Ethnic Issues – Panel 1

1. Towards an Understanding of the Roots of Communal Violence in Western Myanmar – Kyaw Minn Htin, PhD student, Department of Southeast Asian Studies, National University of Singapore

Abstract: The recent outbreak of communal violence in Arakan State in Western Myanmar (2012) has become an important topic in the field of Myanmar studies. However, the current understanding of this conflict has been hampered by the lack of a historical approach. The aim of this paper is to investigate the gradual development of the causes of the conflict in a long distance perspective. What have been the roots of the communal conflict in Western Myanmar and what explains violence in this region at other moments before this event? To answer these questions calls for an awareness of the historical background of the presence of Buddhist and Muslim communities in Arakan in the pre-colonial period and an examination of the construction of opposing communal identities, namely, the way that Muslims and Buddhist Arakanese were defined in opposition to each other by British colonial policy. Other social developments that need to be considered are the rise of Arakanese nationalism and the quest for ethnic and religious identities by the Muslims in the colonial and post-colonial periods. Due attention will also be paid to the political agenda of the Burmese government regarding ethnic minorities. In this context, an important question relates to the impact of post-colonial Burmese policies and the eventual exacerbation of the latent conflict between Arakanese and Muslims. Research for this paper will assess evidence from the pre-colonial, colonial and contemporary periods.

2. Finding a Cause: The Role of Religion in the Conflict in Rakhine State, Myanmar – Richard Roewer, Heythrop College, University of London

Abstract: When the face of Ashin Wirathu appeared on the July (2013) edition of the TIMES Magazine with the headline "The Face of Buddhist Terror" readers in Asia and around the world may have wondered about this man they did not know much about. But they did not wonder about the headline itself. Religious terror is familiar for anyone who reads the news and even though Buddhism has a somewhat different image compared to Islam or Christianity, the headline will not have been surprising. While Wirathu and his doctrines become more and more popular the question about the role of religion in the recent violent conflicts in Myanmar remains unanswered. Studying the coverage of the media (both Myanmar and Foreign) it seems that the issue is discussed without a profound understanding of Buddhism in Myanmar and the structures of power that exist between the religion, the state and its actors. The debate around the issue thus remains indistinct. In my paper I will assess the relation between Buddhism and Myanmar's society, politics and economics. I will show the disparity between the common practice of religion and the way it is used as a means to political and economical gains. I will explore to what extend an argument for the abuse of religion by state authorities and non-government actors can be made. Furthermore I will discuss the relation between ethnicity and religion asking the question "whether it is possible to

declare the conflict in Rakhine state to be either a religious one or an ethnic one". I am going to summarise my findings and arguments to close with an attempt to answer the question "why religion (Buddhism in particular) does not serve as a more solid basis for peace rather than instigation in Myanmar"(especially with regard to the conflict in Rakhine State) and what possibilities for change exist. The paper will specify and partly correct the way the role of religion in the recent conflicts in Myanmar is envisioned by natives and foreigners.

3. Burmese Minority Politics in Bangladesh: Territoriality and Social Integration of Rohingya and Rakhine Immigrant Communities – Anders Bjornberg, PhD Student, Department of Sociology, Binghamton University

Abstract: In south and southeastern Bangladesh, communities of Rakhine and Rohingya immigrants have taken root. Emigrating under vastly differing circumstances and conditions of life, these two ethnic communities have differently navigated their political and social integration. The 200,000 Rohingya in Bangladesh pose a massive resettlement crisis, described as the world's most pressing humanitarian crisis. The crisis of their displacement involves social, historical and political complexities beyond the formal legal protections commonly deployed. In a few important ways, international organisations' efforts to resettle the Rohingya have counterproductively widened the gap between the Rohingya and the Bengalis majority by marking their presence in Bangladesh as an aberration from the national order requiring extra-state action. Though less commonly discussed, a commensurate number of Rakhine have also migrated to Bangladesh, but as landowners and over a longer period of time. Within Bangladesh, these two communities have existed in antagonism and tension – a tension amplified by the politics of Bengali nationalism and state formation – and as of late recent ethnic rioting in Rakhine state has spread to these communities as well. These relations are mutually constituted with minority politics in Burma and show the resilience of racialised ethinic antagonisms beyond Burma's borders. Based on interviews within these communities I argue that a deeper understanding can be reached through considering the modalities by which these communities draw upon differing sorts of territoriality based on subsistence, occupation, and social negotiation.

Ethnic Issues – Panel 2

4. The Making of Figure of Strangeness in Arakanese society – Alexandra de Mersan, Associate Researcher, Centre Asie du Sud-Est, Paris, France

Abstract: In June 2012, the State of Arakan (Rakhine) was the scene of interfaith (inter-communal) violent conflicts between Muslims and Buddhists. Before these events, there were few studies on Arakan State compare to other places with armed conflicts related to the national-building process. However during the 20th century other outbreaks of violence of the same type occurred in Burma. These conflicts concerned aspects not necessary related to ethnicity strictly speaking but rather they reveal questions on access and participation of non-Buddhist populations to the life of the nation, and on the conception of figure of strangeness.

The presence of populations from the West or "Indians" as there were and are called (the word is used without any pejorative sense) in pre-colonial Arakan is well attested (but more or less recognized), although thousands of people from India settled in the region during the colonial era. For this reason they became the symbol of colonialism and since then have always been seen as foreigners.

In this paper, my aim is to understand, though historical and anthropological approach, the process by which Indians became marginalized to such an extent that they are no more recognized as actors of Arakanese society. How is it that Arakanese rejected from their social, cultural and political space this figure of Indian as a stranger. It will also raise the question of how strangeness is conceived as within or without the Arakanese society. Finally, I shall see how Westerners (colonialist, NGO, scholars, etc.) contribute also to the making of these images or figures.

5. Myanmar/Burma through the Eyes of Displaced Karen Children – Courtney Wittekind, University of Oxford, UK

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to investigate the ways in which the fluidity of identity is enacted in the materiality of lived encounters. Specifically, I am interested in how fragmented, shifting identities of displaced youth map onto physical spaces. How do the "checkerboard" identities (Scott, 2009) of those living on the periphery relate to concrete and imagined geographies? How do children, as actors in their own right, work to re-vision Myanmar in a new, seemingly foreign landscape? Inviting displaced Karen youth to document their surroundings through visual auto-ethnography (in the form of photography) and linked narration, this study sought to offer participants a means of interpreting and framing the world around them. Simultaneously, however the use of visual methods provides a point of analysis through which we can explore how concepts of identity translate to the everyday. Presenting a series of photographs taken by child subjects, paired with narrative and ethnographic detail, I will argue that displaced children actively envision and re-vision the physical world, promoting dual readings of space, and resisting the imposition of a sole identity.

6. Violence Against Ethnic Minorities in Myanmar: Critical Analyses of the Situation at Borderland under the Military Regime – Dipongpu, Assam University

Abstract: Myanmar is a multicultural state that constitutes of more than 135 ethnic groups and has shared value of unity in diversity. However the independence of Myanmar (Burma) in 1948 from the colonial rule prompted insecurity among the ethnic minorities and there upsurge a self-determination movements. This circumstance has resulted to a long term political instability in the state. In spite of that the Government of Myanmar under the Prime Minister U Nu was dwindled on peaceful negotiation with those ethnic groups to uphold a strong federal state. The ethnic groups such as the Kachin, Sagaing, Chin and Naga who are mainly concentrated in the North-West Borderland took advantage of weak state and formed insurgent groups for establishing a

separate state based on ethnicity. This state-of-affairs primarily led to a military takeover in Myanmar in 1962. Henceforth the military junta embarked retaliatory measures against on these perpetrators. The draconian ruled of military in Myanmar withstood a strong violation of human rights, and the situation has thus led to immense humanitarian catastrophe upon the engaging groups. This cataclysm continues as the military juntas disdain the idea of separation of state on contour of ethno-nationalism. The Naga are one of those that suffered more under the repressive military government, and were cornered isolated from the prism international community. The primary attempt of this study is to critically analyze the situation at North-West Borderland under the military regime, examine the suffering of ethnic minorities, and the measures taken after a new political landscape drawn in Myanmar in 1990s.

Ethnic Issues – Panel 3

7. Ethnic Conflict and Pluralism in Burma's Democratic Transition – Anup K. Datta, North Bengal University, Darjeeling, India

Abstract: Today Burma stands amidst a confluence of transition and turmoil. She has rapidly transformed from authoritarianism to democracy and attempting to solve ethnic conflict with pluralist federal structure. While ethnic conflict is deeply embedded in pre-colonial Burma, these conflicts have reinvented in newer forms with wider manifestations because of the existence of military regimes and domination. Burma is engirdled with borders of India, China, Bangladesh, Thailand and Laos. In 1992, the military government listed 135 'national races'. While some scholars identified the existence of 'Buddhism' the state religion – as an assault on minority, others dubbed the 'Burmese way to socialism' by Ne Win, as the root source of ethnic isolation, still another group locates the fragmentation of Burmese Communist Party (BCP) and factional struggles. It seems that the state in Burma is sunk, in a state- formation conflict; it is caught between 'Myanmarization' and 'Buddhistization' in a heterogeneous and plural society. This, indeed, explains the dilemmas of democratic transition and federal state in Myanmar. While 2008 constitution provides the basis for the legislative assembly, the 2010 elections constituted the first step towards democratic consolidation, in January, 2011. However, the challenges for the new state are not only political and cultural synthesis but deeply embedded in ethnic marginalization and economic exclusion. The new land laws and foreign investment policies, to achieve economic growth and poverty alleviations, is not helping the majority of small – holding farmers but benefiting local and International companies in Burma's ethnic borderlands. Land grabbing, mining, unsustainable logging are causing extensive plunder to the livelihoods of local communities and environment, which are being strongly resented by civil society organizations, ethnic political parties and groups. The success of the democratization process would depend on how the state bridges the gap between ethnic land rights and regional development – rooted in the participation and consent of local communities. The paper purports to analyze the ethnic dilemmas and violation of

human rights in Myanmar and would identify the main strains in the process of democratization and constitutional process.

8. Post-Colonial State Building and Dynamics of Ethnic Conflict in Burma – Anindya Batabyal, University of Kalyani, West Bengal, India

Abstract: Burma has been engulfed by ethnic conflict between the majority Burmans and the other various ethnic minority groups from the time of its independence in 1948. Burma or Myanmar as it is called today is an artificial product of colonial rule, with its borders drawn largely for the benefit of the former British Colonial rulers. The Kachin, Shan, Chin and various other ethnic minority groups never wanted to share the country with the majority Burmans within the then newly independent Burma in 1948 but they agreed to do so on the basis of the Panglong Agreement signed between the ethnic minority groups and General Aung San in 1947. The Panglong Agreement promised full internal autonomy for administering the frontier areas, envisaged the creation of a separate Kachin state and guaranteed that the citizens of the frontier areas will enjoy rights and privileges, which are regarded as fundamental in democratic states. However, the ethnic minority groups say that from the moment the majority Burman government took over the reigns of power after independence in 1948, it began to move away from the Panglong Agreement. And after the military coup of 1962, the military regime led by Ne Win completely abandoned the Panglong Agreement and thereby undermining and subjugating the rights and interests of the ethnic minority groups in Burma. For the Kachin and other ethnic groups, the Panglong Agreement even today inspires the search for a federal solution to the country's ethnic problems. On the contrary, the military, for its part, has been stubbornly insisting on the unitary nature of the state for decades. The question now is whether Thein Sein's government is willing to go further, build on the current ceasefires and hold talks on political devolution and wealth-sharing. Just as the Kachin, Karen and others have suffered decades of discrimination at the hands of the Burman state, so too have hundreds of thousands of Muslims. It is primarily because of these factors that the reformers in Thein Sein's military government know that continuing ethnic violence could make the country an unstable and dangerous place, deterring the international investors that the government needs to help rebuild the economy. This paper will advance the proposition that there exists no ethnic group that is prone to separatism or even violent secessionism. But whether any ethnic group will move in the direction of ethno-nationalist path to secession largely depends on the degree of centralization and majoritarianism that accompanies the process of nation-building and on the degree to which diverse cultures within the national space are accorded autonomy and recognition. Analysing the root causes of ethnic conflict in post-colonial Burma illustrates that whenever the state elites based on majoritarian identity have attempted to ride roughshod over the rights and aspirations of the ethnic minorities, the result has been the outbreak of violent ethno-nationalist movements with the aim of achieving secession.

9. Myanmar in the Making: The New State, Constitution, Legal System and Society at Work
    – Tushar Kanti Saha, National University of Lesotho

Abstract: Myanmar is at the threshold of new phase of history. Yet, the recent history of Myanmar has been plagued by ethnic violence and protracted conflicts with government forces in the Karen, Kachin and Shan States. There are about 135 different ethnic minorities in Myanmar comprising approximately a third of the estimated total population of 60 million. The 2008 Constitution of Myanmar in its preamble declares "We, the National people, have been living in unity and oneness, setting up an independent sovereign State and standing tall with pride." One of its basic principles is non-disintegration of National Solidarity: s.6(b) and the right to equality, liberty and justice is recognized in s.21. In final analysis, harmony among the three major ethnic groups in the country - *Karen*, *Kachin*, and *Shan* is vitally important to the stability and reconstruction of the country. Ethnic minorities, comprising almost 40 percent of the population, have long been subjected to persecution and mistreatment. It is true that some settlers, belonging to different ethnicities have migrated to the extremely fertile land around River Irrawaddy at different points of time.

The current phase of tensions in the Western State of Rakhine is another thorny nail to the theory of integration. The relationship between the majority Buddhist Rakhine and the Muslim Rohingya has long been a tinderbox. The Rohingya are not recognized by law, and face official discrimination and harsh treatment, including virtually impenetrable barriers to citizenship and forced labor. Muslims compose only 5% of Myanmar's 60 million population and with the displaced Rohingya minority among the country's population, the democracy is on trial in Myanmar. The rise of *Wirathu,* a radical Buddhist monk who has called for the removal of Muslims and referred to them as the chief cause of conflict is posing a challenge. The main demand of the ethnic minorities is greater autonomy and acceptance of their cultural and religious identity in the process of their integration in Myanmar's mainstream. This is not a tall order since there is no definite separatist tendency in the current struggle. The issue of ethnic divide fuelled the debilitating cycle of conflict, militarization and economic malaise that has long needed to be addressed in Myanmar if any real progress has to be made. These issues are crucial to the resolution of disputes and their re-integration into society. The Paper will investigate the root cause of ethno-religious conflicts in Myanmar and point to the course of reintegration by drawing a roadmap to long term solution.