ARTICLE – January 2026

Citizenship, Recognition and Belongings: An insight from Karen's lived experiences in Myanmar

Myanmar, one of the most culturally diverse countries in Asia, officially recognizes 135 ethnic groups, or locally referred to as '*taingyntha*', as nationals of the state. As part of the process commonly described as "Burmanization," these groups are organized into eight major national categories that are entitled to full citizenship, voting rights, and legislative representation. Other communities in the country are placed under conditional forms of citizenship, which require them to provide extensive evidence of their "belonging" to Burma. These groups are often classified as non-Burman, on the basis that their language, history, and cultural expressions do not align with those of the officially recognized national races.

Key points

• The Karen (or Kayin) people are one of the largest ethnic minorities in Myanmar and are affected by mass displacement and human rights abuses

• Citizenship in Myanmar is bound to the logic of recognition through documentation.

• For Karen communities in southeast Myanmar, meeting documentation requirements is often out of reach.

• The process of 'Burmanization' refers to state efforts to make Bamar culture, language, and norms the standard.

The Karen community, one of Myanmar's 135 ethnic groups, maintains diverse cultural traditions that combine distinct religious practices, languages, and rituals different from mainstream Burman norms. Drawing on three qualitative interviews and two focus group discussions with Karen individuals, this article discusses the challenges faced by Karen community in accessing citizenship documentation and basic rights, and explores how these experiences shape their understanding of 'belonging'.

Authors:

Mst Umme Habiba Fahmina Karim
PhD. Lecturer, Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University
fahmina.fahmina7@gmail.com

Wint Lwin Htun
Graduate Student, Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University
wintlwinlwinhtun@gmail.com

Introduction

The Karen (or Kayin) people are one of the largest ethnic minorities in Myanmar, primarily residing in the southern and eastern Myanmar, including Kayin State, the Irrawaddy Delta, Tenasserim Division, eastern Bago Division, and Mon State. There are around 6 to 7 million Karen people in Myanmar, making them a significant portion of the total population.

The term "Karen" is a collective term for several related sub-groups (such as the S'gaw and Pwo) who speak various, often mutually unintelligible, languages within the Sino-Tibetan language family. The S'gaw dialect is the most widely understood. The Karen practice a mix of Theravada Buddhism and animistic beliefs, with a significant number having converted to Christianity (mostly Baptist) through missionary efforts, including some Muslims.

The Karen National Union (KNU) has been a prominent political organization representing the Karen struggle for self-determination and autonomy within Myanmar for decades, making the Karen conflict one of the world's longest-running civil wars. The conflict has resulted in massive displacement, human rights abuses by the military, and a large number of Karen living as refugees along the Thai-Myanmar border and in third countries.

Citizenship in Myanmar has long been bound to the logic of recognition through documentation. To be recognized as a full citizen, a person should have a series of documentary evidence. For Karen minorities, this bureaucratic recognition has remained elusive and uncertain. Despite their long historical presence and officially recognized ethnic race in Myanmar, many Karen people continue to face denial or obstruction in obtaining identity documentation (Bird, Brough & Cox, 2016).

Their experiences illustrate that belonging in Myanmar is not guaranteed by ethnicity, territory, or even birth, but mediated through paperwork and, increasingly, through the politics of who deserves to be seen by the state (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Across Karen communities, people continue to find alternative ways to define who they are and where they belong.

Drawing on three qualitative interviews and two focus group discussions with Karen men and women from varied social and geographic backgrounds, this study investigates how Karen individuals interpret the meaning of citizenship, recognition, and identity in creative and sometimes contradictory ways. This qualitative design was chosen because it allows participants' voices to guide the analysis, highlighting subjective interpretations and the diversity of lived experiences.

Karen's citizenship struggle

Conditional citizenship:

Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law shifted the basis of citizenship away from birth or descent and tied it instead to belonging to one of the officially recognized "national races." Because of this, proving citizenship depends less on where someone is born and more on whether they can document an accepted ethnic lineage. As a result, many people who should qualify as citizens cannot meet the state's evidentiary demands and end up without formal status.

To obtain a National Identity Card (NID), commonly known in Myanmar as a Citizenship Scrutiny Card (CSC), applicants must submit an extensive set of documents. This card is the only document that conclusively proves full citizenship. The documents include household registration, a three-generation genealogy form, birth records or school letters, parents' IDs, proof of residence from local authorities, and other supporting documents. None of these items, on their own, confirms citizenship until one obtains CSC (Cheesman, 2002).

For Karen communities in southeast Myanmar, meeting these requirements is often out of reach. Birth registration only became widespread recently, and there is no clear process for obtaining older records. Years of conflict and displacement mean that people have lost documents to destruction, flight, or confiscation, and many now have no realistic way to replace them, therefore remain without any official identity.

Burmanisation- a process of losing Karen ethnic identity

The process of 'Burmanization' also started by categorizing national races, which refers to the state's effort to centre Bamar culture, language, and administrative norms as the national standard while absorbing or diminishing the identities of non-Bamar groups. The 135 recognized ethnic groups are divided into eight national races (taingyintha): Bamar, Shan, Karen (Kayin), Rakhine, Mon, Kachin, Chin, and Kayah. On paper, Karen appears as one of these major categories. In practice, however, the way these classifications are implemented often sidelines Karen communities and other Karenic groups, considered as non-Burman because of their cultural identities, such as non-Buddhist, non-Burmese speakers, and several other non-Burman cultural rituals. These ultimately make their identity fragile within the state's documentation system (Gravers, 2015).

The access to identity documentation is not only complicated but coercive. Burmanization plays out through civil documents. ID cards, household registration lists, and school records all contain fields for ethnicity and religion, which suggests recognition of diversity. When a Karen person applies for a CSC, the administrative officials often replace their ethnic-based honorific titles with Bamar ones.

Distinctive titles like Saw, Naw, Mahn, Nang, Khun, Sai, Nan, Nai, Min, or Mi are used to indicate which ethnic community they belong to. For example, a S'gaw Karen man's name starts with Saw, a S'gaw Karen woman's name starts with Naw, a Pwo Karen man's name starts with Mahn or Sa, a Pwo Karen woman's name begins with Nang; etc. However Bamar or Burmese name starts with U, Maung, Daw, or Ma.

Karen interviewees in this study said that their Karen titles are often replaced with Burmese titles even though they clearly wrote them in the national ID card application forms. This was a deliberate attempt to erase who they are, and some framed it as a form of cultural violence because it strips away ethnic markers that carry social and historical meaning (South, 2008).

These changes are not limited to ID cards. School registration is another site of Burmanization. Teachers or administrators sometimes replace Karen ethnic names with Bamar equivalents. Once a school adopts the Burmanized name, it can spread across other official documents. This becomes a practical problem when parents need to obtain IDs for children who lack birth certificates and must rely on school letters. If the school's spelling does not match the household registration, the child may be unable to receive an ID at all.

These practices limit access to documentation and reduce the recorded number of Karen, weakening their political visibility. Some individuals manage to keep their ethnic honorifics on official documents, but usually only when village leaders intervene, when officials visit the village, or families can pay informal fees or bribes.

Most individuals, however, face long waits, discriminatory treatment, and shifting administrative demands. Through these everyday practices, Burmanization reshapes the identity of non-Bamar communities not only culturally, but also administratively. By altering names, titles, and ethnic labels in official documents, the state produces both symbolic and statistical marginalisation, positioning Karen and other minority groups as culturally peripheral and administratively uncertain within their own country (Karen Human Rights Group, 2020).

How the Kareneens interpret "Belonging' within conditional citizenship:

Based on the primary data, this section analyses how Karen individuals interpret belonging in relation to identity documentation. The study has identified three dimensions that illustrate how Karen people negotiate their relationship with the state and with one another in the absence or conditional presence of official recognition:

1. Documentation as Instrumental Belonging:

While others said they took this trouble only when they needed it, such as travel, access to education, and protection from arrest, but it does not necessarily translate into a sense of inclusion or citizenship.

Some Karen participants stated that accessing ID documents is not only difficult but, in a way, a complete surrender of their ethnic identity.

This pragmatic orientation reflects what Ong describes as "flexible citizenship," where documents are used tactically rather than symbolically (Ong, 1999). Several participants viewed identity documents as bureaucratic tools with limited emotional attachment. The Karen who acquire documentation for travel or safety occupy a liminal position: technically visible to the state but excluded from its moral community.

One participant described obtaining his ID only "to pass checkpoints," while another commented that "without the card, the soldiers stop us, because we are poor and non-Burman."

2. Documentation as Symbolic Recognition:

While some participants treated documentation as purely functional, others ascribed it symbolic and moral significance. For these participants, possessing a Myanmar ID card represented recognition by the state, a form of visibility that affirmed their legitimacy as citizens, even though they had to give away their ethnic identifier in the ID card.

One NGO representative explained that "having an ID means the government finally sees us," while another participant, a young university student, expressed that "without the card, we do not exist." This articulation of documentation as symbolic recognition aligns with the politics of recognition framework advanced by Honneth and Taylor. Here, recognition operates not merely as a legal mechanism but as a moral relation that affirms dignity and equality (Taylor, 1992; Honneth, 1996).

One participant commented, "They give us ID, but only if we accept their name, their religion, their way."

3. Reimagined Belonging Beyond Documentation:

A third pattern evident across interviews concerns individuals who reject or redefine the meaning of documentation altogether. Some participants expressed disinterest or even resistance toward obtaining an ID, framing belonging through moral, ethnic, or spiritual identity rather than bureaucratic proof.

"I am Karen, not Myanmar," one respondent said, "My belonging is in my people, not in their paper."

This stance represents what Isin and Nielsen term acts of citizenship, moments when marginalized individuals enact belonging through alternative moral or communal practices rather than formal recognition (Isin & Turner, 2002; Isin and Nielsen, 2008). By rejecting the state's framework, these Karen individuals articulate an autonomous politics of belonging that challenges the monopoly of the state over recognition. For others, the absence of documentation does not signify exclusion but an opportunity to redefine belonging on local terms (Fraser, 2000).

Conclusion

This study shows how conditional citizenship shapes belonging beyond the state frameworks. Rather than treating documentation as a fixed marker of citizenship, Karen individuals engage in an ongoing process of interpretation, assigning, resisting, or suspending its meanings according to context. For some, belonging is transactional; for others, it is aspirational or moral.

These varied meanings reveals belonging as an act of negotiation within unequal regimes of recognition. Instead of equating citizenship only with legal status, the study demonstrates that belonging is a dynamic, negotiated, and relational process. Each pathway illustrates different strategy for seeking inclusion, legitimacy, and identity within an exclusionary bureaucratic order.

For the Karen, documentation embodies coercion, conditional inclusion, and aspirational affirmation. State recognition is uneven, contested, and often transactional, yet it remains a meaningful reference point in how individuals negotiate identity. These alternative forms of belonging exist alongside, and sometimes in tension with the state's framework, offering dignity and meaning where formal recognition is denied.

In contexts like Myanmar, where access to documentation is uneven and politically contested, recognizing these alternative forms of belonging is essential for designing policies that respect identity, dignity, and the plural realities of citizenship.

References

Bird, J., Cox, L., & Brough, M. (2016). Doing belonging: Meanings of home and settlement among the Karen Community in Brisbane, Australia. Journal of Social Inclusion, 7(1), 72-84. Link

Bird, J. N., Brough, M., & Cox, L. (2016). Transnationalism and the Karen wrist-tying ceremony: An ethnographic account of Karen settlement practice in Brisbane. The Australian Journal of Anthropology, 27(1), 104-120. Link

Cheesman, N. (2002). Seeing "Karen" in the Union of Myanmar. Asian Ethnicity, 3(2), 199–220. Link

Fraser, N. (2000). Rethinking Recognition. New Left Review, (3), 107–120. Link

Gravers, M. (2015). Disorder as order: The ethno-nationalist struggle of the Karen in Burma/Myanmar—A discussion of the dynamics of an ethnicized civil war and its historical roots. Journal of Burma Studies, 19(1), 27-78. Link

Honneth, Axel. (1996). *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Translated by Joel Anderson. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996 Link

Isin, E. F., & Turner, B. S. (2002). *Handbook of citizenship studies*. Sage Publications. Link

Isin, Engin F. and Nielsen, Greg M. eds. (2008). *Acts of Citizenship*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. Link

South, A. (2008). *Ethnic Politics in Burma: States of Conflict* (1st ed.). Routledge. Link

Karen Human Rights Group (2020) Minorities under Threat, Diversity in Danger: Patterns of Systemic Discrimination in Southeast Myanmar. Link

Taylor, C. (1992). The Politics of Recognition. In A. Gutmann (Ed.), Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition (pp. 25-74). Princeton: Princeton University Press. Link

Ong, A. (1999). *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Duke University Press. Link

Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Belonging and the politics of belonging. Patterns of prejudice, 40(3), 197-214. Link