

Identity Politics outside Conflict Zones:

Karen Identity Development in Central Myanmar during the Pre-Reform Era

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요약

The primary challenge for Myanmar's nation-building is whether ethnic minorities can accept an overarching national identity, a difficult task evidenced by long-running ethnic insurgencies. With a nationwide ceasefire with ethnic armed groups in sight, creating a national identity has become an ever more pressing issue. This study goes back in time and examines mass-level minority attitudes toward national identity in non-conflict zones of pre-reform Myanmar. Preliminary survey data collected in Yangon in 2002-2003 suggest that although ethnic identity was strong, minorities there had developed positive attitudes toward the national identity, which contradicts the prevailing idea about minority identity development in Myanmar at that time. The results also show that positive interethnic contact was associated with national identification despite strong ethnic consciousness and feelings of alienation. This suggests that minority identities were indeed more complex than commonly thought and promoting intergroup solidarity will be important for achieving Myanmar's national reconciliation.

Keywords: Ethnic Identity, National Identity, Myanmar, Karen

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I. Introduction

After five decades of authoritarian rule and international isolation, Myanmar finally appears to be entering a new era. The Thein Sein government, which came to power in 2011, has implemented sweeping political reforms, releasing political prisoners and considerably expanding freedom of the press and association. The culmination of political liberalization happened in April 2012, when the opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, who had spent nearly 15 years under house arrest, won a parliamentary seat at the by-elections with 42 other members of her party, the National League for Democracy. The government has also launched major economic reforms with the aim of reintegrating the country into the world economy. The deeply flawed exchange rate system was reformed with assistance from the International Monetary Fund, and the Foreign Investment Law was amended to attract foreign capital and technology. In response, Western governments have suspended or lifted economic sanctions and aggressively approached Myanmar to expand diplomatic and economic ties.

Yet, the reforms are under threat from the lack of national unity. Myanmar is a multi-ethnic society with more than 135 officially recognized ethnic groups, many of which have been engaged in armed struggles for self-determination since the country's independence from Britain in 1948. Many of the country's vast mountainous border areas have either been seized by ethnic insurgent groups or become battlefields for clashes between the government forces and rebel groups. The new government has actively pursued peace talks with ethnic armed groups in the border regions, which has led to, among other things, the successful

end of the fifty-year insurgency of the Karen National Union (KNU). Yet under the watch of the same government, a 17-year-old ceasefire in Kachin State broke down in 2011 as fresh fighting between the Kachin Independence Army and the Myanmar military displaced tens of thousands of civilians. With domestic political reforms in progress, there are also reports of radicalization among ethnic youth in the conflict zones (Fuller 2013; International Crisis Group 2012). In addition, intercommunal violence between Buddhists and Muslims is spreading across the country. The violence against the Rohingya in Rakhine State in 2011 displaced over 100,000 people and created a massive humanitarian crisis. The hostility against Muslims escalated into anti-Muslim riots in Meiktila and other towns in central Myanmar closer to the capital in 2012. All together, the situation suggests that achieving national unity is an urgent issue for Myanmar's successful transition.

Current accounts of Myanmar's ethnic relations, however, at least hold three limitations for helping us understand the complex nature of the country's nation-building challenges and for exploring potential solutions. First, most accounts of ethnic minority issues have been dominated by the violent conflict in the border regions (Lintner 1990; Lintner 1994), except for an important recent account by Thawngmung (2012). Because their analytic focus has been on the armed struggle in the border region, how the national political community of Myanmar might be conceived by minorities and what the interethnic interactions might be in the absence of physical violence and in the presence of intergroup contact has been left unexamined. Second, because accounts are informed by the contentious history, studies largely assume that minorities' strong ethnic ties are a hindrance to the development of a

sense of political community in Myanmar (Fink 2001; South 2003).¹⁾ Third, largely related to the first and second limitations, ethnic identity has rarely been examined at the mass level. Because armed conflict has dominated the discussion about ethnic relations in Myanmar, political discourse and historical narratives, mostly shaped by ethnic leaders, have received most of the attention (Lintner 1990; Lintner 1994; Rajah 1998; South 2003). In contrast, little is known about the attitudes among the ordinary members of minority groups, especially toward national and ethnic identity issues. It also follows that the focus on ethnic leadership also tends to overemphasize the views of the older generation while the young are frequently overlooked.

In this paper, I examine attitudes toward national identity among an ethnic minority group in central Myanmar.²⁾ Central Myanmar, for the purpose of this study, is defined as the political and geographic space away from conflict zones. Studying identity formation in this particular geographic area is important for three reasons. First, central Myanmar represents a political space characterized by the absence of all-out ethnic conflict, where the social and political environment is not shaped by daily violence and existential challenges.³⁾ Second, it also represents a

1) This tendency has been more pervasive in the policy documents and journalistic treatment of Myanmar, where ethnic and national identities are treated as mutually exclusive categories.

2) In this study, “central Myanmar” indicates the non-border regions and historically corresponds to “Burma Proper” under British rule. The area was sometimes referred to as a “government-controlled” area, as opposed to the conflict zones or rebel-controlled areas along the border.

3) The recent waves of communal violence involving Buddhists and Muslims across the country are historically and structurally different from the more traditional minority conflicts. For a detailed historical analysis of the Rohingya issue, see Leider (2012).

somewhat peaceful interethnic situation where the ethnic majority and minority groups interact on a regular basis outside the conflict setting. Third, central Myanmar includes urban and in some instances, cosmopolitan environments where minorities are exposed to more complex and globalized social settings. In other words, ethnic relations in central Myanmar offer a relatively ideal situation where identity formation can be examined in a non-conflict context, which will become more important once the country attains national reconciliation. Therefore, ethnic relations in central Myanmar provide us important insight about the prospect of Myanmar's nation-building project. Two questions arise from these considerations: (1) What are the levels of national identification among minorities in central Myanmar? (2) What is the relationship between ethnic identity and national identity there?

This paper investigates these questions by using survey responses, in-depth interviews, and participatory observation drawn from Karen communities in Yangon. The Karen provide an appropriate case for this study because a great number of their people live in central Myanmar. Before the Karen National Union signed a ceasefire with the Myanmar government in 2012, the Karen ethnonationalist groups in Karen State at the Myanmar-Thailand border had fought for autonomy for five decades. Yet, a substantial proportion of the Karen population is also dispersed in a wide area in central Myanmar across Yangon, Ayeyaddy, and Bago Divisions. Because they live alongside ethnic Burmans, they socialize, compete, and cooperate with Burmans in various ways, actions which are likely to affect their attitudes toward the national political community of Myanmar. To be sure, it is far from the truth that they are insulated from the tensions created in the borderlands. They have been exposed to the

threats and insecurities created by the clashes and refugee crises in the border regions through personal and community connections as well as political ramifications. Yet the absence of daily violence creates a political space where fundamentally different attitudes toward ingroups and outgroups may develop.

This paper, therefore, is an attempt to contribute to our understanding of the nation-building challenge in Myanmar by investigating mass-level attitudes toward the relationship between national and ethnic identities in non-conflict zones. Understanding the political attitudes of minority groups in central Myanmar will contribute to our knowledge on minority issues in Myanmar by providing a baseline for comparison with minority groups at the border and minorities in the future. If the current negotiations lead to permanent peace in the peripheral regions, the next task will be to forge a national identity.

Current debates on national reconciliation are largely focused on the institutional arrangements of power sharing, most notably federalism, and political strategies of ethnic elites. Policy or media reports are filled with the acronyms of ethnic political groups and accounts of their armed wings attending peace meetings and their positions in the ongoing negotiations.⁴⁾ Yet, equally important is national identity formation among the masses, which will psychologically bring different groups together and bind them to an agreement of sustainable national unity. The extent to which minorities accept the overarching national identity will not only affect the current transition but also determine the long-term

4) My interview in 2013 with a Karen elite in Yangon also indicates that the discourse within the Karen communities appears to be still focused on federalism and formal political and institutional arrangements.

viability and prosperity of the Myanmar nation-state. Policy interventions should likewise consider ways to understand and influence the attitudes among majority and minority ethnic groups favorable to the formation of a Myanmar national identity.

The data to be analyzed here were collected in 2002 and 2003. The belated publication should be understood in the context of Myanmar's political history. The analysis was not published until now because Myanmar began to enjoy relative freedom of the press only recently, after the new government came into power in 2011. Although they were willing to share their political views with foreigners in private, people inside Myanmar at the time of interview rarely felt safe about having their views known in public, not to mention out in print. Since minority communities in Yangon are easily identifiable, it would have been unethical to publish such an analysis. Myanmar's military government detained countless citizens for their often benign and harmless political views, so the potential risks for interviewees and survey respondents could not be underestimated. Though the data may be old, the information is quite rare and informs us of the ethnic attitudes of the day. The public attitudes of 2002 and 2003, if combined with the issues and considerations of the present day, can shed new light on the challenges facing Myanmar.

II. Nation-Building and Minority Issues in Myanmar: Background and Argument

Although the number of clashes between ethnic armed forces and the Myanmar military has declined dramatically in recent years, ethnic minority issues in Myanmar are far from resolved. Rather, with the political and economic reforms finally underway, minority issues are now considered one of the greatest threats undermining Myanmar's transition.

From a historical perspective, Myanmar has been confronted by the prototypical postcolonial challenge of building a political community out of ethnically distinct groups. The current territory includes historical core kingdoms ruled by the dominant ethnic group, the Burmans, into which minorities in the surrounding hills were never completely integrated during the precolonial period. Although Myanmar identity based on "a common language, a common religion, and a common set of legal and political ideas and institutions" already existed in the nineteenth century, this was largely for the Burmans, and minorities remained as separate peoples whose relations with the Burman community were far from stable (Myint-U 2001, 88). During the final years preceding the British annexation, the Konbaung dynasty was plagued by political crises and internal rebellions. Royal authority began to collapse rapidly, and the central government lost its control of the countryside and had to endure a major revolt organized by Shan leaders to depose the Burman King (Myint-U 2001, 171-173). Subsequently, colonial rule and World War II only led to separate developments of Burman nationalism and ethnonationalisms for minorities. The British colonial government heavily recruited ethnic minorities, especially the Karen, into the colonial

military apparatus and low-level administrative positions. Combined with the marginal presence of Burmans within the colonial establishment, it created interethnic resentments and eventually contributed to armed ethnic insurgencies right after independence.

It is abundantly clear that Myanmar's nation-building success will not lie in assimilating ethnic groups into a single group but in creating a sense of national belonging for minorities compatible with ethnic pride and assertiveness. For the most part, the nation-building pursued by the successive post-independent governments, at least in principle, has the civic element of nation-building. The federal framework of the "union" and tolerance, if not promotion, of cultural differences of various minority groups, so long as the authority of the government is not challenged, point to the civic aspect of its nation-building idea. The two constitutions of 1947 and 1974 were accommodative toward ethnic diversity in principle. They conceived a federal system with ethnic states and enshrined the right of ethnic minorities to practice their cultures.

Yet, in reality, Myanmar could be classified as an "ethnocentric" state, wherein a state acts as the agency of the dominant ethnic group in terms of its ideologies, policies, and resource distribution (Brown 1994, 36). Throughout successive postcolonial governments, ethnic Burmans dominated senior positions in the state, and Burman cultural attributes such as language, culture, history, Buddhism, and moral values have been privileged and promoted as the core elements of the political community. Also, Burman hegemony was reinforced through recruitment into socially and politically important institutions and monopolization of the rule-making process of society. Ethnic minorities were expected to play by Burman rules in order to rise in mainstream Myanmar society. In

consequence, although it is unlikely that Myanmar state leaders had an explicit master plan for “Burmanization” of the country, many minorities and scholars came to regard nation-building in Myanmar as being based on an ethnic vision of a nation.

The failure in national integration in the critical years in the wake of independence led to widespread ethnic insurgencies. Out of grievances and aspirations for power and resources, almost all the minorities in Myanmar have revolted at one point or another since the country’s independence. The state of Myanmar has been unable to control much of its border region for much of its independent history. Accompanied by the strong insurgent movements of the Community Party of Burma, almost 60 percent of Myanmar’s territory was not securely under government control in the late 1980s (Smith 1999, 199; Steinberg 2001, 186). The combat and heavy military operations by both sides created widespread internal displacement and refugee crises, especially along the Myanmar-Thailand border. In the presence of insurgencies and civilian atrocities, developing a sense of national belonging was inconceivable. The fact that the ethnic Burmans most minorities in the conflict zones come into contact with are soldiers of the Myanmar military has further hindered the development of national identification through interethnic cooperation.

Away from conflict-zones, however, interethnic relationships and processes of identity development have been far more complex. As discussed earlier, minorities in central Myanmar have been exposed to a political environment different from their kin in borderlands. Social identity theory (Tajfel 1982) offers a potentially useful framework for examining multiple levels of group identities for Myanmar’s ethnic

minorities. Myanmar's challenge is to establish the dominance of a superordinate (Myanmar) group identity over the country's ethnically constituted subgroups. Current accounts of identity formation among Myanmar's ethnic minorities indicate that tension between national and ethnic identities is unavoidable because they may not be held concurrently. Thus, the salient ethnic identity of a minority group member leads to weak national identity, and in turn, strong national identity undermines ethnic identity. Yet, national identification in a multi-ethnic society may not necessarily be a zero-sum concept. There may be situations where identification with a superordinate group membership may not mean suppressed subgroup categorization. In this case, the strong superordinate identity can coexist with a strong subgroup identity and vice versa. In other words, a member of a minority group can identify with the Myanmar national community without sacrificing its ethnic identity.

Once the extent of national identification is established, the next task would be considering factors that may account for the extent of such identity formation. Among others, how the subgroup membership affects the social reality of individuals and how they form a relationship with outgroup members are likely to influence their superordinate identity (Tajfel and Turner 1979). In the context of identity formation in Myanmar, one can consider two types of intergroup interactions: the negative influence of ethnic discrimination and the positive influence of intergroup contact. Discrimination would lead to alienation and marginalization of minorities, thus making the national identity more distant and less relevant for their self-identification. Allport (1954) early on argued that intergroup contact is likely to have positive consequences when the

following four conditions are met: (1) equal group status within the situation; (2) common goals; (3) intergroup cooperation; and (4) the support of authorities, law, or custom. It would be difficult to apply this approach to the Myanmar context with precision, yet the principal insight should prove useful: interethnic contact under favorable conditions—for instance, the absence of armed conflict—should improve national reconciliation.

Drawing on these insights, I analyze the dynamics of national and ethnic identification among a minority community in central Myanmar. Using original survey data, I first assess the levels of national identification using various indicators. I then examine the levels of ethnic identity and ethnically grounded experiences, which include both discrimination and favorable intergroup contact. Considering the surrounding political environment, ethnic minorities in central Myanmar may have developed national identification at levels higher than predicted by popular accounts of the country's ethnic relations. It is also expected that minorities in central Myanmar maintain strong ethnic identity despite their adaptation. Yet whether their strong ethnic identity undermines superordinate national identification needs to be empirically investigated. I further examine whether identity development and ethnically relevant experiences are correlated.

III. Identity Formation in Yangon Karen Communities in 2002-2003

To assess identity formation among ethnic minorities in central Myanmar, this study examines data from survey responses from the Karen in Yangon. The Karen, whose ethnonationalist leadership is mostly constituted by Christians, are known to maintain one of the most organized and persistent nationalist struggles against the Myanmar state.⁵⁾ Yet, unlike other ethnic minorities, Karens are not concentrated in the border region, and a great number of Karen settlements are located in the lowland plains of central Myanmar. Although titular Karen State has drawn much international attention as a site of ethnic strife and humanitarian crisis, the state retains less than half of Myanmar's Karen population.⁶⁾ Many Karens can be found in Pyaw and towns across the Ayeyarwady Delta such as Patheingyi, Hinthada, and Myaungmya. The country's largest city of Yangon has a Karen population of about 270,000, and many of them are Christians (Yan 2000, 114). Yangon has not seen any communal tension between Burmans and Karens for a long time, and interethnic relations have been marked by relatively peaceful coexistence rather than fierce competition or antipathy. Yangon Karens maintain their Christian faith and communities alongside the Buddhist Burman social landscape. There is no denying that there is deep-rooted ethnic prejudice

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- 5) Non-Christians, including Buddhists and spirit worshippers, comprise the majority of the Karen population. Although some Buddhist Karens in the border areas formed their own armed groups in the later 1990s when they broke away from the KNU, they haven't successfully figured in Myanmar's ethnic politics.
- 6) It is difficult to determine the distribution of Karens in Myanmar, but in piecing together information provided by the state and Karen leaders, one can estimate that the number of Karens in Karen State is less than half, or even less than a quarter, of the whole Karen population in the country.

and negative stereotyping of each other or that the Karens are underdogs in competition with the Burmans, who are sometimes condescending towards Karens. Yet the absence of conflict and interethnic interactions on a daily basis characterizes central Myanmar.

The political attitudes of the Karen communities in central Myanmar have been recently analyzed by Thawngmung (2012). Emphasizing that there are significant numbers of Karens who live in “government-controlled” areas, Thawngmung argues that Karens in central Myanmar have adapted to its unique political environment while maintaining their ethnic identity.

“In sum, most Karens living in government-controlled areas have learned to tolerate the negative side effects of the government’s state-building agenda while focusing on personal, communal, and professional goals and creatively exploring ways of retaining valued aspects of their cultural identity. They have succeeded in maintaining cordial relations with the majority population. However, quite a few of them share a concern to promote the Karen cause through nonviolent means, they have varying degrees of identification with the KNU and differing attitudes and levels of awareness toward the organization” (Thawngmung 2012, 74).

This paper shares with Thawngmung’s analysis a claim that members of ethnic minority groups living in central Myanmar have their political attitudes shaped by conditions away from the conflict zones. Yet I further argue that their adaptation does not stop at preserving and asserting their

ethnic identity but possibly accommodating an overarching national identity.

To support this argument, I examine original survey data of ethnic minority responses collected from May 2002 to January 2003 in Yangon. It is a small sample selected through the snowball sampling method (N=75), and the surveys were conducted in Burmese. In addition, twenty interviews and a two-month-long participatory observation were carried out to corroborate the survey results. All survey respondents were aged 16 (Myanmar's college entrance age) and over. About half of the respondents were below the age of 30. This implies that my sample better represents the younger generation of the Karen than existing research. Those under 30 were mostly students, whereas those above 30 held various occupations, such as public servant (16.7 percent), member of the private sector (16.7 percent), religious worker (11.1 percent), professional (8.3 percent), domestic helper (5.6 percent), and housewife (1.4 percent). Most of the respondents had some level of formal education, and 43 percent had either graduated or were attending university. The respondents were not asked questions about their political activism, but my interviews and observations indicate that they were, as a group, quite balanced in their views. Some were interested in the armed struggles in Karen state and expressed strong opinions against the Myanmar governments or ethnic Burmans. Others were, as Thawngmung (2012) pointed out, more keen to pursue personal and professional advancement while remaining a proud Karen. My interviews and observations indicate that many of them are deeply involved in church activities and interested in learning English and going abroad.

Questions analyzed in this study, except those addressing the

respondents' personal information, fall into three categories: (1) national identification, (2) ethnic identity, and (3) ethnically relevant experiences. I used multiple items to improve the validity and reliability of the measures. Questions differ slightly from the standard International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) module on national identity to adapt to Myanmar's then-difficult political climate. Yet the basic theoretical premise that informs the questions is quite similar to that of the ISSP. Each item of the survey will be explained in detail in the results section.

The analysis in this study will proceed in the following manner. I first evaluate national identification, followed by ethnic identity and assertiveness. I then analyze ethnically relevant experiences, which have two components. The first part examines ethnic discrimination, while the second inquires about intergroup contact, mostly in the form of interethnic friendship. Finally, I examine whether strong ethnic identity undermines the development of national identity and whether negative or positive interethnic relationships correlate with the sense of national belonging.

It must be emphasized that the survey sample is not representative of the Karen in general or all the ethnic minorities in the country. Rather, the purpose of this study is to gauge the attitudes of ethnic minorities living in non-conflict areas, where ethnically motivated armed conflict is absent, and majority and minority groups interact on a daily basis. The sample is particularly small, but the sample size and sampling method should be put in the context of the political situation in Myanmar at that time. Thus, the analysis that follows is of an exploratory, not confirmatory, nature.

1. National Identification and Attitudes toward the Political Community

Given the contentious political history and the political climate at the time, self-identification with the Myanmar nation-state among Karens was almost impossible to measure in a direct manner. Due to the strong anti-government sentiment, most did not explicitly state that they are “Myanmar” (in English), which was regarded as a neologism introduced by the then-ruling military junta. The simple utterance of “I am Myanmar” was, on many occasions, a topic of controversy during interviews and participatory observation.⁷⁾ Many Karens did not consider the questions, “Are you Myanmar?” or “Do you think Myanmar is your motherland?” appropriate. When they were asked these questions, many Karens evaded answering them directly by saying, “I am a Myanmar citizen; Myanmar is where I live.” The contention as to the question itself showed the magnitude of confrontation between the state and the Karen ethnic society. The fear of appearing to support the military government also contributed to the reluctance to identify with anything related to the state. Likewise, assessing allegiances to political institutions, a standard

7) Throughout the survey and interviews in 2002–2003, the word “Myanmar” often became a subject of controversy. Although “Myanmar” has been increasingly accepted by the international community since the reform, “Myanmar vs. Burma” was a highly charged debate throughout the 2000s. The Military government in 1989 changed the English name of the country from Burma to Myanmar, which the opposition and the West refused to recognize. Since the nation-building is not yet complete, the concept of “nation” was habitually confused with that of the state or, occasionally, the regime. Aside from the legitimacy of the name change from Burma to Myanmar, the controversy also revolved around its possible ethnic connotation to the word “Burman.” Many ethnic opposition groups and Karen leaders in Yangon believed that “Myanmar” is “loaded” with Burman-centric tendency and is not a neutral, ethnically-blind neologism as the state claims. Nevertheless, the new name and the rationale behind it were widely accepted by the average Karen in Yangon.

procedure in national identification research, was inappropriate for the survey, due to the obvious resistance to the government in power. In sum, because the Myanmar government and Myanmar nation-state were inseparable empirically at the time, indirect measures of national identification—attachment to the land, people, and political community in abstract—were used.

Thus, the key strategy here is to identify the common ground that may bind people of Myanmar who cannot or will not express explicit political allegiance. For a multiethnic country to exist, ethnic groups should have some common ground with the rest of society so as to keep them within the current national boundary, including a sense of common historical experience and common destiny. The resulting sense of belonging to the same community is a social and psychological phenomenon that is best captured as the distinction between “us” and “them.” The salience of national identification then can be indirectly measured as the extent to which respondents consider the Myanmar community as their ingroup. Table 1 shows the survey results.

We begin with territorial identification. Bounded territory is a fundamental requirement for a nation-state’s existence, so territorial identification with the current state may indirectly reveal minorities’ attitudes toward national identification. Therefore, if respondents identify with the territory of the modern state where they presently reside, which is outside the area in which their ancestors lived, it would indicate that their sense of belonging has more or less transformed in accordance with the modern nation-state. To ascertain this, respondents were asked if they agreed with the statement that they would feel more comfortable in Kachin State than in Thailand. About 77 percent of respondents

responded positively. Thailand borders Myanmar to the east and has its own sizable indigenous Karen population, while Kachin State is situated along the northern border with China and has been never been regarded as part of the Karen territory. Yet the respondents indicated greater territorial identification with Kachin State. My informal conversations and participatory observations suggest that ordinary Karens in Yangon were not particularly knowledgeable about the conditions in Kachin State except through a vague notion that the Kachin are an ethnic minority that face similar predicaments as the Karen. Thus, the responses were likely to reflect the geographic unit of Myanmar rather than their affinity to the Kachin people. In sum, it appears that the Yangon Karens' perception of territorial identity corresponds with the geographical boundaries of the modern nation-state of Myanmar.

Next, respondents were asked whether they would support the Myanmar national team in a football match against a foreign country, for instance, Thailand. Modern sports have a social and political significance and are often discussed as a nation-building agent and source of nationalist reproduction. Sports at the international level are commonly used to assert national prestige and promote national unity against a

〈Table 1〉 Levels of National Identification

	Percentage in agreement	N
would feel more comfortable in Kachin State than Thailand	76.8	67
would support Myanmar national team in a football match	57.4	68
would defend Myanmar if there was a war	93.4	66
think they have a common destiny with the people who live in Myanmar	62.3	65
being Karen is compatible with being Myanmar	69.8	69
what is beneficial to Myanmar is also beneficial to them	85.5	63

common opponent, thereby eventually contributing to the construction of nationalist sentiments. The clear demarcation of sport between “us” and “them” serves to remind people of their common destiny (Billig 1995). Among others, football probably has the greatest mass appeal and often epitomizes the ingroup and outgroup distinction. People in Myanmar have been traditionally fond of this sport, and children are often seen playing football in empty lots. It was against this background that the level of support for a “national” sport contingent was explored. About 57 percent of the respondents said they would support Myanmar when the football match is between Myanmar and Thailand. The support for Myanmar is not overwhelming, but it is not inconsequential for a minority group.

Then, respondents were asked whether they would fight for Myanmar if there was a war with neighboring countries. Nationalism and nationalist sentiment is at the core of association with one’s country, as it determines one’s willingness to sacrifice in the “national” cause. The power of nationalism not only makes people willing to kill but also die in a nation’s name (Anderson 1991, 7). Interestingly, about 93 percent of respondents said they would defend Myanmar if the country was at war. Obviously, these results should be interpreted with great caution. This only suggests that ethnic minorities in Yangon may have come to identify with a form of Myanmar community in the most rudimentary sense that this is the geographic area in which their family and friends live, and this sense of belonging does not necessarily translate into support for a political regime.

The next set of questions sought to inquire about the extent of the solidarity respondents shared with the Myanmar national community.

When asked whether they believed they had a common destiny with the people who lived in Myanmar, 62 percent of respondents replied positively. In turn, the next question directly explores the perceived compatibility of ethnic and national identities. Seventy percent of all respondents agreed with the statement that being Karen is compatible with being Myanmar, which is the most direct response supporting the compatibility of national and ethnic identities. This suggests that national and ethnic identities, despite tensions, may be held concurrently for the Karen in Yangon. Finally, 86 percent of the respondents indicated that what is beneficial to Myanmar is also beneficial to them. Both of these results reveal fairly positive attitudes toward the national community.

The picture that has emerged from this analysis is that, although subject to cautious interpretation, Myanmar national identification had developed among Karens in Yangon to a considerable extent. Respondents indicated that they are attached to the territorial boundaries of Myanmar and they feel close to Myanmar as a national unit. The majority of them also indicated that they had a common destiny with other groups and Myanmar as a country. Finally, the majority of them supported the idea that national identity and ethnic identity can be compatible. This suggests that, despite strong rhetorical treatments and discourses reported in the media, minorities in central Myanmar are not entirely antagonistic to the idea of a Myanmar nation-state.

2. Ethnic Identification

This section evaluates the dimensions and levels of ethnic identification of Yangon Karens. Although distinctive features of

language, territory, religion, diet, and dress unique to a group often act as “objective” measures of ethnic identity, what ultimately matters is the psychological process through which individuals define their relation to that group (Brass 1991, 19; Tajfel 1981). Due to the contentious and often violent history, minorities in Myanmar tend to have a strong sense of ethnic identity and assertiveness. Unsurprisingly, all of the respondents and interviewees for this study indicated that they regarded themselves as Karens. Yet what remains to be studied are the varied levels of identification in different dimensions. Among others, this section examines three of them—language proficiency, ethnic boundaries, and ingroup pride. Survey findings are reported in Table 2.

First of all, it should be noted that the prevalence of the Burmese language in Yangon is such that although almost every Karen resident there speaks Burmese, but not all speak Karen.⁸⁾ Yet, for many Karens in Yangon, Karen is a language spoken on a daily basis and constitutes an important part of their ethnic identity. The survey results not reported here show that although all of the respondents could speak and read Burmese, only 60 percent were bilingual in Burmese and Karen in that they spoke both languages at home. For self-rated proficiency, 69 percent of all respondents considered their proficiency in spoken Karen as either

8) The possession of a distinctive language is regarded as one of the primary features of an ethnic group. However, there is no single unified Karen language. Karens are mainly linguistically divided into the subethnicities of Sgaw, West Pwo, and East Pwo. Because these Karen languages are mutually unintelligible, Karens from different subgroups often have to communicate with one another in Burmese. Karens in Yangon mostly belong to the Sgaw group, which is the dominant subgroup. West Pwos are dispersed across the delta area, while East Pwos mainly inhabit Karen State. Since most of the Karen residents in Yangon were Sgaw at the time, the term “Karen language” hereafter refers to Sgaw Karen.

good or very good (Table 2). Yet only about 55 percent indicated that they felt more comfortable in speaking Karen than speaking Burmese, reflecting the concerns of the community leaders that linguistic identity may be declining among Karens in Yangon, especially for the younger generation.

While language use represents an objective attribute of ethnic identity, ethnic endogamy is considered as one of the main structural mechanisms for maintaining boundaries in relation to other ethnic groups (Keyes 1979, 14). Attitudes towards interethnic marriage can illustrate the intensity and extent of the ethnic boundary that a given group's members want to actually maintain. In this respect, attitudes to intermarriage, as a behavioral dimension of ethnicity, are a useful indicator of ethnic consciousness. In his anthropological study of the Karens in Thailand, Kunstadter (1979, 145) found that despite the widespread assimilation to the Thai society, there was a marked preference among Karens for group endogamy. He argued that the change in language, culture, and social convention should be considered with this "barrier" of endogamy when accounting for ethnic identification.

In Yangon, intermarriage was not common in Karen communities. Rather, it was actively discouraged and highly disapproved. On many occasions, people would recount bitter stories of their relatives who had married outside the group. Table 2 indicates sweeping responses toward ethnic endogamy and that 93 percent of the respondents agreed that endogamy within Karens is desirable.

〈Table 2〉 Levels of Ethnic Identification

	Percentage in agreement	N
consider themselves to speak good Karen	69.0	71
find Karen language more comfortable than Burmese	55.2	67
Karens should marry Karens	93.3	70
make conscious efforts to display Karen-ness in the Burman public	78.5	65
positive assessments of Karen character	78.3	69

Finally, we move to ethnic assertiveness and pride. Ethnic assertiveness is another indicator of the strength of ethnic identity because displaying minority identity in the presence of the ethnic majority may be a costly behavior in a majority-dominant society. About 79 percent of the respondents indicated that they made conscious efforts to display their Karen-ness in the presence of Burmans. Likewise, ethnic pride linked to positive self-image points in the same direction. Karens, and probably many other ethnic minorities in Myanmar, have faced negative stereotypes against them. Karens were often self-depicted as naive, gullible, and lacking business acumen. Yet the same underlying characteristics were also described as hardworking, trustworthy, and loyal. The survey, therefore, asked respondents which list of attributes associated with the Karen they agreed with. About 78 percent agreed with the positive statements about the Karen character.

In sum, the analysis suggests that respondents showed high levels of ethnic identity and assertiveness. They are strongly inclined to maintain the ethnic boundary, and the levels of ethnic assertiveness and pride were considerably high.

3. Interethnic Experiences: Discrimination and Intergroup Contact

What has been relatively scarce in scholarly work on ethnic and national identity formation in Myanmar are accounts of interethnic interactions. A substantial number of ethnic minorities reside among the Burman majority, and they experience daily interethnic contact at work, in school, at the market, and in the neighborhood. Such interethnic interactions matter in and of themselves, but they can play an important role in identity formation by affecting group categorization or defining common goals.

Interethnic experiences, broadly defined, can be examined along two lines in Myanmar: ethnically motivated discrimination and positive intergroup contact. Discrimination will negatively affect the level of national identification by reinforcing the ingroup and outgroup distinction. In this light, respondents first asked whether they think their Karen background had affected their education and career (Table 3). As few as 17 percent agreed with the statement. They were then further asked specifically if they experienced discrimination based on their ethnicity by the government and by Burmans. While about a third of the respondents indicated that they felt discrimination by the government, reports of discrimination in the private sector were substantially lower (14%). Overall, the perceived level of ethnic discrimination was considerably low, or at least lower than commonly thought.

This corresponds with in-depth interview results, where many of the civil servants and professionals said that they have not encountered

ethnic discrimination.⁹⁾ To be sure, this cannot exclude the possibility of underreporting. Yet even though the military government had a firm grip on society during the research period, people were comfortable speaking, if not recorded, about their grievances. Whether the survey results are truly indicative of the extent to which ethnicity actually acts as a determinant of social life in central Myanmar requires further investigation, but it at least suggests that interethnic relationships were likely to be more complex than popular accounts of the ethnic relations in Myanmar. It is also worth mentioning that there are differences in the types of discrimination faced in the public and private sectors. This may indicate a difference in the nature of interactions in these realms.

〈Table 3〉 Interethnic Experiences

	Percentage in agreement	N
think Karen background has affected their education and career	16.9	65
personally felt ethnically discriminated against by the government	32.3	64
personally felt ethnically discriminated against by Burmans	14.3	65
have more than ten Burman friends	70.2	67
whose best friend is Burman	50.8	63
think ordinary people in Myanmar have gone through common experiences over the past fifty years regardless of ethnic background	37.9	66

9) What is interesting is that when they were presented with the question of “do you think the Karen and ethnic minorities are discriminated in their workplace?” most of these interviewees responded positively. However, when the question was directed at themselves, most of them said “no.” There are a number of possibilities to explain this discrepancy. First, the respondents were not comfortable revealing they were personally discriminated against. Second, the responses indicate the overall negative assessments of the general situation.

On the other hand, intergroup contact theory developed in social psychology suggests that intergroup contact, under certain conditions, contributes to reducing prejudice and to generating more favorable intergroup attitudes (Allport 1954). The proximity to the civilian members of the ethnic majority also creates a possibility of positive interethnic contact and friendship. During the interviews, almost all indicated that they had Burman friends from work and school. About 70 percent of the respondents had more than 10 Burman friends. Slightly more than half indicated that their best friend was Burman, indicating that Yangon Karens extensively socialize with Burmans. Finally, respondents were asked if they agreed with a statement to the effect that ordinary people in Myanmar have gone through common experiences over the past fifty years regardless of ethnic background. Only about 38% agreed with the statement. This suggests that although Yangon Karens get along with individual ethnic Burmans, they may see high levels of divergence of historical experiences between their own group and ethnic Burmans and even other minority groups. This is understandable, given the failure of Myanmar's nation-building over the past decades.

In sum, interethnic experiences of Yangon Karens offer a complex and nuanced picture. Although respondents indicate that they had no illusions about the ethnic history on a broad scale, the reported ethnic discrimination levels were lower than commonly thought, and respondents interacted and socialized with the mainstream ethnic group on an extensive basis. This is in contrast to the border regions, where Karens generally live insulated from Burman civilians, and grievances based on ethnicity are prevalent.

4. National Identification, Ethnic Identity, and Interethnic Experiences

Now we examine how ethnic identity and experiences are associated with the level of national identity. One would think that salient ethnic identity and negative ethnic experiences may be linked to suppressed national identification, while intergroup contact such as interethnic friendship may foster the development of national identity. For the analysis, simple composite scores were constructed to add the responses from all the items in each category, and then a correlation analysis was conducted. The results are reported in Table 4.

The first result concerns the relationship between ethnic and national identity among Yangon Karens. According to popular perspectives on Myanmar, ethnic and national identification are likely to move in the opposite direction. Yet the results show that ethnic and national identification were not significantly associated for this sample of respondents. In other words, salient ethnic identity, as observed for this group, does not necessarily mean negative attitudes toward the national political community. As shown in the earlier section, Yangon Karens did retain salient ethnic identification. Yet the correlation analysis reveals that strong national identification may be possible for this group of respondents: national identity and ethnic identity may be compatible.

The second finding indicates that perceived ethnic discrimination was not significantly correlated with Myanmar national identity. Negative interethnic interactions would normally undermine national identification through alienation. Yet, perceived ethnic discrimination was not significant in explaining Myanmar national identity. The negative relationships were detected in some of the model specifications not

〈Table 4〉 Correlations among National and Ethnic Identification, Discrimination, and Intergroup Contact

	national identity	ethnic identity	discrimination	Intergroup contact
national identity				
ethnic identity	-0.10 (0.49)			
discrimination	-0.20 (0.18)	-0.08 (0.59)		
intergroup contact	0.38*** (0.01)	-0.22 (0.11)	-0.14 (0.30)	

*p<0.10; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

reported here, but the results were not robust. This may be the result of low levels of ethnically-based discrimination in the first place. Further investigation is needed to determine what this finding means.

Finally, the positive relationship between intergroup contact (friendship) and national identification was significant and robust across different model specifications.¹⁰⁾ The positive and significant correlation coefficient indicates that respondents who had high levels of friendship with ethnic Burmans were likely to have high levels of national identification. On one hand, the extent to which these results conform to the general premise of intergroup contact theory is subject to dispute, since the context in which ethnic minorities in central Myanmar interact may not satisfy the conditions stipulated by the theory, especially the portion about groups meeting on equal status and the provision of

10) Different coding schemes for the composite scores were used. The results are not shown here but are available upon request.

institutional support. Yet given the state of knowledge accumulation on the topic, the simple association between intergroup contact and national identification is worth noticing. Further, the results are still interesting because even in the absence of such enabling conditions, we can observe positive association between intergroup contact and national identification.

IV. Conclusion

A number of caveats to this study need to be mentioned. This research should be interpreted as a preliminary investigation of ethnic and national attitudes that existed in Myanmar before the current political and economic reforms began in 2011. The findings of this study were unlikely to be published at the time of research for the aforementioned political reasons. The data used in this study may now be outdated, but they can serve as a baseline for studies that take place after the country's transition. In the same vein, data limitations were inevitable due to the restricted political and research space at the time. All of these shortcomings notwithstanding, this research is, to my knowledge, one of the first attempts to study identity formation of ethnic minorities in central Myanmar using the public opinion framework.

Nation-building in Myanmar will continue to pose considerable challenges as the country proceeds with its political liberalization. The government and minority ethnic groups will certainly struggle to tackle nation-building in a non-conflict setting. This paper began with the premise that development of national identity, along with political

institutions to ensure power sharing among ethnic groups, is essential for a viable nation-state. Inquiring about identity formation among minorities was difficult in the conflict-ravaged border areas, yet central Myanmar provided a unique opportunity to have a glimpse at a stable situation. The absence of ethnic insurgencies and the presence of interethnic interactions on a daily basis in central Myanmar approximated the future environment of Myanmar ethnic politics.

This study examined identity formation of Yangon Karens using a framework loosely drawn from social psychology, especially the extensions on group identification and intergroup attitudes. National identity, ethnic identity, ethnic discrimination, and intergroup contact with Burmans were investigated in turn and in relation to one another. The survey results, although limited, show that ethnic minorities in central Myanmar have, although indirectly, embraced a Myanmar national identity and seemingly at higher levels than popular accounts suggest. The findings also suggest salient ethnic identity does not necessarily suppress Myanmar national identity and that intergroup contact with Burmans is positively associated with the levels of national identification.

These findings have significant policy implications. First, numerous challenges notwithstanding, nation-building in Myanmar may be a viable project from the public opinion perspective. This study finds that members of minority ethnic groups in non-conflict areas are not against the idea that ethnic identity and national identity are compatible. Their ethnic pride and boundary did not undermine their willingness to accommodate the wider political community. Second, the findings highlight the importance of a nation-building process that is based on

interethnic solidarity and not an ethnic conception of a nation. Since identification with the national government is difficult to develop for minorities due to the history of authoritarian rule and armed conflict, a better starting point for nation-building is to form a sense of solidarity with the members of other ethnic groups, including the majority Burmans. This will require the majority ethnic group to make major concessions, yet it is consistent with what is well known in the nation-building literature and historical experiences. Myanmar policymakers, civil society and minority groups, and the international development community should therefore pay closer attention to the role of public attitudes in achieving permanent peace in Myanmar and incorporate this in their development efforts.

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