

Citizenship unsettled: rethinking legal and social identities in conflict-affected borderlands

Bridget Anderson, Natalie Brinham,
Nyi Nyi Kyaw

October 2026

About the series

The XCEPT *Theories of Border Violence Series* publishes theoretically informed research on the causes and consequences of political violence in contemporary borderlands. Authored by leading scholars in the field, the series offers heterodox interpretations of conflict, power and governance in and across globally entangled borders, borderlands and frontiers.

Series editors: Tobias Hagmann and Benedetta Zocchi.
Series design, proofing and typesetting: Jake Barker.

About the authors

Bridget Anderson is Director of the Migrant Futures Institute, Goldsmiths College, University of London. Her most recent book is *Rethinking Migration: Challenging Borders, Citizenship and Race*.

Natalie Brinham is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, University of Bristol. She is the author of *Citizenship and Genocide Cards: IDs, Statelessness and Rohingya Resistance in Myanmar*.

Nyi Nyi Kyaw is a Research Associate at the Department of War Studies, King's College London. He completed the research for this paper while he was a Marie Curie Research Fellow at the School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, University of Bristol. His research interests include identity, migration, and borders, with a focus on Myanmar and Southeast Asia.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank fellow authors of the XCEPT *Theories of Border Violence Series* – Alessandro Rippa, Michael Watts, Nivi Manchanda, Jasnea Sarma, and Nicholas de Genova – for their helpful criticism and comments on this paper and its ideas. In particular, the authors would like to thank the XCEPT team for their work in supporting the publication of the series. Finally, Tobias Hagmann and Benedetta Zocchi were generous in offering constructive suggestions to clarify and expand the arguments contained herein.

About XCEPT

This publication is issued by the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme, funded by UK International Development. XCEPT brings together world-leading experts and local researchers to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour, to inform policies and programmes that support peace. For more information, visit www.xcept-research.org or contact us at info@xcept-research.org.

The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of the UK government.

This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s) should be credited, with the date of the publication and reference to XCEPT. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the material in this document, the author(s) will not be liable for any loss or damages incurred through the use of this document.

Suggested citation: B. Anderson et al, 'Citizenship unsettled: rethinking legal and social identities in conflict-affected borderlands'. London: XCEPT, 2026.



Contents

Summary	4
Introduction	5
1. Citizenship and nation-statehood	6
2. Citizenising violence	9
3. Non-state organisations and their governance practices	14
4. The international statist order and its technocracies	16
5. Navigating citizenising violence	17
6. Technology and the futures of citizenship	21
Conclusion	23
Bibliography	25

Summary

Citizenship is widely hailed as an unquestionable good. Contradicting such celebratory accounts, this paper advances the concept of citizenising violence: harm produced not by the absence of citizenship, but rather its production and enforcement. Borderlands render this violence particularly visible, not because they are exceptional, but because they foreground citizenship's governing logics in their most explicit form: such areas reveal how law is partial, membership is plural and protection is conditional.

Citizenising violence is enabled by, and generated through, the imaginary of citizenship itself, coupled with the state's power to assign, withhold or manipulate membership. The term itself evokes the nature of such violence as an active, productive process whereby citizenship is constituted, enforced and reworked. With this in mind, the paper examines three analytically distinct but interrelated forms of citizenising violence, using cases from Myanmar's borderlands (and elsewhere) to illustrate them: 1) exclusion; 2) hierarchy; and 3) surveillance and repression.

It is important to note that these forms of violence are not the exclusive preserve of the formal state – in fact, they can be produced by any actor that exercises at least partial authority over territory. Meanwhile, at an international level, UN agencies, the World Bank and other international bodies continue to provide financial and technical support for national ID systems and centralised civil registries. Despite the legal identities agenda being couched in the language of rights and inclusion, the reality is that resources aimed at building the state's capacity to identify, register and document people also increase the capacity of said state to surveil, repress and exclude.

The global proliferation of digital identification systems has led to the logics underlying citizenship becoming more automated and less contestable, as well as more easily projected across borders. In light of this, the future of citizenship can be seen as a matter of who is rendered legible within digital systems or, conversely, subject to an enforced administrative invisibility that reproduces and intensifies structural harm.

Borderlands offer a preview of global trends: citizenship becoming more exclusionary through technological means, even as people innovate alternative ways of relating that challenge the limits of state legibility. Amid an unfolding global drive for universal identification, international policies concerned with equity should embrace this multiplicity of belongings, identities and identification practices. This means looking beyond state authorities as the sole providers of identification permitting access to socio-economic opportunities. Instead, international, inter-state and state organisations should adopt approaches that recognise the plural lived experiences of borderlanders and violence-affected people.

Introduction

Citizenship, both as a concept and in practice, is widely hailed as an unquestionable good. According to its European republican origin story, citizenship gave ‘The People’ the means to resist domination by feudal rulers or tyrants. The related postcolonial narrative presents citizenship as emancipatory: by rejecting imperial subjecthood, nationalist forces were able to claim self-determination, citizenship and sovereignty.

In this paper we tell a rather less celebratory story. As will be shown, the global roll-out of the European citizenship ideal has flattened understandings of membership and obscured how state–subject relations are understood. Key elements within the European idea of citizenship – its fixity; association with belonging; entanglement with race and ethnicity; and centrality to the governance of mobility, protection and rights – have hardened into social facts, with deeply problematic consequences. These dynamics play out in particularly harmful ways in borderlands.

Against this backdrop, we advance the concept of *citizenising violence*: harm produced not by the absence of citizenship, but rather its production and enforcement. This shifts the analytical focus away from citizenship as protection unrealised towards citizenship as a technology that actively distributes exposure to violence across borders, institutions and scales of governance.

Studying borderlands can cast light on how citizenship actively governs and unequally distributes rights, membership and mobility. Here, though, it is important to avoid methodological nationalism: that is, taking the nation-state and its borders to be natural, self-evident phenomena. In reality, the border – like the nation-state itself – is not a stable container, but a historical and political artefact. It is contingent, produced and continually remade. To centre borders uncritically risks reifying the very categories and spatial imaginaries that demand interrogation.

Borderlands and frontiers should therefore be regarded as much more than markers delineating the edges of state authority. Rather, they are zones of encounter, where heterogeneous people live lives that confound the state’s desire for fixed identities and singular loyalties. Within these zones, citizenship manifests as an ongoing process: negotiated, imposed, resisted and lived through overlapping affiliations and membership practices. What the centre reads as ambiguity or failure is often, from the perspective of the border, simply everyday life. The multiple attachments, layered identities and diverse claims to membership found in borderlands do not align neatly with state categories, and it is here that citizenship’s dual character is most starkly revealed: on the one hand, it offers the promise of inclusion; on the other, it acts as a mechanism of control. Thus, in this paper, we treat borderlands not as spatial exceptions, but rather an analytic lens through which the violence of citizenship becomes visible.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 1 situates citizenship within its historical and geopolitical context, tracing the global roll-out of European citizenship through colonialism, nationalism and postcolonial state-making. Drawing on this history, the paper introduces the concept of *citizenising violence*. This is elaborated in section 2 via analysis of three interrelated forms of citizenising violence: exclusions; hierarchies; and surveillance and repression. Such violence is produced not only through state bureaucracies, but also through non-state authorities and the international statist order, which are the subject of, respectively, sections 3 and 4. Next, section 5 turns to the everyday practices by which borderland populations navigate, endure and sometimes mitigate citizenising violence. Section 6 then considers the future trajectories of citizenship in light of expanding digital identification infrastructures and global legal identity initiatives. Finally, the conclusion explores the implications of recognising citizenising violence, as well as what borderlands reveal about the limits and possibilities of citizenship.

1. Citizenship and nation-statehood

In the post-war international political order, nation-states became the dominant legitimate organising units of global politics, international relations and policy-making.¹ Within this order, citizenship – the state recognition of an individual's membership – functions as a crucial mechanism for accessing rights. As Arendt famously argued, 'the right to have rights' rests on membership of a political community.² Citizenship therefore occupies an elevated place in both national and international policymaking, structuring the fundamental responsibilities states claim towards their citizens: welfare and security/protection.

This elevation has stark consequences. For those without citizenship – particularly the stateless – exclusion, rights deficits and violence can become normalised. Moreover, the fact that the political imagination is so dominated by nation-statehood and citizenship means that alternative, more flexible, forms of social and political organisation and membership become marginalised, even when they are central to everyday life. Crucially, the globalisation of citizenship occurred through, and in the aftermath of, European colonialism. Colonial administrative practices (e.g. censuses, mapping, linguistic standardisation) created territorial units and demographic classifications that cut across existing social relations, forms of organisation and subjectivities. These then hardened into borders.³

In many parts of the world, precolonial identities were fluid, syncretic and multiple. As Charney notes of precolonial Burma, for example: 'Whether in terms of religion, ethnicity, or culture, it was not unusual for an individual or a group to change their self-identifications in different contexts'.⁴ Amid a context where, as a senior British colonial administrator and ethnographer observed, 'religion indicates but little', British colonial administrators struggled to classify people who spoke multiple languages and identified differently depending on circumstance.⁵ The 1911 imperial census labelled Burma a zone of 'racial instability', lamenting that racial distinctions were 'neither definite, nor logical nor permanent, nor easy to detect', and that communal racial designations might change dramatically across generations.⁶ This is not to suggest precolonial innocence: the Burmese kingdom was hierarchical and expansionist. However, what we would now recognise as ethnic difference was not at that time the organising principle of rule. Instead, what mattered was political loyalty and incorporation into the king's sphere of influence. British rule transformed this political logic – by reading people as British subjects, it hardened, racialised and bureaucratically fixed social categories.

Not only did British rule racialise pre-existing social distinctions, it arranged demographic shifts, including the migration of large numbers of Indians to Burma as labourers, clerks and moneylenders. While Indian traders and officials had long been present in precolonial Burma, colonial Burma was reframed as a

1 S. Sassen, 'Towards post-national and denationalized citizenship', in E. F. Isin and B. S. Turner, eds, *Handbook of citizenship studies* (Sage, 2002); M. Siegelberg, *Statelessness: a modern history* (Harvard University Press, 2020); N. R. Sharma, *Home rule: national sovereignty and the separation of natives and migrants* (Duke University Press, 2020).

2 H. Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism*, 2nd enlarged edition (Allen and Unwin, 1958).

3 B. Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Verso, 1983); Sassen, 'Towards post-national'; T. Winichakul, *Siam mapped: a history of the geo-body of a nation* (University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

4 M. W. Charney, *A history of modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 8.

5 D. Ibbetson, *Report on the Census of the Punjab, 1881* (Calcutta: Government of India, 1883).

6 T. Myint-U, *The hidden history of Burma: race, capitalism, and the crisis of democracy in the 21st century* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), p. 23.

‘plural society’ of racially segregated groups.⁷ Indians thus became symbolically associated with colonial domination, erasing the long entanglement between the Burmese and Indian social worlds. Economic dislocation and the destruction of precolonial social relations were blamed on Indian labourers and moneylenders. When nationalist agitation coalesced around the slogan ‘Burma for the Burmans’, Indians became early targets, leaving hundreds dead in the nationalist riots of 1930–31. In this way, diverse, overlapping notions of membership were reconfigured and codified through imperial state-making, later to be reworked by independent states.⁸

Three critical lessons emerge from this history. First, legal citizenship relies on *citizenising* processes that parallel *migrantising* processes.⁹ Citizenship, long recognised as historically produced and contingent,¹⁰ has more recently been analysed as a regulated norm enacted from below, producing subjects capable of making particular claims.¹¹ Here, we follow scholars such as Sharma, who argue that the formalisation of national citizenship is fundamental to the making of the nation-state form.¹² In doing so, however, we place particular emphasis on citizenising as a *process*. This perspective allows several dynamics to be tackled simultaneously: citizenship’s global roll-out; its continued propagation through statelessness reduction (and other) initiatives; its intergenerational reproduction through birthright citizenship and individual instantiation via naturalisation; and, critically, the ongoing violence it produces. Citizenising is never an end state, but always in the making, promising recognition, rights and inclusion to those made intelligible as legitimate members. In other words, despite promising universality, citizenship always has its others, produced through legal, social and symbolic exclusions.¹³

Second, citizenising is inseparable from nationalising. Never just a legal relationship to the state, the reproduction of citizenship in everyday life is bound up with belonging. Thus, while nationality can denote legal citizenship, it also signifies belonging to the nation understood as a historical, cultural and ancestral community.¹⁴ As such, it is possible to hold legal citizenship while not being recognised as a bona fide member of the national people.¹⁵ In this respect, claims to history, culture and ancestry inevitably become entangled with race and ethnicity.¹⁶ Borderlands in particular expose the imbrication of nationalism and racism. Put simply, racism is not some aberration afflicting state membership regimes – it is embedded

7 J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial policy and practice: a comparative study of Burma and Netherlands India* (Cambridge University Press, 1948).

8 P. Bijl and G. van Klinken, ‘Citizenship in Asian history’, *Citizenship Studies* 23: 3, 2019, pp. 189–205; K.F. Lian, *Citizenship regimes and the politics of difference in Southeast Asia*, Working Paper No. 8, Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, 2013.

9 B. Anderson, ‘New directions in Migration Studies’, *Comparative Migration Studies* 7, 2019, pp. 1–13; B. Anderson and J. Dahinden, ‘Exploring new avenues for knowledge production in migration research: a debate between Bridget Anderson and Janine Dahinden pre and after the burst of the pandemic’, *Swiss Journal of Sociology* 47: 1, 2021, pp. 27–52.

10 See for example: T. H. Marshall, *Citizenship and social class and other essays* (Cambridge University Press, 1950).

11 E. F. Isin, *Being political: genealogies of citizenship* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); E. F. Isin and G. M. Nielsen, eds, *Acts of citizenship* (London: Zed Books, 2008).

12 Sharma, *Home rule*.

13 B. Anderson, *Us and them? The dangerous politics of immigration control* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); É. Balibar, *Citizenship* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015); R. Brubaker, *Citizenship and nationhood in France and Germany* (Harvard University Press, 1992).

14 R. Mongia, *Indian migration and empire: a colonial genealogy of the modern state* (Duke University Press, 2018); Sharma, *Home rule*.

15 B. Anderson, ‘Methodological de-nationalism: de-exceptionalizing displacement, re-exceptionalizing citizenship’, *Humanity* 12: 3, 2022, pp. 300–11.

16 N. Yuval-Davis, *Gender and nation* (Sage, 1997); P. Gilroy, *Against race: imagining political culture beyond the color line* (Harvard University Press, 2000).

within the very concept of citizenship. Even so, the ethnic exclusions that result and their relationship to nationalism vary according to the borderland, population and political context in question.

Third, despite its homogenising ambitions, modern citizenship has not succeeded in erasing differences. In many cases, state governance sought to adapt these differences,¹⁷ fixing identities in order to render populations legible.¹⁸ Anti-colonial nationalism was, in consequence, deeply shaped by racialised hostility, the legacy of which reverberates to this day – the persecution of Rohingya people in Myanmar being but one example.¹⁹

In sum, citizenship promises emancipation while at the same time functioning as a technology of governance, entangled with property regimes, nation-building, and racialised ideas of entitlement and membership. This duality is central to understanding the physical, symbolic and epistemic violence of citizenship – what we describe as *citizenising violence*. As the remainder of the paper demonstrates, these three critical lessons are particularly apparent in borderland areas that lie at the limits of the nation-state.

17 M. Mamdani, *Define and rule: native as political identity* (Harvard University Press, 2012); A. Mbembe, *On the postcolony* (University of California Press, 2001).

18 J. C. Scott, *Seeing like a state: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed* (Yale University Press, 1998).

19 M. Zarni and N. Brinham, 'Reworking the colonial-era Indian peril', *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 24: 1, 2017, pp. 53–76.

2. Citizenising violence

Citizenising violence is enabled by, and generated through, the imaginary of citizenship itself, coupled with the state's power to assign, withhold or manipulate membership. The term is designed to capture the nature of such violence as an active, productive process whereby citizenship is constituted, enforced and reworked. With this in mind, we examine three analytically distinct but interrelated forms of citizenising violence: 1) exclusion; 2) hierarchy; and 3) surveillance and repression. In doing so, we draw on cases from Myanmar's borderlands. Shaped by layered sovereignties and uneven state reach, the country's heterogeneous border regions are illustrative of how citizenising violence operates across different institutional configurations, populations and intensities.

Citizenising exclusions

Citizenising exclusions refers to the formal denial of membership. Granting citizenship to some – i.e. citizenising inclusion – necessarily requires excluding others. Thus, citizenising exclusion can be actively deployed by states as a technology of rights removal. Crucially, the consequences of withholding or invalidating membership, thereby stripping people (particularly negatively racialised groups) of legal personhood and its protections, often extend beyond borders into the spaces where excluded populations seek refuge.

The Rohingya stand as the starkest example of citizenising exclusions. Since the late 1970s, the state has persistently and deliberately denied membership to this predominantly Muslim community, despite having previously recognised them as part of Myanmar and its citizenry. The 1982 Citizenship Law, which ushered in a raft of discriminatory policies aimed at restricting movement, livelihoods and social lives, remains a cornerstone of the structural violence inflicted upon the Rohingya.²⁰ By withdrawing access to food, health, education and other basic rights, the law laid the foundations for the apartheid and genocide inflicted on Rakhine State, where the majority of Rohingya live(d). The mass displacements of Rohingyas into nearby Bangladesh in 1978–79 and again in 1991–92, accompanied by widespread violence, were ostensibly conducted through 'immigration' and 'citizenship scrutiny' operations.²¹ From the early 1990s onwards, Myanmar's military leadership racialised and securitised the borderlands adjoining Bangladesh, portraying the region as a corridor of uncontrolled colonial and post-colonial migration by 'Bengalis' – a label increasingly imposed on the Rohingya, who were recast as outsiders and non-citizens.

The exclusion of Rohingyas from Myanmar's citizenship regime is often assumed, in policy terms, to stem from the wholesale deprivation of registration documents. As such, the proposed remedy is to provide them with 'legal identities'. According to the accounts given by Rohingyas, however, violence often results not from being under-documented, but over-documented as non-citizens. The state's plethora of carceral identification processes also impact Rohingya lives by enabling surveillance and repression – the third variation of citizenising violence, described below.²²

20 A. Parashar and J. Alam, 'The national laws of Myanmar: making of statelessness for the Rohingya', *International Migration* 57: 1, 2019, pp. 94–108.

21 Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 'Unpacking the presumed statelessness of Rohingyas', *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 15: 3, 2017, pp. 269–86.

22 N. Brinham, *Citizenship and genocide cards: IDs, statelessness and Rohingya resistance in Myanmar* (Routledge, 2024).

As of early 2026, Rohingya borderlanders continue to be confined within vast refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, granted very little capacity to shape the political conditions determining their fate. In Bangladesh, the Rohingya are categorised as 'forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals'. This non-citizenship status holds in place various restrictions leading to indebtedness, deskilling, and financial and food insecurities.²³ The lack of judicial oversight and legal protections enjoyed by non-citizen Rohingyas in Bangladesh also exposes them to direct violence from non-state actors, including abductions, forced conscription and extortion by cross-border armed networks.²⁴

The requirement currently placed on over a million Bangladesh-based Rohingya refugees that they undergo Myanmar citizenship or residency scrutiny prior to repatriation further illustrates the operation of citizenship as a technology of exclusion: rather than state absence or neglect, it relies on intensified surveillance, coercion and violence, extending even across international borders.

Box 1. Citizenising exclusions in Pakistan and Cambodia

In Pakistan, colonial and post-colonial histories have led to the exclusion of ethnic Bengalis from the citizenship registry managed by the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA). In 1971, following the liberation of Bangladesh (former East Pakistan) from Pakistan, a compelling narrative casting the ethnic Bengali community as outsiders was produced through educational textbooks, political rhetoric and media. The implementation gap in citizenship laws and registration procedures resulted in a digitised identity infrastructure that enables belonging to be revoked through administrative routines. Now, in everyday encounters at registration counters, law is enacted through the discretionary judgements of officers bound by racialised attitudes towards Pakistani Bengalis.²⁵

In Cambodia, meanwhile, citizenship exclusions are rooted in colonial racial classification regimes that constructed the ethnic Vietnamese as the country's internal Other. French colonial authorities amplified pre-existing Khmer anxieties about Vietnamese expansion, translating them into bureaucratic categories and practices. Since then, fragmented documentation practices have entrenched a permanent temporariness, in which citizenship is indefinitely deferred. Rather than resolving these exclusions, the overlapping systems deployed in contemporary digital identification initiatives have merely reproduced colonial patterns of bureaucratic ambiguity. The resultant legal liminality continues to shape Vietnamese exclusions in Cambodia.²⁶

Citizenising hierarchies

Citizenising hierarchies capture how citizenship operates as a graded form of membership, in which belonging is formally recognised but unevenly valued. Citizenising violence differentially allocates rights, resources and protections according to a racialised/nationalised ordering, with those furthest from the state's ethnic and religious core subject to the least protection and greatest exposure to harm.

23 S. Manzur and T. K. Prova, *Governing at the margins: a patchwork of policies and practices in the Rohingya refugee response in Bangladesh*, XCEPT, Aug. 2023.

24 Manzur and Prova, *Governing at the margins*.

25 H. Iqbal, A. Malik and M. Rashid, 'Suspended identity: statelessness, citizenship challenges and the impermanence of identity status faced by Pakistani Bengalis', *Citizenship Studies* 29: 3–4, 2025, pp. 159–80.

26 L. Canzutti, 'Making digital (non)citizens: digital identity, non-knowledge and statelessness in Cambodia', *Geopolitics* 31: 3, 2026, pp. 1127–51.

Myanmar's racialised governance structures produce hierarchical layers of privilege centred around a Bamar Buddhist nationalist imaginary.²⁷ Borderlanders in Chin, Kachin, Shan and Kayah/Karenni states are, unlike the Rohingya, not formally excluded from citizenship in Myanmar. Nonetheless, violence impacts these areas in the form of citizenising hierarchies. Power relations between borderland peoples and the central state – including what role should be assigned to local and ethnic-led governance bodies – have been contested ever since independence, giving rise to divergent visions of statehood, federalism and devolved governance. This in turn has led to armed conflict, as well as displacements into Thailand, China and India.²⁸

Historically, the borderlands adjoining India – particularly the Chin State–Mizoram region – have been less violently securitised by the state than Myanmar's other borderlands. Up until the 1980s, the area experienced cross-border armed conflict stemming from contestations over the degree of Mizo (who have strong linguistic and kinship ties to Chin groups) self-determination vis-à-vis the central Indian state and Assam, within which Mizoram had once been subsumed. In 1968, the porous realities of these borderlands were formally recognised in a free movement regime between India and Myanmar allowing borderlanders with economic, social and kinship ties to move freely up to 40 kilometres on either side of the border. In 2004, the Indian government reduced this free movement area to 16 kilometres.²⁹ Now, India is constructing large-scale high-tech border infrastructure along the porous India–Myanmar border, which will work in conjunction with India's Aadhaar national ID system to surveil and securitise the region.

Violence in the area has escalated sharply since 2021, reshaping the citizenship experiences of Chin people in both Myanmar and India.³⁰ Border crossings are now largely under the control of various Chin armed groups, which facilitate people's movement between Mizoram and Chin State. Chin are recognised by Myanmar state and society as one of the eight major 'national races', meaning they are not subject to the more direct form of citizenising exclusion endured by the Rohingya. Even so, as a predominantly Christian minority, they have long faced structural violence at the hands of the Bamar Buddhist majority.³¹ Moreover, Chin State has persistently experienced some of the country's highest levels of poverty and food insecurity.

Understanding citizenship as a racialised system, the violent effects of which are structurally rooted but variably expressed, clarifies why some groups (e.g. the Rohingya) experience genocidal forms of citizenising violence, while others (e.g. the Chin) face differently configured yet still profound constraints

27 M. J. Walton, 'The "wages of Burman-ness": ethnicity and Burman privilege in contemporary Myanmar', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43: 1, 2013, pp. 1–27; I. Holliday, 'Addressing Myanmar's citizenship crisis', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 44: 3, 2014, pp. 404–21.

28 For studies on the Myanmar–Thailand borderlands, see: D. Brenner, 'Inside the Karen insurgency: explaining conflict and conciliation in Myanmar's changing borderlands', *Asian Security* 14: 2, 2018, pp. 83–99; S. Banki, 'Porosity on the Thailand–Myanmar border: before and after Myanmar's 2021 coup', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 51: 2, 2025, pp. 526–45; For studies on the Myanmar–China borderlands, see: M. Sadan, ed., *War and peace in the borderlands of Myanmar: the Kachin ceasefire, 1994–2012* (NIAS Press, 2016); D. S. Lawn, *Myanmar's northern borderlands: changing power dynamics since the 2021 military coup*, XCEPT, 2025. For studies on the Myanmar–India borderlands, see: K. McConnachie, 'Boundaries and belonging in the Indo-Myanmar borderlands: Chin refugees in Mizoram', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 31: 3, 2018, pp. 314–33; P. K. Pau, 'Transborder people, connected history: border and relationships in the Indo–Burma borderlands', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 35: 4, 2020, pp. 619–39.

29 International Crisis Group, *A rebel border: India's evolving ties with Myanmar after the coup*, Asia Briefing No. 182, 11 April 2025.

30 H. Russell, 'Introduction to the special issue on displacement to Mizoram', *Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship* 6, 2025.

31 L. H. Sakhong, 'Christianity and Chin identity', in M. Gravers, ed., *Exploring ethnic diversity in Burma* (NIAS Press, 2003); P. Z. Mang, 'The politics of religious conversion among the ethnic Chin in Burma', *Studies in World Christianity* 24: 3, 2018, pp. 188–211.

on their security, mobility and belonging. Together, these two borderland areas reveal how citizenising violence operates as both a structural feature of racialised citizenship regimes and a contingent set of practices shaped by local histories, neighbouring state relations and the positionality of specific communities. On the one hand, the Rohingya experience shows how the state can mobilise citizenship and its withdrawal to produce extreme, targeted violence rooted in racial and religious exclusion. On the other, the Chin case demonstrates how recognition within the national racial hierarchy can mitigate some forms of direct violence while leaving structural inequalities intact. The latter example also points to the ways in which cross-border kinship networks and federal politics can generate either pockets of protection or heightened vulnerability.

Box 2. Citizenising hierarchies in the UK

In the UK, there are multiple racialised categories of British citizenship which grant uneven rights to reside, work and claim protection. These include: British citizen, British Overseas Territories citizen, British Overseas Citizen and British National (Overseas). The ‘Windrush scandal’ exposed how Commonwealth migrants who were legally British were nevertheless in many cases being treated as ‘foreign’ due to documentation gaps in a ‘modernised’ and securitised bureaucracy. This led to detentions, denial of services, and deportations. The UK’s stratified citizenship regime demonstrates how the graded forms of membership created by legal status leave some more vulnerable to exclusion than others.³²

Citizenising surveillance and repression

Citizenising surveillance and repression describes how citizenship is operationalised as a regime of political control through identification systems, surveillance technologies, checkpoints and movement restrictions, thereby rendering certain populations governable as suspects.

The Myanmar–Thailand borderland shows how citizenising violence shifts form as political conditions change. Prior to the 2021 coup, repression in this borderland was primarily shaped by ethnicised state logics rooted in Myanmar’s contested state- and nation-building project vis-à-vis peoples such as the Karen.³³ As such, the Bamar-dominated military targeted the Karen and other groups in ways that mapped directly onto the country’s racialised hierarchy of belonging.³⁴

Following the 2021 coup, this configuration shifted markedly as a broader range of borderland populations – including those without prior histories of armed resistance – became subject to repression. As a consequence, political opponents from Myanmar’s urban and central areas fled to borderland areas under the territorial control of ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) such as the Karen National Union. Thus, what had previously been framed as ethnic conflict morphed into a more diffuse regime of political

32 See the Institute of Historical Research’s ‘[The Windrush scandal in transnational and commonwealth context](#)’ project. See also W. Williams, *Windrush lessons learned review: independent review by Wendy Williams*, HC 93 (Home Office, March 2020).

33 J. Silverstein, ‘Civil war and rebellion in Burma’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 21: 1, 1990, pp. 114–34.

34 M. P. Callahan, *Political authority in Burma’s ethnic minority states: devolution, occupation, and coexistence* (East-West Center, 2007); M. T. Smith, *Burma: insurgency and the politics of ethnicity* (Zed Books, 1991); M. T. Smith, *State of strife: the dynamics of ethnic conflict in Burma* (East-West Center, 2007); C. Fink, ‘Militarization in Burma’s ethnic states: causes and consequences’, *Contemporary Politics* 14: 4, 2008, pp. 447–62; International Crisis Group, *Identity crisis: ethnicity and conflict in Myanmar*, Asia Report No. 312, 28 Aug. 2020.

persecution, demonstrating how citizenising violence can shift its justifications, targets and modalities while still retaining its core function of regulating belonging and dissent.

Identification and registration infrastructures ostensibly designed to govern citizenship and immigration have, since the coup, been weaponised to repress political opposition. Myanmar's vast network of checkpoints, operating in conjunction with national ID cards linked to digital surveillance systems, has not only allowed the military regime to curtail the movement of dissidents to the borderlands, but also to limit borderlander mobility to urban and central areas.³⁵ Importantly, as well as citizenship status, Myanmar's ID system records ethnicity, religion and place of birth. These categories are used to flag borderlanders – and others – as 'suspect', triggering heightened scrutiny, interrogation and checkpoint violence. The security forces also use household lists and overnight guest registration to flush out borderlanders and identify individuals displaced from conflict-affected areas.

The ongoing digitisation of the ID system and civil registries, alongside mandatory SIM card registration, has raised serious concerns among opposition groups about expanded surveillance. This move towards digital authoritarianism has been further reinforced by the launch of the Person Scrutinization and Monitoring System in 2024 and the enactment of a Cybersecurity Law in 2025.³⁶

The military regime's citizenising surveillance and repression has a transnational reach, pursuing political dissidents into Thailand. There, undocumented or under-documented escapees are exposed to surveillance, exploitation and extortion by Thai authorities, particularly in borderland areas.³⁷ Worse still, they are required to produce Myanmar national ID cards and household registration documents in order to regularise their status via the Myanmar embassy in Bangkok or consulate in Chiang Mai, drawing them back into the junta's grasp. Since September 2025, Myanmar passports issued in Thailand have been stamped to indicate their validity *only within Thailand*, effectively trapping holders within the kingdom.

35 H. H. Aung, 'Myanmar military junta's increasingly powerful surveillance ecosystem over four years', Myanmar Internet Project, publ. online 26 April 2025.

36 Human Rights Myanmar, 'Privacy violations and discrimination in Myanmar', publ. online 9 June 2025; Justice For Myanmar, 'Silk Road of surveillance: the role of China's Geedee networks and Myanmar telecommunications operators in the Junta's digital terror campaign', 2025; W. P. Myint and D. Bamrungchok, 'Five years after coup, Myanmar's digital authoritarianism enters new phase', Tech Policy Press, 13 March 2026; I. Poetranto, 'The architecture of digital repression', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, publ. online 10 March 2026.

37 Human Rights Watch, '*I'll never feel secure*: undocumented and exploited: Myanmar nationals in Thailand', July 2025.

3. Non-state organisations and their governance practices

The three forms of citizenising violence outlined in the previous section are not the exclusive preserve of the formal state – in fact, they can be produced by any actor that exercises at least partial authority over territory. Such dynamics are particularly prominent in borderlands, which tend to sit at the periphery of state authority while also experiencing the sharp end of state or state-like bordering projects. Here, a multitude of overlapping cross-border and local governance practices adapt alongside, or in opposition to, state practices. Both state and non-state/state-aspirant groups seek legitimacy by drawing on military and administrative structures, which grant at least some measure of control over territories and populations.

Such claims are, however, always contested and control is rarely absolute – more usually manifesting as parallel governance structures with fluctuating spheres of influence and power. Against this backdrop, non-state/state-aspirant organisations may exercise control over the movement of goods and people in to, out of and through their territories; (re)distribute resources to populations living within their territories via taxation and public service provision; and provide security and protection through implementing judicial systems.

Myanmar's borderlands are testament to these dynamics. Historically, a plethora of non-state groups, including EAOs and their administrative wings, have exerted varying degrees of control over these areas. In doing so, they have frequently sought to fulfil governance functions (e.g. judicial systems, security forces) that overlap with those of formal state institutions.³⁸ Since the 2021 coup, the authoritative reach of non-state and de facto state organisations has continued to fluctuate amid often violent contestation with the central state. Alongside the parallel governance structures produced by these non-state actors, parallel varieties of citizenising violence are enacted.

The most visible forms of post-2021 citizenising violence produced through non-state groups relate to Rohingya populations in Rakhine State under the control of the Arakan Army (AA) and its administrative wing, the United League of Arakan (ULA). Driven by an exclusionary Rakhine ethnoreligious nationalism, the ULA/AA's governance practices contradict the more egalitarian statements put out by its public relations departments.³⁹ Like the Myanmar military, the ULA/AA exercises citizenising violence, refusing to recognise Rohingya histories in the region of Rakhine. The ULA/AA's administrative system mirrors that of the state, maintaining family registration documents and overnight guest registration requirements. While the ULA/AA does not issue its own ID cards, it does issue restrictive checkpoint travel permissions for non-citizen Rohingya based on the former state system, known as Form 4s. Rohingyas living in ULA/AA-controlled areas report that the violence they are experiencing mimics the citizenising violence perpetrated under both the military regime and the pre-coup civilian government. This manifests as

38 D. Brenner, *Rebel politics: a political sociology of armed struggle in Myanmar's borderlands* (Cornell University Press, 2019); A. Ong, *Stalemate: autonomy and insurgency on the China–Myanmar border* (Cornell University Press, 2023); A. M. Thawngmung and A. South, *Revolutionary regimes: emerging forms of governance in post-coup Myanmar* (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2025).

39 K. S. Hlaing, 'Understanding the Arakan Army', Stimson Center, publ. online 21 April 2023; N. Lin, 'The Arakan Army's struggle for regional sovereignty: imagining a new future union', TNI, publ. online 4 April 2025; S. Mon, 'From state to nation: The Arakan Army's ascent in post-coup Myanmar', Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), publ. online 31 October 2025.

restrictions on movement; economic exclusion; property confiscation; arbitrary arrests; abuses tied to non-citizenship status; mass violence; and deportations.⁴⁰

Citizenising violence under non-state governance can also arise due to the absence of institutional protective mechanisms. In such circumstances, the borderland becomes a ‘state of exception’ where law and judicial process are suspended,⁴¹ as evidenced by the cyber-scam compounds in the Karen National Army (KNA)-controlled borderlands around Myawaddy along the Myanmar–Thailand border. Here, thousands of kidnapped foreign nationals live and labour outside judicial protections. These arrangements exemplify what has been described as ‘compound capitalism’ or ‘compound governance’.⁴² The area is governed by a layered non-state assemblage of actors – including the KNA, allied militia commanders, local strongmen and business elites, and transnational partners – who exercise territorial control, regulate economic activity and provide protection in the absence (or suspension) of state law.

As a form of rule, this militia capitalist border governance should not be confused with the personalised armed domination and predatory extraction of warlordism. Rather, armed actors exercise institutionalised authority in order to regulate territory, facilitate accumulation and allocate protection. Crucially, this mode of governance produces citizenship-like inclusion for recognised members (in this case, commanders, families, contractors, trusted intermediaries, etc.), who receive protection, predictability and livelihoods. By contrast, those classified as outsiders (the kidnapped workers) are governed only as labouring bodies.

Box 3. Yazidis under ISIS governance

The experience of Yazidis under ISIS territorial control provides another example of institutionalised violence in non-state governance structures. ISIS established parallel administrative systems – including courts, taxation, security forces and public services – that mimicked state functions, while systematically excluding Yazidis from legal protections. This governance framework facilitated rather than prevented mass atrocities, establishing a violent hierarchy of belonging that explicitly targeted Yazidis for extermination, enslavement and displacement. The institutionalisation of violence facilitated by these arrangements reflected ISIS’s ideological construction of citizenship as exclusive and hierarchical, with non-Muslim communities positioned outside the protections afforded its declared citizens.⁴³

40 Rohingya Human Rights Initiative, *The ashes of Arakan: ongoing atrocities against Rohingya in the Rakhine State*, 2025; Fortify Rights, ‘International Criminal Court: expand investigation to include Arakan Army massacre of Rohingya in Hoyyar Siri’, publ. online 9 April 2026.

41 G. Agamben, *State of exception* (University of Chicago Press, 2008); A. Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, *Public Culture* 15: 1, 2003, pp. 11–40.

42 I. Franceschini, L. Li and M. Bo, ‘Compound capitalism: a political economy of Southeast Asia’s online scam operations’, *Critical Asian Studies* 55: 4, 2023, pp. 575–603.

43 H. A. Mohammed, ‘The last genocide against the Yazidi people’, *Review of Middle East Studies* 56: 1, 2022, pp. 108–22.

4. The international statist order and its technocracies

At the international level, citizenised violence is enabled by the rigid notion of citizenship underpinning the international political order, as well as the primacy given to states as the legitimate unit of political organisation. Development logics direct resources towards building the capacity of state organisations, which are viewed as the legitimate providers of welfare and protection to citizens. UN agencies, the World Bank and other international bodies promote universal legal identities by providing financial and technical support for national ID systems and centralised civil registries. People's legal and citizenship status are foundational to these systems. Anyone falling outside these citizenisation categories is excluded from national and international statistics, and thus national and international policy. In programming terms, therefore, identifying 'stateless' and 'irregular' people is viewed as a critical first step on the way to providing more inclusive welfare and rights.⁴⁴ Here, the aim is to render these populations legible through 'legal identities', before setting them on a trajectory towards citizenship, as recognised by at least one state.

Despite the legal identities agenda being couched in the language of rights and inclusion, the willingness of states to buy in stems mainly from border security and surveillance, efficiency, and the prevention of (citizenship ID/voter registration) fraud. Thus, resources aimed at building the state's capacity to identify, register and document people also increase the capacity of said state to surveil, repress and exclude. In this way, the universal identification agenda risks pushing those already subject to citizenising exclusions and hierarchies into an increasingly carceral inter-state system of surveillance and immobilities.⁴⁵

The Rohingya exemplify how international-level citizenship logics have helped consolidate citizenising violence. International agencies' promotion of legal identities as a 'pathway to citizenship' for 'stateless' people in Myanmar served to legitimise their forced registration and documentation. These violent forms of registration ran alongside a broader 'slow' process of citizenised exclusions, ultimately producing the identity destruction that Rohingyas associate with the genocidal violence of 2016–2017.⁴⁶

Box 4. The promotion of legal identities in the Dominican Republic

The negative impacts of the 'legal identity for all' agenda, promoted through global development frameworks and World Bank-backed civil registry modernisation, can be seen in the case of the Dominican Republic. Having received international support to digitise and standardise its civil registration and ID systems, the authorities proceeded to retroactively scrutinise documents held by Dominicans of Haitian descent. This ultimately enabled policies and court rulings that recast long-recognised citizens as foreigners in their own country. In this way, inclusionary development infrastructure was transformed into embedded mechanisms facilitating denationalisation and statelessness.⁴⁷

44 B. Manby, 'The Sustainable Development Goals and "legal identity for all": "first, do no harm"', *World Development* 139, 2021.

45 N. Brinham and A. Johar, 'Refugee experiences of identity documents and digitisation in India and Myanmar', *Forced Migration Review* 73, April 2024.

46 Brinham, Citizenship and genocide; UNHRC, *Detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar: report to the 42nd Session of the Human Rights Council*, A/HRC/42/CRP.5, 16 September 2019.

47 E. Hayes de Kalaf, 'How some countries are using digital ID to exclude vulnerable people around the world', *The Conversation*, 3 Aug. 2021.

5. Navigating citizenising violence

While borderland populations are never just passive recipients of citizenised violence, it would be a mistake to cast their methods of coping as simply a form of escape or resistance. Instead, their attempts at navigating citizenised violence are best viewed as an uneven, resource-dependent set of practices by which people endure, mitigate and/or temporarily rework the harms produced by citizenship regimes. In practice, this translates into three broad responses: 1) navigating pathways to legal status; 2) navigating access to social and economic resources; and 3) navigating access to protections.

Navigating pathways to legal status

Citizenship documents function not only as markers of legal membership, but strategic resources. They can enable socio-economic mobility within and beyond borderlands; certify educational credentials and skills; facilitate access to formal employment and banking systems; and permit travel through official channels. Given this, borderlanders may seek pathways that lie at the intersection of formal state systems and informal social relations, drawing on social networks, intermediaries and overlapping forms of membership to access legal statuses.

In practice, borderlanders often obtain national identity cards and citizenship recognition from Myanmar, India, Bangladesh, Thailand and other states in the region via semi-regular or irregular means. Rather than engaging with the state, these modes of accessing citizenship rely on social relations and social capital linked to kinship, ethnic organisations, community groups, churches or political networks. In doing so, they unsettle dominant political and technocratic imaginaries of citizenship as a direct, transparent relationship between an individual and the state. From a borderland perspective, dominant understandings of citizenship as a bounded social contract between citizen and state are destabilised by distance from central authorities, plurality of affiliations, and layered systems of mediation. The social capital, financial resources and proximity to intermediary networks required to obtain documentation are, however, unequally distributed. As a result, those most exposed to citizenising violence are often those least equipped to navigate their way out of it.

The Myanmar–Thailand borderland illustrates how these dynamics play out. In the immediate aftermath of Myanmar’s 2021 coup, several thousand people – largely political activists, dissidents and officials – found it difficult to remain in Thailand legally, regardless of whether they had crossed the border through regular or irregular channels. Many were compelled to live precariously and invisibly, avoiding both Thai enforcement and cross-border repression. While doing so, some sought Thai citizenship documents and/or routes to regularise their legal status as Myanmar ‘migrants’ in Thailand. Eventually, those with access to the necessary financial and social resources were able to stabilise their legal position. In doing so, they had to navigate three intersecting dimensions of illegality: 1) timing of arrival; 2) availability of labour regularisation schemes; and 3) location within Thailand after border crossing.

The timing of an individual’s border crossing significantly shapes the possibilities open to them. Particularly significant in this regard is eligibility for Thailand’s periodic labour regularisation schemes, which enable illegalised migrants to secure temporary legal status and with it a degree of protection. By contrast, those ineligible for such schemes find themselves much more vulnerable to extortion, arrest and deportation.

Place of residence within Thailand also conditions exposure to enforcement, as well as access to navigational resources. While those in border districts are often more visible to security forces, they remain closer to ethnic networks, community organisations, and brokers familiar with local bureaucratic practices. On the other hand, those who move to urban areas and cities such as Chiang Mai and Bangkok can blend into larger migrant populations, where random street immigration checks are almost non-existent.

Ultimately, the capacity to navigate citizenising violence only serves to highlight the endurance of such violence, which remains unevenly survived rather than resolved.

Box 5. Accessing citizenship in Côte d'Ivoire

Access to citizenship in Côte d'Ivoire is, according to Banégas and Cutolo, routinely navigated through informality and intermediaries, rather than state procedures.⁴⁸ Faced with incomplete civil registration, high costs and bureaucratic obstacles, Ivorians rely on document brokers (*margouillats*), local officials, family networks and other authorities to obtain and modify identity documents.

These intermediaries translate state requirements, arrange attestations, and sometimes produce or legitimise 'proper fakes' (such as the so-called '*René Caillié*' documents). In this way, individuals can pragmatically claim citizenship in everyday life. The introduction of biometric IDs has failed to halt these informal practices, which adapt accordingly. Thus, rather than a purely legal status conferred by a centralised state, citizenship in this context is better understood as a socially negotiated process embedded in networks of mediation.

Navigating access to social and economic resources

Local and semi-formal organisations in Myanmar's borderlands – including EAOs and refugee leadership structures – have proved vital to the provision of services and welfare, as well as the administration and distribution of international aid.⁴⁹ Here, socio-economic opportunities and social support may be obtained via a range of affiliations and allegiances, including religious groups; kinship and clan-based membership; political and ideological affiliation; and labour and commercial networks. This exemplifies how, in contexts shaped by intense, ongoing citizenising violence, access to economic and social resources is rarely mediated primarily through state or inter-state structures, which tend to be exclusionary, hierarchising and otherwise actively hostile.

Armed conflict and political violence routinely disrupt the delivery of welfare, aid and development assistance via official state channels.⁵⁰ If they are to access territories and populations, local and international service providers must find ways to navigate the complex, shifting fault-lines separating state authorities, non-state armed actors and community-based organisations. This requires negotiations with semi-official or unofficial governance arrangements, including ethnic organisations, religious institutions, refugee leadership structures and other informal intermediaries. For international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), such channels present significant practical and ethical challenges. Delivering assistance via non-state structures, or even moving goods and services across unofficial

48 R. Banégas and A. Cutolo, *ID wars in Côte d'Ivoire: a political ethnography of identification and citizenship* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

49 Lawn, *Myanmar's northern borderlands*; Manzur and Prova, *Governing at the margins*.

50 This and the following paragraph draw on unpublished findings from fieldwork by Nyi Nyi Kyaw in Thailand and India (under Marie Curie Fellowship Grant), and Natalie Brinham in Bangladesh and India (under Leverhulme Fellowship) 2024–2026.

international or internal borders, may be construed as ‘nepotistic’, ‘untransparent’ or ‘unaccountable’, potentially running counter to state-centred donor requirements. From the perspective of those living in borderlands, however, these informal, relational networks are rarely just temporary substitutes for formal provision – rather, they are the primary means by which economic survival and social support are accessed.

The fluid local, cross-border and informal networks that borderlanders are a part of frequently cut across – and may predate – formal state governance structures. In Kachin border areas, for example, displaced families often receive food, cash support and referrals to basic healthcare from church-based networks and Kachin civil society organisations that coordinate with, yet remain distinct from, international agencies. Along the Thailand–Myanmar border, Karen and Karenni refugee camp committees and faith-based organisations mediate between INGOs and camp residents. In doing so, they organise registration lists, oversee the distribution of rations and resolve everyday disputes, acting as de facto welfare administrations. In the Chin highland borderlands, where formal services are minimal, households have long utilised overlapping church, kinship and migrant networks to secure remittances, emergency food and transport out of conflict-affected villages. This was the case even before the 2021 coup, illustrating how economic survival in such areas often hinges on relational rather than state-centred channels of support.

Navigation in this sense is not a deviation from governance, but rather a constitutive feature of how resources are secured in the shadow of citizenising violence. The patchwork of borderland welfare and social support touched on above persists not only during wartime but during relatively peaceful periods. Moreover, it cuts across international borders and state structures, standing in marked contrast to the neat governable categories associated with states and citizenship. Nevertheless, the ingenuity of these arrangements should not obscure their fragility: informal networks are vulnerable to conflict, donor conditionality and political disruption. Ultimately, their very existence is the result of the citizenising violence that renders formal provision inaccessible or unsafe.

Box 6. Autonomous administration in Rojava

During the war in Syria, the Kurdish-led Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) organised welfare and resource distribution via a decentralised, movement-based system in the Rojava region. Local councils and communes coordinated the distribution of subsidised food and agricultural cooperatives. In addition, they regulated access to land and water in order to maintain subsistence. Meanwhile, basic healthcare and education was provided through locally run clinics and schools. In many cases, these were reliant on volunteer labour, women’s organisations and parallel institutions created by the Kurdish movement to fill the gaps left by state withdrawal.

Amid conditions of military threat, international non-recognition and scarcity/embargo, these practices rooted welfare in solidarity, self-organisation and survival governance.⁵¹ Throughout, stateless Syrian Kurds and people of all ethnic backgrounds received equal access to resources and welfare, bypassing the problems associated with citizenising exclusions.⁵²

51 A. Aslan, *Anticapitalist economy in Rojava: the contradictions of revolution in the Kurdish struggle* (Daraja Press, 2023).

52 T. McGee, ‘Implications of legal identity documentation issued by the Kurdish-led self administration in Northern Syria: competition and compromise with the central state’, *Citizenship Studies* 27: 7, 2023, pp. 835–49.

Navigating access to protections

State protections associated with citizenship traditionally incorporate legal and judicial protections, as well as the protection of people's physical safety via institutionalised security services. Borderlanders, however, rarely navigate access to physical and legal protections through a singular relationship with a central state. Instead, they draw on plural, overlapping, often competing jurisdictions administered by ethnic, armed and customary authorities.

In Myanmar's borderlands, a plethora of EAOs and People's Defence Forces claim to provide protection from external threats, including state violence and the incursion of other armed or criminal groups into ethnic-held territories. Some have also established legal protection systems. In the Chin borderlands, for example, a tapestry of overlapping jurisdictions has emerged. Here, residence, land use, property rights, and crime and punishment are adjudicated according to multiple legal frameworks, including the Myanmar junta's laws; the Chinland Constitution; non-state administrative systems such as that of the ULA in AA-controlled areas; customary law; and India's legal frameworks. The resourcefulness with which borderlanders navigate these plural legal landscapes should not, however, obscure the fundamental asymmetry at the heart of citizenising violence: the burden of navigation falls on those most exposed to it.

Box 7. Plural protection landscapes in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Plurality is a pronounced feature of the protection landscape in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, where armed groups, customary chiefs and international peacekeeping forces all claim protective authority over borderland populations. These overlapping claims produce competing protection hierarchies, with civilians forced to navigate providers whose legitimacy derives from distinct sources: coercive capacity, customary and ancestral authority, or internationally mandated obligation.⁵³

53 J. Verweijen, 'Protection as a spectrum: The different faces of protection in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo', in J. Krause et al., eds., *Civilian protective agency in violent settings: a comparative perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 115–32; A. W. Dorn, 'Peacekeepers in combat: protecting civilians in the D.R. Congo', *Journal of International Peacekeeping* 26: 1, 2023, pp. 31–54.

6. Technology and the futures of citizenship

As touched on in the preceding sections, UN agencies, the World Bank and major corporate actors are – under the banner of inclusion, development and efficiency – helping states across the world develop digitised ID systems and centralised civil registries. Through such means, citizenship is being reconfigured into a technocratic, data-driven category. Rather than expanding membership, however, these systems merely serve to harden the boundaries of belonging.

By creating a ‘single source of truth’ via biometrics and interoperable databases, digital ID infrastructures tighten the links between proof of identity, proof of residence and proof of citizenship.⁵⁴ Thus, for those with multiple, cross-border, undocumented or difficult-to-verify identities (borderlanders, migrants, long-settled minorities), the push for digital legibility produces new forms of exclusion, illegality and dependency. Interoperable databases regulate mobility, welfare, employment, communication and financial participation.⁵⁵ Citizenship comes to function as an entry point for accessing state and state-regulated private services, with everyday practices – whether enrolling a child in school or transferring money – increasingly reframed as anomalies requiring correction should the documentation available not align with state expectations. At the same time, state authorities take advantage of these systems to deepen surveillance, enforce borders and extend their control over citizens beyond territorial limits.⁵⁶

Instead of resolving the violences associated with citizenship regimes, digitalisation therefore serves to intensify citizenising violence, layering administrative disablement onto the violences of exclusion, hierarchisation and surveillance. Borderlanders (and others) are rendered unverified, inconsistent or non-compliant within data systems. The result is a less visible, less contestable and more easily routinised form of violence. By suspending an ID number, denying biometric verification or marking someone as ‘unverified’, states can instantly strip individuals of access to mobility, livelihoods, services and protection. Digital infrastructures also enable the state to act in advance of political claims, governing populations through continuous verification and disciplining individuals algorithmically inferred to pose a threat.

Through biometric registration, interoperable databases, and consular oversight, states extend citizenising violence beyond their borders, governing citizens and non-citizens (migrant workers, refugees and borderlanders especially) across transnational spaces. Here, Myanmar’s post-2021 junta stands as a prominent example. Through exerting its extraterritorial citizenship-based control, the regime has been able to force migrant workers to obtain specific identity documents; levy taxes abroad; and use consular systems to monitor political dissent. As all this implies, borderlands are no longer merely sites where citizenship is negotiated – they have become testing grounds for technologies that allow citizenship’s exclusions to travel, scale and persist far from national territory.

In light of the above, the future of citizenship can be seen as a matter of who is rendered legible within digital systems or, conversely, subject to an enforced administrative invisibility that reproduces and

54 S. Masiero, *Unfair ID* (Sage, 2024); Z. Rahman, *Machine readable me: the hidden ways tech shapes our identities* (Edinburgh: 404 Ink, 2023).

55 J. R. McConvey, ‘New digital public infrastructure program from World Bank aims for inclusivity’, Biometric Update, publ. online 7 October 2025; C. Felt and W. LaRivee, *Exploring the global digital ID landscape*, Atlantic Council, 2025; World Economic Forum, *Reimagining digital ID*, June 2023.

56 M. Aizeki, M. Mahmoudi and C. Schupfer, *Resisting borders and technologies of violence* (Haymarket Books, 2024).

intensifies structural harm. Such a future – in which citizenising violence becomes ever more diffuse, automated and difficult to contest, even as it is framed in the language of inclusion, efficiency and development – does not signal a departure from the violences traced in this paper. Rather, they are simply being consolidated in new form. This is evidenced by India's national e-ID system, Aadhaar, which has been hailed internationally for improving social inclusion and bureaucratic efficiency. Despite these supposed gains, the government's increasingly restrictive citizenship and social welfare regimes have impacted refugees – as well as racialised and minoritised others such as Bengali Muslims in Assam – in ever more negative ways.⁵⁷

The interoperability of national digital ID systems and refugee digital ID systems, typically administered by national government bodies in conjunction with UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency), has also provoked alarm among borderlanders, who often draw strategically on multiple forms of belonging and registration. Such database interoperability can transform administrative inconsistencies arising from these strategies into evidence of illegality.⁵⁸ In Kenya's borderlands, for example, biometric systems have been applied to separate citizenship and refugee databases, with local residents – especially ethnic Somalis with kinship ties that transcend international borders – sometimes registered in both databases. In the push for interoperable citizenship and refugee databases, individuals who have 'double registration' are rendered permanently 'suspect' due to contradictory or mismatched records. New vulnerabilities are therefore produced through cross-checking and data sharing, often leading to exclusion from services and/or loss of legal status.

Digital infrastructures can make citizenship harder to obtain, easier to revoke and more consequential for everyday life.⁵⁹ Thus, rather than citizenship becoming more inclusive or universal, as global ID advocates claim, it may just as easily become more stratified, automated and punitive. Regardless, the future of citizenship is not predetermined. Borderland populations demonstrate that even as digital systems expand, people continue to find ways of navigating exclusion through alternative forms of membership, whether religious networks, ethnic organisations, kinship structures, informal labour brokers or cross-border solidarities. It is these forms of belonging that often provide the protection, access to welfare, dispute resolution or mobility opportunities that the state refuses.

57 M. A. Bhat, '(Un)credible citizen: citizenship dispossession, documents and the politics of the rule of law', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 50: 19, 2024, pp. 4867–90.

58 K. Weitzberg, 'Keeping people out of camps: biometric technologies, contested sovereignty, and border practices within humanitarian spaces', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 51: 14, 2025, pp. 3590–609.

59 M. Madianou, 'Technocolonialism: digital innovation and data practices in the humanitarian response to refugee crises', *Social Media + Society* 5: 3, 2019.

Conclusion

Citizenship cannot be reduced to an unevenly distributed legal status. Rather, it is a productive, violent process that actively organises exclusion, hierarchy and surveillance, and thereby exposure to harm. From colonial classification to contemporary digital infrastructures, citizenship has consistently functioned as a technology that promises inclusion while at the same time producing 'others'. By theorising citizenising violence, we have shown how harm emerges not only through exclusion from citizenship, but its enactment across states, non-state actors and international technocratic regimes. Borderlands render this violence particularly visible, not because they are exceptional, but because they foreground citizenship's governing logics in their most explicit form: in such areas, law is partial, membership is plural and protection is conditional. The proliferation of digital identification systems has led to these logics becoming more automated and less contestable, as well as more easily projected across borders. Recognising citizenising violence therefore compels a rethinking of citizenship itself: instead of a settled endpoint of political progress, it is better understood as an unsettled, ongoing process, the future(s) of which will shape how vulnerability, mobility and belonging are differentially distributed in an increasingly interconnected world.

Having established that citizenised violence and citizenship classification schemes produce violence in borderlands, the question arises of what can be done about it. The challenges for policy-makers can be broken down into three categories.

Recognising plurality in identification practices

As citizenship becomes more technologically rigid, so the plural, relational forms of membership that flourish in borderlands become ever more vital. Borderlanders demonstrate that equitable access to security and support does not hinge on the institutions that formalise identity, but on the creative ways people negotiate, resist and reconfigure those systems. In this sense, the future of citizenship is neither linear nor uniform: most likely, it will involve hyper-bureaucratized digital citizenship coexisting alongside informal, relational and cross-border modes of relating.

Borderlands, where these tensions are most acute, offer a preview of global trends: citizenship becoming more exclusionary through technological means, even as people innovate alternative ways of relating that challenge the limits of state legibility. Amid an unfolding global drive for universal identification, international policies concerned with equity should embrace this multiplicity of belongings, identities and identification practices. This means looking beyond state authorities as the sole providers of identification permitting access to socio-economic opportunities. Instead, international, inter-state and state organisations should adopt approaches that recognise the plural lived experiences of borderlanders and violence-affected people.

Working with 'illegibilities'

The international policy landscape is dominated by the principles of identification and enumeration, which are seen as vital for informing programming and evidencing impact. When it comes to delivering welfare, protections and rights, however, such an approach is ill-suited to the overlapping, fluid, often illegible forms of membership that sit alongside the neat categories favoured by states and their citizenship regimes.

The pursuit of data and identities as baseline indicators justifying resourcing frequently serves to exacerbate exclusions associated with being unregistered, uncounted or undocumented by states. Thus, rather than ask ‘How do we identify stateless people or undocumented people?’ or ‘How do we count invisible populations?’, a better starting point for policy-makers would be ‘How do we work with people who are not identified and not counted by states?’ or ‘How do we resource and justify interventions with limited and unverifiable data?’.

Rethinking power dynamics in identification technologies

State-centred arguments paint the universal provision of legal identities as improving social inclusion. Recognising that violence is generated by the production – rather than just the absence – of citizenship undermines such assumptions: in fact, supporting upgraded ID systems and bordering infrastructures risks resourcing and legitimising citizenising violence. Scholarship on digital IDs and Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) has underlined the importance of individuals retaining greater control over their data if they are to circumvent harms. Here, the need for state recognition of one’s identity when navigating socio-economic worlds represents the intractable obstacle to realising such ambitions, reinforced by an international political order that naturalises the state as the only viable unit of political organisation.

Against this backdrop, humanitarian and human rights programming must take proper account of the perils of international ‘technical expertise’ and resources being provided to states engaged in citizenship-related digitisation projects. More generally, sensitivity to citizenised violence should be factored into the design and implementation of any intervention in which the distribution of welfare and protections is reliant on civil registries, national ID systems or DPIs.

Knowledge production is, inevitably, responsive to international policy and politics. Given this, it is unsurprising that much of the relevant research centres around the state, citizenship and other statist framings. Our final challenge, then, is for our fellow researchers in the field: How can we ensure our work unsettles the structures of methodological statism while still remaining relevant to policy-makers?

Bibliography

Agamben, G., *State of exception* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

Aizeki, M., M. Mahmoudi and C. Schupfer, *Resisting borders and technologies of violence* (Haymarket Books, 2024).

Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Verso, 1983).

Anderson, Bridget, *Us and them? The dangerous politics of immigration control* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Anderson, Bridget, 'New directions in Migration Studies', *Comparative Migration Studies* 7, 2019, pp. 1–13.

Anderson, Bridget, 'Methodological de-nationalism: de-exceptionalizing displacement, re-exceptionalizing citizenship', *Humanity* 12: 3, 2022, pp. 300–11.

Anderson, Bridget and J. Dahinden, 'Exploring new avenues for knowledge production in migration research: a debate between Bridget Anderson and Janine Dahinden pre and after the burst of the pandemic', *Swiss Journal of Sociology* 47: 1, 2021, pp. 27–52.

Arendt, H., *The origins of totalitarianism*, 2nd enlarged edition (Allen and Unwin, 1958).

Aslan, A., *Anticapitalist economy in Rojava: the contradictions of revolution in the Kurdish struggle* (Daraja Press, 2023).

Aung, H. H., 'Myanmar military junta's increasingly powerful surveillance ecosystem over four years', Myanmar Internet Project, publ. online 26 April 2025.

Balibar, É., *Citizenship* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015).

Banégas, R. and A. Cutolo, *ID wars in Côte d'Ivoire: a political ethnography of identification and citizenship* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

Banki, S., 'Porosity on the Thailand–Myanmar Border: before and after Myanmar's 2021 coup', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 51: 2, 2025, pp. 526–45.

Bhat, M. A., '(Un)credible citizen: citizenship dispossession, documents and the politics of the rule of law', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 50: 19, 2024, pp. 4867–90.

Bijl, P. and G. van Klinken, 'Citizenship in Asian history', *Citizenship Studies* 23: 3, 2019, pp. 189–205.

Brenner, D., 'Inside the Karen insurgency: explaining conflict and conciliation in Myanmar's changing borderlands', *Asian Security* 14: 2, 2018, pp. 83–99.

Brenner, D., *Rebel politics: a political sociology of armed struggle in Myanmar's borderlands* (Cornell University Press, 2019).

Brinham, N., *Citizenship and genocide cards: IDs, statelessness and Rohingya resistance in Myanmar* (Routledge, 2024).

Brinham, N. and A. Johar, 'Refugee experiences of identity documents and digitisation in India and Myanmar', *Forced Migration Review* 73, April 2024.

Brubaker, R., *Citizenship and nationhood in France and Germany* (Harvard University Press, 1992).

Callahan, M. P., *Political authority in Burma's ethnic minority states: devolution, occupation, and coexistence* (East-West Center, 2007).

Canzutti, L., 'Making digital (non)citizens: digital identity, non-knowledge and statelessness in Cambodia', *Geopolitics* 31: 3, 2026, pp. 1127–51.

Charney, M. W., *A history of modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Dorn, A. W., 'Peacekeepers in combat: protecting civilians in the D.R. Congo', *Journal of International Peacekeeping* 26: 1, 2023, pp. 31–54.

Felt, C. and W. LaRivee, *Exploring the global digital ID landscape*, Atlantic Council, 2025.

Fink, C., 'Militarization in Burma's ethnic states: causes and consequences', *Contemporary Politics* 14: 4, 2008, pp. 447–62.

Fortify Rights, 'International Criminal Court: expand investigation to include Arakan Army massacre of Rohingya in Hoyyar Siri', publ. online 9 April 2026.

Franceschini, I., L. Li and M. Bo, 'Compound capitalism: a political economy of Southeast Asia's online scam operations', *Critical Asian Studies* 55: 4, 2023, pp. 575–603.

Furnivall, J. S., *Colonial policy and practice: a comparative study of Burma and Netherlands India* (Cambridge University Press, 1948).

Gilroy, P., *Against race: imagining political culture beyond the color line* (Harvard University Press, 2000).

Hayes de Kalaf, E., 'How some countries are using digital ID to exclude vulnerable people around the world', *The Conversation*, 3 Aug. 2021.

Hlaing, K. S., 'Understanding the Arakan Army', Stimson Center, publ. online 21 April 2023.

Holliday, I., 'Addressing Myanmar's citizenship crisis', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 44: 3, 2014, pp. 404–21.

Human Rights Myanmar, 'Privacy violations and discrimination in Myanmar', 9 Jun. 2025.

Human Rights Watch, 'I'll never feel secure': undocumented and exploited: Myanmar nationals in Thailand, Jul. 2025.

Ibbetson, D., *Report on the Census of the Punjab, 1881* (Calcutta: Government of India, 1883).

International Crisis Group, *Identity crisis: ethnicity and conflict in Myanmar*, Asia Report No. 312, 28 Aug. 2020.

International Crisis Group, *A rebel border: India's evolving ties with Myanmar after the coup*, Asia Briefing No. 182, 11 April 2025.

Iqbal, H., A. Malik and M. Rashid, 'Suspended identity: statelessness, citizenship challenges and the impermanence of identity status faced by Pakistani Bengalis', *Citizenship Studies* 29: 3–4, 2025, pp. 159–80.

Isin, E. F., *Being political: genealogies of citizenship* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

Isin, E. F. and G. M. Nielsen, G. M., eds, *Acts of citizenship* (London: Zed Books, 2008).

Justice For Myanmar, 'Silk Road of surveillance: the role of China's Geedge networks and Myanmar telecommunications operators in the Junta's digital terror campaign', 2025.

Kyaw, N. N., 'Unpacking the presumed statelessness of Rohingyas', *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 15: 3, 2017, pp. 269–86.

Lawn, D. S., *Myanmar's northern borderlands: changing power dynamics since the 2021 military coup*, XCEPT, 2025.

Lian, K. F., *Citizenship regimes and the politics of difference in Southeast Asia*, Working Paper No. 8, Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, 2013.

Lin, N., 'The Arakan Army's struggle for regional sovereignty: imagining a new future union', TNI, publ. online 4 April 2025.

Madianou, M., 'Technocolonialism: digital innovation and data practices in the humanitarian response to refugee crises', *Social Media + Society* 5: 3, 2019.

Mamdani, M., *Define and rule: native as political identity* (Harvard University Press, 2012).

Manby, B., 'The Sustainable Development Goals and "legal identity for all": "first, do no harm"', *World Development* 139, 2021.

Mang, P. Z., 'The politics of religious conversion among the ethnic Chin in Burma', *Studies in World Christianity* 24: 3, 2018, pp. 188–211.

Manzur, S. and T. K. Prova, *Governing at the margins: a patchwork of policies and practices in the Rohingya refugee response in Bangladesh*, XCEPT, August 2023.

Marshall, T. H., *Citizenship and social class and other essays* (Cambridge University Press, 1950).

Masiero, S., *Unfair ID* (Sage, 2024).

Mbembe, A., *On the postcolony* (University of California Press, 2001).

Mbembe, A., 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture* 15: 1, 2003, pp. 11–40.

McConnachie, K., 'Boundaries and belonging in the Indo-Myanmar borderlands: Chin refugees in Mizoram', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 31: 3, 2018, pp. 314–33.

McConvey, J. R., 'New digital public infrastructure program from World Bank aims for inclusivity', Biometric Update, 7 Oct. 2025.

McGee, T., 'Implications of legal identity documentation issued by the Kurdish-led self administration in Northern Syria: competition and compromise with the central state', *Citizenship Studies* 27: 7, 2023, pp. 835–49.

Mohammed, H. A., 'The last genocide against the Yazidi people', *Review of Middle East Studies* 56: 1, 2022, pp. 108–22.

Mon, S., 'From state to nation: The Arakan Army's ascent in post-coup Myanmar', Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), publ. online 31 Oct. 2025.

Mongia, R., *Indian migration and empire: a colonial genealogy of the modern state* (Duke University Press, 2018).

Myint, W. P. and D. Bamrungchok, 'Five years after coup, Myanmar's digital authoritarianism enters new phase', Tech Policy Press, 13 March 2026.

Myint-U, T., *The hidden history of Burma: race, capitalism, and the crisis of democracy in the 21st century* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019).

Ong, A., *Stalemate: autonomy and insurgency on the China–Myanmar border* (Cornell University Press, 2023).

Parashar, A. and J. Alam, 'The national laws of Myanmar: making of statelessness for the Rohingya', *International Migration* 57: 1, 2019, pp. 94–108.

Pau, P. K., 'Transborder people, connected history: border and relationships in the Indo–Burma borderlands', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 35: 4, 2020, pp. 619–39.

Poetranto, I., 'The architecture of digital repression', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, publ. online 10 March 2026.

Rahman, Z., *Machine readable me: the hidden ways tech shapes our identities* (Edinburgh: 404 ink, 2023).

Rohingya Human Rights Initiative, *The ashes of Arakan: ongoing atrocities against Rohingya in the Rakhine State*, 2025.

Russell, H., 'Introduction to the special issue on displacement to Mizoram', *Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship* 6, 2025.

Sadan, M., ed., *War and peace in the borderlands of Myanmar: the Kachin ceasefire, 1994–2012* (NIAS Press, 2016).

Sakhong, L. H., 'Christianity and Chin identity', in M. Gravers, ed., *Exploring ethnic diversity in Burma* (NIAS Press, 2003).

Sassen, S., 'Towards post-national and denationalized citizenship', in E. F. Isin and B. S. Turner, eds, *Handbook of citizenship studies* (Sage, 2002).

Scott, J. C., *Seeing like a state: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed* (Yale University Press, 1998).

Sharma, N. R., *Home rule: national sovereignty and the separation of natives and migrants* (Duke University Press, 2020).

Siegelberg, M., *Statelessness: a modern history* (Harvard University Press, 2020).

Silverstein, J., 'Civil war and rebellion in Burma', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 21: 1, 1990, pp. 114–34.

Smith, M. T., *Burma: insurgency and the politics of ethnicity* (Zed Books, 1991).

Smith, M. T., *State of strife: the dynamics of ethnic conflict in Burma* (East-West Center, 2007).

Thawngmung, A. M. and A. South, *Revolutionary regimes: emerging forms of governance in post-coup Myanmar* (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2025).

UNHRC, *Detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar: report to the 42nd Session of the Human Rights Council*, A/HRC/42/CRP.5, 16 Sept. 2019.

Verweijen, J., 'Protection as a spectrum: The different faces of protection in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo', in: J. Krause et al., eds., *Civilian protective agency in violent settings: a comparative perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 115–32.

Walton, M. J., 'The "wages of Burman-ness:" ethnicity and Burman privilege in contemporary Myanmar', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43: 1, 2013, pp. 1–27.

Weitzberg, K., 'Keeping people out of camps: biometric technologies, contested sovereignty, and border practices within humanitarian spaces', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 51: 14, 2025, pp. 3590–609.

Williams, W., *Windrush lessons learned review: independent review by Wendy Williams*, HC 93 (London: Home Office, March 2020).

Winichakul, T., *Siam mapped: a history of the geo-body of a nation* (University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

World Economic Forum, *Reimagining digital ID*, June 2023.

Yuval-Davis, N., *Gender and nation* (Sage, 1997).

Zarni, M. and N. Brinham, 'Reworking the colonial-era Indian peril', *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 24: 1, 2017, pp. 53–76.

