2015.

The Letpadaung copper mines have generated comparable emotionally charged debates and controversies. Located east of the city of Monywa, on the opposite side of the Chindwin River, the mining area covers a couple of dozen rural villages – all lying in the constituency of Salingyi, in Myanmar's Sagaing Region. Through a joint venture with a military-owned conglomerate, Ivanhoe Mines, a Canadian firm, started to mine the deposits around Letpadaung, Sabetaung, and Kyisintaung in the 1990s. The Canadians, however, withdrew from the project in 2007. Three years later, a subsidiary of China's powerful NORINCO – a state-owned weapons manufacturer – took over the project. A Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Wanbao (the subsidiary) and the military-backed Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd (UMEHL) when then Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao travelled to Naypyitaw. The Letpadaung Copper Mining Project started under Chinese supervision a year later.

Discontent among villagers soon emerged and was principally framed around issues of land evictions. To make way for the expansion of the mining areas, thousands of people were asked to vacate their lands in exchange for financial compensation or relocation (Amnesty International, 2017; Chan & Ngai Pun, 2022; Zerrouk, 2016). Unrest began as some villagers refused to leave their expropriated homes, often claiming that the compensation offered by Wanbao Mining was too low or the new land plots too small

(Cheesman, 2014, 222). Local public protests began in early 2012, but villagers were soon denied permission to demonstrate by local police forces. Social mobilisation escalated with the involvement of activists and urban-based civil society groups from across the country (Zerrouk & Neef, 2014). Demonstrations started to be held without permits and were met with increasing force by police units. During one gathering in November 2012, police fired white phosphorous grenades and tear gas at protesters, inflicting severe burn injuries on dozens of them. The incident drew media attention, since most demonstrators wounded at the time were Buddhist monks marching in full robe (Bünte, 2017, 198–199).

The Chinese investor then paused its mining project, worth US\$1 billion. This action fuelled another round of tensions between Beijing and the USDP administration (Luo, 2016). A commission of inquiry was ordered by President Thein Sein. Chaired by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, then an opposition backbencher in the USDP parliament, the commission presented its findings in March 2013. It argued for a resumption of the project – depicted as a beneficial investment for developing Myanmar – but urged a renegotiation of the contract and the adoption of international standards. The commission did not, however, fully address the grievances of farmers and villagers regarding the coercive measures employed by the police or the detrimental effects of the project on the environment and local landscapes (Prasse-Freeman, 2016, 88–89). Wanbao nevertheless resumed the project, developing in the Letpadaung area a series of Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives to assuage local criticism (Tang-Lee, 2016). The anti-mining mobilisation thereafter declined, with only episodic and localised protests erupting (Chan & Ngai Pun, 2020, 2116; 2021).

Data and Methodology

This article draws upon the Burmese-language records of the plenary sessions of Myanmar's two successive Union legislatures elected in November 2010 and November 2015. The first parliament was dominated by the USDP and the military delegation, which constitutionally held a quarter of all seats (2011–2016). After the 2012 by-elections, the NLD, the Shan and Rakhine parties formed the core of the opposition in the house. The second legislature was controlled for the following five years by the NLD (2016–2021), with the military as the biggest group in opposition. Extant studies (EgretEAU, 2022, Chapter 3) have shown that while legislative elites were almost fully renewed in 2015, their sociological profiles did not much change. Male, ethnic Bamar, and Buddhist parliamentarians with a background in the civil services or the security sector have dominated both legislatures. Politicians from Rakhine and Shan States came in a distant second position.

My analysis necessarily excludes committee meetings and discussions – minutes of which were embargoed in 2011 – as well as unstarred questions to the government, where responses have not been made public. Perhaps one day the archival records of committee behaviour and answers to written questions will be open to public scrutiny and may be compared with plenary behaviour. That said, given the public nature of plenary sessions during Myanmar's decade of political opening up (2011–2021), the examination of floor debates helps us identify different forms of narratives and parliamentary discourses, as well as the legislative tools and strategies deployed by individual legislators when addressing or mentioning conflictual public policy issues. This method frequently used by legislative scholars seeks to gain insights into parliamentary discourses, policy

narratives, and frames, especially on controversial large-scale energy projects (Edberg & Tarasova, 2016). Parliament also emerged in Myanmar as a surprisingly strong site for deliberation for a full decade until the 2021 coup (Egreteau, 2022; Fink, 2015). Such a deliberative public space as a national legislature allowed not just political leaders, but also activists and minority groups seeking public attention to express their views and develop framing devices or strategies.

A qualitative work by nature, my examination has followed conventional procedures of document and content analysis to decipher some of the complexities and nuances contained in plenary speeches. Examining and identifying frames indeed involves capturing minimal nuances in such raw data as legislative proceedings (Benford & Snow, 2000). In collaboration with a native Burmese speaker, Ms Naw Sar Htoo Wa, who first identified plenary sessions during which the sites and projects of either, or both, Letpadaung (Burmese: လက်ပံတောင်း) and Myitsone (Burmese: မြစ်ခုံ) were raised by legislators, we have filtered all parliamentary records of the three chambers (Amyotha Hluttaw or House of Nationalities, Pyithu Hluttaw or House of Representatives, and Pyidaungsu Hluttaw or the joint assembly), including starred questions to the government (with oral responses given on the floor by officials from the executive), motions and proposals tabled and debated, the discussions of draft bills, and other votes or public announcements made in the house. The objective was to identify the most substantial discussions on the Myitsone dam project and the Letpadaung copper mining project offered by legislators and public officials who came to the floor between 2011 and 2020, and to then get them translated by a native speaker to engage more closely with their contents. In the end, the corpus of pertinent speeches and declarations I retained proved quite limited: only 60 daily sessions during which one, or both, projects were mentioned (out of 2,271 daily sessions held between January 2011 and August 2020 in all three chambers).

Legislators mobilised different legislative instruments to bring attention to both megaprojects in the house (see Figure 1). They comprised 21 motions tabled and seconded during plenary sessions by individual representatives, 18 starred questions to the government, 10 discussions of reports submitted by parliamentary committees, four debates of draft bills, and the discussion of (and vote on) one international loan. The decision made by President Thein Sein to suspend the Myitsone dam project was also

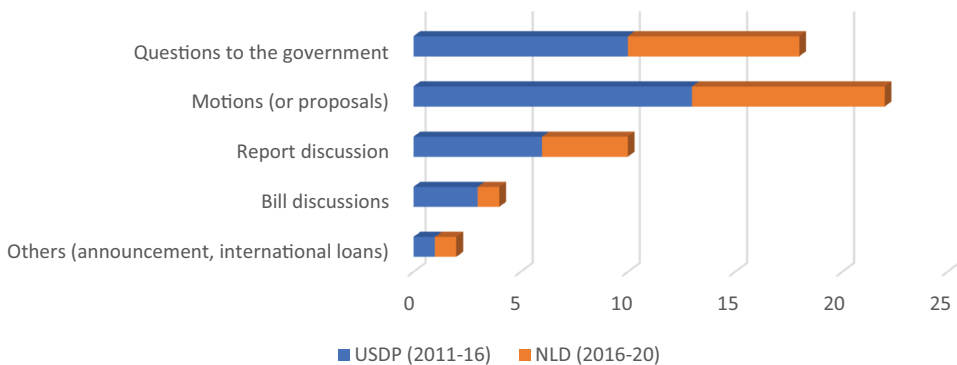


Figure 1. Legislative instruments deployed by MPs when addressing the Myitsone and Letpadaung projects in the Union Legislature (2011–2020)

Table 1. Legislative Instruments Deployed by MPs when Addressing Each, or Both, of the Myitsone and Letpadaung Projects in the Union Legislature (2011–2020)

	MYITSONE PROJECT	LETPADAUNG PROJECT	BOTH PROJECTS
Questions to government			
USDP-controlled parliament (Jan 2011 to Jan 2016)	4	3	3
NLD-controlled parliament (Feb 2016 to Aug 2020)	-	8	-
Motions (or proposals)			
USDP-led	6	6	1
NLD-led	1	6	2
Bill discussions			
USDP-controlled	-	1	2
NLD-controlled	-	1	-
Report discussions			
USDP-controlled	-	6	-
NLD-controlled	-	4	-
Others (official statement, ratification of foreign loans)			
USDP-controlled	1	-	-
NLD-controlled	-	-	1
TOTAL	12	35	9
USDP-controlled	11	16	6
NLD-controlled	1	19	3

read out in parliament on 30 September 2011. Given the timeline, more discussions of the Myitsone case were observed during the USDP legislature (2011–2016), while the Letpadaung project was more prominently addressed by the NLD parliament (2016–2021), as shown in [Table 1](#).

In the following empirical analysis, I have distinguished three major frames – transparency, land grabbing, and environmental frames – deployed by legislative actors either involved in debates on one, or both, megaproject(s), or participating in discussions not directly related to them, but using Myitsone and/or Letpadaung as a case study or illustration.

Frames and Framing Strategies Deployed by Legislators

Dodgy deals and ill-conceived projects

Megaprojects and major public infrastructure programmes tend to generate intense public debate, if not controversy. Typically, the negotiations of such large-scale projects can involve strategic deception and corruption, but also unexpected cost overruns and delays (Flyvbjerg & Molloy, 2011; Locatelli et al., 2017). In societies long plagued by corrupt cultures and unaccountable governments, massive infrastructure projects are routinely portrayed as dodgy deals made through the backdoor, between corrupt leaders and investors not-so-sensitive to shady practices (Huda, 2022). A large body of recent work has documented how contemporary societies across Asia have resisted the construction of power plants, dams, mining projects, and Special Economic Zones using such oppositional tropes (Chheat, 2022; Kirchherr et al., 2016; Mendoza et al., 2018; Morris-Jung, 2017; Sovacool & Cooper, 2013).

A prominent frame deployed by parliamentary elites during Myanmar's decade of political opening has been one insisting on the lack of transparency, and thus of democratic accountability, of the Letpadaung and Myitsone projects. Both were signed during the junta era that preceded the democratic experiments of the 2010s. Legislators in the USDP parliament proved keen on highlighting the discontent that both projects had generated among their constituents, calling for greater accountability and improved monitoring. For instance, a legislator from the ruling party urged Thein Sein's government to take stock of past errors made while negotiating new megaprojects. In a starred question to the government, Maung Toe (USDP, Minhla) asked whether the latter could avoid repeating past mistakes, particularly in the ongoing negotiations about a deep-sea port planned in Myanmar's southern city of Dawei. Maung Toe, a former army colonel in the Pyithu Hluttaw, continued:

It is true that in every country, governmental organisations serve for the benefits of the citizens. Regardless of good intentions, if there is a poor alignment between what the government does and what the people expect, there can be problems and very little benefit. The Myitsone dam project and the Letpadaung copper mine project are illustrative of this. I think that while conducting national-level megaprojects, there should be transparency and accountability (PH-1-6-2, 11 January 2013).

Then, during a plenary discussion of the National Planning Bill for 2015–2016, Daw Khin Hmwe Lwin (NLD, Mingin) warned against developing a dependence on resource extraction and the development of ill-conceived large-scale projects for Myanmar's future economic growth. Both Myitsone and Letpadaung were significant cases of failed public policy, she contended. She pleaded for more, or better, public investment in agriculture and the rural world instead:

The future of our country is bleak if we continue to attract trade and investment in natural gas and other natural resources, and less in the agricultural sector. To give you some examples regarding resource extraction, the Letpadaung project, the Hatgyi project, and the Ayeyarwady Myitsone project, which was halted during the President's five-year tenure, pose immense challenges to the state. What kind of future shall we pass on to our next generations if we always extract and depend on natural resources (PDH-1-12-19, 26 February 2015)?

It is startling to see lawmakers from the NLD and the USDP join hands and call for a thorough renegotiation of these agreements. But taking a relatively strong position against the action of past regimes – a stance more commonly associated with pro-democracy politicians – was typical of the efforts of the USDP administration to distance itself from previous military eras. Thein Lwin, USDP representative for Chauk, was explicit: he referred to both Myitsone and Letpadaung as aberrations, arguing that these business agreements and Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) required a detailed reassessment (PH-1-9-2, 16 January 2014). Daw Khin San Yee, Deputy Minister of National Planning and Economic Development, responded ambiguously, addressing only the MoUs and business deals prepared by her ministry. This response visibly irritated the legislator. As Secretary of Pyithu Hluttaw's Committee on Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation, Thein Lwin urged the central government to provide a more thorough answer and his objection was recorded by the Hluttaw offices – yet not really followed up. In June 2017,

a motion formulated in similar terms was moved by Daw Min Kun Chan (NLD, Paung) in the NLD-controlled legislature. The MP urged the government – now under the aegis of State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi – to reassess all mega-projects signed by past governments. Significantly, the motion was approved by unanimous consent (PH-2-5-20, 23 June 2017).

Overall, the need for transparency and good governance proved a popular narrative in both successive parliaments. In March 2013, a USDP representative from the Ayeyarwady region tabled in the Amyotha Hluttaw a motion urging the government to expand and foster its development plans ‘for the future of the country’. Dr Aye Maung (Rakhine Nationalities Development Party, Rakhine-1) seconded it by stressing that large-scale projects should be developed in full transparency:

When contracting MoUs [on megaprojects] in full transparency, we can seek to minimise the environmental, socio-cultural, and public health impact of the projects, equally sharing their benefits between the two countries [parties to an MoU]. Obtaining the support and cooperation from the people is also crucial to the success of such mega development projects. If we were able to commit to such MoUs, we would succeed in all our developmental projects in the future. The Letpadaung project is a case in point (AH-1-6-26, 13 March 2013).

Likewise, when the Foreign Investments Bill was discussed in the Pyithu Hluttaw in February 2013, the Secretary of the Bill Committee, Saw Hla Tun, further suggested that they rephrase a paragraph dealing with land use by foreign investors, insisting again on the concept of transparency. He drew on both Myitsone and Letpadaung as examples of bad practices (PH-1-6-13, 4 February 2013).

Land grab as a framing device

Conflicts over land have been an important device for framing the negative impacts that megaprojects can have on local communities, cultures, and geographies (Borras et al., 2011; Gellert & Lynch, 2003). Echoing James C. Scott (1998, 4), activists in Myanmar have long been wary of strong, ‘muscle-bound’ state-led development. Social movements, public intellectuals, and academics in and around Myanmar have routinely portrayed large-scale energy projects as opportunities for extensive land confiscation, expropriation, and forced migration (Carter, 2018; Woods, 2015). Multiple reports have documented such behaviours and practices (HRW, 2018; KDNG, 2010; KHRG, 2015; TNI, 2015). Companies involved in the construction of dams, power plants, mining facilities, and Special Economic Zones have long been accused of dubious land acquisitions; others have been silent about inadequate land compensation given to villagers and farmers (Prasse-Freeman, 2016). Community leaders, media agencies, and civil society organisations in Myanmar have thus deployed powerful narratives around the politics of dispossession in megaproject development (Aung, 2018; Chan & Ngai Pun, 2022; Zerrouk, 2016; Zerrouk & Neef, 2014). Rural communities have also used a growing body of international standards and regulatory guidelines to frame their struggles and claims. Their collective action and engagement strategies have sought to consolidate their tenure of land, forest, and fisheries (TNI, 2015, 24–26).

A handful of legislators in Myanmar's parliament have borrowed similar oppositional frames, equating megaprojects with land confiscation fostered by the Myanmar state, or the military institution itself, through its conglomerates. Members of the army-backed USDP and military legislators seemed however reluctant to deploy narratives so overtly attacking the military's lucrative business activities. In December 2015, a motion was moved in the USDP-controlled Pyidaungsu Hluttaw on the establishment of a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Kyaukphyu, Rakhine State (PDH-1-13-21, 29 December 2015). Several elected legislators, especially from the local nationalist party, the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP), brought to the fore the question of land grabs in similar SEZs in the country. The two cases of Myitsone and Letpadaung were mobilised to illuminate such messages. Thar Sein (RNDP, Kyauktaw) pointed to the lack of transparency in land redistribution programmes proposed in Letpadaung, while Pe Than (RNDP, Myebon) urged the central and Rakhine state governments to learn from the mistakes made in both megaprojects. The proposal was adopted by 424 legislators, with only 23 voting against.

In February 2016, another motion tabled by Daw Khin San Hlaing (NLD, Pale) in the Pyithu Hluttaw pressed the incoming NLD government to take all necessary steps to monitor existing megaprojects and addressed 'once-and-for-all' land grabs. Despite the recognition by two successive commissions (including one on Letpadaung led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi herself) that various state, non-state, and foreign companies had been repeatedly involved in land expropriation conflicts over the years, local grievances had continued to be disseminated by farmers and rural communities across the country, and especially around the Letpadaung mining area, she claimed.

Internally displaced people all over the country are forcibly banished without compensation or systematic reparations. Plans to extract mineral resources at the Letpadaung Copper Mine Project, which has long faced problems with locals, are about to proceed in May, without appropriately following up on the Investigative Commission's report (PH-2-1-12, 25 February 2016).

Her motion was endorsed by 278 MPs but opposed by the 110 military appointees and their USDP colleagues in the chamber (PH-2-1-12, 25 February 2016). Echoing her concerns a year later, Win Thein Zaw, NLD legislator for Salingyi, asked a starred question on whether the government had any concrete plan to stop land confiscation practices still reported against the Chinese company Wanbao in Letpadaung (PH-2-4-14, 28 February 2017). The Minister for Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation, Ohn Win, came to the floor to reply that the authorities had been aware of the problem and paid due attention. Unsatisfied with the platitudes offered by the NLD minister, the representative asked for a follow-up question. The latter was again only vaguely answered by the Union minister, who told the audience that the administration had merely followed the recommendations listed by the Commission of Inquiry chaired by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

Environmental Threat Framing

Classic environmental frames have also been mobilised by lawmakers when discussing large-scale projects in parliament. Typically, parliamentarians have messaged about environmental risks to local ecosystems and wildlife driven by allegedly unchecked mining operations, hydropower facilities, pipelines, and other major infrastructure projects. Politicians worldwide have used such framing strategies in their opposition to nuclear energy, shale gas, and genetically modified crops, among other hotly debated environmental issues (Bugden et al., 2017; Buttel, 2005; Edberg & Tarasova, 2016; Tan et al., 2019). Civil society organisations in Myanmar have launched multiple studies on the Letpadaung project, identifying the mining facilities as a major source of pollution in the surrounding ecosystem (Zerrouk, 2016, 180). Mining activities not only require the use of toxic chemical reagents, but also produce waste tailings that can (and do) leak into soils and rivers. The nearby Chindwin River, a tributary of the mighty Ayeyarwady River, has been especially affected.

In Myanmar's two successive legislatures, representatives have echoed such arguments put forward by activists. Surprisingly, they came from all parties and often represented constituencies where the influence of social and labour movements was significant, such as in northern Yangon. The direct environmental threats posed by Letpadaung and Myitsone to local biodiversity have been frequently highlighted during parliamentary debates. For instance, during a plenary discussion on the adoption of the Fourth Protocol Amending the ASEAN Comprehensive Investment Agreement, a NLD legislator for Hlaingbwe urged the government to comply with international standards of environmental protection. As requested by the 2008 Constitution, the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw must ratify international treaties before Myanmar officially joins them. The parliamentary debate mentioned above merely focused on foreign investments within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); yet it was the occasion for some legislators to reiterate their criticism of foreign investors that they openly accuse of depleting national resources and damaging local ecosystems through megaprojects, such as the Myitsone and Letpadaung projects (PDH-2-12-9, 20 May 2019). The protocol was nevertheless passed unanimously.

Likewise, when she was an opposition legislator in the USDP-controlled parliament, Daw Sandar Minn (NLD, Zabuthiri) asked a question to the government about illegal gold mining activities in the Sagaing Region, where Letpadaung is located. She enquired whether either the central government or the regional government in Sagaing had plans to stop, or at least minimise, the environmental impact of such activities. She used Letpadaung as an illustration of how a large-scale mining project could irretrievably damage a river (PH-1-12-54, 28 May 2015). A Deputy Minister in the President's Office, Kyaw Kyaw Win, replied that the central government had received no public complaints or evidence-based report on illegal gold mining along the Chindwin River – a doubtful claim. Similarly, in August 2017, Win Myint (NLD, Bago-11) discussed the annual report of Amyotha Hluttaw's Committee on Natural Resources and Environmental Preservation. He too lamented the steady pollution of soil and waters around mining sites such as around Letpadaung:

Air pollution can be observed; it is caused by smoke (carbon dioxide) released by factories, particularly in industrialised countries such as China. It may not be an obvious problem in Myanmar. However, we have to take into consideration that such a stinking smell, which cannot be seen with your eyes, also affects the bioecology of our surroundings. We must also consider water pollution caused by chemicals released from gold mining, which kills fish and all living creatures in our waters. For instance, there are such large-scale mining sites at Sabetaung, Kyisintaung, and Letpadaung, in Salingyi township; they use some fifty tons of sulphuric acid every day. The Moe Gyo factory, owned by the Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd., produces and supplies the neighbouring mines with the needed chemicals. As a consequence, fish are dead in nearby streams, age-old trees have dried up like the ones on Kan Kon high school compound, and sunflower and sesame plantations in the surrounding areas have also been destroyed (AH-2-5-38, 4 August 2017).

Another parliamentary question asked in the NLD-led Pyithu Hluttaw prompted a strong rebuttal from the armed forces. Win Thein Zaw, the representative from the township where Letpadaung is located, queried the NLD government on whether there was any plan to relocate an army-owned chemical factory out of his constituency. That factory produced chemicals supplied and used at the neighbouring Letpadaung site, and that proved a significant source of pollution in the Kan Kon village area, the MP contended (PH-2-5-45, 16 August 2017). He received a brutal response from the Deputy Minister of Defence who had come to the floor to defend and clarify the role of the joint venture signed in 2006 between a military conglomerate (Myanmar Economic Corporation) and China's NORINCO, a major Chinese state-owned defence corporation. Brig-Gen. Myint Nwe argued that the chemical factory had functioned since 2006, with regular monitoring of all pollution levels. There had been no evidence of any damage to the local ecosystem, the general affirmed.

Strikingly, representatives elected from the area of Monywa, the biggest city next to the Letpadaung site, were not always the most active in their oppositional framing. Several opposition politicians and legislators from more distant urban areas, including Daw Sandar Minn, also mobilised around the megaproject and condemned the environmental impact of mining industrial projects. As such, environmental frames played a key role here: they bridged the ideological gap between parliamentarians with an activist, pro-democracy, or civil society background on the one hand, and members of the urban, often military-backed, elites on the other. Both sides of the political spectrum have thus proved wary of growing resource depletion and environmental degradation in the country.

In July 2014, two motions were successively moved in the Pyithu Hluttaw by a member of the ruling USDP, Tin Maung Oo (Shwepyitha). Both motions shed light on the degradation caused by acid and chemical leakages around various mining sites across the country. The lawmaker, a retired army colonel representing a peri-urban township north of Yangon, urged the government of President Thein Sein to take precautionary measures to prevent new controversial cases such as Letpadaung from emerging; he suggested that economic development should be considered alongside the protection of the environment. Both motions were approved unanimously (PH-1-10-25, 8 July 2014; PH-1-10-28, 14 July 2014). Some legislators nevertheless expressly lamented the lack of commitment from the USDP government to the protection of vulnerable townships. When the final report of the Letpadaung Commission of Inquiry was discussed in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (PDH-1-12-58, 11 June 2015), Daw Khin San Hlaing (NLD, Pale) intervened and complained that the environmental damage caused by the project was not sufficiently addressed in the report.

Lastly, another motion moved in the Amyotha Hluttaw by Kyaw Htwe (NLD, Yangon-8) urged the NLD government to develop more efficient plans to control flood and drought-related problems in the country. His proposal was seconded by a legislator from northern Kachin State, who contended that deforestation had led to continuous floods during the monsoon season. Khun Win Taung (NLD, Kachin-11) pointed to China's recent curbs on domestic logging, an official ban inside China that had prompted aggressive logging in neighbouring regions, such as around the area where Myitsone dam was purported to be built, from 2016:

Many experts have pointed out that deforestation is the main factor contributing to floods. The depletion of our forests is caused by the construction of more dams than we need, intensive logging, forest fires clearing land for agriculture, the expansion of our cities, and overextraction of natural resources for profits. As a consequence, we have suffered from natural disasters such as floods. About half of the forests in Kachin State have been chopped down because of the Myitsone dam project, and about 540,000 hectares of Myanmar's forest are being destroyed every year (AH-2-2-10, 8 August 2016).

Shunning Frames of Cultural Nationalism

Multiple studies have provided illuminating accounts of how some segments of Myanmar's civil society, the media, and public intellectual circles have advanced nationalist, if not xenophobic, frames to oppose megaprojects. Such framing has emphasised the threats that foreign-funded projects could constitute to Myanmar's cultural resources, sensitive historical sites, and the lifestyles of its local and ethnic communities. Both Letpadaung and Myitsone are Chinese-backed projects. The public outcry regarding the foreseeable impacts of the Myitsone project was early on couched in strong anti-Chinese language (Cheesman, 2014; Kiik, 2016; Min Zin, 2012; Tang-Lee, 2017). Ethnic Kachin activists, church leaders, and community-based organisations across Kachin State also began to frame their opposition to the hydropower project in ethnonationalist terms. This struggle was first a resistance for local, pan-Kachin cultures and ancestral lands that only later combined with Bamar ethnonationalist activists to form a broader movement opposing the Chinese-backed dam project (Chan, 2017; Chan & Ngai Pun, 2022; Kiik, 2020; Kirchherr, 2018). Likewise, the Letpadaung mines have attracted strong resistance also driven by anti-Chinese sentiment, thriving on conspiracy theories (Kiik, 2023; Luo, 2016).

This mainstream discourse was not reflected in parliament under both successive administrations in the 2010s. Only a handful of ultra-nationalist parliamentarians, and a few ethnic politicians, raised such nationalist and anti-Chinese frames during plenary debates. I wish to add a caveat, though, before shedding light on some of these uncommon nationalist tropes. The parliamentary code of ethics enforced under both legislatures has stipulated that legislators must behave with 'dignity'. They are expected to deliver speeches in polite and formal ways and address other members of parliament with good manners (Egreteau, 2022, 45). The speaker of each house has the right – and often uses it – to remove from parliamentary records interjections, scuffles, and other insulting

or abusive language used by legislators. The analysis of written proceedings can thus miss what a daily non-participant observation may have otherwise noticed – including rude, offensive, or xenophobic remarks.

During the second plenary session of the USDP legislature, Dr Aye Maung, a Rakhine nationalist leader elected in the Amyotha Hluttaw, denounced the Myitsone project as a form of neocolonialism by a regional power, China:

Regarding the Ayeyarwady River and the Myitsone dam, it is time for us to be wary of neocolonial expansion threats, both geopolitically and economically. We must be vigilant about the neocolonial ambitions of powerful countries that are geographically connected to us and have more regional and economic influence than other powerful countries further away. Since the Ayeyarwady River is the lifeblood of Myanmar, we have to listen to what environmentalists call the EIA [Environmental Impact Assessment] . . . In the future, such megaprojects should not be decided by one person or a small group of people. According to Section 220 of the 2008 Constitution, every development plan of the government needs to get the approval of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw. It is a necessity to discuss in the Hluttaw all existing development plans and decide whether to continue them or not. In that respect, we must debate the Myitsone dam project and prevent its further development (AH-1-2-16, 12 September 2011).

J. Yaw Wu, another legislator from the same chamber representing Kachin State, once complained in a question to the USDP government about the importation of foreign workers from Yunnan (AH-1-2-24, 23 September 2011). Local labour markets in northern Myanmar had suffered from such unfair competition, he remarked. The discontent of local communities towards Chinese migrant workers employed in small businesses and large-scale projects such as Myitsone had been brewing for years. The comments by the ethnic Lisu politician (and member of the National Unity Party) were not well received by the USDP administration. The Minister of Mines, Thein Htike, countered that the central government had already been providing plenty of assistance to Kachin State, stressing that its people should cooperate with staunch patriotism with such developmental programmes.

In the following NLD legislature, such chauvinistic tropes barely lingered. Foreigners foster land conflicts when they invest in megaprojects, Zaw Lin Htut (NLD, Mon-9) once contended. As he spoke in support of a motion moved by another lawmaker from the ruling party encouraging the NLD government to revise the National Land Use Policy, the Amyotha Hluttaw representative used Letpadaung as an example of how foreign (Chinese especially) investors tend to rely on land confiscation to develop their projects. The opening up of Myanmar following the lifting of international sanctions in 2012 had exacerbated such land conflicts, he argued (AH-2-11-17, 25 February 2019).

In February 2013, the Amyotha Hluttaw passed an important parliamentary motion on the creation of a river commission tasked with the monitoring of the Ayeyarwady River (AH-1-6-14, 5 February 2013). The proposal was tabled by two legislators from the USDP – Myo Myint (USDP, Mandalay-6), seconded by Khin Maung Yi (USDP, Ayeyarwady-6). In their parliamentary speeches both argued that the Ayeyarwady River was a national treasure to be cherished and protected by all in Myanmar, regardless

of background or creed. The passing of the proposal illuminated how clashing identity struggles and ethnonationalist movements can sometimes converge in such a deeply divided society as Myanmar (Kiik, 2020). Khin Maung Yi stressed:

I want to discuss the first part of the motion put forward by U Myo Myint (Mandalay-6). It has stated that the Ayeyarwady River is Myanmar's national river. The Ayeyarwady River and Myanmar cannot be separated. As long as Myanmar exists as a nation, so must the Ayeyarwady River. It [the river] is such a rare gift for Myanmar. Unlike other major rivers such as the Mekong, Danube, and Amazon that flow through different countries and are shared through international treaties, the Ayeyarwady River is a true gift given by nature with Myanmar its sole beneficiary (AH-1-6-14, 5 February 2013).

At the opposite end of Myanmar's political spectrum stood Hla Swe, a staunch, voluble retired infantry officer and openly nationalist legislator for Magwe-12 in the USDP legislature. He expressed concern that if such important megaprojects were stalled, Myanmar may well remain in the unenviable group of the world's lesser developed countries. Blaming international NGOs and Western civil society organisations, he thundered on the floor:

Do any of those who love the Ayeyarwady River know this fact? Who will finance the conservation of the Ayeyarwady River? The USA? The EU? I doubt these countries will finance such a project . . . According to a weekly news website, one of the foreign embassies [in Yangon] has given financial support to the opposition against the Myitsone dam project. Whether it is true or not, only the people involved in it would know. Yet I am sure that the government of Myanmar is fully aware of the importance of such a project to preserve the Ayeyarwady River. What we need the most to do so is a [adequate] budget (AH-1-2-47, 16 November 2011).

Yet such chauvinistic frames and aggressive cultural narratives have seldom been used by legislative elites to resist foreign-funded megaprojects in either of the parliaments under study – which marks out a sharp point of difference with social media, Myanmar's wider public sphere, and the networks of social movements.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study on a decade of resurgent parliamentary debates in Myanmar suggest that the new breed of legislative elites that emerged in Myanmar in the 2010s effectively engaged in various framing contests over major conflictual policy issues. There is robust evidence that parliament surfaced during the decade of reforms as a public site for problem and issue framing. Taking discontent to parliament, many legislators openly, and often candidly, addressed on the floor some of the most contested large-scale infrastructure projects developed in the country. In doing so, they advanced various framing (and counter-framing) strategies. In particular, the data points to three prominent frames and narratives of contested megaprojects. The dominant framing strategy aimed to describe the Letpadaung mines and the Myitsone dam in terms of good (or, rather, bad) governance. It stressed the issue of transparency (or lack thereof) in contracting and developing both projects, portraying them as dodgy agreements in need of reassessment. This popular narrative was deployed by both the USDP and NLD parliaments. Even government officials responding to questions or defending a draft bill related to development policies adopted such frames. Admitting the lack of

transparency, urging better governance and accountability when signing an agreement with foreign investors, and monitoring subsequent implementation and operations, Union ministers and leading policymakers frequently cited in parliament both Myitsone and Letpadaung as examples *not* to follow. A second critical frame tapped into the concept of injustice, highlighting the immediate negative consequences of such megaprojects for local communities of farmers and villagers, who were evicted from their land to make way for the expansion of a mine, deep-sea port, Special Economic Zone, or large dam. Echoing narratives deployed by activists, this was another popular strategy observed on the parliamentary floor – one that seemed effective in not only capturing a wider audience but also responding to direct demands formulated by constituents. Lastly, classic environmental frames were also mobilised in Myanmar's Union legislature to denounce the adverse impacts on biodiversity and ecosystems of these megaprojects. Such a tactical focus likewise astutely borrowed from global studies and arguments advanced by international experts and environmental activists.

The study also reveals that only a handful of legislators deployed nationalist and cultural frames expressing concern about the influence – or lack of concern – of foreign stakeholders involved in megaprojects and the potential threats that the latter could pose to Myanmar's cultural heritage, traditional lifestyles, and national identity. This is in stark contrast to the existing literature that has pointed to several collective actors in Myanmar – the media, civil society organisations, and activists – who more routinely advanced highly chauvinistic, if not xenophobic, tropes against large-scale foreign investment in the 2010s (Kiik, 2023; Min Zin, 2012; Zerrouk & Neef, 2014). The analysis of plenary discussions of both Letpadaung and Myitsone megaprojects demonstrates that the use of emotions, or emotionally loaded claims, was very limited under both the USDP and NLD legislatures. These findings seem consistent with recent European research claiming that parliamentary framing tends to overlap only to a limited extent with civil society or media framing (Roggeband & Vliegthart, 2007).

Taken together, these findings advance our scholarly understanding of framing processes and the actors involved in framing activity. Little is known about the participation of legislative elites in the framing of major policy issues. The means by which elected parliamentarians engage with other collective actors in framing contests and how they respond to frames proposed by social movement entrepreneurs is poorly understood. This study fills such important empirical gaps. Counter-framing and frame-displacement strategies that are developed by institutional elites and policymakers can have a strong influence over public opinion and perceptions (Edberg & Tarasova, 2016; McAdam, 1996; Noakes, 2000; Ryan & Gamson, 2006). More research is needed, however, to assess whether voters in Myanmar were really listening. Extant studies have shown that legislators in both parliaments were keen on being seen doing things in the house, yet not necessarily with re-election benefits in mind (EgretEAU, 2022). Social mobilisation has long played a dominant role in the struggle against abuses, damage, and violations surrounding such megaprojects as the Myitsone dam and the Letpadaung mines. Protest movements and the media were at the forefront of such mobilisation and the adoption of international social safeguards norms by developers of megaprojects during the 2010s (Kiik, 2020; Kirchherr, 2018; Prasse-Freeman, 2016; Tang-Lee, 2017; Zerrouk, 2016). Yet, parliamentary elites also advanced

their own frames of interpretation of contentious large-scale projects, and engaged in framing contests with social activists, the media, and, more significantly, other state officials, especially the government and the military.

The framing paradigm was useful here for making sense of how newly elected politicians in Myanmar addressed contested public policy issues in parliament during a decade of incomplete liberalisation. Neophyte legislators adopted, appraised, and refined several frames typically generated by social movement entrepreneurs. Although unfamiliar with the practice of legislative affairs, several representatives sought to position themselves as seasoned policy actors, deploying policy narratives grounded in arguments and claims about good governance, transparency, potential environmental damage, and injustice related to land confiscation or inadequate compensation for the relocation of villagers. Yet, they also largely avoided the nationalistic and culturalist discourses deployed by some social activists and media outlets in the country. This was a rather safe strategic choice for novice legislators, one that allowed politicians to highlight the wrongdoings of past military regimes while positioning themselves as seasoned and informed elected officials in a post-authoritarian society much in need of such a profile.

This suggests a need for further studies, though, particularly on the effects of framing by legislators and the factors influencing their selection of frames and framing tactics. Issue and problem framing play an important role in social mobilisation and policy action. A critical component of success, a particular choice of frames against, or in support of, a public policy issue can drive policymaking in a certain direction (Benford & Snow, 2000). It is because frames are thought to shape policy behaviour that state officials often engage with social movements in framing contests over controversial issues. Future research should seek to better understand how legislators choose their frames and framing devices. An intersectional analysis could, perhaps, reveal more about the complexities of framing tactics and the repertoire deployed by parliamentary elites, especially those with a background in activism. I mentioned above that the social composition of parliament did not evolve much after the 2015 elections, despite a high legislative turnover. A deeper analysis of the sociological profile of the most active legislators may help explain their framing strategies. Do they directly respond to the framing efforts of social movements or the media? Or do they adopt frames that derive from their own personal beliefs, experience, or occupational backgrounds?

Megaproject narratives are also important elements that can shape the views of citizens and constituents, allowing elected legislators to decide whether to embrace such projects in their own community. Have the framing efforts made by legislators effectively resonated with their constituents, in poll after poll? Does it pay off to position oneself as a seasoned representative concerned with the impact of megaprojects? Alas, parliament was brutally shut down in Myanmar by the coup d'état of 1 February 2021. The military takeover has shattered a decade of increasingly informed public policy debate, including on the nature of megaprojects such as Letpadaung and Myitsone. The closure of parliament – even if it was only partially elected under Myanmar's 2008 Constitution – has deprived the country of a venue where grievances could be voiced, and contentious issues publicly discussed.

Megaprojects will however certainly continue to attract attention in Myanmar in coming years and invite further examination of all the framing contests they may generate in such a volatile environment.

Note

1. The format used for citing proceedings is as follows: [Name of the House]-[Legislature No., with '1' for USDP 2011-2016]-[Session No.]-[Day No.]:[Date]. 'AH' refers to the Amyotha Hluttaw (the 224-seat House of Nationalities), 'PH' to the Pyithu Hluttaw (the 330-seat House of People's Representatives), and 'PDH' to the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (the joint assembly of representatives from both chambers).

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