

UNDERSTANDING CHIN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN MYANMAR

by

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	iii
Abstract	v
Glossary	vii
Chapter One. Introduction	1
Chapter Two. Political context	13
Chapter Three. Methodology	19
Chapter Four. The Chin	25
Chapter Five. Stories of Chin political participation	34
1. University student activism	34
2. Armed resistance	56
3. Party politics	68
4. Christian identity and the Church	75
5. Everyday resistance	85
6. Chin identity and anti-government feelings	86
7. Interest in politics and activist identity	97
Chapter Six. From individual experiences to generalizable patterns	104
1. Identity and socialization	104
2. Networks	112
3. Where people lived	117
4. Mobility	121
5. Sequencing	124
Chapter Seven. Conclusion	127
References	131

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Abstract

In scholarship on political participation, a tension exists between paying attention to individual agency, complexity, and contingency on the one hand and generalizing to a level that allows the application of findings to other contexts on the other. Generalization is useful but the tendency in broader studies of political participation has been to neglect individual subjective experience, individual geography, and biography and lose sight of individual agency, complexity, and contingency through aggregation of data and in presentation of research. The result is accounts of political participation that make mobilization seem overly deterministic. In this thesis I have utilized an approach that attempts to address this tension to understand political participation among the Chin, one of Myanmar's "ethnic nationalities." My aim has been to understand processes through which individual Chin came to participate in political activity in Myanmar in different ways and to different degrees. From life story interviews with Chin living in the United States focused on their experiences in Myanmar, patterns emerged, related to identity, networks, where people lived, mobility, and sequencing. These patterns are likely relevant beyond the case of the Chin and many would likely not have emerged using more standard approaches to understanding political mobilization.

Glossary

1988 Generations Students Group: a group formed in 2006 by people who had been leaders in the 1988 uprising, focused on developing a grassroots movement

1988 uprising: a nationwide pro-democracy uprising that took place in August and September 1988

1996 protests: protests held primarily by university students in Mandalay and Yangon in response to an alleged beating of university students by police in Yangon

Aizawl: the capital of Mizoram State in northeast India

Asho: a sub-group of the Chin who have historically lived in lowland areas

Aung San Suu Kyi: a central leader of the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar

BDF (Burmese Democratic Front): the name used by a group based in Champhai camp in Mizoram that joined CNF en masse

BSPP (Burma Socialist Program Party): the socialist party of Ne Win

Burman: the name of the dominant ethnic group of Myanmar (also called Bamar)

Champhai: a town and district in Mizoram state, northeast India and site of a refugee camp that served as recruitment and training center for CNF

Chin National Day: February 20, commemorating a meeting in 1948 in which Chin chiefs decided to replace the chieftdom system with an electoral system

Chin nationalism: Chin ethno-nationalism, associated with promoting and protecting the Chin ethnic group

CLCCs (Chin Literature and Culture Committees): government-sanctioned student networks on different university campuses, with sub-groups for different Chin sub-groups

CNF (Chin National Front): a Chin armed resistance organization established in 1988

CNLD (Chin National League for Democracy): a political party that contested the 1990 elections, with membership from different Chin sub-groups

District council: administrative councils at the township level during the Ne Win area

Ethnic nationalities (Burmese: လူမျိုး *lu-myo*): non-Burman ethnic groups of Myanmar

Falam: a sub-group of the Chin associated with Falam Township in northern Chin State

Hakha: a sub-group of the Chin; a township in Chin State; the capital of Chin State

Kachin: one of the principle ethnic nationalities of Myanmar

Kale College/University: A college/university in Kalembo Township that opened in 1993; it became a university in 2000

Kalembo (Kalaymyo): a city and associated township in Sagaing Division, just outside of Chin State, and the gateway to northern Chin State

Karen: one of the principal ethnic nationalities of Myanmar

Lai: the Hakha sub-group of Chin and their language (also used for other related languages)

Mandalay: the second largest city in Myanmar, a commercial center, and site of Mandalay University

Mizo: a sub-group of the Chin, also known as the Lushai or Lushei, who live primarily in northeast India but also in parts of Sagaing Division and Chin State

Mizoram: a state in northeast India bordering Chin State

MPP (Mara People's Party): a political party that contested the 1990 elections, with membership from the Mara sub-group of Chin

NLD (National League for Democracy): an opposition political party led by Aung San Suu Kyi and winner of the 1990 elections

NUP (National Unity Party): a political party that contested the 1990 and 2010 elections, constituted from BSPP

Saffron Revolution: a pro-democracy uprising in 2007 in which Buddhist monks played a prominent role

Sagaing: one of the seven administrative divisions of Myanmar

September 18 coup: A military coup led by Saw Maung that ended the 1988 uprising

SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council): the name of the military regime between 1988 and 1997

SPDC (State Peace and Development Council): the name of the military regime between 1997 and 2010

Tatmadaw: the Myanmar armed forces

Tedim (Tiddim): A township in northern Chin State; the Zomi sub-group of Chin

Thantlang: a township in Chin State

Yangon (Rangoon): the capital of Myanmar up until 2005, the largest city, and the site of Yangon (Rangoon) University

ZNC (Zomi National Congress): a political party that contested the 1990 elections with membership from the Zomi sub-group of Chin

Zo: an alternative name for the Chin preferred by some

Zomi: a sub-group of the Chin associated with Tedim and Tonzang Townships in northern Chin State

Zophei: a sub-group of Chin, the territory with which they are associated, and the language they speak

Chapter One. Introduction

VRM¹ was born in Hakha, the capital of Chin State, which lies in western Myanmar (Burma²) on the border with India and Bangladesh. He identifies as Chin, an ethnonym used collectively to self-identify by various groups who constitute the majority of the population of Chin State and one of the general ethnic categories recognized by the government of Myanmar. I spoke with him for 7½ hours, in five sessions, about his life from childhood until the time he left Myanmar. He is among forty-four Chin whom I interviewed in the United States in order to explore how they had become politically active in Myanmar or why they had not.

VRM explained that he moved with his family to another state when he was young, when his father – a policeman – was relocated there for a few years. There, he witnessed discrimination against the Chin who are a minority in that state and began to develop a stronger Chin identity. He went to university in Yangon (Rangoon³) where he spent time with Chin nationalists⁴ and became more nationalist himself. After graduation, he moved to another state to help his sister with her business and was out of touch with the activists he had known. He moved back to Hakha to work for the government and was there at the time of the nation-wide pro-democracy uprising in August 1988, aimed at bringing down the government. In large part influenced by networks with Chin activists developed since his

¹ Consistent with standard practice, I have generally not used people's names in this thesis. I do make reference to some individuals by name when the information is well known or (in several cases) when the individual is deceased.

² In 1989 the country's government changed the English name of the country from Burma to Myanmar. I use the name Myanmar throughout except when quoting informants who used the name Burma.

³ In 1989 the English name of the city was changed to Yangon. I use the name Yangon throughout except when quoting informants who used the name Rangoon.

⁴ Here and throughout I refer to Chin ethno-nationalism simply as Chin nationalism.

university days but motivated also by anti-government feelings, he played a leading role in the uprising. Following the military coup in September, which ended the uprising, he went with a group from Hakha to Mizoram State in northeast India with the intention of engaging in insurgency against the military government. When others he was with joined the Chin National Front, an armed resistance group, and went to Kachin State in northern Myanmar for military training, he returned to Hakha. He was in Hakha as parties campaigned for parliamentary elections in 1990 and he helped with one campaign. Watched and harassed by the military, he became less politically active and left the country several years later.

Stories like VRM's – of individuals with their own individual subjective experiences, individual geographies, and biographies – are largely absent from the various literatures that relate to explaining political participation, even as raw data. This thesis has aimed to bring in such stories to let them inform an understanding of political participation that pays adequate attention to individual agency, complexity, and contingency. The project began with a frustration with the various literatures that address relations between upland, minority, or indigenous groups and the state in different countries of Southeast Asia, much of which treats these groups collectively. For example, individuals are completely absent from Edmund Leach's classic (1954) *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, which describes interactions between upland Kachin and lowland Shan statelets. James Scott's (2009) *The Art of Not Being Dominated: an Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* calls attention to the agency of upland peoples in moving to areas outside the reach of states and practicing swidden agriculture while leaving little room for the agency of individuals in these processes. In short, he makes upland peoples appear monolithic. In another example, Jonsson's (2005) analysis of the relations of the Mien people with the state in Thailand focuses on the

collective agency of the Mien while ignoring the individual agency of Mien people. More generally, the literatures that seek to explain political activity – such as literatures on resistance, social movements, and political participation – tend to aggregate individuals or treat them as interchangeable. Everyday experience, on the other hand, suggests that there is considerable individual agency, as well as complexity and contingency, in the processes that lead individuals to participate in political activity to different degrees (the subject of this thesis) and in other aspects of political participation.

Christina Fink's (2009) *Living Silence in Burma*, a study of political history and political participation in Myanmar, models an approach to understanding political participation that takes individual subjective experience (if not biography and geography) seriously. While it is not her only focus, Fink makes use of in-depth interviews with people from Myanmar, quoting them at length, to explain the reasons why people became involved in politics or did not. This is, more or less, the approach that I have taken here. Important differences are that I have focused on the Chin while she considers the country as a whole (though in places she does make specific mention of the Chin) and I have looked at more different aspects of people's lives – for example, I have paid more attention to the geographies of participation as well as to identities and networks. Ardeth Thawngmung's (2012) *The "Other" Karen in Myanmar* is also similar to this thesis in some respects though its subject is the Karen rather than the Chin. In one chapter Thawngmung explores factors that have led some Karen but not others to join the armed resistance. While also based on extensive interviews, this chapter aims more to identify explanatory factors than to describe processes, as has been my aim, and she simplifies the complexity of individual stories rather

than trying to preserve it as I have attempted to do here. Other works that have adequately addressed individual subjective experience and biography while developing broad explanations for political participation include James Scott's (1985) *Weapons of the Weak* and Hank Johnston's (1991) *Tales of Nationalism*. The former develops a theory of everyday peasant resistance while opening a window onto the thinking of individual Malaysian peasants. The latter makes use of in-depth interviews to describe common trajectories in the life stories of participants in the Catalan nationalist movement in Spain while preserving individual agency.

More commonly, however, individual subjective experience, individual geography, and biography are absent from accounts of political participation. For example, the literature on political participation *per se*, located primarily within Political Science, has generally sought to explain overall patterns of participation and typically data focus more on individual attributes than individuals' subjective experience. While *The Other Karen* falls within this literature, it is atypical. The focus has primarily been on voting behavior, though the literature includes research on other forms of participation such as protest and armed insurgency. Scholars in this tradition have also generally focused on explanatory factors such as ideological orientations, political attitudes, social status, biographical availability, age, and organizational involvement (Barnes, Kaase, & Allerbek, 1979; van Aelst & Grave, 2001; Verba & Nie, 1972) rather than on processes.

Within the literature on social movements, which is located primarily within Sociology, greater attention has been given to processes at the individual level leading to political participation – what is referred to as “micro-mobilization” (Snow et al., 1986). Individual-level explanations in social movement theory have blossomed in recent years,

relating mobilization to identity, emotions, social networks, personality traits, and other factors. (See Snow et al. (2007), Della Porta and Diani (2006), and Tarrow (2011) for overviews.) However, individual agency, complexity, and contingency are often lost through the aggregation of data, and individuals, including individual leaders, are treated as interchangeable. This is true even of case studies based on extensive interviews. Johnston (1991: 4) makes this point, in reference to resource mobilization theory (one of the main traditions in social movement research), writing: “Its impact has been profound, resulting in what amounts to a redefinition of the research agenda for the field. My feeling, however, is that this was accomplished at the expense of what the participants had to say about their own participation.” In Johnston’s own case study (1991), which I have mentioned already, he attempts to address this concern.

In Geography there is, of course, a general recognition that individuals are not interchangeable and that individual subjective experience, individual geography, and biography are important (Mountz, 2003; Naylor, 2008; Wilson, 1992). Subject formation is given particular emphasis in feminist ethnography (Jones, Nast, & Roberts, 1997). Various geographers have explored individuals’ political lives, especially through oral history (Baird, 2012; R. Nagar & Benson, 2006; Richa Nagar, 2006; Naylor, 2008; Riley & Harvey, 2007). Outside of Geography there are numerous biographies of activists; the popular *Biography of Malcolm X* (X & Haley, 1992) falls into this category. Closer to the Chin, Vathana Pholsena (2008) relates the narratives of two women who became Lao revolutionaries when young – stories that to large extent are consistent with broader theories of political participation and mobilization but show the individuals as multi-dimensional and the processes through which

they are mobilized as highly contingent.

In general, this oral history and biographical literature does not aim to be explanatory and because of the extreme focus on the individual subject it tends not to be generalizable. It is typically not clear from such work what about it is relevant to processes of political participation in other contexts. It has also generally not found its way into the different literatures that attempt to develop broad explanations of political activity. In Geography, there is, furthermore, little literature at the level of broad explanations related to processes involving mobilization of individuals, though literature at this level has addressed questions of resources, regional differences, space, place, and scale (Agnew, 1990; Featherstone, 2003; Le Billon, 2001, 2004; Lohman & Flint, 2010; Miller, 2000; Paddison, 2000; Paul Routledge, 1993).

There is, thus, a tension between paying attention to individual agency, complexity, and contingency on the one hand and generalizing to a level that allows the application of findings to other contexts on the other. Generalization is useful but the tendencies in broader studies of political participation have been to neglect individual subjective experience, individual geography, and biography and lose sight of individual agency, complexity, and contingency through aggregation of data and presentation of research. The result is accounts of political participation that make mobilization seem overly deterministic. On the other hand, too much biography runs the risk of over-emphasizing individual agency at the expense of very real group processes and structural factors.

This thesis has aimed at understanding the processes that have led to individual Chin people's involvement in political activity to different degrees, seeking explanations applicable to other contexts while paying adequate attention to individual agency,

complexity, and contingency – without over-emphasizing individual agency. What is the role of individual agency in political participation? What general patterns emerge when individual subjective experience, individual geography, and biography are taken seriously? Each individual's political participation is obviously shaped by a multitude of different, unique influences building on each other over the course of his or her life as well as by individual agency; potentially, anything in a person's life story could be significant. I have attempted to aggregate data that are rich in individual subjective experience, individual geography, and biography to identify general patterns – but without erasing individual agency, complexity and contingency in either analysis or presentation.

In defining “political activity” I find Verba and Nie's (1972:2) definition to be a good starting point: “those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take.” They do not consider activities targeting non-state actors or activities that support the state to be political activity and I have not done so either. But they are concerned (p. 3) only with “activities ‘within the system’ – ways of influencing politics that are generally recognized as legal and legitimate,” whereas protest and other unsanctioned forms of activity have been particularly important for the Chin and other groups and are a central part of this thesis. Since 1962, multi-party national elections have been held just twice in Myanmar, once in 1990 and the second time in 2010 (Charney, 2009; Cheesman, Skidmore, & Wilson, 2012; Fink, 2009). Ultimately, however, I am not overly concerned with the boundaries of “political activity.”

There is very little scholarship that is directly relevant to understanding political activity among the Chin in recent decades – though it is important to people trying to

understand recent changes in Myanmar, including recent efforts at reconciliation between the Chin armed resistance and the government (Thang, 2012). Lehman's (1963) ethnography of the Chin, based on fieldwork conducted in 1957 and 1958, provides important cultural and historical context. He describes the Chin's as a sub-nuclear society fundamentally structured by its relations with the Burman⁵ Other. Stevenson's (1943) *The Economics of the Central Chin Tribes* and Bareights' (1981) *Les Lautu: Contribution à l'étude de l'organisation d'une ethnie chin de Haute-Birmanie* are other useful early ethnographic works. Sakhong's (2003) comprehensive treatment of Chin history through Myanmar's independence in 1948 is particularly helpful for understanding the construction of collective Chin identity. Vumson's (1986) history extends through 1976 and is useful for understanding Chin political activity up until that time. The edited volume, *Chin History, Culture & Identity* (Robin, 2009) provides useful background though none of the contributions specifically address recent political participation. Son (2007) uses a macro-level resource mobilization approach to explain how conversion to Christianity has created an elite among one group of Chin (the Hakha) who have been able to access international resources and dominate Chin politics. It is particularly helpful for understanding the role of the Chin diaspora. I have found it useful to draw upon accounts of Chin Church history (Johnson, 1988; Khai, 1999) and recent works by Chin political figures (Htoo, 2011; Kio, 2011; Lian, 2011). In addition, as Chin have been prolific writers on the Internet, there is a large body of writing there (in English and various Chin languages) which is directly relevant to this project, especially relating to the Chin armed resistance.

⁵ Burman (Bamar) is the name of an ethnic group, the majority population in Myanmar. In English, "Burmese" (officially "Myanmar") is used to refer to all people of the country though my informants generally used "Burmese" to refer to ethnic Burmans.

Other authors have written about recent political participation in Myanmar though not that of the Chin. I have already mentioned Fink (2009) and Thawnghmung (2012). Boudreau (2002) and Shock (1999) both write about the 1988 pro-democracy uprising but examine why the protests happened and why they achieved the outcomes that they did rather than why different individuals participated in different ways. Smith (1999) and Charney (2009) provide good overviews of recent political history.

It would have been impossible to conduct this research inside Myanmar and I conducted it instead among the Chin diaspora living in the United States, primarily between June and August 2012. I used a qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews focused on individuals' life stories. I tried to understand each individual's political activity in Myanmar and border areas in India and Bangladesh (where the Chin armed resistance has been based) but not their activity once they moved elsewhere, for example to New Delhi or Kuala Lumpur, or after coming to the United States. Conducting the research in the United States both enhanced and limited my ability to address my research goals.

While I also interviewed people with roots in other parts of Chin State, most of my informants had roots in two of the state's nine townships (Hakha – where the state capital is located – and neighboring Thantlang) and information on experiences in villages comes primarily from people who lived in the Zophei area within Thantlang Township. This geographic focus was due to my ability to meet contacts. The political activities I have documented extend from the 1980s (primarily from the 1988 pro-democracy uprising) through the 2007 Saffron Revolution, an uprising involving large numbers of Buddhist monks that received global attention. I have not focused on a particular movement or event,

but have rather tried to cover as wide a range of political activity as possible – from armed resistance to everyday resistance. Although informants’ roots were in Chin State, some were born elsewhere and many spent a considerable part of their time in Myanmar outside of Chin State; I have not limited the scope of this research to any particular geographic area within Myanmar.

This thesis demonstrates mechanisms that influence individual political participation and affirms the importance of paying attention to individual subjective experience, individual geography, and biography when studying political participation. On the one hand, interviews not surprisingly confirmed that at the individual level there is a great deal of individual agency, complexity, and contingency. On the other hand, aggregating data from individual life stories revealed patterns in political participation processes that are considerably different from what I might have found had I not taken individual subjective experience, individual geography, and biography seriously. Several key findings are absent from the main social movement and political participation literatures. In some cases the gaps are filled by literature in Geography, but there are several points of which I have found no clear reference in the literature. The interviews confirmed the central role of identity⁶ and networks in political mobilization processes while revealing patterns in identity and network processes that have not been highlighted in the literature. Further, an overarching feature of all the interviews was the importance of where people lived. In some ways this factor dominated all

⁶ Identity has been defined in numerous different ways. Erikson (1968:22) writes that identity formation is a process “by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them; while he judges their way of judging him in the light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them and to types that have become relevant to them.” Della Porta and Diani (2006:91) define identity as “the process by which social actors recognize themselves – and are recognized by other actors – as part of broader groupings, and develop emotional attachments to them.”

other factors, although it is essentially absent from the literature. And, in part because of the importance of where people live, mobility has been important to identity processes and mobilization – again a point that has been ignored in the social movement and political participation literatures. In addition, the interviews reflected the importance of sequencing of life events to political mobilization.

Let me illustrate my main points with the case of VRM, whom I introduced above. Beginning in childhood, his father's interest in politics contributed to his own. His strong Chin identity developed through participation in a Chin students' network in Yangon University, but the network was most important for bringing him into contact with one individual in particular who was most influential in shaping his identity. At the time of the 1988 uprising, feelings of Chin nationalism gave way to identification with the pro-democracy movement. In Hakha he was drawn into the 1988 uprising through contacts made through the Chin students' network as well as childhood friends. His movements between different places were important to his identity formation and put him in places where he could join the 1988 uprising, go to Mizoram, and campaign for the elections. Responsibilities to his own family were the main reason he returned to Hakha without joining the armed resistance.

As my informants were primarily from Hakha and Thantlang townships I have to be careful about making generalizations to the broader Chin population. The details I present are primarily the story of Chin from these townships. But it will become clear in Chapter Four that the Chin are not really a unified people. These townships have unique geographies that have influenced people's political participation. The location of Thantlang Township on the

border with India and the role of Hakha town as the administrative center of Chin State and site of the first Christian mission in Chin State are particularly important. However, I believe that the overall patterns that I identify in this thesis are generally applicable among the Chin and probably other groups as well.

The outline of this thesis is as follows: In Chapter Two I provide background that is relevant to understanding the remainder of the thesis and in Chapter Three I describe the methodology I used. In Chapter Four I begin to draw on the interviews to explore Chin ethnicity, its construction and contention, and related issues. I give some background of the two Chin sub-groups which are most represented among my informants, the Hakha and Zophei, and describe recent Chin migrations out of Myanmar and the Chin diaspora. In Chapter Five I describe the processes reflected in the interviews through which individuals became involved in political participation – trying to preserve as much individual agency, complexity, and contingency as has been reasonably possible while also drawing broader generalizations. In order to make the processes as comprehensible as possible in the context of the Chin, I organize them around seven main stories which encompass most of what informants told me. I make extensive use of interviews to illustrate the main points. In Chapter Six I draw on the processes described in detail in the previous chapter to identify patterns that I use to engage relevant literatures. While the previous chapter is very specific to the case of the Chin, I believe that the patterns I outline in Chapter Six are likely to have much broader applicability.

Chapter Two. Political context

Through the nineteenth century various kingdoms and principalities rose and fell in what are now Myanmar, northeast India, and eastern Bangladesh. People living in the Chin-Lushai Hills, which straddle the modern-day borders, were not subjects of any of these (Fink, 2009; Sakhong, 2003, 2010) though Lehman (1963) points out that in some ways they were defined by their relation to surrounding peoples who were part of these states. The British annexed the Chin-Lushai Hills area over a period of years, completing annexation of most of the area as part of India in 1896 (Sakhong, 2003, 2010). When what is now Myanmar was separated from India in 1937, the British made a distinction between Burma proper (which was given a degree of autonomy) and the Frontier Areas (which the British governor ruled directly) (Charney, 2009; Kio, 2011; Sakhong, 2010; South, 2008). The former included roughly what are now the seven divisions plus Karen, Rakhine, and Mon States of modern-day Myanmar and the latter included what are now Chin, Kachin, and Shan States (Charney, 2009; Sakhong, 2010). (Refer to the map in Figure 1.)

Aung San, who was effectively Prime Minister of Burma Proper, negotiated with Britain for independence. He sought to include the Frontier Areas in the bid for independence but the British would only negotiate with him over the Frontier Areas if he obtained consent of the respective leaders in those areas (Fink, 2009; Kio, 2011; Sakhong, 2010; Silverstein, 1990). He met Chin, Kachin, and Shan leaders at Panglong in February 1947 and they signed the Panglong Agreement, which called for seeking independence jointly and establishing a federal state in which the different nationalities would have equal status (Fink, 2009; Sakhong, 2003; Vumson, 1986). Aung San's party (the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom



Figure 1. Map of modern-day Myanmar

League, or AFPFL) approved a constitution based on the principle of equality among the different nationalities (Sakhong, 2010) but Aung San was assassinated before Myanmar became independent on 4 January, 1948 (Charney, 2009). A new constitution was promulgated and the new nation was based on a unitary rather than federal system, though Shan and Karenni states were given the right of secession after ten years (Smith, 1999; South, 2008). The Panglong Agreement, which the constitution violated, is one basis for self-determination claims by Chin groups (Sakhong, 2003).

Under U Nu, the first Prime Minister of independent Myanmar, the country was anything but united. He immediately faced a rebellion by the Communist Party of Burma and later insurgencies by the Karen and other ethnic groups (Charney, 2009; Silverstein, 1990) which Chin army units helped to suppress (Kio, 2011). Multi-party elections were held in 1951, 1956, and 1960 and U Nu was re-elected Prime Minister each time (Charney, 2009; Fink, 2009). Constituencies in Chin Special Division (now Chin State) were won by Chin candidates (Kio, 2011). General Ne Win came to power in 1962 through a military coup, ostensibly to prevent the country from breaking apart due to ethnic insurgencies, after holding power briefly from 1958-1960. He dissolved Parliament, banned all political parties and other organizations other than the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) and affiliated organizations, and declared what he called “the Burmese way to socialism.” A new constitution was put in place in 1974 and single party elections were held that year (Charney, 2009; Fink, 2009; Steinberg, 1981). Invited by the government, Chin intellectuals had provided inputs into the drafting of the constitution and were arrested for doing so (Fink,

2009; Thawnga, n.d.).⁷

Pro-democracy protests in March and June 1988, primarily in Yangon and Mandalay, were followed by Ne Win's resignation in June. Nation-wide protests began on August 8 (8-8-88) and continued over the coming weeks. The military responded with violence and many demonstrators were killed. On August 12 Ne Win's successor, General Sein Lwin, was removed and on August 19 Dr. Maung Maung took his place; on August 24 troops were called back and the shooting stopped. The government essentially ceased to function as the demonstrations grew. A military coup staged on September 18 brought the protests to an abrupt end and installed a military junta that later called itself the State Law and Order Reconciliation Council (SLORC) (Charney, 2009; Fink, 2009; Seekins, 2002; Silverstein, 1990; South, 2008). Following the coup many of those who had been most involved in the uprising took up arms to fight the government, based in border areas (Charney, 2009; Fink, 2009). Many Chin who were leaders in the uprising and others in their networks joined the Chin National Front (CNF), an armed resistance group, at this time (Human Rights Watch, 2009).

Under SLORC rule, cabinet positions were held primarily by military officers and military units controlled local administration. State and district (township) councils of the Ne Win era were replaced by State and Township Law and Order Restoration Councils (Charney, 2009) and some of the members of the councils that were abolished joined opposition groups. SLORC held nation-wide elections in 1990, which the National League for Democracy, or NLD (one of whose leaders was Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of Aung

⁷ A submission made by Chin university students was later published as a popular book named *Opinions Given by Chin Youth* (Burmese: ချင်းလူငယ်များအကြံပေးချက် *Chin lu-nge-mya: achan-pei-che*).

San), won in a landslide. When the military showed no sign of seating the elected members of parliament, NLD tried to form a government itself. SLORC then attempted to arrest NLD delegates who were involved in the effort and many fled the country. The elected parliamentarians were never seated (Charney, 2009; Fink, 2009).

In 1997 SLORC was reconstituted as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) but there was little change in practice (Charney, 2009). Severe human rights abuses by the SLORC and SPDC military regimes have been documented, especially in ethnic nationality (Burmese: လူမျိုး *lu-myo*) areas (NCGUB, 2007; Lewa, 1998). In 2007 the most significant protests since 1988 erupted, known as the Saffron Revolution because of the large numbers of monks involved. Many monks and other people were killed in the government crackdown on the protesters (Charney, 2009; Fink, 2009).

SLORC and then SPDC executed a process leading to the drafting of a constitution, which was put in place in 2008 following a much-criticized referendum for which an unsuccessful “Vote No” campaign was organized (Charney, 2009; Fink, 2009). Chin activists supported by groups outside the country participated in the Vote No campaign. SPDC organized elections in 2010 that were generally not considered free and fair, and the constitution guaranteed the military twenty-five percent of the seats in the new parliament. The main opposition party, NLD, boycotted the elections and the regime-affiliated Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won most of the seats (ALTSEAN Burma, 2011). Chin parties that had participated in the 1990 elections and continued to exist in exile did not contest the elections (Burma Partnership, 2010) and new Chin parties registered (ALTSEAN Burma, 2011). Members of Region and State *Hluttaws* (Assemblies) and the national-level

Amyotha Hluttaw (House of Nationalities) and *Pyithu Hluttaw* (House of Representatives) were elected. Thein Sein, who had been a general until 2010, became president (ALTSEAN Burma, 2011). Prior to the elections, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), which had been one of the strongest rebel forces but signed a ceasefire agreement in 1994, became engaged in armed combat with the government (ALTSEAN-Burma, 2012). However, most other groups have now concluded ceasefire agreements with the government and CNF signed its first ceasefire agreement in January 2012 (ALTSEAN-Burma, 2012; Chinland Guardian 2012).

Chin have participated in the state in various ways over the decades. During the colonial period Chin served in the British Burmese Army and also directly under the British in the civil service, including in district administration positions (Kio, 2011; Sakhong, 2003, 2010; Vumson, 1986). Since independence more and more Chin have entered government service and the large populations of government servants in the towns in Chin State include many Chin. During the military regimes Chin continued to serve in the government army (Tatmadaw) in larger numbers than have other ethnic nationalities (Scherrer, 1995).

Chapter Three. Methodology

This thesis is based primarily on life-story interviews I conducted with forty-four Chin from Myanmar, including ten women. Of this number, twenty – including one woman – could be considered high-risk activists.⁸ Of the twenty, eight participated in armed resistance, six (including two of those who participated in armed resistance) were leaders of the 1988 uprising, six were active in the Saffron Revolution, and two were involved in student activism in other ways. Other informants who had been involved in less high-risk political activism included one who was a political party activist at the time of the 1990 elections, four who participated in lower-risk student activism, and two who wrote political poems or sang political songs. Five of the high-risk activists were also involved in political campaigns for the 1990 elections. Fourteen of the informants were essentially non-activists and three left Myanmar while still in high school and could not at the time they left have been considered activists. Some, but not all, engaged in political activity after leaving Myanmar or the border area but this was not of concern to this project. Most of the informants were born between the 1960s and 1980s, but seven were born in the 1950s or earlier and two were born in the 1990s.

In addition to this group of forty-four core informants, I conducted interviews with five other Chin that aimed more at collecting general information or background on the Chin rather than life stories. However, these interviews did cover some aspects of these informants' personal experiences. I also had shorter, more informal conversations with a number of other Chin. I have incorporated some parts of these interviews or discussions into my analysis.

⁸ McAdam (1986:67) defines risk as it relates to activism as: "the anticipated dangers – whether legal, social, physical, financial, and so forth – of engaging in a particular type of activity."

All of the Chin I interviewed were living in the United States. Most live in Indianapolis and I met them there in person – sometimes at their homes, sometimes in a restaurant, and in two cases at the apartment I rented with my family during the interview period. I was also able to meet two people who live elsewhere in the United States in person in Indianapolis because they were visiting for a large conference of the Chin Baptist Convention. I interviewed the others by phone.

I spent four hours or more with five of the 44 core informants, between 1½ and four hours with 27 of them, 45 minutes to 1½ hours with eleven of them, and 30 minutes with one person. In those cases in which I spent more time with people I did so in serial interviews. I conducted some of the interviews in English, others in Hakha or Lai (a Chin language widely spoken in Hakha and Thantlang townships) in which I had become fairly proficient. I was assisted by a translator, my brother-in-law, with three early interviews. In general, I asked about people's lives through the time that they left Myanmar or northeast India, which for most people was between 1996 and 2007. In practice, the interviews typically did not cover the entire period of people's lives from childhood, but seven people told me about their childhoods in some depth. They included two members of the Chin armed resistance, one leader of the 1988 uprising, two Saffron Revolution participants, and two others who were involved in activism as students to different degrees. Twenty-six others told me about their childhoods but in lesser depth. Within the constraints of the time available to interview each person (my informants were generally busy and had limited time to speak with me) I sought to get as candid and full a picture as possible of what they were thinking and experiencing at different times in their lives. I probed particular times in people's lives in more depth than others. Some interviews were more open ended, while others (especially those conducted in

the Lai language) were less so. Overall, many but not all of the informants opened up to me and appeared to be quite candid about their lives; those whom I interviewed multiple times were among those who opened up the most.

I used various lines of questioning to understand how people came to participate in political activity or did not. In some cases I began by asking about particular episodes in their lives, such as participation in the Saffron Revolution, and then probed some of the influences that seemed to be most important. In other cases I began by asking informants to tell me about different periods in their lives – their experiences in high school, for example, or in college.

I did not attempt to interview a representative sample. However, I made a special effort to interview women and also meet Chin who had lived in villages (my contacts tended to introduce me to more men and people from towns and cities). I primarily sought out people who had been especially active politically, but also made a point to ensure that I talked to people who were not. I found people to interview using a snowball method. My initial contacts were through my wife's friends and relatives and people whom I already knew who were involved with a human rights organization. They helped me to meet other people. Three of the 44 primary interview subjects were in fact close family members of my wife. While I debated the wisdom of including them in the sample, in the end I decided to do so because they provided rich insights that I would not otherwise have been able to obtain. Using the snowball method resulted in most of my sample consisting of people with roots in Hakha and Thantlang townships in Chin State and especially the Zophei area of Thantlang Township – though many had grown up or spent extended periods of time elsewhere,

especially cities outside of Chin State. This had the disadvantage of making it difficult to generalize to the broader Chin population but the advantage of allowing triangulation and greater depth of focus.

Caution must be taken in using life stories or other kinds of information based on reminiscences of the past; they cannot be taken at face value. Eastmond (2007:250), for example, writes that “stories cannot be seen as simply reflecting life as lived, but should be seen as creative constructions or interpretations of the past, generated in specific contexts of the present.” The relationship between the narrator and researcher is important to the recording of life stories (Waterson, 2007). People may have experiences that they do not tell the researcher about. Because of these considerations, while some scholars use life story approaches with the aim of getting accurate descriptions of informants’ life trajectories, others focus on the symbolism and meaning implied by life stories (Bertaux & Kohli, 1984). However, I have more or less taken the former approach, attempting to reconstruct the most accurate picture of people’s lives possible while recognizing that there will inevitably be inaccuracies. I probed the stories rather than taking them at face-value and was also able to cross-check some stories through interviews with other informants. As I mentioned above, I did not just ask people to tell me stories that explained their political activity but also asked people to talk about different periods in their lives or particular experiences. I also used my own judgment to recognize more extreme cases of distortion or exaggeration. In the end, I feel that the parts of stories of people’s lives on which I have based my analysis here, when taken together, produce a reasonably faithful picture of the processes through which this group of Chin became politically active to different degrees.

Speaking to people in the United States posed another limitation. Chin living in the

U.S. have been exposed to new ways of thinking that could shape how they present their life stories. The population of people potentially available for me to interview was also not representative of the overall population from Thantlang and Hakha townships living in Myanmar during the period of interest, and was probably more educated and overall more politically engaged. Their experiences were likely different from those of others in ways that I do not understand. In total, 26 of my 44 core informants had received at least some secular university education in Myanmar and eight had been to theological colleges (including four of those who went to secular universities). The parents of at least 23 had worked for the government in Myanmar at some time.

There were, on the other hand, some advantages to conducting the interviews in the United States and, in any case, many of those who were leading activists in the past no longer live inside Myanmar. A large number have been resettled to third countries. People were able to speak to me much more openly than could conceivably have been possible in Myanmar. Even in Indianapolis, some were nervous about talking about details of high risk activism, especially with regards to revealing the identities of other participants. Interviewing informants who were legally residing in the United States meant that they generally had little to gain from distorting the stories they told me. Instead, for example, had I conducted interviews among refugees or migrants in India or Malaysia, they might have hoped through their stories to increase their chances of being recognized as refugees or resettled.

Focusing on a group of people who share a sense of common identity, but who were scattered geographically and involved in different kinds of political activity, has allowed me to understand geographies of political participation in a way that would not otherwise have

been possible. The importance of place to political participation was reflected in different ways than it would have been had I employed an area-based approach. And I was better able to understand the different ways Chin have participated in political activity, and cases when they have not, than I might have had I used a movement- or event-based approach.

Chapter Four. The Chin

The distribution of the Kuki-Chin language family as recorded by Grierson (1963[1903]) is shown in the map in Figure 2 below. It includes upland areas on either side of the modern-day India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh borders as well as surrounding low-lying areas. Various groups speaking languages within this language family, primarily living in western Myanmar, collectively call themselves Chin. Chin is one of the major ethnic nationalities recognized by the Myanmar government. Chin groups form the dominant population in Chin State in the hills of western Myanmar (Lewa, 1998) and there are also large Chin populations in adjacent areas. By numerous measures, the population of Chin State is the poorest of any of Myanmar's seven ethnic-based states and seven divisions (IDEA & IHLCA 2007; IHLCA, 2011). The state is extremely hilly, especially in the north. The vast majority of Chin are Christians (Ling & Mang, 2004; Sakhong, 2010) and for many, being Christian is part of being Chin (Sakhong, 2003).

Like other ethnic identities, the conglomerate Chin identity is socially constructed (Nagel, 1994). The process of construction continues today and is more apparent than in many other cases of ethnicity construction. There is little evidence that the people of the Chin-Lushai Hills had any sense of belonging to larger ethnic groups (such as Chin) prior to the arrival of the British, and the name Chin appears to have first been formally applied to all the different sub-groups in the Chin Hills Regulation of 1896 (Sakhong, 2010). Sakhong (2003) describes various processes through which different Chin groups came to identify as a single people: resistance to the British, the development of church-based associations that brought together converts from different parts of the Chin Hills, and a meeting in 1948 of



Figure 2. Distribution of Kuki-Chin language family. From Grierson (1963 [1903]).

from around Chin State (then Chin Special Division) to decide on the form of government they wanted.

The name “Chin” and the question of which groups are included within the identity(ies) it represents are hotly contested today. Some groups in Myanmar argue for the name “Zo” instead, claiming that “Chin” is a name given by the British and unlike “Zo” is not a word in any of the languages of the people claiming to be Chin (Vumson, 1986). Those using the name Chin typically do so only when speaking Burmese or English; for example, in the Hakha or Lai language (spoken by a Chin sub-group in Hakha and Thantlang townships known as the Lai) people use *Lai* to refer to all Chin people as well as the Lai people. However, the name Chin is increasingly being used by people when speaking Chin languages. The history of formal joint administration of the Chin-Lushai Hills⁹ and cultural and language similarities are the basis for people identifying groups across the Indian, Bangladesh, and Myanmar borders with a single overall conglomerate ethnic category, named either Zo (Vumson, 1986) or Chin (Sakhong, 2003).

There is no accurate estimation of the Chin population, and the ambiguity regarding which groups to include makes one essentially impossible. However, Lewa (1998) writes that the total Chin population in Myanmar is between 750,000 and 1,500,000. According to a Myanmar government website (MIMU, 2013), a 2009 report by the Ministry of Information gives 545,431 as the population of Chin State.

My informants came from a number of different Chin sub-groups, which can be

⁹ On paper the Chin/Lushai Hills were a single administrative unit from 1896 until 1935 when the India Act split them between India and Burma, though in practice areas that would become parts of India, Pakistan, and Myanmar upon those countries’ independence in 1947 (India and Pakistan) and 1948 (Myanmar) were governed separately (Sakhong, 2003).

identified roughly as Hakha or Lai, Falam, Zophei, Zotung, Mizo or Lushai, Zomi or Tedim, Matu, and Mara. Most of these sub-groups speak mutually unintelligible languages and within some there is significant ethnic and linguistic diversity. These groups include some of the largest Chin sub-groups as well as some smaller groups. Each sub-group is generally affiliated with a specific geographic area.

Because of my use of the snowball method, the majority of the informants were Hakha or Zophei – an estimated seventeen people each out of a total of 44 informants. (I cannot be precise because I did not ask all informants their ethnicity.) Most of the people I interviewed who grew up in villages were Zophei. The Hakha and Zophei are among the groups that most strongly self-identify as Chin (as compared to Zo) and that support the most inclusive definition of Chin.

The Hakha or Lai are one of the larger and more influential Chin groups. The Hakha are dominant in Hakha and Thantlang Townships in northern Chin State and the Lai language is spoken throughout these townships as well as being widely known by people in other townships. The Hakha include a number of smaller groups speaking different related dialects. People from Thantlang often distinguish themselves from Hakha but this seems to be a territory-based rather than ethnicity-based distinction.

The Zophei people are associated with the Zophei area (Lai: *Zophei peng*) within Thantlang township where overall they constitute the dominant ethnic group. The Zophei area consists of about 24 villages and extends to the Indian border. The Zophei speak a language (Zophei) which is distinct from Hakha and both Hakha and Zophei consider these to be separate ethnic groups. However, other Chin frequently refer to the Zophei as Hakha. Zophei people themselves identify as Hakha in some contexts and often affiliate with Hakha

people. For example, Zophei university students have generally participated in Hakha or Lai sub-groups within Chin student networks. The Zophei's affiliation with Hakha goes beyond their physical location within the Thantlang-Hakha area; Bareights (1981) writes, based on fieldwork done in the 1960s, that most Zophei chiefs are of Hakha origin. Compared to other Chin groups, a relatively large number of Zophei people live in Western countries.

In addition to ethnic groups (Lai: *miphun*), clans (Lai: *phun*) are also important for categorization (Bareights, 1981; Lehman, 1963); my informants did not always seem to be clear on the difference between the two. Clans are descent-related groups that extend across ethnic boundaries. Thus people from different ethnic groups may be of the same clan, and within a given ethnic group are people from many different clans. Some clans are considered to be higher status than others and stereotypes about different clans are maintained. Clans are an important basis for social networking as people often judge others, and decide with whom to affiliate, according to their clans.

Almost all informants used the name Chin instead of Zo and most considered Chin to include primarily groups associated with territories within Myanmar (as compared to including also related groups in India and Bangladesh). Informants gave various explanations as to how they knew who was Chin. One person in his thirties who grew up in Kalemmyo (a city in Sagaing division, just outside of Chin State) said of the Asho, who live primarily in lowland areas in Myanmar outside of Chin State, "They are also Chin. When we celebrate Chin National Day,¹⁰ they join." He also noted that they have "Chin" written on their ID

¹⁰ Chin National Day, celebrated on February 20, commemorates a meeting held in Falam in 1948 in which chiefs from around Chin Special Division agreed to abolish the traditional administrative system based on chiefs (Sakhong, 2003).

cards. When I asked about the Zomi, who live primarily in Tedim and Tonzang townships in northern Chin State and who generally identify as Zo, he said that they are Chin “because they don’t have their own state. And they are like us culturally... They join Chin National Day.” Another young person who lived in a village in the Zophei area said that when he was in middle school he knew that the Zomi and Asho were Chin because pastors talked about it. “They said, ‘we are all Christian,’ and talked about the different groups... Pastors talked about this a lot.” In high school, this informant participated in celebrations of Chin National Day, and he explained: “At Chin National Day, Chin people make dances. Zomi people, Asho-Chin do their cultural dances.” He said also that Zomi are Chin because there are Zomi people in Chin State and Zomi people have “Chin” on their ID cards. But Mizo are not Chin because Mizo people don’t live in Chin State. A middle-aged man who grew up in Hakha said that when he was in college he thought Lushai, Asho, and Naga were all Chin, because he had read it in books published by the government based on the government’s ethnic categories. Factors that influenced people to identify a group as Chin thus ranged from cultural similarities, pastors telling people about different Chin group, participation in Chin National Day, government books, government-issued ID cards, and affiliation with Chin State¹¹.

Because of my focus on the Hakha and Zophei people, geographically my research

¹¹ It appears that the struggle for self-determination in Chin State is one of the main reasons why people felt so strongly about the need for a common ethnic identity. Chin/Zo groups make up the vast majority of Chin State and there is a feeling that self-determination must be pursued on the scale of Chin State.

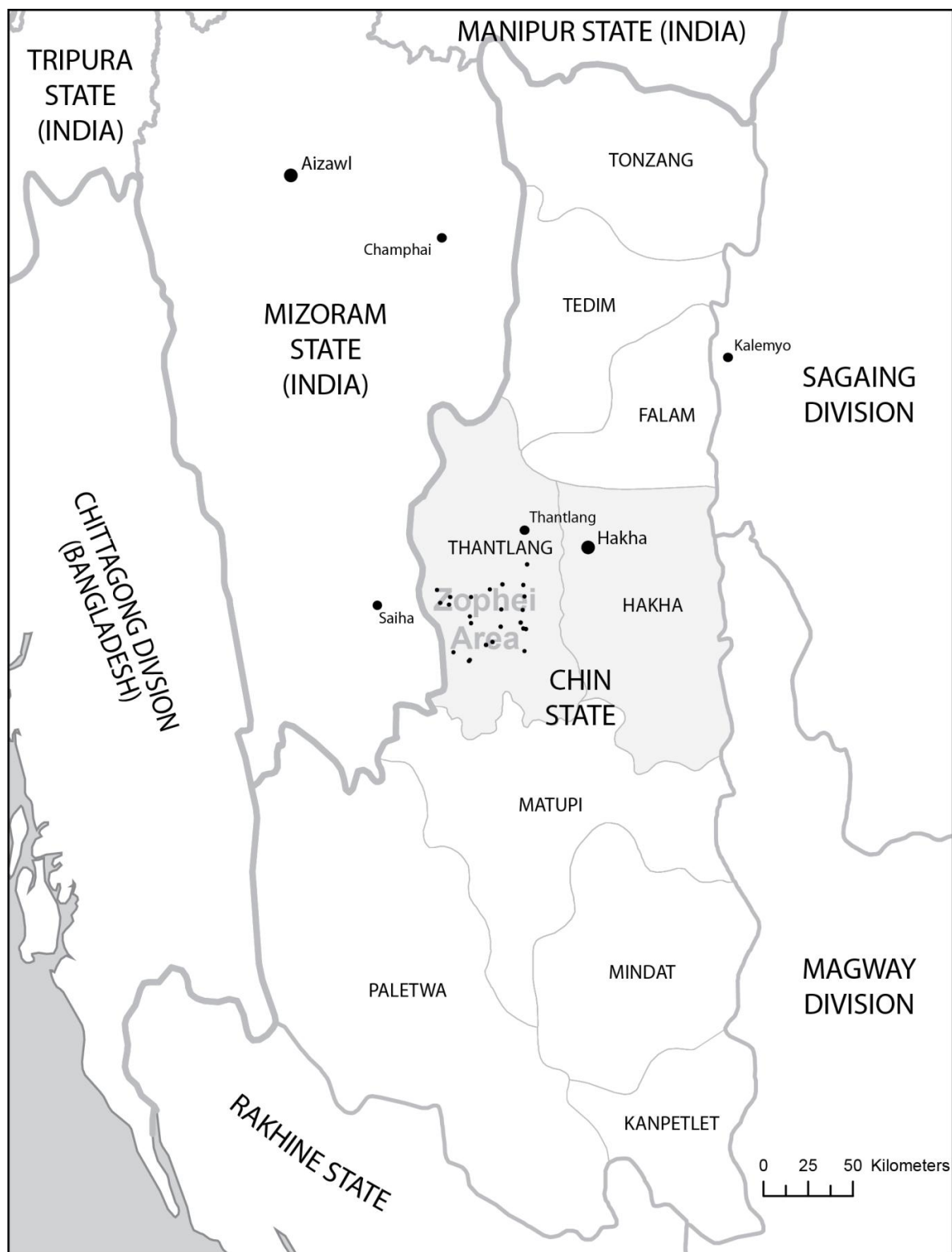


Figure 3. Townships of Chin State. (Villages in the Zophei area are indicated.)

focused on Hakha and Thantlang townships. (See the map in figure 3 above). Sixteen of the 44 core informants grew up in villages in these townships (thirteen of them in the Zophei area in Thantlang); ten grew up in the township center of Hakha (which is also the state capital); and three grew up in the township center of Thantlang. Seven others had roots in these two townships but grew up elsewhere. Some of these grew up in Kalembo (a city in Sagaing division at the border of Chin State that is essentially a gateway to Chin State and has a large Chin population), one grew up in another state, and others moved around while growing up. Five others had roots in these two townships but I do not know where they grew up. A number of the informants spent time in Kalembo as students at Kale College and later Kale University¹² where most students from northern Chin State go to college. Others spent time in Yangon (the capital up until 2005 and the largest city) and Mandalay (the second largest city and a commercial center), mostly as university students. There are growing Chin populations in both cities. Many had lived in Mizoram State in northeast India, which borders Chin State, to work, avoid repression in Myanmar, or participate in the armed resistance (Chin National Front). And several spent part of their lives in other ethnic states, typically because their parents were civil servants who were transferred there. One studied at a theological college in southern India and returned to Myanmar.

At the time of the 1988 uprising there were already large numbers of Chin from Myanmar living in Mizoram State where there were more opportunities for employment, and those numbers increased after the uprising and September 18 coup (Human Rights Watch, 2009). In the early 1990s Chin began going to New Delhi to apply for asylum and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) began to recognize Chin refugees and

¹² Kale College was renamed Kale University in 2000.

resettle them to other countries (CHRO, 2009). Malaysia later became the country from which the most Chin refugees were resettled. The Chin Human Rights Organization (2009) reported that the estimated population of Chin from Myanmar living in Mizoram State was 100,000 and that 4,200 Chin had gone to New Delhi and 30,000 to Malaysia to seek protection as refugees. Chin refugees have been resettled to the United States, Canada, Australia, Norway, and other countries (CRC, 2012; CHRO, 2009). A number of Chin who had left Myanmar also came to the United States on US State Department Burmese Refugee Scholarships, administered by Indiana University. This is one reason that a large Chin population has built up in Indianapolis, where there are now approximately 8,000 Chin (Norman, 2012) – more than anywhere else in the US (Boss & Ferenchick, 2012). As I have mentioned, many of those Chin who have been most involved in political activism inside Myanmar now live outside the country.

The Chin diaspora have been crucial players in Chin politics in recent decades. Many Chin living in India, Malaysia, and countries of resettlement have actively engaged in politics in Myanmar in various ways, including through the Chin National Front, political parties, and women's, youth, human rights, and other organizations. They have also raised money, often through home village-based networks, to support community projects in Myanmar such as small hydropower systems and road construction.

Chapter Five. Stories of Chin political participation

As could be expected, informants' stories do not point to specific, clear-cut factors that led them to become involved (or not) in political activism. Their stories are complex and for each individual there were a multitude of influences over an extended period of time that taken together were important. My task was to look for general patterns without simplifying away the individual agency, complexity, and contingency. In this chapter I present those general patterns with the aim of making the processes of political mobilization as comprehensible as possible in the context of the Chin, while illustrating the individual agency, complexity, and contingency through the use of individual examples; in the following chapter I generalize from these processes to draw out patterns that are less context-specific. For heuristic purposes I have chosen in this chapter to present these patterns through seven stories which cover most of the content of the interviews. The first five relate to five main forms of political activity among the Chin: student activism, armed resistance, formal political participation, church-related activism, and everyday resistance. The remaining two are ethnic and anti-government/pro-democracy identities and interest in politics.

In this chapter I make extensive use of interview segments to illustrate individual experiences. In the interest of maintaining confidentiality I have kept these segments short and do not present people's life stories as such. At the same time I have tried to provide sufficient information to place each individual in space and time.

1. University student activism

Much of the more visible political activism among the Chin has been carried out by university students or graduates who have been inspired, motivated, and mobilized in ways

that are directly related to being university students. The association between university students and activism has been seen in various other contexts, such as in the Civil Rights movements in the United States (Morris, 1984; Polletta, 1998) and revolts against President Syngman Rhee in South Korea (Kim, 1996). Students in Myanmar have long played a central role in political activism, dating back at least to a students' strike in 1920 (Charney, 2009; Fink, 2009; Silverstein & Wohl, 1964; Smith, 1999). Chin students have been part of that tradition, most saliently in the 1988 pro-democracy uprising in which many played leading roles in Chin areas (Human Rights Watch, 2009). Chin students participated in anti-government protests in the 1970s in Yangon and Mandalay (Htoo, 2011) and in 1976 Salai Tin Maung Oo (an Asho Chin and the best-known Chin activist), who played a leading role in several of those protests, became the youngest activist to be executed in Myanmar (Htoo, 2011). Chin university students continue to be active to the present.

Chin university students constitute an elite group. In addition to economic obstacles, the tenth grade exams¹³ pose a considerable hurdle for students hoping to go to college. For example, in 2012, only 1,093 students in Chin State passed these exams, comprising just 14.91% of students who took them (Global Chin News, 2012). Those who failed were ineligible to go to government universities.

Overview of university student activism: I will give a brief overview of the ways in which students have been politically active during the period covered by this project, starting with the two big events that bookend this study: the 1988 uprising and the 2007 Saffron Revolution. The 1988 uprising played out in towns in Chin State as well as other towns and

¹³ Secondary school runs through tenth grade.

cities across the country. Informants told me that the government made no effort to prevent the uprising in Hakha and Thantlang towns, and described the uprising in those towns as bloodless. The previous year, Chin students participated alongside others in demonstrations that broke out on Yangon and Mandalay University campuses in response to the demonetization of the currency (Charney, 2009; Fink, 2009), and were sent home. Those students played an important role in organizing the 1988 uprising. In Hakha, students were arrested on 8-8-88 but when a group of (mostly) university graduates demonstrated the next day they were released. Informants estimated that 5000 people participated at the peak of the protests in Hakha. An uprising committee made up of students, young intellectuals, and teachers took over administration of the town as the government essentially ceased to function. (See Fink (2009) for a description of these committees.)

In most villages in Chin State there were no protests. Some student activists from villages, especially those who had been student leaders in college, participated in the uprising in Hakha and other towns, but many did not. Most university graduates from villages were probably already living in towns and cities anyway.

The coup on September 18 (Charney, 2009; Fink, 2009) brought the demonstrations to an end. In Hakha, Thantlang, and other towns of Chin State, the coup, like the uprising, was bloodless though around the country many people were killed in both (Charney, 2009; Fink, 2009), and I did not hear of any arrests in these towns. In Kalembo, during the uprising a former district council member who was the target of a crowd's rage was killed and after the coup people were arrested on charges that they had been involved in the killing. Some of the leading activists in Chin State, Kalembo, and elsewhere went into hiding, but others did not. Universities reopened in 1991 and were soon closed again (Fink, 2009).

While Buddhist monks played the most visible role in the Saffron Revolution of 2007, it was started by 1988 Generations Students Group (a group of people who had been leaders in 1988, formed in 2006, focused on developing a grassroots movement) and many students participated (Fink, 2009). Nationwide, Chin played a relatively minor role. But a number of Chin students and recent graduates and other young Chin who were living in Yangon got involved by helping to protect the monks, uploading photographs of the demonstrations, and in other ways. A number of them were pursued by the authorities and left the country. In Kalembo, Chin students organized demonstrations at the time of the Saffron Revolution. The demonstrations there lasted two days (24 to 25 September) and leaders then had to go into hiding and later leave the country.

Between these two events students have been involved in a variety of (more subdued) political activity on and off campus. When universities reopened in 1993 a number of additional campuses opened. They included Kale College, located in Kalembo township in Sagaing Division at the border of Chin State and roughly half of whose students were Chin. University students were under considerable pressure not to get involved in any kind of political activity, and semesters were shortened so people were busy and had little chance to get to know each other (Fink, 2009). But in 1996 a fight involving students in Yangon led to demonstrations, primarily at Mandalay and Yangon Universities, and universities were closed again for two years. They reopened briefly in 1988 and shut down again until 2000 (Fink, 2009). At Kale College, at the time of the 1996 demonstrations students had been fighting Burman students and took the opportunity to make demands of the college. Demands included that the name be changed to Chin State College since Chin State did not have a college and

the college served students from Chin State. Informants who had been students at Kale College or later Kale University also described a number of smaller events in the 1990s and 2000s, including organizing celebrations of Chin National Day, organizing a students' union, making various demands of school authorities, and getting into fights with police and teachers. Informants also described political activities of students when they were back in Thantlang and Hakha during vacations.

Identity: Identification of university students with political activism, related to the long history of students in activism, has been an important influence in student activism. This is not unique to Myanmar; Polletta (1998), for example, writes about “student activist” becoming a new identity in the U.S. Fink (2009:38) writes of university students, “Inspired by the role students had played in leading resistance protests against the colonial regime, and also because they were young and generally free of financial responsibilities, they saw themselves as having a moral duty to speak out.” People talked about feeling that as students they should get involved in activism and other people expecting them to be activists. One person who participated in protests in 1973 related this to memory of the 1962 attack on the students union of Yangon University (Charney, 2009; Fink, 2009): “On July 7, 1962 the Student Union building was bombed and a lot of students were killed. So every student knows July 7 as a bloody day. The students hated the government for that reason.” He said that “even today people haven’t forgotten about that day.”

Interviews showed that both students and non-students drew a clear connection between being a university student and political participation. One woman from Hakha said that she wanted to go to university but her family was too poor. Had she gone she would have gotten involved in politics. “All university students participated in politics,” she said. A

university graduate who lived in the Kalemmyo area at the time said that during the 1988 protests he was requested to give a public speech because he was young and had recently received his degree. A man from Thantlang who went to Kale College in the 1990s explained that activism begins with religious activities and going to college. “If I hadn’t gone to college I wouldn’t do anything. But I was in that channel.” However, some university students also felt other contradictory influences. One person who was in the middle of exams at Dagong University in Yangon at the time of the Saffron Revolution said that his main concern at the time was that the university not be closed. He said he could not get involved in politics in college because he needed to study and he was not even a member of any organizations.

In general, students seem to have been given somewhat greater freedom to act than were other people, and this may have encouraged students to be more active than others. One former Kale College student said that “students were very powerful in Burmese history – even the government was afraid of students.” Authorities appear to have been cautious because of students’ ability to organize large numbers of people. A student from Thantlang, referring to the situation in the early 1990s, said, “On behalf of the people, the student body complained to authorities. The authorities respected the student body because they knew they could demonstrate.” A former Kale University student related another incident in which students at Kale University were being harassed as they tried to organize a celebration of Chin National Day. They said that if their leaders were arrested they would destroy all of the buildings in the university, and after that, soldiers stopped following the students.

While identification of students with activism seems widespread, identity came into play in student activism in other ways that were much more individual. I will discuss some of

these other identities in later sections: Chin identity, interest in politics, activist identity, identification with the pro-democracy movement, and identification with Aung San Suu Kyi. Here I will note the importance of activist identities (McAdam, 1986; Oliver, Cadena-Roa, & Strawn, 2003) for people when they were in college. One student leader who seems clearly to have had an activist identity recalled the 2007 Saffron Revolution in Kale University. “We knew that there was an 80 or 90 percent chance that we would die if we demonstrated,” he said. After thinking about it the whole night, the next day he helped lead a demonstration. Even as he called people together to begin, he thought there was a good chance he would die.

Another young person who was involved in the Saffron Revolution in Yangon said: “After I knew why they were marching, I personally felt that it was my responsibility to join. Burma is a dictatorship, that’s why we wanted to change to democracy. We wanted Burma to become a developed country. No one invited me. I joined because I wanted to change Burma like the other countries.” On September 28, 2007 soldiers and police had become very strict and people weren’t allowed to gather in groups. Only some of the people who had participated in the preceding days turned out, but he was one of them. “At that time I wasn’t very scared. When I thought about it afterwards I was scared. I don’t know why I wasn’t scared at that time.”

Other university students clearly did not identify as activists. One student leader at Kale University said that he never considered himself an activist. “I only considered that I was president [of a student committee] and needed to take care of my members... I focused on taking care of all my members, so they can study freely.”

Students’ family considerations were also important. For example, some people’s parents supported their activism. One student leader at Kale University said that when he

decided to lead the 2007 Saffron Revolution demonstration, his parents were crying. But his father, who had been an activist at the time of the 1988 uprising, told him, “If you believe it, you should do it.” And his parents allowed him to lead the demonstration. Another person who also helped lead those demonstrations said that when he was at Kale University his father was supportive of his political involvement but his mother was not. She was afraid. At the time of the Saffron revolution she called him and said he should not take part. “You’ll be killed,” she told him. Though he led the demonstrations anyway, others talked about not getting involved in political activity because of their parents. Fink (2009) writes extensively about parents discouraging their children from getting involved in political activity because they are concerned about their children’s well-being and do not want them to suffer. A woman from Hakha who was at Mandalay University at the time of the 1996 protests told me that her parents called her and told her to go home. “They said that in 1988 the military shot people, put people in jail.” They did not allow her to participate in the protests – although, she said, she was afraid and would not have participated in them anyway.

Networking: Networking, both formal and informal and both among students and between students and non-students, was important to political participation processes. Student networks contributed to identity formation (such as development of Chin nationalism) and through these networks people were invited to participate in political activity. Informants talked about formal on-campus student networks (especially the Chin Literature and Culture Committees and their sub-groups), formal town-based networks that formed in 1988 and organized the 1988 uprising, and town-based student networks that have been set up since then.

The formal, government-sanctioned Chin Literature and Culture Committees (CLCCs) have been crucial networks for students. After his attack on university students in 1962, Ne Win closed the universities for two years, and student organizations were banned. However, in 1964 the Literature and Culture Committee (Fink, 2009) was set up at Yangon University. Within it, committees for different national groups were established, including the CLCC. A CLCC was later set up in Mandalay and when new campuses were opened, such as Kale College, CLCCs were set up there as well (Konumthung, 2010). The chairman of each CLCC was a faculty member but the secretary (typically the most important position) was a student. Within each CLCC, sub-groups for different Chin groups (such as Hakha or Lai¹⁴, Falam, Tedim or Zomi) were set up; the specific breakdown depended on the university. CLCCs were perpetuated over the years despite university closings and the opening of new campuses.

The CLCCs were not expressly political but they did contribute to political participation in important ways. Many leading Chin activists were at one time CLCC leaders, including Damkhohau (who led an uprising in 1964) (Vumson, 1986), Lian Uk (who was elected to parliament in 1990), Tin Maung Oo (who led student protests in the 1970s and was executed for his role in them) (Htoo, 2011), and Cin Sian Thang (who became chairman of the Zomi National Congress, or ZNC, and was elected to parliament in 1990) (Thang, 2003). Fink (2009) has described the LCCs as recruiting grounds for activists and this appears to be an accurate description. CLCC activities included social activities, such as fresher (freshmen) welcomes and senior farewells, as well as more political activities such as organizing

¹⁴ The Hakha sub-groups were originally known as the Hakha Students Association (Burmese: ဟားခါး ကျောင်းသူများအသင်း *Hakha Chaung:-thu-mya: a-thin:*, but are now known as the Lai University Students Group (Lai Sianghleirun Sianghngakchia Bu).

celebrations of Chin National Day and publication of journals. Informants told me that the sub-committees generally had more activities than the overall CLCCs. While students were involved in protests, CLCCs and their sub-committees were not formally involved in them. One person who was involved with the CLCC at Mandalay University in the 1980s said it provided an important place to talk about issues related to being Chin. “CLCC was not very openly involved in politics but it is very important for Chin people... For the Chin people, we had only CLCC. We talked in the CLCC. We could express our feelings in that area.” He said people could talk freely within the CLCC, though they could not really do anything. “It was a very good thing,” he said.

One person who participated in the CLCC in Yangon in the 2000s said the committee members included some real activists. He became friends with some of them and some had already been his friends. “In the meetings we could only talk about how to hold Chin National Day, fresher welcome, and so on... We couldn’t say things like ‘we don’t like the government.’” But outside of meetings, they talked more openly; Chin nationalism and more general grievances related to the government were both important themes, Chin nationalism being perhaps slightly more salient.

University students developed important links with other politically influential people, including faculty, through CLCCs and their sub-groups. One informant who studied in Yangon described meeting a faculty member who spoke at fresher welcomes and farewells in the Hakha sub-group of the CLCC. “He told us many times about Chin nationality during my first and second years... Sometimes we visited him. They had a separate teachers’ building. We went to his room, and he told us that we need to take care of our own

language... He also told us the value of our national dress.” Only a few students, mostly students from the executive committee of the Hakha sub-group, went to the faculty member’s residence. “He didn’t talk about democracy or anything like that, just about Chin nationality.”

CLCC student leaders might or might not be activists, and were elected for different reasons. An informant who was elected chairman of the Hakha Students Union in Yangon thinks one reason he was elected was that many people knew him because of his prowess at sports. Another who was elected in his third year in Kale University thinks he was elected because he was doing better in school than others.

The 1988 uprising was led by new, formal networks that had their origins in the CLCCs. Informants described how in Hakha and Thantlang towns, students (who were in town because the universities were closed and they had been sent home) organized new town-based student unions that played the leading role in organizing the uprising. In Hakha, a library committee that had been set up by the Hakha sub-committee of the Yangon University CLCC played an important role as well.¹⁶

Since universities reopened in 1993, relatively formal town-based university student networks (known in English as “fellowships”) have become important for mobilizing younger people in towns and villages. People told me about fellowships in Hakha and Thantlang towns (Lai: *Hakha Thantlang sianghleirun bu*) in which university students participated when they were back home during vacations. These fellowships could exist only because students went home for vacation. When students arrived home for summer vacation,

¹⁶ An informant explained that the library committee was registered with the government and the chairman was a member of the district council. Before the 1988 uprising it was not involved in politics *per se* but quickly became involved once the uprising began.

they held elections for leaders, who were often the same as leaders of the CLCCs. The fellowships organized various activities, including celebrations of Chin National Day, annual “Lai conferences,” fundraising dinners, and town clean-ups. Some activities were of more political nature than others. In the 1990s, the student fellowship in Thantlang helped to get an abusive policeman transferred. An informant explained that many people in the town were afraid of the policeman, and encouraged the students to do something about it. About ten students from the Thantlang student fellowship had a meeting with government officers and asked for him to be transferred – and he was. One person described a similar case in Hakha, in which the student fellowship filed a report on police arbitrarily arresting people and taking bribes. “Someone told me the police were all transferred to another place. But there wasn’t much punishment; they were just moved to another place.” The student fellowship in Thantlang also tried to stop the sale of alcohol there.¹⁷

Through these various networks, university students were involved in identity work, were mobilized, and became activist leaders. Exposure to university students (informally and through formal networks or activities) was also important for identity and mobilization work with young people who were not university students. University students and high school students were able to meet up in their towns or villages when all were home during vacations. When universities were closed in 1987, students were sent back to their villages,

¹⁷ In general, it seems that students and their affiliates have taken the lead in filing complaints. However, I heard of some other examples that do not seem to be related to students. For example, one informant was able to identify three cases in which complaints in his village in the Zophei area had been filed. In one of the cases a villager filed a complaint to the authorities when another villager was killed by a soldier. Higher ranking soldiers came to the village and paid a small amount of compensation to the widow of the person who was killed. The National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB, 2007) reported that in 2007 villagers in Matupi township wrote a letter to Senior General Than Shwe (chairman of SPDC) protesting a killing and the arrests of sixteen people and that six villagers were arrested after writing the letter.

creating more opportunities for them to interact with others in their villages.

Some people had influential interactions with university students and others did not. One person from a village in the Zophei area said that when he was in high school in Thantlang in the 1990s he had friends in Kale College who were interested in politics. They said things like, “We want democracy, we need [Aung San] Suu Kyi as our leader.” A woman who lived in Hakha who did not go to college talked about meeting university students in the 1990s. She said she knew many university students and when they came back home they often had meetings and passed out pamphlets. She was interested in what they had to say. “We thought that they were educated people, we really respected them and wanted to be like them... I wanted to be involved. Educated people knew about our situation, educated people can change and do it. We knew that... They explained the need for democracy, why Chin State is the poorest, why we need to learn the Chin language.” While most people from villages in the Zophei area said there were people in their villages who went to university, both in the 1980s and more recently, there were years and villages when there were none. And some people didn’t have close relations with any university students although there were students from their villages or towns. A woman who went to high school in Hakha in the 1990s, for example, said that she had friends who went to university but never saw them when they came back home.

Non-students participated in various activities or otherwise engaged with the town-based student fellowships, but because these activities took place during vacations, primarily in towns, people from villages generally did not participate. University students did, however, sometimes organize activities in villages for youth, such as football (soccer) fellowships held after Christmas involving youth from different villages. University students

held meetings for people in villages, sometimes touching on political subjects, and set up libraries in some. In the case of Kalembo, because the university was located in the town, direct links between students and communities were possible and the CLCC had contact with leaders of a youth network in the city named the Chin Youth Organization. Many people living in Kalembo were probably aware of the students' activities even if they had no direct contact. One woman who lived in Kalembo said that she knew of Kale University students' political activity and was supportive of them, but she was afraid to get involved. "If I heard, I could be arrested." She said she did not know what the students did.

In addition to students attending government-run, secular universities, large numbers of Chin students attended theological colleges inside or outside the country. They did so in part because they were unable to attend secular universities (they do not pass their exams), in part because of cost or because of expectations of being able to learn English or get a job with a Christian institution after graduation. While the student body in a theological college might be organized in some way, there were no CLCCs and, overall, theological college students seem not to have been as involved in political activities as were secular university students. Theological college students also might not have contact with secular students. One informant who had been a student at a theological college in Kalembo never saw Kale university students because they stayed in hostels while she lived with her family in Kalembo. One person who had been active in Hakha during the 1988 uprising and had helped with campaigning for the 1990 elections went to India after the elections and attended theological college there. There was no one around him interested in politics and from that time he was no longer involved in any political activities.

Some theological college students, however, were active in politics. One informant who attended a theological college in Yangon said that he was chairman of the students' publication committee. They published a journal which included political as well as theological issues. "I wanted to show people what is political and what is religious," he said. And a number of leading Chin political figures attended theological colleges, including No Thang Kap, president of the Chin National Front, and John Mang Tling, Member of Parliament in the 1950s and founder of the Chin Democratic Party.

Distance education students also tended not to be involved in CLCCs or student groups or, more generally, in politics. Fink (2009:197) writes, "The regime also encourages students to enroll in distance education programmes, in which they come to the campus only once or twice a week or just ten days before exams... Distance education students do not have much of an opportunity to develop friendships and associations that could lead them into political activity." One woman who had been a distance education student at Kale University said that she was unclear about what the Kale students were doing. As a distance student, she only went to the campus for about ten days a semester, for exams, and she did not participate in the CLCC or its sub-committee. Some distance education students did, however, get involved in politics though it appears that their university enrollment had little to do with it.

In Yangon there was a kind of oppositional subculture that was closely linked with university students and graduates but also involved other activists, including some theological college and distance education students. Informants who lived in Yangon described networks of friends, including CLCC leaders, who got together to talk about politics and other subjects and e-mailed, sang political songs, or found other outlets for their

political interests. One person who moved to Yangon when he was in high school had friends who were university student activists. He knew some of them from childhood and met others in Yangon. "The Chin community in Rangoon is not that big, people see each other a lot, like in weddings." He recalled meeting friends at beer and tea shops and secretly talking about politics.

Another activist who had moved to Yangon when he was in middle school went to theological school in Yangon, and after graduation he published a magazine which he circulated among the Christian community. He had friends who were leaders in the CLCC and others who were activists he met through his church. He wrote about political movements in other countries led by religious figures and other topics. He said he and his friends spent a lot of time in tea shops. "We compared our country with other countries, like Malaysia. Over the past fifty years, if Aung San had been our leader what would our country have been like? Most of the people talk about that... Most of the time we compared education, politics, economics and sometimes our social life."

Some activists in Yangon also discovered the Internet. One who participated in the Saffron Revolution there said that he and his friends were active e-mailers. They posted poems and agreed to start an online information group. "We were pretty ready for the revolution already," he said.

One person who grew up in Kalembo and later moved to Yangon spent considerable amounts of time in Yangon with friends who liked to talk about politics. He wrote political poems and shared them with friends. He and friends also wrote articles which they distributed to people they knew on topics such as the need to support Aung San Suu Kyi, the need for

unity, and the need to protest. But he never published anything. “I would have been arrested,” he said. He had friends who were arrested; some had made flyers to distribute in public places and were arrested in the university, and one was arrested in a tea shop while talking about politics.

Student networks, including their links back to towns and villages and links with members of the oppositional subculture, constituted what could be called a mobilizing infrastructure, which was extremely important to Chin political activism. Any Chin university student who might potentially become interested in political activity would have a difficult time not being mobilized through the CLCCs. And through the town-based student networks and through students’ own personal networks with others, university students were able to influence others.

Mobilization at the time of the Saffron Revolution demonstrates the flexibility of student networks. In Yangon, mobilization happened through informal networks that involved students and non-student members of the oppositional subculture. One informant described how a small group of friends, including a CLCC leader and some recent graduates, used to meet at a safe place in Yangon and got to know a few underground political activists who never told them their real names. One of them had secret contacts with the 88 Generation Students Group in Yangon. A few days after monks started demonstrating in other cities he told the others about the protest that would soon happen in Yangon and said that they would have to get involved. When monks started protesting in Yangon they joined immediately. They e-mailed hundreds of young Chin in Yangon to get them to join the protest. Other Chin joined later as the protests in Yangon grew.

In Kalembo, a number of Chin students who led the Saffron Revolution

demonstrations were leaders of the CLCC and its sub-groups. They were in contact with 88 Generation Students, Buddhist monks, and NLD activists. They informed other students in the middle of the night of September 23 of their plans to protest and the next day went to a park in the middle of the school to announce the demonstrations. “We will demonstrate peacefully. If you want to go, we will wait here for you.” Students were taking their final exams. “After 30 minutes only 20 people were there,” one of the leaders told me. “After 45 minutes, we decided it was time to start. Even though there still weren’t a lot of students we started anyway. About 300 students ran out of their exams. We went around the whole city.” Monks and Burman leaders joined them. In both Yangon and Kalemmyo, current and former students joined the Saffron through informal networks that drew on the leadership of the CLCCs.

The 1996 event at Kale College at the time of demonstrations in Yangon and Mandalay also illustrates the way informal student networks operated. At the time, students from Yangon and Mandalay came back to Kalemmyo and encouraged students there to act. “That’s the big reason why we did something in 1996,” said an informant who was one of the student leaders in Kale College at the time. “At least about 4 or 5 students on the way back from Rangoon and Mandalay stopped by at the Kale campus. They talked about what had happened on those campuses and encouraged us to do something. Before those students came we had no idea to challenge the government at all, but we wanted to change the name of the college from Kale to Chin State College.” They presented their demands to the university authorities.

The interviews clearly demonstrated that individuals were not interchangeable with

regards to how they participated in student networks. For example, people's participation in networks was inseparable from their childhood friendships and friendships in college. One person from a village in the Zophei area who was a first-year student at Mandalay University at the time of the 1988 uprising described his relationship with one of the leaders of the CLCC there, a fourth year student, who became a leader of the uprising in Hakha and later a leader of the Chin National Front. "We were good friends. I already knew him when I was in Hakha high school." Because of this friendship, he says, and friendship with a leader of the Hakha sub-committee (and later member of CNF) whom he met in college through a friend, he was more active than others. "These two were leaders, I knew them... I was close to them." He went with them to meet faculty members. And while some people associated with activists in college, others did not have any such contacts. One person from Thantlang who went to university in the 1990s said that the people he was close to in college "didn't have any political ideas."

Within networks, there was also much that transpired at the level of individual interactions. An informant who was a student in Yangon in the 1980s talked about meeting leaders of the Hakha sub-group of the CLCC when he was a freshman. Sometimes he met them in church, sometimes they talked when CLCC had activities, and sometimes they visited his apartment. "They told us what we need to do for the future. We need to work hard... They gave guidance. They talked about Chin nationality." I have already mentioned students meeting faculty individually and family influences on people's political activity.

Geographies of student activism: The mobilizing infrastructure had spatial consequences. For example, non-students living in certain places – such as towns or villages with large numbers of university students – had more contact with students than did those

living in other places. Some people experienced little influence from university students because they lived in villages with few or no students. There were other structural consequences as well. Key leaders of the CLCCs tended to be male and networking in tea shops involved sixty percent of the students who participated were female. The poor were less likely to go to college or be in contact with university students, and thus less likely to be mobilized.

Student networking and the oppositional subculture linked with it played out through specific sites. Routledge (1997:70) writes about the importance of such sites that are “insulated from control and surveillance.” Two former students from Yangon talked about meeting at a particular place in Yangon where they got to know members of the 88 Generation Students Group and could speak safely. A cyber café owned by an activist in Yangon also served as a meeting place. Many of the informants talked about meeting in teashops, and Fink (2009) has also emphasized the importance of teashops for networking among activists. In 1988, a tea shop in Hakha owned by university graduates was a key place for people to meet and plan the 8-8-88 events. A man who grew up in Kalembo and later moved to Yangon said he used to talk about politics, especially about communism, in tea shops and bars. There were only a few shops where they could talk and they had to look behind their backs when discussing politics. “Only men go to talk in tea shops and liquor shops,” he told me. A former student in Yangon said that when he was in college he was not active in politics but did talk a lot about politics with friends, in the university canteen. “We had to be careful, and used indirect words, words that had different meanings for us so that if others heard they wouldn’t understand.” He said that while he attended the university,

military intelligence agents were also enrolled as students, and they watched him. “It was the only time I was watched by MI.” Students also met at each other’s residences.

The activities of Chin student activists had specific geographies. In the 1970s Chin student activists participated in protests in Yangon and Mandalay. In 1988 they led demonstrations in cities and towns but there were few demonstrations in villages. At the time of the Saffron Revolution there was no activity in Chin State: one former student activist at Kale University explained, “There is no way to be [politically] active in Chin State... If they kill people in Hakha, it won’t change the country. Chin leaders know that. So there is no movement in Chin state.” In Kalembo, he said, “it is more difficult to do something but we can be more effective. The officers there are high ranking. The government in Chin State is controlled by the government in Sagaing [Division].” Aside from these big events, much of the political activity of university students happened on campus.

Differences in how people interacted with student networks or were affected by them related to mobility, which brought people in and out of contact with them. One person who was a leader of the Hakha sub-group of the CLCC at Yangon University in the 1980s, for example, moved to another state and for two years did not have any contact with people there. His focus was business and he did not have any involvement in political activities. However, when he later returned to Hakha and got a government job there, he regained contact with former university students and became a leading activist. Another former activist from Hakha, who helped lead the 1988 uprising there, later went to theological college in India. There he was no longer in contact with people involved in political activity and from that time was not politically active.

People’s mobility also determined which university they could attend, which

significantly influenced their political participation. The CLCCs in Yangon were generally more active than those elsewhere, students and graduates there had links with activists in the city, and Chin students studying in Yangon often had greater opportunities to participate in political activity. But, in general, Chin students from Chin State or Kalembo were expected to study instead at Mandalay University and later Kale College/University, though there were certain times when they were allowed to study in Yangon. Students studying particular subjects, such as law, medicine and economics, were also allowed to do attend universities in Yangon. A number of informants moved to Yangon with their parents and were then able to attend universities there. One informant whose father was a government worker, for example, was permitted to go to college in Yangon because he had moved there with his family. He became involved in activist student networks there and participated in the Saffron Revolution.

Geography played a role in how student networks operated in other, often fairly specific, ways as well. Middle and high school students in towns who were in school at the time of the 1988 uprising were easily mobilized into the demonstrations. An informant who was in sixth grade in Hakha at the time said that she participated in the protests there. “Everyone did. We were in school. The leaders called us. The teachers couldn’t control us.” University student housing arrangements mattered for mobilization. A Kale College student from the 1990s noted that “in Kale college there was a female hostel and a male hostel. All the female students stayed together, and all the male students stayed together. So even if there were no organizations, it was very easy to communicate.” Over the years, demonstrations often started on campus and were initiated by students who were living on

campus. For example, a student at Mandalay University at the time of the 1987 demonstrations recalled that seniors living outside the city, on campus, were the first to demonstrate. First and second year students rented private dormitories in the center of the city and seniors marched by, saying, “come on, everyone join.” A woman who was in Mandalay University at the time of the 1996 demonstration there was living in a women’s hostel that was separate from the campus where the protests took place. On the day of the protests she heard about them – “40 or 50 people in the hostel were talking about them” – but she did not see them or participate in them.

The government apparently paid attention to the geography of student protest. Fink (2009:86) writes: “Regular university courses reopened in 2000, but most were no longer held on their former campuses in Rangoon. Instead, new campuses had been built in satellite towns outside city. Most importantly, from a political point of view, students could not easily organize demonstrations anymore, because campuses were scattered and the access roads into Rangoon could be easily blocked.” A former student at Dagon University in Yangon told me, “Dagon University is far from the city and the two roads leading to the city cross bridges. The bridges can be easily controlled so it is very difficult for students to go from the university into Rangoon to protest. The Dagon campus was set up to keep students from protesting.” This is a good example of organizing space.

2. Armed resistance

The Chin National Front (CNF), an armed resistance force established in 1988 (Human Rights Watch, 2009), has been a dominant force in Chin politics – albeit a controversial one. Among Lai speakers in Chin State CNF members were commonly called *Lai ralkap* (Chin

soldiers). CNF's history is intricately related to the students' and former students' participation in the 1988 uprising, as leaders of the uprising and people in their networks played a leading role in building up CNF initially (Lewa, 1998) and continue to lead it today. There is great heterogeneity among Chin in terms of their contact and interaction with, and recruitment into, CNF. I will give a brief history of CNF, and then look at how people joined CNF or came to support it in other ways.

Overview of CNF: Other ethnic groups had mounted sustained armed campaigns for years prior to 1988; the Karen had done so since 1948 (Charney, 2009; Fink, 2009; Smith, 1999). However, while there were some earlier intermittent insurgent events by Chin groups (especially by the Chin National Organization starting in 1964 and Chin Democratic Party in 1977) (Vumson, 1986) there was essentially no Chin military activity in the period leading up to 1988. A number of insurgent organizations did, however, continue to exist (Scherrer, 1995). The border with India and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) played an important role in the efforts of the Chin National Organization and a number of other Chin insurgent groups, as it would also for CNF – by way of support from these other countries, links with other armed groups operating there, and bases.

CNF was founded in Mizoram (northeast India) in March 1988 by a 58 year old Falam man named Tial Khal. He had been involved with the Mizo National Front, an insurgent group engaged in fighting primarily with the Indian government, before it signed a peace agreement and Mizoram State was established in northeast India. Following the 1988 uprising and coup, CNF grew quickly. The Indian government provided some money to CNF (BurmaNet News, 1995) and CNF also raised funds from people living in Mizoram. Students

and other young Chin involved in the 1988 uprising soon joined. They included a group calling themselves the Burmese Democratic Front (BDF) based in a refugee camp near the town of Champhai in Mizoram (see the map in Figure 3) who were receiving rations from the Indian government as refugees (Lalremruata, 2012; Lintner, 1990). When most of the Chin decided to join CNF, Burmans left the camp. In early 1989 CNF members went to Kachin State for training with the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) for a period of two years (Lian, 2011; Lintner, 1990; Scherrer, 1995). While they were away, CNF leadership in Mizoram was reorganized with No Thang Kap (who had arranged the training with KIO, and who was also Falam) president and the head of Champhai camp (Sang Hlun) and Tial Khal as vice presidents. In December 1989 CNF opened a base in the border region in Bangladesh though Champhai camp continued to serve as a recruitment center.

One former CNF soldier described life at the base in Bangladesh. “This was our first time in that environment... I can’t express how difficult it was. We didn’t have any money, we had nothing to eat. Half of us were sick, but we had to find food for them. We went inside Burma and collected rice. Each person carried a 30-40 pound bag of rice back to Bangladesh. Every week we did that. We went inside, collected rice, and carried it back. We also planted some food in Bangladesh. We didn’t have any medicine.” They had very few weapons. No Thang Kap, president of CNF at the time, is quoted saying, “This way there's no way we can increase the number of our freedom fighters, because we have to feed them... There will come a time when we could have a sufficient enough arms from somewhere, and then we could slowly build up” (Scherrer, 1995). CNF trips into Myanmar focused on acquiring supplies. Over time, CNF acquired weapons through ambushes and deals with other insurgent groups based in the border region, and also collected taxes in Chin State and on

border trade (Scherrer, 1995; Human Rights Watch, 2009).

In 1992 a split occurred in CNF (Scherrer, 1995; Human Rights Watch, 2009), No Thang Kap was expelled, and Falam members left and became refugees in New Delhi. CNF soon had serious conflicts with Zomi (Chin) and Zomi political leaders refused to let CNF operate in northern Chin State. In 1994 and 1995 a joint operation between the Indian and Myanmar governments led to the closing of Champhai camp and killing of Sang Hlun in the custody of the Indian military (BurmaNet News, 1995). The Indian government also shut down CNF's headquarters, which had been moved to a site within Indian territory known as Mount Victoria.

CNF never had many forces or many resources and never had a liberated area (Euro Burma Office, 2013; Scherrer, 1995). Its strategy was essentially to make it impossible for the Myanmar government to govern Chin State, and ambushes and assassinations were important tactics (Lewa, 1998; Scherrer, 1995). CNF was one of the few ethnic nationality armies not to enter a ceasefire agreement with the Myanmar government (NCGUB, 2007; Charney, 2009; Fink, 2009; Minahan, 2002), until 2012 (Chinland Guardian, 2012a). CNF has now been allowed to establish offices inside Chin State (Chinland Guardian, 2012b).

Recruitment into CNF: In general, it appears that networks, ethnic identification, and family considerations mattered more to recruitment into CNF than did specific grievances or identification with armed resistance as a strategy. Among the informants were several who felt aggrieved but did not have networks to mobilize them into CNF or whose families kept them from joining. Probably in large part because of the important role of networks, recruitment into CNF varied considerably between nearby villages. Some villages had no

members of CNF and others had many (often including people who had joined during the initial period).

Following the 1988 uprising and coup there were a large number of Chin who might have been willing to join an armed insurgent group but only a small number ended up in CNF. Networks among students and graduates were important for initial recruitment into CNF and many of those who joined during the early phase were students and graduates from towns and cities. For example, Sang Hlun, who had been involved in the 1988 uprising (CNF, 1995), played a central role in mobilizing people from Hakha and Thantlang towns to go to Champhai and eventually join CNF. In mid-October 1988, after the government had already announced its plans for elections and some parties had already registered, he organized one meeting in each of these towns in which he encouraged participants (mostly student and former student leaders) to go with him to Champhai. Most did go with him. One person who went from Hakha estimated that there were about 17 people in the meeting there. He had never been to India but was very eager to go. “We were very active at that time,” he said. The people going were his friends, including one of his two best friends. But, he said, “I wanted to go. I wasn’t just following others.”

Once in Champhai the group sent people back to Myanmar to invite others, and they targeted specific people. Many of the Chin leaders of the 1988 uprising were still in Myanmar. One person explained that “a lot of Chin students hadn’t gone to India since the Burmese government threatened to arrest them [if they tried to go].” Two people from the Champhai group went to Hakha and Thantlang, with lists of people to invite that included former district council members. They met political leaders in Hakha and student leaders in Thantlang, and the leaders in Thantlang then called a meeting. The two also went to some

villages in the Zophei area and met some people who later mobilized others to go to Champhai. The two were supposed to go to Matupi Township in southern Chin State but did not go. Another team was supposed to mobilize people in Falam, Tedim, and Kalembo but they were arrested and tortured. No one from the Champhai group went to Mindat, Kanpalet, or Paletwa townships in southern Chin State, but one person went to Yangon to invite people there. The result was that many of the leaders of the 1988 uprising (from parts of Chin State) went to Champhai at this time, as did other people in their networks such as university students who lived in villages where there had been no uprising. Some Burmans also went to the Champhai camp, including one woman – the only woman to go.

The group in the Champhai camp called themselves the Burma Democratic Front (BDF) (CNF, 1995). Sang Hlun was elected head of the camp before the Burmans arrived and when they did they too joined BDF. CNF leaders from Aizawl came to negotiate with leaders in the camp to get them to join CNF. An informant who was in the camp at the time told me, “We were looking for someone to support the resistance... We had meetings every Saturday night and Monday morning. We discussed the political situation. And we talked about how we can find supporters – any way to create an armed force... Everyone wanted to join an armed force.” And when the leaders agreed to join CNF, most of the others did as well. The people from Champhai camp who joined CNF at this time included a number of people who would become important leaders of CNF. Some people, however, went back to Myanmar without joining CNF as others prepared to go to Kachin State for training.

Other young people, mostly from the southern townships, had gone to Saiha (a town in southern Mizoram, closer to those townships – see Figure 3) independently of Sang Hlun,

and there they also received rations from the Indian government. A number of them also joined CNF though others returned to Myanmar without joining. A large number of people went to Mizoram on their own, but many stayed there or came back to Myanmar without being mobilized into CNF. One person, for example, told me that he went to Mizoram before the 1988 uprising had ended but went back to Hakha in November without knowing the Champhai camp had been opened. "Otherwise, I would have gone there and not returned to Burma," he said. Others stayed inside Myanmar not knowing where to go. One person who had participated actively in the uprising in Thantlang as a high school student said, "Only university students went to India... We were not informed where to go."

In the early period CNF also recruited many people who were already living in Mizoram. One person who had been involved in the 1988 uprising in Thantlang went to live with relatives in a village in Mizoram in 1989. He had heard that he would be arrested if he stayed in Thantlang, plus he was interested in earning some money and had nothing to do. I asked if he knew about CNF in Mizoram when he left Thantlang. "I kind of knew, but not really. I didn't know where they were." He knew their intention was to fight the government but had no interest in joining. While he was living in the village in Mizoram he did not hear anything about CNF until a CNF organizer came to the village later that year to recruit people. He decided to join. There were a number of other Chin from Myanmar who had been living in the village for much longer than he had, and several of them also joined at the same time. Another person who had gone to Mizoram in the 1970s to work joined CNF the following year (1990), at Champhai camp. When he joined he invited two Chin who had defected from the Myanmar army and were living in Mizoram to join with him. After an initial period, however, CNF no longer recruited since they could not provide supplies for

their members.

When Sang Hlun mobilized people to go to India he apparently had the intention of forming an armed resistance group there, but people who went with him said he did not tell them so explicitly. Still, they more or less expected to do just that and seemed comfortable with that prospect. One person who went with him said that at the time of the meeting with him in Chin State he assumed that the reason for going to India was to fight the Myanmar government, “because it had killed a lot of students in Rangoon, our friends.” Personally, he wanted to fight. Another who went said, “At that time we didn’t have a plan for arms.” He didn’t know if he was going to join armed group. “If I knew I might also have gone. But I didn’t think about armed struggle at that time.” Once he was in Champhai, he said, he agreed with the idea of armed struggle. “But I knew this would be a long journey... This is for a long time.” Someone who was recruited in Mizoram said the recruiter talked about the intention of CNF to fight the Burmese Government. “At that time I was excited about the way he told me. The way the government ruled the country, how they treat the Chin people, how poor the Chin people are, how we need to fight. I was excited. I really wanted to go.”

I was not able to get a clear picture of how people were recruited into CNF other than through mobilization by Sang Hlun and mobilization in Mizoram by CNF recruiters. Especially after the split in CNF in 1992, people from villages in Chin State who were not university students or former students joined CNF directly. People already living in Mizoram were also recruited. People’s motivations for joining, recruitment networks, and selection criteria changed over time but I am unable to say anything conclusive about them.

In addition to networks, people’s family situations were also important in determining

whether or not people joined CNF. One person who lived in Champhai camp when it first opened said that his father-in-law called him to come back to Myanmar, but he refused. One month later, when he learned that his wife was pregnant, he decided to return. He told me that when CNF was organizing people to go to Kachin State, “most married people decided to go back to Burma.” A former CNF soldier told me that his parents came to Mizoram and asked him to quit CNF and go to college. His mother was crying. She was so concerned that she couldn’t sleep at night. “For me,” he said, “I didn’t want to quit, but my mother requested.” He thought, “I need to leave CNF.” And he left. An activist who participated in the Saffron Revolution in Kalembo said that he never thought about joining CNF because he was the oldest son and had to take care of his parents.

Within these general patterns of participation in or support for CNF, experiences varied greatly between individuals. Some of this variation related to mobility. In October 1988, for example, one informant who lived in a village in the Zophei area was in Thantlang visiting someone to discuss the political situation when Sang Hlun came to town to hold a meeting to mobilize people to go to Mizoram. Sang Hlun and another student leader, who was the informant’s friend, happened to visit the same person at the same time and invited the informant to the meeting. He participated in the meeting and ended up going to Mizoram with Sang Hlun and the group. Had he not been in Thantlang that day, or had they not met up, he likely would not have gone to Mizoram at that time, though because of his involvement in the student networks he might have been mobilized later. For other people, going to Mizoram for reasons unrelated to CNF put them in places where they could be recruited by CNF; how and when people went to Mizoram, and where in Mizoram they went, affected the potential for recruitment.

Supporting CNF in other ways: Joining CNF was not the only way people participated in it. For example, people also contributed food and money. While in some cases this was in the form of taxes (Human Rights Watch, 2009), which led to resentment, in other cases it was voluntary. People also provided information (sometimes going to the border to meet CNF soldiers) and some let CNF soldiers sleep at their homes. In villages, providing support to CNF seems to have been the most significant form of political activity in which people engaged. A man from a village in the Zophei area told me that sometimes his friends in CNF came to his village at night; other CNF soldiers whom he knew from meeting them in Mizoram also came to his house. They spent the night at his house. He said he was not afraid to let them do so: “There weren’t any spies in the village.” He was supportive of CNF ever since a CNF leader came to the village and gave a talk about CNF. Some people in towns also provided support to CNF. For example, a political party activist in Thantlang said that he used to help CNF and give them intelligence reports. They came to town frequently, he said, ate and slept at his house, and campaigned secretly. “The police didn’t know they came,” he said. A Kale University student who participated in the Saffron Revolution said that he used to give information to CNF. “Other students asked me, ‘aren’t you scared?’ I said, ‘yes, but I have to do it.’ I told them about CNF, this is the only one in Chinland.” Providing support of any kind to CNF could be extremely risky and people were tortured or killed for suspected support to CNF (NCGUB, 2007; Human Rights Watch, 2009).

Levels of contact with CNF varied greatly and influenced the degree to which people supported CNF. In any given village, certain people had more contact than others. For example, one informant who grew up in a village in Hakha Township said that his father was

the president of the community committee and collected money from villagers for food for CNF soldiers. CNF soldiers came to his house secretly and when he was young he used to meet them. “I really liked their AK-47s and uniforms,” he said, “and I would have liked to hold their guns if I had been allowed to.” A woman from a village in the Zophei area said that when CNF soldiers came to her village to collect food she was aware that they came but did not go to see them. Only some people, mostly men, she thinks, were invited to go meet them. A woman from another village in the Zophei area said that CNF soldiers came to her village often, but she only saw them one time, at a meeting in the village with CNF soldiers. Even then, she made tea for the participants so did not participate fully in the meeting.

CNF soldiers were based across the border in India and Bangladesh and visited certain areas in Chin State more than others. Villages nearer to CNF commands were generally visited more often, as were villages on key routes to other villages. The location of government military bases was also important, so, for example, CNF could not visit the one village in the Zophei area with a permanent military base as much as other villages. Villages from which people had joined CNF tended to be visited more often than others. CNF soldiers rarely visited villages in northern Chin State (Tedin and Tonzang Townships) where, in general, they had little support.

In addition to meeting CNF soldiers when they visited villages or towns, some people also met them deliberately in Mizoram or at the border or met them when they traveled to Mizoram for other reasons. A man from a village in the Zophei area said, “The border is close” – just a two days’ walk from his village. After he graduated from high school he went there often, splitting his time between Mizoram and his village. When in Mizoram, he visited CNF camps and met friends who were in CNF. At one of the camps, he once gave CNF

members some goods that he had bought for them. Other informants, however, talked about going to Mizoram and never meeting CNF except at the border crossing.

People's perceptions of CNF were also important. Perceptions were apparently largely influenced by positive personal relations with CNF members on the one hand and unhappiness at paying taxes, experiencing misbehavior of CNF soldiers (Chinland Guardian, 2003), or suffering government repression as a result of CNF on the other. Where people did not have direct contact, they might have had impressions (positive or negative) or might not have even have heard of CNF. Someone who grew up in Kalembo in the 1990s said of CNF, "I admired them when I was a kid." He thought he would join the army, learn military tactics, and then join CNF. But when he got older his impression of CNF turned negative and he came to perceive CNF as causing trouble for the Chin people. A man who went to high school in Kalembo in the 1990s said that he never heard about CNF when he was in Kalembo, but later when living in Yangon he heard about Chin soldiers (*Lai ralkap*) from some people from Chin State who were involved with CNF.

Finally, there was an element of contingency in people's support for CNF, sometimes linked to their mobility. For example, one woman from Kalembo who otherwise had no involvement in politics or CNF happened to be in a village near one of CNF's commands when a CNF soldier was killed nearby. She was talked into taking a suitcase of the dead CNF soldier's belongings and a note from the CNF commander back to Kalembo to give to his parents.

3. Party politics

Studies of political participation in democracies often focus on participation in elections, especially voting behavior. (See Norris (2007) for a review.) However, during the period covered by this project, multi-party elections were held just one time, in 1990 (Charney, 2009; Fink, 2009). The latest previous multi-party elections were in 1960 (Charney, 2009; Fink, 2009), and the next were in 2010 (ALTSEAN-Burma, 2011).

Participation in the BSPP: During the Ne Win period, the only legal party was the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP), in which many Chin participated – including in leadership positions at township and state levels. One person who later joined CNF said that he and many other people from his village joined the BSPP during this time. “There was no choice outside the party... No matter how educated you are, outside of the party you can’t do anything. You can only do something if you are in the party.” A man who became a leader of the 1988 uprising in Hakha said, “Before 1988, for people who wanted to become a political leader the only way to do so was to join the party... It was impossible to work apart from the party.” He participated in the socialist youth program and was selected for a national training. “Many people who participated in this training later turned against the government in 1988,” he said. One informant described the party structure: in the town there was a five member party unit for the district (township), elected by all the party members in the district. Starting in 1974, when the district councils were set up, the party committee nominated the district council. The councils continued to function up until the coup in September 1988, when they were dissolved. Some people who had been council members joined the CNF, some joined opposition parties, and some joined the National Unity Party (NUP), which was basically a reconstitution of BSPP (Charney, 2009; Sakhong, 2010; Silverstein, 1990).

Participation in campaigns for the 1990 elections: Shortly after the military coup in 1988, elections were announced and parties were allowed to register (Charney, 2009; Fink, 2009). Fifty-five candidates from eight parties contested the elections in Chin State: the National League for Democracy (NLD), NUP, Chin National League for Democracy (CNLD), Di Nyein, Mara People' Party (MPP), Democratic Labor Party (DLP), Myo Khaw Khami National Unity Party, and Zomi National Congress (ZNC) (Myanmar Ahlin Aung Than, 1992). The parties set up offices in the townships, recruited members, mobilized support, and eventually nominated candidates. Two independent candidates also ran; one was Lian Uk from Aibur village in the Zophei area, a leader from CNLD who failed to get the party's nomination, and the other was Dr. Hmuh Thang from Cawngthia village in the Zophei area, a leader from NLD who failed to get that party's nomination (Myanmar Ahlin Aung Than, 1992). U Tin Oo, vice chairman of NLD, visited Chin State in March 1989. Though other writers have described the May 1990 elections free but the election campaign period as unfree (Charney, 2009; Fink, 2009), people I talked to described the entire process as free. In Chin State, NLD won 4 seats, NUP won 1 seat, CNLD won 3 seats, MPP won one seat, ZNC won two seats and the independent candidates won two others (Myanmar Ahlin Aung Than, 1992). In Kalembo, NLD won both seats.

People joined political parties or became involved with political campaigns for a variety of different reasons. People in senior positions in parties had generally been living in towns and cities though large numbers of people in villages joined parties too. Some who participated were already politically active, such as activists already mobilized during the 1988 uprising. One informant had been involved with the Chin National Organization's

short-lived insurgency in the early 1960s and then became a local leader in the BSPP and a district council member. He became a party activist with one of the opposition parties that contested the 1990 elections. He told me that other people involved with the CNO insurgency also joined opposition political parties at the time of the 1990 elections. As I mentioned above, other senior leaders in the BSPP and former council members under Ne Win also became involved in political parties like CNLD and NLD. For people who had played active roles in the 1988 uprising, one factor motivating them to join political parties was that the parties provided political protection (Fink, 2009). For example, one person who played a leading role locally in NLD said, “The party served as my shield.”

Some people who had played leading roles in the 1988 uprising and went to Mizoram returned without joining CNF and were involved in political campaigns. One such person explained that when he returned to his town in Chin State political parties had already formed. He did not want to join a party but he was still interested in the struggle for democracy. He was harassed by the military and taken in for questioning. He became involved in a campaign for some time but did not actually join a party. “Most young people didn’t join parties, I don’t know why. Young people thought parties are for older people.” He said he never considered joining a political party. “Party activities are for politicians. We felt we were not politicians.” Others were in Mizoram, involved with CNF or otherwise, and did not participate in campaigns.

An informant who was involved with NLD said, “My father was anti-dictatorship before I was born... So I had an anti-dictatorship mind since childhood.” His whole family was involved in the 1988 uprising and his older brother became a leader. After the coup in September 1988 he decided to continue to fight for democracy, and chose NLD. From the

beginning, he said, he did not believe in armed resistance, but he did not blame those who took up arms. He did not think that armed resistance could stop the junta. “Almost all Burmese people believed the junta’s announcement that they would hold elections and hand over power. That’s why they made their political campaigns. They trusted General Saw Maung’s speech. But, they didn’t keep their promise.” Another informant said he did not believe that the government would keep its promise but assisted with a campaign nonetheless.

People had diverse reasons for supporting different parties. Fink (2009:61) writes of ethnic minorities, “Some thought it was best to join the NLD, because the NLD had a chance of winning the election and effecting change through legislation. Others chose to support ethnic-based parties that might succeed only in minority regions, but offered more space for voicing demands for ethnic cultural and political right.” One person from Kalembo said that he joined NLD because he trusted Aung San Suu Kyi and her leadership. He knew that NLD was the largest and strongest party and “it could organize everyone.” Someone from a village in the Zophei area said that people in his village supported NLD. “Chin League [CNLD] is a Chin party, NLD is a central party. People supported NLD because they liked [Aung San] Suu Kyi. Plus Chin League was too small, NLD was big.” He was too young to join a party, but his father and four or five of his friends joined NLD. He recalled his father saying, “NLD will be first. If people vote for NLD, Burma will be good. If people don’t vote for NLD, Burma won’t be good.” On the other hand, a man from Hakha town said, “We thought we need to have a national party, and just a few people supported NLD.” Everyone liked Aung San Suu Kyi, he said. They thought she could lead the country and bring about democracy.

But “they didn’t support NLD in Chin State.” Ethnic identity was also important. Both ZNC and MPP were based on ethnic groups (Zomi and Mara) and CNLD didn’t even field candidates in the Zomi areas (Tedin and Tonzang townships).

In addition to joining parties, many people participated in political meetings organized by the parties. Those living in towns had more opportunities to participate but there were also meetings in villages. Several informants described these meetings as being influential for their political development. One person who was in high school in Thantlang at the time of the campaign said, “I was a very curious child in 1990. I went to a lot of meetings and political speeches. I wanted to learn what the leaders were saying. I wanted to learn more about politics.” An informant who was in middle school in Kalemmyo at the time of the campaign said he knew one person who was a youth leader with NLD, a student from Yangon University. “When he came back he brought brochures from Rangoon about democracy and NLD, about what is human rights, what is political, what is communist, what is socialist, and passed them to his friends. So I received a lot of flyers.”

Interaction with NLD after 1990: SLORC did not recognize the results of the election, and instead harassed the winning parties and candidates and disqualified them. This led to some of the elected parliamentarians leaving the country and others being arrested (Charney, 2009; Fink, 2009). Three elected Chin MPs (Lian Uk, Dr. Zahleithang, and Thanglianpau) left the country and ended up in the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), or government in exile, based in Washington, D.C. (Scherrer, 1995). Other elected MPs stayed inside Myanmar. CNLD, ZNC, and MPP were deregistered by the government but continued to operate outside the country. NLD was never made illegal (Charney, 2009; Fink, 2009) and continued to maintain offices in townships of Chin State

and Kalemmyo. In Kalemmyo, an office was maintained by the elected NLD MP, Do Thawnga, but he was arrested in 1996 and imprisoned for seven years (Thawnga, n.d.).

Contact with NLD members during the 1990s and 2000s was important to some people's political participation, and the degree to which this was true depended in part on where people lived. Interactions with NLD were most important for people living in Yangon or in Kalemmyo, though only some had these contacts. A man who went to college in Yangon in the early 2000s said he had friends in NLD, and they went to tea shops together. Someone else who was in Yangon at the same time had had a lot of contact with NLD while she lived in Hakha, but when she was in Yangon she did not have any contact. An informant who was active in the Saffron Revolution as a student in Kale University said that he participated in NLD activities in Kalemmyo, such as their secret lectures. "NLD knew me because it was their job to know the student leaders... When there were political changes, most of the time it was university students and monks who led things. Politicians had to know who the student leaders are, and know whenever there are changes in the organization." He said that student leaders were in contact with NLD members as they planned the Saffron Revolution demonstrations in Kalemmyo. On the other hand, a student leader in Kale College in the 1990s said that when he was in Kalemmyo he did not know any NLD members. Though there were NLD offices in towns in Chin State, none of the informants from those towns mentioned being influenced by NLD in the period after the 1990 elections. One person from Thantlang who became a university student leader said that he met NLD members in town, but those interactions did not have much effect on him. He had discussions with them, but, he said, "Personally, I didn't get big ideas from NLD. They weren't politically motivated, not real

leaders or good in politics. They were hoping for future positions.” A university student leader at Kale University in the 2000s, from Hakha, said that when he was young he did not know NLD or any NLD members and didn’t have any relatives or friends in NLD. “NLD members were older. I never talked with them, and never participated in their meetings.”

There were NLD members in villages but apparently not much party activity. One man from a village in the Zophei area said that there were about ten NLD members in his village, and the party leader used to go to meetings, but the party did not do anything in the village. I did not get any sense of whether, as a group of people interested in politics, NLD members were any more politically active than other villagers. In general, informants from villages said they had little or no knowledge of NLD while they were living there, though male informants were more aware of NLD than were female informants.

However, informants from villages had been familiar with Aung San Suu Kyi and while it did not mean identification with NLD it appears that she was very popular in the villages over the years. In 2003 she visited Hakha and the visit was inspirational to many.¹⁸ People who lived in Hakha and villages along her route turned out to see her and some people from villages also went to Hakha to see her. An informant who lived in Hakha at the time of her visit recalled that her speech was at 12 PM on Sunday, and because people wanted to hear her speak some churches did not have services that day. A woman from the Zophei area who was living in Hakha said that she was there, on the side of the road, to see Aung San Suu Kyi. “There were lots of people... I was very happy... In the Chin Hills, soldiers made us afraid. But when we saw her, we weren’t afraid.”

¹⁸ Aung San Suu Kyi also visited Matupi at the same time and ten people were reported targeted for arrest for helping to prepare for her visit (CHRO, 2003).

4. Christian identity and the Church

Christianity is perhaps one of the most central aspects of Chin identity, and it is therefore not surprising that it is important to Chin political participation. Ling and Mang (2004) write that 90% of Chin are Christian. American missionaries began working among Chin in the lowlands outside of the Chin Hills in 1888 and in the Chin Hills in 1899; the first mission in Chin state was in Hakha. Christianity spread through both foreign and Chin mission work (Sakhong 2003; Johnson, 1988; Khai, 1999). Chins for Christ in One Century (CCOC), an indigenous Chin movement launched by the Zomi Baptist Convention (an umbrella group of Chin churches) in 1983 during the Ne Win period, contributed significantly (Fink, 2009; Sakhong, 2010). In some ways similar to the case of student activism, Christianity plays a role in political participation both through Christian identity and church-based networking.

Christian identity: Christian and Chin identities are both associated with being persecuted and informants often referred to persecution because of being Chin and being Christian in the same breath. Religious persecution persisted over the years, and persecution under SLORC and SPDC has been well documented (NCGUB, 2007; Lewa, 1998; Ling & Mang, 2004). Religious persecution documented by Ling and Mang (2004) included the destruction of crosses, construction of Buddhist temples in their place and forced contribution to that construction; prohibition of building of new churches; disruption of worship; abduction, torture and killing of pastors, evangelists, and missionaries; coerced conversion to Buddhism; and discrimination against Chin in giving promotions. This last point came up several times in interviews. One person said that her father was a police

sergeant and served the police force until he retired. “If he was Burman, he would have been a one-star or two-star officer.” But “because we are Chin, Christian, he can’t get promoted.” Another whose father was a policeman said that when he was in seventh or eighth grade he understood that his father, who was a graduate of a police academy, could not get promoted “because he was Chin and Christian.”

Christian identity and religious belief were important to activism. Much political activity was aimed at religious ends and many people’s initial forays into activism were related to Christianity (sometimes with no apparent secular aims) and happened in the context of youth groups associated with churches. Particularly common were efforts to stop the sale of alcohol. For example, the Thantlang Baptist Church bought the license for selling alcohol in Thantlang so that no one could sell alcohol, though police ended up selling licenses to others anyway. One person who was active in the Saffron Revolution in Kale University said that his first act of activism, carried out as a youth group leader in his village in the Zophei area before he went to university, was to try to get a policeman who was selling alcohol in his village transferred. The effort was unsuccessful. Unofficial village committees (elected by villagers and not affiliated with any church), which exist in many villages, sometimes enacted their own rules which often included prohibitions on drinking alcohol in the village. A former CNF member was a bit embarrassed to say that when he went to one village, and drank with the former village head, villagers said, “Why are you drinking? You are violating our by-laws.” And he had to pay a fine. “Villagers punished many CNA officers,” he said. “They also tried to punish the Burmese army.”

Destruction of crosses and prohibitions against building churches were other common targets of activism. One informant who became a student activist said that the first step in his

political career happened when he was in middle school in Kalembo, when he led the Chin Youth Organization in helping a village rebuild a church that soldiers had torn down. The group went to try to rebuild the church and blocked soldiers from entering the area. But “the next day there were too many soldiers and we couldn’t even get in,” and the soldiers destroyed the church again. The Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) documented a protest over the destruction of a cross in Thantlang town. On January 6, 1999, “the whole town staged a silent protest by closing down their businesses and refusing to go to work, and by observing a 24-hour fast and prayer vigil in their local churches and homes. Fearing the news of protest might spread to other towns, the authorities shut down telephone connections of Thantlang and arrested 20 more Church leaders. Nevertheless, on January 9, Churches in the Chin State capital, Hakha, joined the protest... ” (Ling & Mang, 2004:11).

Missionaries have been particularly activist. While mission work in Chin villages seems to have been tolerated, in Burman and other areas it was not and several informants described confrontations with authorities during the course of mission work. One Chin missionary talked about doing mission work in Burman Buddhist communities near Yangon. Authorities asked him who gave him permission to do his work. He said, “I have no secular permission. God gives me permission.” He told them that the socialist government had ruined education in the country and he was providing education to children who could not go to government schools. In the end, he said, they did not know what to say and left him alone. A woman from Kalembo said, when I asked if she felt scared doing her mission work, “I’m human. I’m scared, too. But God will help me.” At one point the village chief in the village where she was working gave her a letter telling her to stop her work in the village. She

refused to leave and told the village chief that if he wanted her to stop he would have to tell the church for which she worked.

Despite cases in which people resisted, there were many other cases in which people did not. A man from Hakha explained, “If people are forbidden to build a church, they pay off the military and build it. It isn’t that they just go ahead and build it in defiance.” A man from a village in the Zophei area described a case in which soldiers made villagers take down a church bell. The villagers did not dare do anything. When the mobile battalion moved to another state, they put the bell back up. In another case he described, from the same village, soldiers destroyed a cross that villagers put up. “The villagers didn’t say anything, thinking it was better not to say anything than to go to jail. They never put the cross back up.”

Because of religious persecution it seemed to me that everyday Christian practice might have constituted a form of political action, but people appear not to have felt this to be the case. On a larger scale, daily worship clearly is political as it defies the government’s efforts to unify the country under the Buddhist religion. But when I asked about their personal experiences, informants told me that in the course of regular worship they had not felt threatened or felt that what their worship was an act of defiance.

Christian identity and belief were also at work in some activism on secular themes. For example, a number of people mentioned praying for CNF. A former CNF member told me that pastors from Chin State, mostly Evangelists, went to Mizoram to pray for CNF and organized religious activities with them. “There were only a few, since they were afraid. They had to come secretly because they could get in a lot of trouble.” One person who helped lead the Saffron Revolution in Kalembo said that he was motivated to act in part to show that Christians could help their people. “We call ourselves Christian but never do anything for the

people,” he said. Immediately thereafter he said he also wanted to make history for Chin university students. One person who was involved in the 1988 uprising in Hakha said that some people depended on their faith during the 1988 events. “They prayed a lot... I prayed many times.” But overall he thinks that for most people the main motivators were social and political, not religious.

One of the most significant cases of Christianity-based secular activism involved a man named Kio Luai, who was in the Tatmadaw (government army) and became an Evangelist. One of the informants explained: “He preached that the Chin were one of the lost tribes of Israel. He preached to villagers... At that time no one dared to oppose the government – but Kio Luai did. Many people joined him... His people occupied Re Zua police camp in 1990. Five people surrounded the camp and told them, “We are 300 people, all around you”... The soldiers surrendered and gave all their weapons... Ultimately Kio Luai surrendered to the Burmese government.”

Christian identity could also keep people from acting, especially on secular issues and especially for church leaders or those were most devout. There is a long-standing debate among Chin over the role of the Church, and of pastors, in politics (Fink, 2009). A former Kale University student activist who participated in the Saffron Revolution there told me, “They say, ‘If you are a pastor you shouldn’t do politics.’ I can’t accept that pastors can’t be involved in politics. In Buddhism, monks, who are like their pastors, fight for democracy. They are Buddhists, but they are heroes for the people. We are Christians, we say we have more sincerity, but we do nothing. I can’t say that that is right.” Pastors, however, appear to have had some freedom to act though officially they were not allowed to get involved in

politics. An informant from Hakha, who lived there until the late 2000s, said that “only religious leaders have a little chance to oppose the government. The government knows they are popular so doesn’t want to directly oppose them. So pastors have some rights. Only they can talk to the authorities, write letters to the authorities.” A man who worked as a missionary based in Yangon told me, “The government doesn’t dare do anything to missionaries.” Many of those who were most devout seem to have felt that they should not think about politics, though there were differences between denominations. Two of the informants were particularly devout. One said several times, “I was not interested in politics, only in religion.” The other said, “I worked in religion, I didn’t know anything about politics. I only knew about religion and pastors.”

While Christian identity was important for all of the activists and non-activists I spoke with, there were times when activists acted together with Buddhist monks. This was especially true during the Saffron Revolution, in which overall monks played the most visible role. Former student leaders at Kale University described working together with Buddhist monks to organize the Saffron Revolution demonstrations in Kalembo. An informant who was in Yangon at that time recalled walking with other demonstrators, holding hands to protect the monks. Then, “on September 28th, a lot of people gathered in the streets, but they couldn’t march at all. On every route there were soldiers and police. They blocked streets... People gathered in the streets. One of the monks was still preaching and they prayed like Buddhists. Then, even when they gathered to pray, the monk spoke about why they were marching. Then police came. Soldiers were trying to find where people gathered; they told people not to gather. And they tried to catch us and shoot at us. So we ran again.”

Church-based networking: Along with identity, networking is the second area

where Christianity was influential for political participation, and identity and networking were closely linked. Of particular importance was participation in church-based civil society groups such as the youth groups that I have already mentioned. Village-wide youth fellowships were also set up to include youth from all the churches in the village – for example, an informant from a village in the Zophei area told me that the youth fellowship in his village was set up by the village leader in 1994 and that it was kept secret from the military.

Networks often did important identity work. For example, a leader of the Hakha CLCC sub-group in Yangon who later became a leader of the 1988 uprising in Hakha attributed his active participation in that group to his involvement in church groups as a child. He had clearly come to identify with organizations through that experience. “In high school I wasn’t involved in anything political but I was active in church – group activities, Sunday school, the youth group. I was also involved in sports. So I was already familiar with organizations and activities. And when I got to Rangoon I was more active than others.” A student leader in Kale College in the 1990s said he was familiar with organizations from his youth in Thantlang. He wanted to organize the student body at Kale College not because of a desire to mobilize people for activism but rather because of a feeling that the student body should be organized.

Some informants from Yangon recalled engaging in political discussions through their church youth group. For example, one student activist who lived in Yangon told me about two activist friends whom he met at his church. “We met every Saturday and Sunday in our church... Generally we talked about the Burmese situation... not only the politics, also

economics, the people, our Chin faith... And sometimes we talked about the girls... Every Saturday we had choir practice for Sunday. We had a youth committee, so around 50 or 70 people. After we practiced the choir, most of the people went back home. But about ten people, we talked together about politics and things. Every Sunday, we distributed a pamphlet about youth activities in our church and the world activities. For example, some different places, some different states, the soldiers or the generals went and they raped the girls, if that news we heard, we talked about that news. We repeat and repeat our country's situation." A woman who went to the same church said that in the church there were some people interested in politics, though she did not know them personally, and she recalled that there were sentiments of "we don't like the government" included in the church services. She said that she did not participate in the youth group because the church was 1 ½ hours from her home.

In general, it appears that churches in Yangon had more space for political activism than did churches in Kalembo or Chin State, related in part to greater openness in Yangon in general for political participation as well as the presence of more politically inclined church leaders. One informant who had lived in Kalembo and Yangon explained the geography of activist pastors: "In the 1990s there were activist pastors in Rangoon. But they didn't do it openly, they did it secretly. I know of some. I don't know of any in Kalembo. In Yangon, it is harder for police to know what they are doing, it's a big city. There are a lot of intellectual and educated pastors in Yangon, there are many with connections to other countries. However, they do it secretly; they don't dare to do it openly. They often go to meetings at the border with Thailand. They are Chin, Burman, Kachin, Karen pastors."

As with identity, networking had ambiguous effects on political participation. Some

people's religious networks kept them from coming into contact with activists. For example, one very religious woman from Kalembo said that no one ever invited her to do anything political. "My friends were pastors and missionaries." The presence of different Church denominations could also lead to divisions between people while facilitating networking within each denomination. In each village there might be three or four churches of different denominations. One person explained that most people's friends went to the same church as they did and were thus of the same denomination as themselves, though people were fairly flexible with regards to their children marrying people from different denominations.

Activist Church leaders: Though a minority, there were pastors who were politically active or who talked with people about politics and inspired others to engage in political activity. Some of them became pastors after being activists in the secular realm. An informant explained that Rev. Dr. Sang Awar and Rev. Hnjar Kio (who are both deceased) were lawyers and wanted to participate in politics but were arrested during the Ne Win period. "When they were released, they became pastors," he said. One informant who grew up in Kalembo and became an activist credited his interest in politics in part to pastors he met in Christian camp during vacation in high school. Some of the pastors who lectured in camp talked about politics. They wanted to let people know about politics, he said, but could not do it in public. In lectures in the Christian camp, in the mountains far from the city, they could speak more freely. "We didn't have a place to learn about politics. If the pastors hadn't done that, we wouldn't know." More typical was the comment of one informant from a village in the Zophei area: "Sunday school teachers and pastors never said anything critical of the government." He did not know why this was the case, as villagers could speak fairly freely

about not liking the government. Another informant was more critical, saying that a majority of religious leaders are active in politics – but in a conservative way that helps to shore up the regime. Church leaders appear not to have been much involved in the 1988 uprising, though there were some exceptions. One informant from Thantlang explained that the reason for this was that many church deacons were BSPP members. “It wasn’t that the party had planted people in the churches but rather that people had elected those people to be deacons. In Thantlang, the church chairman was also council chairman of Thantlang Township.”

Theological colleges: Because of the large numbers of Chin who attended theological colleges, it is worth examining these colleges’ influence on political activity more thoroughly. While I have already noted that there was relatively little political activity among theological college students compared to students at government-run secular universities, some students derived greater political understanding from their theological college curricula than secular university students did from theirs. While particularly true of those who studied in other countries, it was also the case for some who studied at theological colleges in Myanmar; there was considerable variation across colleges. Theological colleges in Myanmar had some independence and in some the curriculum included political content. An informant who studied at a theological college in Yangon and later participated in the Saffron Revolution there told me, “Theological school is very free. Because it is only religion, the government is not involved in theological school. My favorite subject was Asian theology, which mostly started in politics. In America there was liberation theology... In Burma we have to change our way of politics... So we talked about that.” In addition, what students got out of the curriculum depended on the student. One informant who studied at a theological college in Chin State said, “I don’t know the curriculum of the other colleges, but my

college's curriculum included liberation. If students' notes got outside of the college, there would be trouble." He attended both a theological college and a government-run secular university, and said that in the theological college students learned more about politics than in the secular university. Another person who went to the same theological college (albeit for just one year) said he never encountered anything in the curriculum related to politics.

5. Everyday resistance

Scott (1985) writes about "everyday resistance" and suggests that foot-dragging, small-scale sabotage and other similar forms of resistance may be more common than overt forms of protest. An informant from Kalembo described several cases of everyday resistance there of which he was aware. In one case, when a railway was being built, every household was required to provide a certain amount of stone for the construction or make a payment in lieu. "So me, my sister, father, we went to the small river in the back of our house. We carried stones from the river. And at home we broke them up. We cheated, by putting sand down first, then putting stone on top. Sometimes sand and wood." The person who came to collect the stone was different from the one who checked that each family had fulfilled its requirement, so they were not caught. "The poor people will all cheat," he told me. He said he was not afraid to cheat the authorities in this way. "Everyone was doing like that, so why would we be afraid?" An informant from Hakha said that when he was forced to clear land for a tea plantation, the number of days each person had to work was specified and "we worked slowly. Everyone worked slowly."

I made an effort to uncover such acts of everyday resistance in villages but was

unsuccessful. People in villages appear to have been under much greater control and the space for resistance to have been much smaller than in towns and cities. The consequences of being caught were more severe. For example, when people in villages were forced to porter for soldiers, evading portering only made things worse. A man from a village in the Zophei area who left in the mid-2000s said that if a man were forced to porter, and fled to Mizoram, his wife would be forced to porter in his place. And if people did not plant tea or jatropha as required, soldiers beat them – so people followed instructions. A man from another village in the Zophei area who left around the same time told me, “When people were told to porter, they always went. When they were called to build or repair the military base, people always went. When soldiers took their chickens, they couldn’t stop them. When people were forced to porter on Sunday, they went.” Village leaders would be punished if people evaded portering or, more generally, if they were unable to force villagers to meet government demands.

People followed orders or paid bribes instead of resisting. One person who lived in Hakha in the 1990s and 2000s explained that people could avoid portering by making payments. “Soldiers may require people to do forced labor just to get paid off. Some people don’t participate in forced labor and don’t pay off, and then they are arrested.” Fink (2009:119) writes that “The collective effect of almost every family protecting its own members is that challenges to military rule are generally not promoted or valorized except in rare situations, such as in 1988, when it looks as if real change is imminent.”

6. Chin identity and anti-government feelings

Many of the informants spoke about having feelings of Chin nationalism (Lai: *miphun*

dawtnak) which they felt were important to their political participation. While some clearly referred to (ethno-) nationalism in the usual sense, others appear to have been describing more of a strong sense of Chin identity. These feelings were generally closely connected to Christian identity, as I mentioned above. Strong feelings of Chin identity appear to have been important for many people's political participation though pro-democracy, anti-government, and other identifications were more important at times for some. But it has been difficult to determine just how strong the influence of Chin identity has been. When pushed, all of the informants whom I asked about it said that they felt some degree of Chin nationalism while they were in Myanmar. In addition, people's understanding of Chin nationalism has certainly been influenced by their experiences since leaving Myanmar, and informants may have had difficulty recalling identities felt years ago.

Importance of Chin identity: Informants described numerous cases demonstrating how Chin identity was important for their political activity. For example, some political acts had specific targets related to Chin identity. The 1996 event at Kale College, at the time of student protests in Yangon and Mandalay, is a case in point. One informant who was involved in the event recalled that college authorities supposedly closed the college as part of general university closures in response to the protests in Yangon and Mandalay. But there had also been a fight between Chin and Burmese students and college authorities organized a meeting in which many students participated. Chin students presented demands which clearly reflected a strong sense of Chin identity, including changing the name of the college to Chin State College, recognizing Chin National Day, and eliminating discrimination against Chin students. The informant said that students wanted to change the name of the college because

Chin State did not have a college or university and many people thought that Kale College was the college for Chin State.

In general, Chin “nationalism” lent itself to various activities that students could undertake without enormous risk, perhaps because they did not target the existence of the government directly. Organizing celebrations of Chin National Day was a fairly safe political act. But it was still contentious, as authorities often said that only celebrations of “Chin State Day” would be allowed. The response of an informant who had been a student leader in Yangon University in the 1980s when I asked if he had been worried about spies or infiltrators at that time illustrates the relatively low level of risk associated with activities organized around Chin identity. He said that students were not worried “because they didn’t have political ideas, only nationalist ideas.” Following the 1990 elections, when many people who had been politically active no longer felt they could do anything, one informant who had been active in the 1988 uprising and helped campaign for the 1990 elections turned to focus on Chin issues rather than broader political issues. He said that when he had the chance he talked with relatives – “about nationalism but not about the government.” His feeling was “that we need to take care of our Chin nationality.” Presumably talking about Chin “nationalism” was also safer than talking about the government.

Chin identity also motivated people to act in other ways. Above I already mentioned a student leader involved in the Saffron Revolution in Kale University who was motivated in part by the desire to make history for Chin university students. When I asked him to clarify the importance of Chin nationalism for him, he said, “Personally, nationalism is a big motivator... Burmese people look down on the Chin people. Kalembo is in a Burmese area. We know how much they look down on us... I am Chin. I can’t let them look down on us... I

am Chin, I must do it.” But he said he would have helped lead the Saffron Revolution demonstration even if he had not felt a sense of Chin nationalism. Chin identity seems also to have been important for networking: strong feelings of Chin identity attracted people to Chin activists. When students described going to talk with activists or faculty, Chin nationalism was often the subject of discussion. Strong feelings of Chin identity also seem to have made people especially receptive to the pro-democracy movement. A leader of the 1988 uprising in Hakha, for example, said that before the uprising he had felt a sense of Chin nationalism for a long time. When in college, he felt that “Chin State didn’t have equal rights compared to other state and divisions.” He quickly became swept up in the pro-democracy movement. “Nationalism and democracy go together... We think if we get democracy our Chin state will get self-determination.”

Formation of Chin identity: Informants described Chin identity becoming salient for them in a variety of different ways; each person could typically point to a number of specific influences. For many, socialization by parents during childhood was important. A man who grew up in Hakha and played a leading role in the 1988 uprising described his mother contributing to early feelings of Chin identity. “She is a little bit nationalist. She talked about Chin people and culture, how we have the same family members, how we are related to other Chin people.” Another informant born in the early 1980s whose father was a policeman told me that when he was in first and second grades, his aunts and uncles told him bedtime stories about Chin nationalists like Hrang Nawl, leader of the Chin National Organization in the 1960s. “I liked those stories,” he said.

Several informants whose parents worked for the government talked also about

developing feelings of Chin identity when they recognized that their parents could not get promotions because they were Chin and Christian. I have already mentioned some of their comments regarding this above. One said that her father, who was a policeman, could not get promoted to a higher position because of discrimination against Chin and other ethnic groups, and against Christians. “He said that he should have been promoted. And he talked about his Chin friends not getting promoted because they were Chin.”

Informants also described direct experiences with discrimination against Chin by people of other ethnicities. Because contact with other ethnic groups differed between different places, and overt discrimination seems to have varied with the relative proportion of the Chin population, experiences of discrimination were place specific. One activist born in the 1980s talked about his being one of only two Chin families in his section of Kalembo when growing up. “We know how much they look down on us,” he said. Experiences of discrimination were also often related to moving to different places. One person from Hakha lived in Rakhine State when he was in elementary school. “Chin women there had tattoos on their faces, so people looked down on them. When kids were crying their parents would say, ‘shut up, the Chin lady is coming.’ I heard it many times.” He says this was when he first began to feel the stirrings of Chin nationalism. One person whose family moved numerous times when he was young because his father was a policeman said that when he was outside of Chin state he had stronger feelings of Chin nationalism. “In Chin state, other than government everyone was Chin. When in Chin State I was not aware of oppression. I knew more when I was in Burma.”¹⁹

Celebrations of Chin National Day, organized by student networks, were also

¹⁹ Many of my informants referred to Burman areas as *Kawlram*, the same as the word for Myanmar.

important. One person who participated in Chin National Day celebrations in Falam and Hakha towns when he was young told me, “Chin National Day was big... Almost everyone joined... People wore Chin dress. We showed cultural dances, cultural sports. We felt proud of Chin people. It makes people a little more nationalistic.” On the other hand, a woman from Kalembo said that she rarely participated in Chin National Day celebrations and did not pay much attention to them. If she went, she would have to spend money on new clothes. And she lived fifteen miles from where the celebrations were held. “My family had only one bicycle for eight people,” she said.

For university students, participation in CLCCs and their sub-groups and individual interactions with students and faculty were often important, as I discussed in the section on student activism. Former students also cited specific experiences of discrimination that shaped their feelings about being Chin. An informant who was a university student in Yangon when he participated in the Saffron Revolution there said that the university authorities did not allow students to use a particular university hall to celebrate Chin National Day. “We needed to get approval. They said we had to write a letter, and after approval then we could have the celebration. We approached a lot of people. After we talked with Burmese authorities we found a lot of Burmese authorities discriminated.” He also told me, “In Rangoon we built our own church but the government didn’t allow us to worship in there. When I heard that I was really angry.” The oppositional subculture in Yangon that I described was also important for developing what can truly be described as Chin nationalism. One activist deeply embedded in the subculture in Yangon said of his best friend, “His activeness was based on hatefulness towards the Burmans. He often told me that ‘Chin are

not supposed to be other's slave in this modern era, Chins were never part of Burma.' That ideology was in fact a sound political perspective."

Chin nationalism was also actively promoted within CNF and participating in CNF helped build Chin nationalist feelings in other ways as well. A former CNF soldier said that military training at the CNF camp in Bangladesh was particularly important in his transformation into a Chin nationalist. The trainer invoked Chin nationalist themes, but the informant also began to identify strongly as a Chin Army soldier and as such felt the need to fight for the Chin. His Chin nationalist feelings became even stronger after he was captured and tortured by Myanmar government (Tatmadaw) soldiers.

Other ethnic and related identities: On the other hand, the importance of Chin nationalism should not be overemphasized. Other kinds of ethnic and related identities were important as well, such as ethnic sub-group, clan, village, and township. These identities were the basis of much networking. And they were particularly significant for internal Chin politics. I have already mentioned, for example, that sub-groups within CLCCs were based on Chin sub-groups (such as Hakha, Falam, and Tedim) and ethnic sub-group identification was important to participation in CNF and political parties. For example, CNF had little support in the Zomi areas in northern Chin state and the Chin National League for Democracy (CNLD) did not field candidates there in the 1990 elections. Networking along ethnic lines had spatial consequences because of the spatiality of the ethnic groups themselves. Lai people from Thantlang Township sometimes distinguished themselves from the Hakha (referring to themselves as *Thantlang*) and sometimes identified themselves as Hakha – in both cases with consequences for networking.

Importance of pro-democracy or anti-government identifications: Chin identity

was also at times subsumed by pro-democracy or anti-government identifications and some people developed these identifications without previously having a strong sense of Chin nationalism. In general, people active in the 1988 uprising seem to have been motivated largely by pro-democracy sentiments. One person who was active in the 1988 uprising in Thantlang as a high school student said, “The students said we should have democracy, so I thought ‘OK, democracy is best.’ We were asking for democracy, for freedom. 1988 was really for democracy. That was the slogan.” Others who were swept up in the uprising also talked about wanting democracy or overthrowing dictatorship. A woman from Kalemmyo who otherwise was not politically active, but did participate in the 8888 uprising, said she walked around Kalemmyo holding up a signboard saying “I don’t like Ne Win.” She said that at the time she had heard about democracy and thought it was good but did not really understand it.

Many of those who would join CNF in the initial period were motivated by pro-democracy sentiments along with everyone else. The group of students, former students, and others in their networks who were based in Champhai camp and would join CNF en masse called themselves the Burma Democratic Front and included Burmans among their number. A former CNF soldier, who joined CNF in 1989 after BDF had merged into CNF, explained the feelings he developed through his participation in the 1988 uprising. “I had some feeling about the need to fight for our country... After 1988 I wanted to remove the dictatorship government... The main thing was to get rid of the dictator, to have democracy.” It was only after joining CNF that he began to feel Chin nationalism.

Development of feelings about the government and democracy: A leader of the 1988 uprising in Hakha described how his feelings about the government evolved in the

period leading up to the 1988 uprising. In college in the early 1980s he first started becoming critical of the government, “but no one wanted to say they were critical because it was too scary.” And his feelings about the government were not very intense at the time. “Everyone thought, ‘there is no way to think against the government.’” When the government demonetized the currency in 1987 (Charney, 2009; Fink, 2009), “everyone blamed the government a little because of living conditions.” But he didn’t feel strongly that he needed to do something against the government. That changed in 1988. “Before, I wanted but felt it was impossible. In 1988, I saw students doing it and thought it was possible.” For many, being swept up in the pro-democracy movement in 1988 was apparently related to having new feelings that change was possible.

Some people from villages recalled having had a desire for democracy in the 1990s and 2000s. A woman from a village in the Zophei area said that she had heard of democracy and wanted democracy even when she was in the village “because I didn’t like the Burmese soldiers.” A man from a village in Hakha Township said that people in his village talked about democracy. “They couldn’t do anything, but they could talk.” (He said he never heard of people in the area reporting on other villagers, and people could speak freely in his village. In general, people from villages in the Zophei area said that they could speak freely in their villages, though not in front of soldiers.) He also said that teachers in his school in the village talked about Aung San Suu Kyi and democracy. “When they taught us about [Aung San Suu Kyi’s father] Aung San, teachers mentioned her, and said that ‘she is working for democracy in Burma.’” Others recalled having had more general anti-government orientations, related to experiences such as being forced to plant tea and jatropha, porter and work for the military and having soldiers take chickens. A woman from a village in the Zophei area who was born

in the 1980s said of the time when she was 15 or 16 years old, “We really hated the Burmese government.” She used to talk with her friends about not liking the government. “Most people in the village were like this. Because of soldiers, portering, our brothers and fathers being subject to forced labor. If people disagreed soldiers used force against them.” A man from a nearby village said that even when he was young he knew he didn’t like the government and his parents expressed anti-government sentiments. “No villagers liked the government.” He attributed these feelings to people being forced to porter for soldiers. Most of the people from villages described similar situations in their villages. A woman from a village in the Zophei area said, “My parents didn’t like the government, no one did, but they never talked about it.”

Several people from villages said that feelings about the government changed between 1988 and 1990. One person said, “Before 1988 I never saw soldiers but after 1988 they came often. They took rice and chickens, and forced people to porter.” She said they began coming to the village in response to CNF’s activities. “Before 1988, I didn’t know if our country was good or bad... But after 1988 I wanted the government to change.” A man from a village in the Zophei area said that he first knew that he did not like the government after the 1990 elections when the government refused to hand power over to Aung San Suu Kyi. He also said that during the Ne Win regime he never saw any soldiers and he did not feel any hardship at that time.

On the other hand, some of the informants recalled having had very different feelings about the government while living in villages during the 1990s and 2000s. One person from southern Chin State said that people in his village considered portering to be normal and did

not consider it to be oppression. “When I was young, I helped my village when they were called for forced labor. I enjoyed doing it. I didn’t know it was forced labor. The soldiers liked me.” A man who participated in the Saffron revolution recalled his childhood in Chin State, when he was around nine years old: “When we finished our class, before I went home I went to the soldiers’ camp, and we spent at least half an hour there, sometimes one hour or two hours. We looked at the guns and we made some walkie talkies... When I think back, we loved the soldiers at that time.”

One person from a village in the Zophei area described developing anti-government feelings when he went to university. “Before I came to university I was in a village in Chin State... I saw soldiers in the village. They asked people to porter. At the time I thought that is our responsibility. If soldiers take any chickens, I thought they have the right to do that because they are the government, they are the soldiers... After I joined university... I look back, portering and taking chickens is not their right... After I joined university I knew that the government discriminates a lot against ethnic groups.”

Some people from towns recalled that during the 1990s and 2000s they did not have any direct negative experiences with the government. Many of the informants from towns had parents who worked for the government and did not grow up with anti-government feelings. For example, a woman who was born in the early 1980s and who grew up in Hakha and Kalembo said that when she was young, she liked the government. Her father was a policeman and her family lived in a police compound, and she said she never personally faced problems with the government. A young man said that when he was living in Thantlang town he saw many government soldiers but did not have any bad feelings about the Tatmadaw at the time. “I didn’t care about anything. I just thought about hanging out

with my friends and going to school... I knew that the army was to defend the country, I learned that in school.” Some people from towns said that people there could not speak freely; this must have affected perceptions of the government. In general, for informants who lived in towns and cities who developed strong anti-government feelings, involvement in student networks and the oppositional subculture seem to have been more important in the development of these feelings than were direct experiences of grievances.

Identification with Aung San Suu Kyi: Identification with Aung San Suu Kyi, which I have already noted was widespread, was also an important motivator for some informants’ political activity. A leader of the 1988 uprising in Hakha described Aung San Suu Kyi’s importance to people’s participation in the demonstrations. “Everyone liked her. We thought, ‘she can help us get democracy... We will back her.’” Without her, he thinks the demonstrations would not have been as strong, not because fewer people would have participated, “but our hope would have been less.” One leader of the Saffron Revolution demonstrations in Kalembo said that for him the main motivation to organize those demonstrations was to secure Aung San Suu Kyi’s release from house arrest. “If they release Aung San Suu Kyi, there will be hope... I hoped they would release her... It wasn’t really to get democracy, just to get her released – that was our goal. And they did release her.”

7. Interest in politics and activist identity

Political or civic attitudes or orientations have been identified as a determining factor in political participation (Beck & Jennings, 1982; Sherkat & Blocker, 1994; Verba & Nie, 1972). The number of informants who had been activists in Myanmar and who talked about

having had an interest in politics (Burmese: နိုင်ငံရေး naing-ngan-yei:) while in Myanmar indicates that this was indeed a significant factor. (Interest in politics was different from dislike of the government. One informant, for example, said that she had no interest in politics, had no friends or relatives involved in politics, and did not know anyone involved in politics – but even as a child she knew she did not like the government.) Consistently, people whose political participation was most limited said they had had no interest in politics. I have already mentioned extremely devout people who said they were interested only in religion, not in politics, and who were essentially not involved in any political activity.

The mechanisms through which interest in politics influenced informants' political activity were not clear. It seems, however, that for people with such an interest it helped to draw them into networks with activists, in the way I have suggested strong feelings of Chin identity did. I suspect it also led them to spend more time thinking about participation in political activity than they might have otherwise. To be clear, not everyone with an interest in politics actually became involved in political activity. One young person from Hakha, for example, said that while he was interested, he never got involved in political activities because he was afraid to do so.

Informants developed an interest in politics in a variety of ways, including through socialization in their families, interactions with other people, reading books, listening to the radio, and other influences. Parents were clearly very influential, in many ways similar to the way they contributed to the development of Chin identity. Some informants' parents were interested in politics and communicated this interest to them when they were young. A leader of the Saffron Revolution in Kalembo, for example, said that in high school he was more

actively involved in politics than any of his friends. He says he was greatly influenced by his father, who had been involved in the 1988 uprising and was very interested in politics.

Fink (2009), however, has written that activists in Myanmar often do not want their children to become activists themselves because of the suffering it will cause them, and thus try to keep them from developing an interest in politics. This was the case with one of the informants who grew up in a village in Thantlang, then went to high school in Yangon and was there at the time of the Saffron Revolution. His parents might not have been activists, but they were interested in the Saffron Revolution and talked about it with other adults. “My dad is a really smart guy... He knew a lot about politics since he’s educated.” But his parents did not talk to him about politics or about the Saffron Revolution. “They didn’t want their kids to worry about it. They just wanted their kids to get an education. That is why they moved to Yangon – so the kids could go to school there... My parents thought it was necessary to get educated first, then one could help the country, otherwise the only thing one could do was protest.” He himself was not really interested in politics. “My parents didn’t even talk about it, so how could I be interested?” A number of informants whose parents worked for the government said they were not encouraged to get involved in politics.

Informants also described being influenced during their youth by siblings, relatives, university students, politicians, and others who were interested in politics. A man from a village in the Zophei area who joined CNF early on described influential relationships with two political leaders from his village when he was in high school. He went with them when they visited government officers in Hakha, and in this way he learned about democracy and systems of government. One person who grew up in Thantlang town told me that he learned

about politics from his brother's friend, a college student. "He was an informal leader. He used to talk about politics, that they could challenge even government officers at that time. We discussed a little, and my understanding developed gradually..." What made him receptive to this student? "I was curious and wanted to know about things." Others said they did not know any activists or have any interactions with them. One person who grew up in a village in the Zophei area said that he did not have any politically oriented relatives or any relatives working for the government and he himself never got involved in anything political.

A few informants spoke of influential pastors and teachers but they were the exception. I have already mentioned one person who spoke of being turned on to politics by pastors talking about politics in Christian camp. While people generally said their teachers never said anything critical of the government and tried to keep them out of politics, a young man who went to high school in Mandalay said that he first heard about democracy when he read a book by an American, translated into Burmese, that he borrowed from one of his teachers. He credits reading this book – which he did not understand very well – in part for his strong interest in politics. An informant from Kalembo recalled a middle school teacher who taught him in the early 1990s. "When he talked about England and Burma he always added his own ideas: 'Because we are facing problems,' 'because of the government.'... I heard about communism from him... He talked about democracy, socialism, communism. He said 'We have to thank General Aung San, but now the military government has colonized us. Under colonialism was better than now. It is like Hong Kong, everything could have improved if we had stayed a colony.' And then he would say, 'I didn't tell you this.'"

A parallel to civics classes in the West was the socialist youth program created by the BSPP (Htoo, 2011; Steinberg, 1981), which was implemented up until 1988 and which a

number of activists credited for the development of their interest in politics. Individuals responded differently to the program. One person who later became a leader of the 1988 uprising in Hakha said that he was selected for national training. “Through these programs, participants learned more and more about the government. There was only one party, and there were steps to joining the party. These trainings were part of that... Those who participated got a lot of rights. Plus becoming a youth leader was interesting. People didn’t have access to books, but through this training they got access to political science of the Socialist Party.” Another informant who later joined CNF talked about having better insights into how local government should work as a result of participating in the socialist youth training in high school. But another, who participated several years earlier, said of the program, “I don’t think it helped me. They were just drilling.” And another said, in reference to the national training, “Some just wanted to go to the training to see the big city.”

Some informants described particular, unique formative experiences that contributed to their interest in politics. A young man who never became involved in politics, out of fear, described how nonetheless he first developed an interest in politics. In seventh grade his aunt took him to visit Pagan, the site of an ancient kingdom. There, a boy showed them a small room in one building that had a tunnel leading to the Irrawaddy River. When the king gave orders, someone would be killed and the body would be sent down the tunnel to the river, where it disappeared. “That was the first thing I remember,” he said. For others, it appears that growing up around government officers or soldiers gave them a familiarity with government that contributed to later interest in politics.

Many of the informants who had been activists talked about reading books with some

political content when they were young. Many of those who had not been activists had not read such books. The books included foreign titles translated into Burmese, a number of which were cited by multiple informants (such as books on Abraham Lincoln and World War II). One informant who was born in the early 1980s and whose father was a policeman told me, “I had a hobby of reading at an early age... When I was in 7th and 8th grades, my brothers and friends had books that were translated into Burmese which I read, on the Nazis, the British Empire, and so on. When I read books I automatically liked them.” And from that age he liked politics. His father read Time and Newsweek magazines and he liked to look at them, too. He saw images of other countries and asked himself why Myanmar was so different. Some people – mostly from villages – said that when they were young they could not read Burmese and talked about having read Chin books. Each person typically had someone who helped them get the books. Many informants also talked about listening to news broadcasts on the radio or watching them on television; again Burmese language ability was an issue and one person said he did not listen to the radio because he could not understand Burmese. Some informants spoke of discussing what they read or heard with parents. The informant cited above, whose father was a policeman, said his father also listened to the radio – BBC and VOA – and when he was young he listened with him and asked his father about the things he heard. “That was key to my interest in politics.” A man who was involved in the Saffron Revolution in Yangon said, “My father was watching TV and listening to the radio every day, every morning and every night, from the BBC and VOA. I heard about the Burmese situation from that time. After he listened to that radio, my father shared about the situation. From that day, I knew, I liked to know about Burmese politics.”

There were also many informants, primarily people who never became activists, who

never read much related to politics or listened to the radio. For example, a woman who grew up in Hakha and whose father was involved in politics said that in middle school she read romance novels. She did not listen to the radio but enjoyed watching television, especially Korean movies. She never became involved in any kind of political activity. Another woman who also was never involved in any political activity said that when she was young she did not read anything nor did she listen to the radio very much. “We didn’t have batteries,” she said. People from villages said there were radios and televisions in their villages but many did not have access to them.

Chapter Six. From individual experiences to generalizable patterns

In the previous chapter I described processes through which individual Chin came to be involved in political activity in different ways and to different degrees. Clearly, despite individual agency, complexity, and contingency, there were some general patterns. One overriding conclusion is evident: a main thesis of resource mobilization theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1973; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Oberschall, 1973), that deprivation is not the main explanatory factor for mobilization into political activity, has been confirmed. People's political participation was more closely linked to processes involving identity and networks, which often played out at the individual level. These, in turn, were strongly related to where people lived, which was probably the single most significant influence on their political participation, and, consequently, to their mobility. The sequencing of events in people's lives was also very important. These common themes have implications beyond the case of the Chin, and I will now examine each in turn.

Some of the details confirm what has already been written in literature on social movements and political participation, but there is also much that has received inadequate attention or is even absent from the literature. I do not develop these patterns in detail, for to do so would involve repeating much of the content of the previous chapter and goes beyond the aims of this thesis. Describing any one of the patterns fully would constitute a thesis in itself.

1. Identity and socialization

Identity played a central role in most of the stories of the previous chapter. We saw the importance of people identifying as students, activists, Christians, and Chin and identifying

with the Chin National Front, the pro-democracy movement and Aung San Suu Kyi. The social movement literature deals extensively with identities of these general kinds; general overviews are given by Della Porta and Diani (2006), Hunt and Benford (2007), and Tarrow (2011). People's sense of duty to their parents, interest in politics, anti-government feelings, and feelings that armed resistance was or was not a legitimate strategy also operated essentially like identities. Identities like these feature less in the social movement literature, but the political participation literature addresses political or civic attitudes or orientations without using the language of identity (Beck & Jennings, 1982; Sherkat & Blocker, 1994; Verba & Nie, 1972).

The interviews showed identities working in several different ways. First, collective identities were important for networking, a role emphasized in the social movement literature (Della Porta & Diani, 2006; Hunt & Benford, 2007). For example, I have noted that strong Chin identity and interest in politics both appear to have been important for motivating people to interact with activists (as Chin nationalism and politics were common topics of discussion with activists) and for enabling them to be drawn into activist networks. Identification with Chin sub-groups was the basis for people joining sub-groups of the student networks (CLCCs) and joining or supporting various political parties and CNF. People's identification with clans affected how they judged others and thus their interactions with them, and identification with Christian denominations determined to large extent people's friendship circles. (I will discuss the importance of networks themselves in the following section.)

Second, identities made people feel strongly enough about a cause to act. Again this is

a role that has been written about in the social movement literature (see, for example, Della Porta & Diani, 2006). In 1996, Kale College students were clearly motivated by their Chin identity when they made demands which included changing the name of the college to Chin State College, recognizing Chin National Day, and eliminating discrimination against Chin students. I cited a student leader of the Saffron Revolution in Kalembo who was motivated to take great risk in part to show that Christians could help their people and to make history for Chin university students. Identification with Aung San Suu Kyi also motivated people to act: for example, I mentioned a leader of the 2007 Saffron Revolution demonstrations in Kalembo who said that for him the main motivation to organize those demonstrations was to secure Aung San Suu Kyi's release from house arrest. Identification with the pro-democracy movement appears to have been an important motivator to join the 1988 uprising for large numbers of people who previously had not been politically active.

Third, identities appear to have guided people to participate in political action by defining for them what kind of action was consistent with who they were or what kind of person they were (that is, with their identity) (Della Porta & Diani, 2006; Hunt & Benford, 2007). Some university students felt that, as students, it was their role to be politically active while others felt that because they were not students it was acceptable for them not to be politically active. Some informants clearly had activist identities which compelled them to act. For example, I cited a participant in the Saffron Revolution who said, "After I knew why [the monks] were marching, I personally felt that it was my responsibility to join." Developing activist identities appears to have enabled people to overcome their fear of acting and enabled them to take considerable risks. Some people felt comfortable with ("identified with") armed resistance as a strategy while one informant who said he did not believe in

armed resistance became active in a political party.

I turn now to aspects of identity processes that have not received as much attention in the literature – related both to how identities operate in political participation processes and to processes of identity formation.

Identities preventing people from acting: The role of identities in keeping people from acting was evident from the interviews and while it has received more attention elsewhere it has not been highlighted in the social movement literature. Parents, aunts, and uncles played a crucial role by encouraging and supporting their children's activism or preventing them from getting involved (see Fink, 2009). Understanding of their own role within their families and of duties to their families was cited by several informants as a reason they did not get involved in various political activities. I mentioned a student leader in Kale University whose father told him, as he prepared to help lead the Saffron Revolution, "If you believe it, you should do it." I also mentioned a woman who returned home from Mandalay University following the breaking out of demonstrations there in 1996 when her parents told her to do so, and thus never saw the demonstrations. One man left CNF for the sake of his mother, and told me, "I didn't want to quit but my mother requested." Another said that he never considered joining CNF because he was the oldest son and had to take care of his parents. In other cultures where duties to parents are emphasized, parents are similarly likely to play an important role in stifling political activity.

Christian identity could also block people's political participation. Many people with strong Christian identities seem to have felt that, as devout Christians, it was not their role to become involved in political activity. On the other hand, Christian identity could make

people feel strongly enough about a cause to act, and Christian identity played a role, for example, in motivating people to try to stop the sale of alcohol and help rebuild a church destroyed by soldiers. The ability of Christian identity to prevent people from acting thus enabled it to play an ambiguous role in political mobilization as I described in the previous chapter.

Targets for political action created through identities: McAdam (1986) writes about people developing an activist identity through initial participation in activism: if the experience is positive, they are likely to develop network ties with activists and be socialized into an activist identity. The interviews demonstrated the importance of such initial experiences with political participation. Notably, Chin and Christian identities often provided targets for low-risk activism through which people gained experience. In the previous chapter I noted that Chin nationalism lent itself to particular activities that people could undertake without enormous risk, perhaps because they did not target the existence of the government directly. The same is true of Christian identity. Trying to stop the sale of alcohol, for example, was a specific, fairly low-risk political activity. The literature on New Social Movements describes the trend towards identity-based social movements (such as movements based on ethnicity, gender, and sexuality) (Buechler, 2000), but the case of the Chin suggests that in a repressive environment identity-based activism may also be important for mobilizing participation. Through activism targeting issues related to Chin and Christian identities people developed experience in organizing and political action, as well as activist identities, that might lead to higher-risk activism when opportunities arose. The Chin who were most active in the 2007 Saffron Revolution typically had this kind of prior experience.

The creation of categories of people with relative freedom to act: Thus far I have

referred to ways people have been influenced by their own self identities. However, identities also affect how others treat an individual as they ascribe qualities to the individual based on those identities. This is relevant to explaining how people of other ethnic groups treated Chin and how members of different Chin sub-groups treated each other. Also, in the previous chapter I cited informants saying that the government had allowed students and pastors more political space than others. One, for example, said that “even the government was afraid of students” and another that “the government knows [pastors] are popular so doesn’t want to directly oppose them. So pastors have some rights.” These identities (student and pastor) constituted categories of people who were freer to act than others.

The importance of socialization processes: The social movement literature generally treats people’s identities either as given or shaped by contemporaneous forces, such as participation in networks (Diani, 2007; R. J. Johnston, 1983; McAdam, 1986; Passy, 2001). Zald (2000: 7) writes, for example: “Because we study movements in their mobilized and mobilizing phase, and because we often have disconnected movements from larger ideological and historical movements, we have tended to assume the ideological/value commitments of possible participants. Our theories have been about already-socialized adolescents and adults. We do not ask how sympathetic bystanders become sympathetic. What life processes have led them to identify with the movement’s beneficiaries, with the movement’s diagnoses?” However, outside of the social movement literature, socialization during childhood and adolescence are given greater attention. (See, for example, McLean, Breen, & Fournier, 2010.) The literature on political socialization, which flourished in the 1960s and 1970s but now appears to be in decline (Beck & Jennings, 1982), identifies

factors, and, to a lesser extent, processes, that lead to the development of political orientations or interest in politics. Research in this tradition has tended to make use of longitudinal studies or large surveys. This literature describes effects of parents' interest in and participation in politics, parents' socioeconomic status and related opportunities for education, participation in civics classes, extracurricular activities, and other factors. (See, for example, Beck & Jennings, 1982.) My interviews, too, highlighted the importance of socialization processes beginning in childhood and suggest that studies of social movements, political participation, and resistance need to take these processes seriously. Individuals' identities were shaped over time through multiple threads of experience and individual processes. Because identities develop over such an extended period of time we cannot understand political participation at any given time without looking back one or more decades to a time when today's actors were young.

The role of parents in the development of identity in their children was evident from the interviews. We saw the influence of parents in the development of Chin identity, interest in politics, and anti-government attitudes. For example, I mentioned one party activist who said, "My father was anti-dictatorship before I was born... So I had an anti-dictatorship mind since childhood." In the literature, parents' interest in and participation in politics has been shown to be particularly important for political socialization (Beck & Jennings, 1982; Sherkat & Blocker, 1997). Informants described parents contributing to early feelings of Chin identity. While I did not highlight it, parents were also clearly important for the development of Christian identities as well. Personal experiences during childhood and adolescence (such as being subjected to oppression or discrimination or participating in political activism), participation in political meetings held by political parties in the run-up to

the 1990 elections, interaction with pastors and teachers, identity work done by activists, participation in celebrations of Chin National Day, reading books and listening to the radio were also important. While the political socialization literature is ambivalent about the role of civics education (in part because in countries where studies were conducted it was so widespread that it had little explanatory value) (Beck & Jennings, 1982; Kahne & Sportes, 2008; Sherkat & Blocker, 1994), participation in the youth socialism program of the Ne Win regime was clearly important for some.

Socialization processes played out in very individual ways in many of the informants' stories. The interviews demonstrate that there was considerable individual agency, complexity and contingency in these processes. In some cases, different people responded to more or less the same influences in very different ways, making it difficult to generalize about the importance of those influences. For example, attending theological college was important to some informants' development as political activists but for others it had no such apparent effect. People's family situations differed. Some had parents who talked about politics or listened to news broadcasts and discussed them with them and others did not. People's idiosyncratic interests set them down different paths. One woman who never became politically active talked about reading romance novels and watching Korean movies as a child, while others (especially those who became most active) talked about reading books with political content and listening to the news. One person happened to have a teacher who talked about democracy, socialism, and communism, and another happened to have a teacher who let him borrow a book about democracy. Some people had anti-government feelings as a result of rights abuses by soldiers, but one person said that when he was young

he considered portering to be normal and even liked it, and another recalled feeling affection for the soldiers based near his village. Some credited the socialist youth program of the 1970s and 1980s with helping them learn about politics while others found it useless.

2. Networks

The interviews confirmed the importance of networks for mobilization of participation, on which there is a vast literature. Reviews or overviews are given by Della Porta and Diani (2006), Tarrow (2011), Buechler (2000), and Diani (2007). Networking of various kinds was important to most stories of political participation. This included networks among and with students, church-based networks, youth groups, childhood networks based on sports, the Chin National Front and various political parties and people's links with them, clan-based network, and less formal networks.²⁰

Within the social movement literature there is a considerable amount of scholarship on identity work done by networks (Diani, 2007; Hunt & Benford, 2007). Networks have been particularly important for identity formation in the case of the Chin because people did not have access to media by means of which identity work could be done; most identity formation seems to have happened through direct interactions and experiences. Informants described being radicalized through contact with activists. In addition, interviews highlighted the importance in identity work of experiences people had as a result of participation in networks, a phenomenon which has been written about in the social movement literature

²⁰ Organizations such as churches, CNF, and political parties had defined memberships but other networks did not. Thus the church-based youth groups, village-wide youth fellowships, and student networks had committees but not defined memberships. For example, all Hakha students on a university campus were typically automatically considered to be members of the Hakha sub-committee of the CLCC, even if they did not participate.

(Della Porta & Diani, 2006). For example, a former CNF member said that as he received military training in the CNF camp he began to feel the need to fight for the Chin and increasingly experienced feelings of Chin nationalism.

The interviews also demonstrated the role of networks in recruiting people to participate in political activity (see Diani, 2007). Just being interested in a cause is generally not sufficient for people to act; they must also be invited to participate (Klandermans, 2007). Networks were crucial, for example, to recruitment into CNF. I have described how meetings were organized in Hakha and Thantlang towns and participants, who knew each other from networks in Yangon and Mandalay universities and through leadership of the 1988 uprising, went together to Champhai (in northeast India) where many eventually joined CNF. People from the camp in Champhai went back into Myanmar to meet specific individuals in order to invite people to join them in India. There were others who went to Mizoram at the same time, on their own, who were not mobilized into CNF. Networks also enabled bloc recruitment (Oberschall 1973) into CNF: after leaders in Champhai camp negotiated with CNF leaders and agreed to join, many of the others in the camp also joined CNF. Networks were important for people who supported CNF in other ways as well, such as providing money or allowing CNF members to stay at their homes. In addition, mobilization for the 1988 uprising and 2007 Saffron Revolution happened largely through contacts among students and former students who had worked together in student networks (CLCCs) in their universities.

Some informants who were not linked with networks that could do this identity work or mobilize them never became politically active. One person who engaged in only limited political activity, for example, told me that the people he was close to in college did not have

any political ideas. Another informant who never became politically active was a distance education student at Kale University, was only on campus for ten days a semester, and never participated in the CLCC on campus. I mentioned one very devout woman from Kalembo who said that no one ever invited her to do anything political and who told me, “My friends were pastors and missionaries.” It appears that for her and other people in similar networks, these networks may have actually kept them from becoming involved in political activity. This is an example of what Kitts (2000) refers to as negative ties.

Social movement scholars have written about the importance of networks for sustaining action over time (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). This was evidenced clearly by what I have termed a “mobilization infrastructure” involving student networks and their links back to towns and villages and with members of the oppositional subculture in the cities. These networks drew in Chin university students as well as other Chin who were in contact with university students or former students and mobilized those who had some interest in political activity. The mobilization infrastructure survived for generations as older generation activists reached out to the next generation. CLCC leaders in universities (who tended to be juniors or seniors) were in contact with other activists and political leaders outside of the university, and also reached out to younger students. When they went home for vacation, university students met and influenced friends and community members informally and (since the 1990s) through town-based student fellowships.

I now examine aspects of networking that have received less attention in the literature.

Individual interactions in networking: The interviews suggest a greater role for individual interactions in networking than has generally been described in the literature. Not

surprisingly, though the social movement literature generally treats networking as a group-level phenomenon, much of what can be described as network processes plays out at the level of individual interactions. For example, the interviews highlight the importance of networks for bringing people into contact with individuals who do identity and mobilization work with them. Informants talked about meeting activists through CLCCs, for example, then being influenced by those activists over the course of later encounters with them together with friends. I mentioned one person who participated in the CLCC at his university in Yangon and became friends with some of the committee members. They could not say much during CLCC meetings, but when he met them outside, in tea shops, they talked about Chin nationalism and grievances related to the government. I also mentioned an informant who talked about going with several other friends to meet a faculty member at his residence to talk about issues related to Chin identity. Another informant who had been part of the oppositional subculture in Yangon recalled a friend trying to convince him that the Chin needed to reject domination by the Burmans.

Networking often took the form of interactions with influential individuals without any involvement of groups. For example, some people had friends or relatives who were involved in or interested in politics who inculcated in them an interest in politics. I mentioned one person who learned about politics from his brother's friend. Another described influential relationships with two political leaders from his village when he was in high school.

Role of networks in the development of leadership and familiarity with organizations: Several informants attributed their active participation and leadership in

CLCCs in college to their leadership roles in youth groups when young; youth groups appear to have served as a springboard for leadership in the CLCCs. “In high school I wasn’t involved in anything political,” said one person, “but I was active in church. Group activities, Sunday school, the youth group. I was also involved in sports. So I was already familiar with organizations and activities. And when I got to Rangoon I was more active than others.” People were elected to leadership positions in CLCCs for a variety of reasons and one person credited his academic success, another the large number of people who knew him because of his prowess in sports in high school. They developed leadership skills while serving in those positions. Leaders were elected and gained experience at successive levels, from local youth group to CLCC sub-group to CLCC (and, in 1988, to the ad hoc student unions that organized the uprising in the towns). And, from a young age people began to identify with organizations and identify themselves as leaders.

Free spaces, gendered spaces and networking: Many of the stories of networking involved particular places, such as tea shops, bars, university canteens, churches, and people’s homes. These networking sites appear to have been important both as familiar and comfortable places for people to gather and for providing safe places free of surveillance – what Evans (1979) calls “free spaces”. The social movement literature makes little mention of such places though they have received more attention in Geography (Routledge, 1997). Two people who participated in the Saffron Revolution in Yangon talked about meeting at a particular place where they got to know members of an activist group (the 88 Generation Students Group) and could speak safely. A cyber café owned by an activist in Yangon also served as a meeting place for people involved in the Saffron Revolution there. What is perhaps most significant about these sites of networking is their gender dimensions. By far,

tea shops were most commonly cited as places where people met friends to talk about politics (Fink, 2009), but, in general, tea shops are seen as a place for men to meet. It appears, therefore, that sites of networking may have systematically excluded women from political participation.

The intersection between friendship and network ties: Finally, intersections between friendship ties and the various networks were important. For example, one person from a village in the Zophei area said that when he was in Mandalay University, one of the leaders of the CLCC at the time was a friend of his from high school days. He also became friends with another CLCC leader. Though he did not participate in the 1988 uprising, he did join a group of activists who had helped lead the uprising (including one of those friends and other CLCC leaders) when they went to Mizoram to organize resistance to the Myanmar government. An informant from Yangon talked about becoming friends with some activists there and associating with other activists who were friends he knew from high school. These activists played an important role in his eventual participation in the Saffron Revolution. Thus where friendship ties intersected with networks, network influences (such as influences of student networks) were often greater than they would otherwise have been.

3. Where people lived

An overriding feature of all the interviews was the importance of where people lived. This factor appears to dominate most other influences, though it is largely absent from the literature. In the social movement literature the question “why in this place?” is rarely asked, though “why at this time?” is commonly asked. In identifying factors that are important for

political participation, where someone lives is typically not mentioned (Barnes et al., 1979; van Aelst & Grave, 2001; Verba & Nie, 1972). Geographers have not really filled this void, though the importance of place and space have been highlighted (Featherstone, 2008; Paddison, 2000; Pile & Keith, 1997). One reason the influence of where people lived came across so clearly was my focus on a particular group of people as compared to a particular movement, event, or geographical location. The very different experiences of people living in Chin State villages, Chin State towns, Kalemmyo, and Yangon were clearly evident. People were, overall, not very mobile – activist leaders included – and identity and network processes and opportunities for participation differed between these places.

Identity formation: As noted already, direct interactions and experiences were important to identity processes. People living in villages could speak relatively freely, and talked about democracy and feelings about the government. Many also developed anti-government feelings as a result of abuses by soldiers. People living in towns and cities were less likely to have negative experiences with the government. Yet they were more likely to experience direct discrimination by non-Chin. In the previous chapter I quoted a man who grew up in Kalemmyo saying, “We know how much [the Burmans] look down on us.” People living in towns also had more opportunities to participate in political meetings prior to the 1990 elections. While many identified participation in celebrations of Chin National Day as important for the formation of their Chin identity, celebrations were only held in towns and cities. One woman from Kalemmyo said that she rarely participated in these celebrations because she lived fifteen miles out of town. While Aung San Suu Kyi’s visit to Hakha in 2003 was influential, those who saw her were primarily people who lived in Hakha or along the road to Hakha.

Network participation: Again, network participation was also primarily through direct contact, which depended on where people lived. For example, interaction between university students and non-students was uneven. People living in some villages had more contact with university students and thus potentially greater network links with student activists than did people in other villages (contingent largely on the number of people from each village who were in university), and people living in towns could participate in activities of the town-based student fellowships. Youth living in parts of Kalembo had especially strong ties to university students because Kale University was situated nearby. A student from Kalembo was influenced by NLD activists in the city and participated in their secret meetings during the early 2000s, and people living in Yangon also talked about the importance of their ties with NLD, but no one from Chin State mentioned being influenced by NLD after the 1990 elections. People living in Yangon could participate in the oppositional subculture there and had more opportunities to interact with politically-minded pastors. Networks involving CNF had the most striking spatiality. For example, I described people from Thantlang and Hakha townships, going to Mizoram (mobilized through networks) and many of them later joining CNF. When people were sent back into Myanmar to invite others to join them in Mizoram, they targeted specific places. No one went to Matupi, Mindat, Kanpalet, or Paletwa Township in southern Chin State to invite people to the Champhai camp. CNF soldiers visited some villages more than others and impressions of CNF varied considerably from place to place. People living in villages in Chin State had contact with CNF while people elsewhere did not, and some people living in cities never heard of CNF.

Mobilization by networks could vary on small spatial scales. I have described how demonstrations often started on university campuses and those students who lived on campus were the first to join. For example, in the 1987 demonstrations at Mandalay University, seniors living on campus, outside the city, were the first to demonstrate and they then mobilized first and second year students who were living in the center of the city. One woman who had been a student and lived off campus never participated in the 1996 demonstrations at Mandalay University. Students were easily mobilized when they lived together in dormitories. The physical separation of theological colleges and government-run secular universities was one reason that theological college students often did not participate in activities organized by secular university students. A woman who spent time in Yangon said that while she was there she did not participate in her church's youth group (whose members included a number of activists) because it took 1 ½ hours to get from the place where she lived to the church.

Opportunities for political participation: Finally, opportunities for action also varied spatially, in large part because political activity primarily involved direct, physical participation. At the time of the 1988 uprising, for example, while in towns even young children participated, there was no activity in most villages and most people who lived in villages did not participate in the uprising. People living in Yangon had the greatest opportunity to participate in the 2007 Saffron Revolution. People living in villages in Chin State that were visited by CNF soldiers had opportunities to support CNF – providing food, information, or a place to stay. People living in towns and cities appear to have had more opportunities for everyday resistance whereas those living in villages had limited opportunities because of the severe repercussions they were likely to face.

4. Mobility

In part because of the importance of where people lived, mobility played a role in explaining the political participation of many of the informants. But while their mobility had consequences for their political participation, it was for purposes related to their everyday lives rather than for purposes related to political participation. Informants spoke, for example, about moving when parents who worked for the government were transferred; going to university in Yangon, Mandalay, or Kalemmyo; returning to villages and towns during vacation from college; going from villages to towns to go to high school; and going to Mizoram in northeast India to find work. People's movements brought them to places that affected the identity and network processes that influenced them and the opportunities for action available to them. Despite its importance, however, mobility has largely been ignored in the social movement and political participation literatures. On the other hand, a number of geographers have written about the connections between mobility and political participation, focusing primarily on the effects of mobility on networks (Featherstone, 2008; Nicholls, 2009).

Role of mobility in identity formation: Many stories relating to identity formation involved mobility. For example, people developed feelings about being Chin because of interactions they experienced after moving to new places. I wrote about one person from Hakha who moved to Rakhine State when he was in elementary school and observed the local people there looking down on Chin, leading to what he described as his first feelings of Chin nationalism. People who went to theological colleges outside of Myanmar had greater opportunities to learn about politics. And one informant began to become interested in

politics when he visited the site of the ancient city, Pagan, with his aunt, after moving to Mandalay to live with her.

Role of mobility in networking: Because participation in networks depended on direct contact, and network leaders often did not have the resources to reach out to participants themselves, participation in networks often involved people going to places where they could meet others. While Featherstone (2008) writes about mobility allowing leaders to network outside of particular places, and thus expand networks, the interviews highlighted the importance of mobility of the rank-and-file whose participation in networks depended on their mobility. To participate in networks with student activists in Yangon, for example, one had to physically get to Yangon and meet activists there. Several informants who participated in the oppositional subculture in Yangon had moved there with their families – otherwise they might never have ended up in Yangon. People who went to Mizoram for other reasons might meet CNF members there and could be recruited. Two of my informants were recruited into CNF after they had already been working in Mizoram. People joined networks and left them because of their own movements. I mentioned one person who moved to another state and helped his sister with her business there for about two years, losing contact with activists he knew in Hakha and Yangon. When he later returned to Hakha and got a government job there, he regained contact with former university students and became a leading activist. A leader of the 1988 uprising in Hakha stopped being politically active after going to theological college in India where he was no longer in touch with anyone else who was politically active.

Nicholls (2009) writes about the role of mobile activists in creating networks by building connections between geographically separated groups and helping them find

common ground. The interviews highlighted a different dynamic in network creation: people's mobility for other unrelated reasons leading to the formation of networks. For example, university students went back home for vacations and those who were from towns like Hakha and Thantlang organized temporary university student fellowships there at those times. High school students from the towns could participate in the activities of these fellowships, but students from villages who attended high schools in towns also went back home at this time so could not participate. High school and university students who were from the same villages could meet up in their villages during vacations when they were all at home. The practice of university students going back home during vacations was crucial to the functioning of what I refer to as a "mobilizing infrastructure" among the Chin.

Nicholls writes that those who are most mobile (typically people with more resources, from more affluent organizations) can become the most influential in networks. Related to this, the interviews demonstrated that those who were most mobile were often the most active in networks, though again their mobility was generally not for the purposes of networking. For example, the young people who led the 1988 uprising in Chin State were among the most mobile people in the state – many had moved back and forth between Chin State and Yangon or Mandalay to attend college.

Role of mobility in opportunities for participation: People's opportunities for political action also depended on their movements. For example, people who went to Yangon to go to college or moved there with their families were able to participate in the Saffron Revolution there. People who were in Mizoram in northeast India at the time of the campaigns for the 1990 elections did not participate in those campaigns, but three of the

informants who had been in Mizoram returned without joining CNF and helped with campaigns.

Mobility and contingency: Much of the contingency in the processes of political participation experienced by informants related to their mobility. For example, one person lived in a village but happened to be in Thantlang in October 1988 when people were preparing to meet to discuss going to Mizoram. He joined the meeting and ended up going to Mizoram and joining CNF. Had he not been in Thantlang that day he likely would not have gone to Mizoram at that time and it is unknown whether he would have joined CNF. A woman from Kalembo who otherwise had nothing to do with politics or CNF happened to be in a village near one of CNF's commands when a CNF soldier was killed nearby. She ended up taking a suitcase of the dead CNF soldier's belongings back to Kalembo to give to his parents.

5. Sequencing

Unfortunately, though I have emphasized the importance of employing a life history approach, in the interest of maintaining confidentiality I have not presented life histories as such. Instead, I have described isolated events in people's lives. However, the sequence of events in an individual's life was crucial to political mobilization processes and the life story approach was ideal for elucidating these sequences. I will try to give some sense of here of what I mean.

Several informants described the importance of becoming connected to university student networks for their participation in the 1988 uprising, the Chin National Front, the Saffron Revolution, and other forms of political activism. Participation in these student

networks could typically be traced back to informants' childhoods, when, for example, they heard parents talk about the importance of Chin people taking care of their land and people, experienced discrimination against the Chin, participated in celebrations of Chin National Day, read books about Ho Chi Minh or Abraham Lincoln, listened to the BBC, or discussed politics with parents. Experiences in high school were also important, including participation in church youth groups, developing networks through sports, and participating in meetings with political parties. By the time they started college, these informants had typically developed an interest in politics, the beginnings of Chin nationalist feelings, leadership skills, and identification with organizations; some had also developed friendships with people who would later become CLCC leaders. They talked about participating in CLCC meetings and other CLCC events in college and beginning to make contact with key student leaders or faculty members during their first years there. Interactions with student networks and radicalization happened in parallel, as people's growing interest in Chin nationalism and politics drew them towards activists who performed identity work with them.

Several informants had also clearly developed activist identities which were important to their participation in the Saffron Revolution or other political activity. Some had experience with activism while young, often in the context of youth groups. They continued to participate in activism in college, such as organizing celebrations of Chin National Day in defiance of university authorities or engaging in more individual acts of resistance. Others developed an interest in politics and feelings of Chin nationalism when young, met activists through church or through the CLCC (including childhood friends who had become activists), contributed to student magazines, and became drawn into the oppositional

subculture. Their activist identities grew through interactions with activists and participation in activism.

Of course, the multiplicity of influences in each individual's life followed a unique sequence that mattered greatly for political participation. The key point here is that events and experiences at one point in time were important to the way each person responded to events and experiences at a later time. For some people, participating in the CLCC's fresher (freshmen) welcome led to relationships with activists. For some, theological college provided an opportunity to learn about politics. For some, going to college in Yangon led to participation in the oppositional subculture. For others, none of these was true, in large part (but not solely) because of preceding life events.

Chapter Seven. Conclusion

In the introduction I described a tension between, on the one hand, those approaches to political participation that aim to elucidate generalizable patterns and, on the other, those that are rich in individual subjective experience, individual geography and biography. The former tend to pay inadequate attention to individual agency, complexity, and contingency and thus make participation seem overly deterministic, giving the impression that participation “just happens.” The latter tend to focus on a small number of individuals – often just one – and are of limited applicability beyond the immediate case at hand. In this thesis I have applied an approach that attempts to address shortcomings of both approaches to explore the specific case of the Chin of Myanmar. This approach has involved seeking generalizable patterns while paying attention to individual agency, complexity, and contingency in my methodology, analysis, and presentation – but trying not to over-emphasize individual agency. The approach is not entirely new but does differ significantly from the dominant approaches taken in studies of political participation. Many of the findings presented in the previous chapter would likely not have emerged using more typical approaches.

At the methodological level, I employed a life history approach aimed at capturing individual subjective experience, individual geography, and biography and revealing as full a picture of each subject over an extended period of time as possible. Recording full biographies of each informant was not practical, but seven informants told me about their childhoods in some depth, while twenty-six others told me about their childhoods but in lesser depth. To the extent that I was able to push the time horizon of interviews back towards informants’ childhoods this was valuable for understanding socialization processes.

Interviews involved considerable back-and-forth interaction and probing of informants' stories which helped to reveal much that would likely have been missed had I used more structured interviews – such as what informants were thinking at different junctures, how they experienced different events and influences in their lives, the influences specific individuals had on them, the ways different influences interacted, and the importance of being in particular places at particular times. Different people experienced theological colleges very differently and perceived abuses by soldiers very differently. Christian identity influenced different people in different ways. People's family situations were very diverse. They enjoyed reading different kinds of books. One informant had a teacher who talked about politics in class, another learned about politics from his brother's friend who was a university student. Some people's closest friends were activists and others' closest friends were not involved in any kind of political activity.

Methodologically it was also significant that I did not limit myself geographically or to a particular event or movement. Had I focused on just one village in Chin State, one set of villages, one township, or Chin State, or had I focused just on the 1988 uprising, the Saffron Revolution, or CNF, I would have arrived at a very different picture. The importance of place and mobility to political participation, for example, were particularly evident because my informants came from diverse places and many had moved between places.

One consequence of my methodological approach was that experiences and interactions at the individual level were made especially salient, at the expense of those at the group level as well as of structural constraints. Some influences that have been highlighted in the literature, operating at these other scales, did not come across in the interviews. For example, Shock (1999) and Boudreau (2002) identify macro-level changes that shaped the

1988 uprising, whereas the interviews highlighted the role of identity and network processes for mobilization at that time.

At the analytical level, I have attempted to aggregate data while preserving as much individual agency, complexity, and contingency as possible. No doubt one of the reasons these elements are absent from much of the literature is that they are aggregated away through analysis. Finally, as much as has been practicable I have tried to preserve these elements in presenting my research findings. This has helped to give a voice to my informants as well, I hope, as helping to keep my account from seeming overly deterministic.

While I have focused on processes of individual mobilization into political activity, the general approach I have employed could also be applied to other aspects of political participation. It could be used, for example, to complicate Jonsson's (2005) analysis of the relations of the Mien people with the state in Thailand to which I made reference in the introduction. Jonsson describes the Mien positioning themselves in specific ways vis-à-vis the state, but not the micro processes at work as they do this. How were the strategic decisions behind that positioning reached? What calculations were made? What other positions were considered or tried? How do those individuals involved in these strategic decisions relate to the broader Mien population? In short, it would be helpful to bring individual agency, complexity, and contingency back into the picture – not just in the case of the Chin, or Mien, but more generally in scholarship on political participation. One way to begin to do this is, I believe, to pay greater attention to individual experience, individual geography, and biography.

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