

Research Article

## Transnational Activism and Identity Formation: The Role of the Wesean Student Federation in Supporting Democratic Movements in Myanmar

John Haokip\* 

Department of Political Science, Mizoram University, Aizawl, Mizoram-796004, India.

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\*Corresponding Author: **John**

**Haokip** (john.haokip96@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** This paper explores the pivotal role of the Wesean Student Federation (WSF) in transnational activism, focusing on their support for Myanmar's democratic movements. By examining the WSF's initiatives, this study delves into how their activism transcends borders, fostering solidarity with Myanmar's ethnic groups, and shaping the political identity of WSF members. The research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing case studies, interviews, and content analysis to uncover the Federation's influence on local and international policies.

Key findings suggest that WSF's engagement in transnational activism not only strengthens cross-border ethnic ties but also significantly impacts the political consciousness of its members, contributing to a broader understanding of democracy and human rights. The paper concludes by highlighting the importance of such activism in the broader geopolitical landscape of Northeast India and its implications for future policy and student-led movements.

**Keywords:** Transnational Activism, Wesean Student Federation (WSF), Myanmar Democratic Movements, Cross-Border Solidarity, Political Identity Formation.

### 1. Introduction

The Wesean Student Federation (WSF) represents a crucial collective in Northeast India, a region known for its complex cultural and political landscape. Founded to address the educational and social challenges faced by students from various indigenous communities, the WSF has evolved into a key actor in both local and transnational activism. The Federation's history is deeply intertwined with the region's struggles against political marginalization and cultural erosion, reflecting its commitment to preserving the unique identities of its

constituent communities while advocating for broader social justice and educational equity (**Baruah, 2003; Misra, 2011**).

Northeast India shares profound historical and cultural connections with Myanmar, particularly among ethnic groups such as the Kachin, Chin, and Naga, who straddle the borders of these two nations. These ties are not merely historical artifacts but active cultural and social bonds that continue to influence the political dynamics of the region (**Bhattacharyya, 2001; Kipgen, 2013**). The WSF, recognizing these connections, has been instrumental in fostering solidarity with Myanmar's ethnic groups, particularly in the wake of the country's ongoing struggles for democracy. This engagement reflects a broader trend in which student organizations extend their activism beyond national borders, aligning themselves with global movements for democracy and human rights (**Mukherjee, 2012**).

Student-led movements have historically played a pivotal role in driving political and social change, particularly in regions marked by conflict and marginalization (**Altbach, 1989**). The WSF's involvement in Myanmar's democratic struggles is a clear example of how student organizations can influence not only their immediate environments but also broader geopolitical issues. This transnational activism is not just a manifestation of solidarity; it also serves to reinforce the political identities of WSF members, who increasingly view their activism as part of a larger global struggle for human rights and democracy (**Deshpande, 2020**). This dual focus on local and transnational issues highlights the importance of understanding how student movements operate within and across borders, and how these movements contribute to the formation of political identities that transcend national boundaries (**Blee & Creasap, 2010**).

This paper seeks to address the following research question: How does the Wesean Student Federation (WSF) engage in and influence transnational solidarity movements, particularly in Myanmar, and what impact does this have on their political identity and activism?

The study is guided by three primary objectives:

1. **To analyze the role of the WSF in supporting Myanmar's democratic struggles**, exploring the strategies and methods employed by the Federation, the challenges encountered, and the outcomes of these efforts. This will involve a detailed examination of the WSF's engagement with Myanmar's ethnic groups, particularly the Kachin and Chin, who share significant cultural and historical ties with Northeast India.
2. **To understand the influence of these transnational activities on the political identity of WSF members**, focusing on how their involvement in Myanmar's democratic movements shapes their views on democracy, human rights, and ethnic solidarity. This analysis will draw on theories of political identity formation and transnational activism, highlighting the ways in which cross-border solidarity

efforts contribute to the development of a distinct political identity among WSF members (**Tarrow, 2005; McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001**).

3. **To assess the broader implications of WSF's activism on local and international policy**, considering how the Federation's actions influence perceptions and policies within Northeast India and the international community. This will involve an exploration of the potential impact of WSF's activism on regional security, ethnic relations, and the broader discourse on democracy and human rights in South and Southeast Asia (**Sahni, 2000; Singh, 2008**).

Thus, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersection between student activism, transnational solidarity, and political identity formation in a region characterized by complex ethnic and geopolitical dynamics. By examining the WSF's role in these processes, this research will shed light on the broader significance of student-led movements in shaping both local and global political landscapes.

## 2. Literature Review

The phenomenon of student activism, especially within conflict zones, has garnered significant scholarly attention due to the unique roles students often play in both perpetuating and resolving conflicts. Scholars such as Altbach (**1989**) have extensively documented the history and impact of student movements, emphasizing how students in conflict-ridden regions are often at the forefront of political change, driven by their relatively unencumbered social positions and access to educational institutions as platforms for organizing. In these zones, student activism is often fueled by a combination of ideological fervor, social injustice, and the perceived failure of traditional political actors to address the needs of the populace (**O'Brien, 1996; Zald & McCarthy, 1987**).

In the context of Northeast India, student activism has been a critical force in shaping the socio-political landscape. This region, characterized by its ethno-political complexities and historical marginalization within the Indian state, has seen numerous student-led movements that have sought to address issues ranging from ethnic identity and autonomy to social and economic justice (**Baruah, 2003**). The All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the Naga Students' Federation (NSF) are prime examples of student organizations that have significantly influenced both regional and national politics (**Misra, 2011**). These movements have often been responses to the region's unique historical experiences, including colonialism, post-colonial state formation, and ongoing ethnic conflicts (**Baruah, 2007**).

Research on the Wesean Student Federation (WSF) is comparatively sparse, but it is recognized as a significant player in this broader narrative of student activism in Northeast India. The WSF has engaged in

various forms of activism aimed at preserving cultural identity, promoting educational rights, and addressing the socio-political marginalization of the region's indigenous populations (**Bhattacharyya, 2001**). Like its counterparts, the WSF operates within a context of ethnic diversity and political fragmentation, which complicates its activism but also underscores the importance of its role as a unifying force for the region's students.

The WSF, while less studied than larger movements like AASU, has been noted for its role in advocating for the rights of Wesean students and engaging in broader political and cultural issues. Current media highlights how the WSF has played a crucial role in mediating between local ethnic groups and the broader political structures of India, often acting as a voice for the region's marginalized communities. Similarly, media critics like Pamei explores how the WSF, along with other student organizations, has contributed to the political mobilization of Northeast India's youth, fostering a sense of collective identity that transcends individual ethnic affiliations.

Transnational activism refers to the processes by which activists engage in political, social, or cultural campaigns that cross national boundaries. This form of activism has become increasingly significant in an era of globalization, as movements are no longer confined to their geographic origins but can influence and be influenced by global dynamics (**Keck & Sikkink, 1998**). Scholars such as Tarrow (**2005**) and McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (**2001**) have examined how transnational activism operates, focusing on the ways in which activists create and sustain networks that facilitate cross-border solidarity and collective action.

Student-led initiatives are particularly prominent in transnational activism, given the global interconnectedness of educational institutions and the mobility of students. Studies have shown that student organizations often act as catalysts for transnational solidarity, leveraging their networks to support causes that resonate with their own struggles at home (**Smith, Chatfield, & Pagnucco, 1997**). In the case of Northeast India, these movements are often shaped by shared cultural and ethnic ties that extend beyond national borders, particularly with regions like Myanmar where similar ethnic groups face comparable struggles (**Kipgen, 2013**).

Ethnic and cultural ties play a crucial role in the formation and sustenance of transnational solidarity movements. These ties often provide the foundational basis for collective identity and action, as seen in numerous cross-border movements where shared ethnicity or culture motivates and legitimizes activism (**Anderson, 1983**). In the context of the WSF, these connections are particularly salient given the historical and cultural links between the people of Northeast India and Myanmar. The Kachin, Chin, and Naga communities,

among others, share deep cultural ties that transcend the contemporary borders of India and Myanmar, fostering a sense of kinship that underpins WSF's solidarity with democratic movements in Myanmar (**Haokip, 2012**).

Research on transnational ethnic movements, such as those by Smith (**1999**) and Keating (**2001**), highlights how these movements often challenge traditional notions of state sovereignty and national identity, promoting instead a more fluid and dynamic understanding of political boundaries and affiliations. The WSF's engagement in Myanmar's democratic struggle can be seen as part of this broader trend, where student activism is not limited by the confines of the nation-state but is instead motivated by a sense of shared cultural and political destiny that transcends borders.

## **Identity Formation**

### **Theories on Political Identity Formation in the Context of Activism**

Political identity formation is a critical aspect of activism, particularly in conflict zones and among marginalized groups. Theories of political identity suggest that identity is not fixed but is continually constructed and reconstructed through social interaction and political engagement (**Tilly, 2003**). Activism plays a significant role in this process, as it provides individuals with a framework through which they can articulate and negotiate their identities in relation to broader social and political structures (**Jenkins, 1996**).

In the context of student activism, identity formation is often shaped by the intersection of local, national, and global influences. Students involved in activism are typically at a stage in life where they are forming their political beliefs and identities, and their participation in movements can profoundly shape these identities (**Altbach, 1989**). For members of the WSF, involvement in transnational activism—particularly in support of Myanmar's democratic movements—serves as a critical site for the construction of political identity. Through their activism, WSF members negotiate their identities as both Wesean students and as participants in a broader global struggle for democracy and human rights (**McAdam et al., 2001**).

### **Impact of Engaging in International Causes on Local Identities**

Engaging in international causes can have a significant impact on local identities, often leading to the development of a more complex and nuanced sense of self that incorporates elements of both local and global consciousness (**Tarrow, 2005**). For the WSF, involvement in Myanmar's democratic struggles allows members to see their local struggles in a broader context, linking their own experiences of marginalisation and political struggle with those of their counterparts across the border. This process of linking local and global identities is

not without its challenges, as it requires activists to navigate the tensions between local loyalties and global solidarities (Castells, 2010).

Research on transnational activism has shown that such engagement can lead to the emergence of a new form of political identity that is both rooted in local experiences and informed by global perspectives (Risse-Kappen, 1995). For the WSF, this means that their identity as Wesean students is increasingly shaped by their involvement in global movements for democracy, leading to a more cosmopolitan and outward-looking political identity. This process of identity formation has significant implications for both their activism and their broader political engagement, as it influences how they perceive and interact with both local and international political structures (Tilly, 2003).

### 3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the role of the Wesean Student Federation (WSF) in transnational activism, focusing on its influence on political identity formation among Wesean communities in Northeast India. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the complex socio-political dynamics and the nuanced experiences of individuals involved in the WSF. Specifically, the research utilized case studies, in-depth interviews, and content analysis to examine the WSF's activities and their impact.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with both current and former members of the WSF. These interviews were designed to gather detailed information about participants' motivations, experiences within the Federation, and perceptions of the WSF's role in advocating for Wesean communities across borders. In addition to interviews, the study analyzed official WSF documents, such as manifestos and press releases, as well as the Federation's social media activity. These sources provided insights into how the WSF framed its activism, the issues it prioritized, and the strategies it employed to engage with both local and international audiences.

Secondary data were obtained through a review of existing academic literature on student activism, particularly in conflict zones, and transnational movements. This review was supplemented by news reports and previous research on similar student organizations in Northeast India, offering additional context and perspectives on the WSF's activities and their broader implications.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes related to transnational activism and identity formation. This process involved coding the data to uncover patterns and connections,

such as the influence of ethnic and cultural ties on the WSF's solidarity efforts and the impact of cross-border activism on local political identities. A comparative analysis was also conducted to draw parallels between the WSF and other student movements in conflict zones, highlighting both the unique and shared aspects of their activism.

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were paramount. All participants were informed about the study's objectives and provided consent prior to their involvement. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained to protect the identities of the participants, particularly given the sensitive nature of the topics being discussed. The research adhered to established ethical guidelines to ensure the respectful and responsible treatment of all subjects involved.

### **Case Study: WSF and Myanmar's Democratic Struggle**

The Wesean Student Federation (WSF) has maintained strong ties with ethnic communities in Myanmar, particularly the Kachin, Chin, and Naga groups. These communities share deep ethnic, cultural, and historical connections with their counterparts in Northeast India, making their struggles intrinsically linked. The political situation in Myanmar, especially the military's oppressive rule, has had significant repercussions on these groups, impacting both their daily lives and their broader socio-political aspirations. For decades, Myanmar's military regime has engaged in systematic oppression, particularly targeting ethnic minorities like the Kachin and Chin, who have been involved in protracted struggles for autonomy and recognition.

In response, the WSF has engaged in solidarity actions, rooted in a shared sense of ethnic identity and common historical grievances against authoritarian rule. The solidarity is not just symbolic but is deeply personal for many WSF members, who see their struggle as intertwined with that of the Kachin, Chin, and Naga communities across the border in Myanmar. These ties have been reinforced by shared experiences of marginalisation and the ongoing fight for democracy and human rights.

The WSF has played a significant role in supporting Myanmar's democratic movements, particularly through various initiatives aimed at raising awareness and providing support to affected communities. One of the key elements of WSF's activism has been its vocal opposition to the military junta in Myanmar. This has manifested in numerous campaigns, public statements, and solidarity letters, which highlight the Federation's commitment to the democratic cause in Myanmar.

<b>Initiative</b>	<b>Key Outcome</b>	<b>Challenges</b>
Online classes for Kachin students	Ensured education continuity despite conflict	Logistical challenges due to conflict
Solidarity protests	Raised international awareness of Myanmar's situation	Limited resources and media coverage
Public statements and solidarity letters	Strengthened solidarity with ethnic groups in Myanmar	Political opposition from authorities

**Table 1:** WSF Initiatives and Outcomes

For example, a letter from the Kachin and Zo-Chin Wesean Student Federations, documented in a recent publication, illustrates the depth of this solidarity. The letter, written in the midst of Myanmar's ongoing political crisis, expresses profound sorrow and determination, emphasizing the WSF's unwavering support for the people of Kachin, Chin, and Naga regions (Table 1). The letter also outlines specific initiatives undertaken by the WSF, such as organizing online classes for middle school students from these regions to ensure that their education continues despite the turmoil. This effort underscores the Federation's belief in education as both a weapon and a shield in the fight against oppression.

The WSF has also organized protests, awareness campaigns, and educational outreach programs, both within India and internationally, to draw attention to the plight of the Myanmar people. These activities are not only aimed at pressuring the international community to take action but also at fostering a sense of solidarity among Wesean communities, reinforcing their collective identity and commitment to democratic ideals.

The involvement in Myanmar's democratic struggle has significantly shaped the political identity of WSF members. Engaging in transnational activism has deepened their understanding of democracy, human rights, and the importance of cross-border ethnic solidarity. For many members, participating in these activities has been a transformative experience, reinforcing their sense of duty to support their ethnic kin in Myanmar while also contributing to broader democratic movements.

This activism has also influenced the way WSF members view their role within the larger socio-political landscape of Northeast India. It has strengthened their resolve to fight against authoritarianism and oppression in all its forms, both within their own region and beyond. Moreover, their involvement in these transnational efforts has fostered a sense of global citizenship, where local struggles are seen as part of a larger, interconnected fight for justice and human rights.

**4. Discussions**

The Wesean Student Federation’s (WSF) engagement in transnational activism, particularly in supporting Myanmar's democratic struggles, exemplifies the critical role that student organizations can play in broader global movements. Through their solidarity actions, educational initiatives, and vocal opposition to Myanmar's military junta, the WSF has effectively mobilized attention and support for the plight of ethnic communities in Myanmar, especially the Kachin, Chin, and Naga groups.



**Figure 1** : Perspectives of WSF members on the impact of their activism.

The effectiveness of WSF's transnational activism can be evaluated through several indicators. Firstly, the Federation's ability to organize and sustain educational initiatives for affected communities in Myanmar, despite significant logistical challenges, reflects a strong commitment to their cause. In interviews with WSF members, approximately 85% indicated that their involvement in these initiatives had strengthened their resolve to continue advocating for democracy and human rights in Myanmar. As seen in Figure 1, additionally, 70% of surveyed participants believed that the WSF's actions had raised awareness about the situation in Myanmar among international audiences, leading to increased pressure on the military regime from global actors.

Policy Area	WSF's Influence	
Cross-border ethnic ties	Raised ethnic solidarity through activism and media	Local government engagement with affected ethnic groups

Human rights advocacy	Provided firsthand reports to international organizations	Increased international pressure on Myanmar's military regime
Regional stability and security	Brought attention to regional implications of Myanmar's conflict	Consideration of cross-border security measures

**Table 2:** WSF's Influence and Key Challenges

The WSF's activities also mirror broader trends in global student activism, where students increasingly engage in cross-border solidarity efforts, often driven by shared identities, histories, and political goals. Similar to other student movements, such as those in Hong Kong or Chile, the WSF's activism is rooted in a deep sense of shared struggle, where local issues are connected to global discourses on democracy and human rights.

### **Identity Formation**

The role of transnational activism in shaping the political identities of young people in conflict regions cannot be understated. For WSF members, involvement in Myanmar's democratic struggle has been a formative experience, deeply influencing their political and cultural identities. The interviews conducted for this study revealed that 78% of WSF members felt that their participation in these transnational efforts had significantly shaped their understanding of democracy and human rights. Moreover, 65% indicated that their engagement had strengthened their ethnic and cultural ties with the communities in Myanmar, reinforcing a collective identity that transcends national borders.

The WSF's engagement with Myanmar has also led to a more nuanced and comprehensive political identity among its members. This identity is characterized by a strong commitment to democratic values, a deep sense of solidarity with oppressed groups, and a recognition of the interconnectedness of struggles across borders. The WSF's activities have enabled its members to see themselves not only as students advocating for change within Northeast India but also as part of a larger, global movement for justice and human rights. This expanded political consciousness is reflective of the broader trend in youth activism, where young people increasingly view their local struggles as part of a global fight against oppression and inequality.

### **Policy Implications**

The activism of the WSF has the potential to impact both local and international policy, particularly in terms of how governments and international bodies respond to the situation in Myanmar. Student organizations like the WSF often serve as catalysts for broader societal change, pushing governments to take action on issues that may otherwise be overlooked. In the case of the WSF, their sustained activism has brought attention to the

plight of ethnic communities in Myanmar, contributing to increased international scrutiny of the military regime's actions.

The role of student organizations in influencing government policy and international relations is well-documented. In Northeast India, the WSF's actions have prompted local governments to address the concerns of Wesean communities more directly, particularly regarding cross-border ethnic ties and the implications of Myanmar's political situation on local stability. Additionally, on the international stage, the WSF's efforts have been recognized by various human rights organizations, which have cited the Federation's reports and campaigns in their advocacy work.

The interviews and surveys conducted for this study suggest that there is significant potential for the WSF's activism to shape policy outcomes. Approximately 60% of WSF members believed that their efforts had already influenced local government policies regarding cross-border ethnic solidarity. Furthermore, 45% indicated that they had been in contact with international human rights organizations, providing them with firsthand accounts of the situation in Myanmar, which have been used in reports and advocacy campaigns (Figure 1).

## 5. Conclusion

This study has highlighted the pivotal role of the Wesean Student Federation (WSF) in supporting Myanmar's democratic struggles and the significant impact of such activism on the political identity of its members. The WSF's efforts in transnational activism have not only provided crucial support to ethnic communities like the Kachin, Chin, and Naga in Myanmar but have also shaped the political consciousness of young activists in Northeast India. The findings indicate that WSF members have developed a broader understanding of democracy, human rights, and cross-border solidarity, seeing their local struggles as part of a larger, global movement against authoritarianism.

The implications of this research extend beyond the WSF, suggesting that student organizations in conflict regions can play a vital role in transnational activism. Future research could delve deeper into the long-term impact of such activism on identity formation, exploring how sustained engagement in these movements influences the political and cultural identities of youth over time. Additionally, there is potential for further study on the role of student organizations in shaping local and international policy, particularly how they navigate the complexities of international relations and advocacy.

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of understanding the interconnectedness of local and global struggles for democracy and human rights. The WSF's transnational activism serves as a powerful example of how student organizations can transcend national boundaries, forging solidarities that challenge

oppressive regimes and advocate for universal values of freedom and justice. In an increasingly globalized world, the role of transnational student activism will remain crucial in the ongoing fight for a more just and democratic society. Understanding these dynamics is essential for academics, policymakers, and activists alike, as they work to address the pressing challenges of our time.

## 6. Notes

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