

Manipur's Conflict: Geopolitics, Identity, and Land

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Abstract

The Lok Sabha Election in Manipur 2024 holds significant political importance, reflecting the dynamic socio-political landscape of the northeastern state. The elections witnessed active participation from major political parties, including the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Indian National Congress (INC), National People's Party (NPP), and regional parties, highlighting the state's diverse political spectrum. Key issues influencing the electoral discourse included ethnic tensions, economic development, unemployment, infrastructure challenges, and the demand for greater autonomy by various tribal communities. The 2024 elections were marked by heightened security measures due to intermittent socio-political unrest and concerns over electoral violence in sensitive areas. The election outcomes in Manipur are expected to have far-reaching implications for the state's future governance, development priorities, and center-state relations. The results will also provide insights into the evolving political preferences of Manipur's electorate, the effectiveness of coalition politics, and the role of regional aspirations within the broader national framework.

Introduction

On May 3, 2023, the Northeastern Indian state of Manipur erupted in unprecedented communal violence, pitting the Meitei community against the Kuki-Zo tribal groups. Over 17 months later, hostility between the two communities hasn't subsided in any visible form, locking the state in a cycle of mistrust, resentment, displacement, and bloodshed. The continued lack of decisive intervention by both the state and Union governments has turned the region where violence is the norm, where more than 60,000 people have been displaced and more than 200 people killed. Any aspect of kindness and empathy seems to have vanished into thin air.

Almost everyone has argued that immediate events under the current dispensation trigger the crisis, but it is deeply rooted in the region's complex socio-political and historical context. Ethnic identity, land rights, access to resources and governance failures have all been intertwined to create a volatile situation. Before the onset of the mayhem, symmetrical and provocative narratives were being pushed from certain sections. One presents the Kuki-Zos as foreigners, illegal immigrants, and refugees, fuelling a sense of persecution. On the other hand, Manipur and its kingdom of the olden days are portrayed as only 700 sq. miles, adding to the sense of siege and geographical marginalisation the Meiteis feel in their own homeland.¹

Geographical contestation: "Hill and Valley Divide"

Manipur's geography, its rugged mountains and valleys, tell a lot about its ethnic tensions. While different ethnic communities call the state their home, the very idea of what Manipur is could fundamentally vary at times.² One could argue that its unique demographic composition has long been a source of tension. The predominantly Hindu Meitei community, which is concentrated mainly in the Imphal Valley, constitutes about 53 per cent of the population. At the same time, the hills are home to the predominantly Christian tribal groups, including the Kuki-Zos and Nagas, who account for 41 per cent of the state's population. Tensions flared in May 2023 when the Meitei demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status reignited fears among the Kuki-Zos of losing their land rights and autonomy. This was exacerbated by claims that the Meitei valley-dwellers would infringe on the Kuki-Zo traditional land. However, the root cause of the "divide" is the invented colonial topographical dichotomy between two geographical features of a composite Manipur landscape; in the post-colonial era, this division was nurtured officially among a small population with same ethno-linguistic family roots.³

The state features two starkly contrasting terrain: the central Imphal Valley, which constitutes less than 10 per cent of the land but houses over 60 per cent of the population, predominantly Meiteis, and the surrounding hill territories, dominated by Nagas and Kuki-Zos. The valley, which is cosmopolitan in its linguistic, religious, and ethnic composition, is open to modern revenue administration and settlements of all Indians. The hills, however, are governed by tribal customs and lack systematic land laws.

The Meiteis are concentrated in the increasingly crowded valley where pressure on land built up over the past couple of decades has reached a

crisis point, leading to a sense of “siege mentality.” Their demand for ST status, aimed at gaining access to government affirmative actions/reservations and perceived parity with hill tribes, has provoked anxieties among the Kuki-Zos and Nagas. The latter fear that granting ST status to the Meiteis could dilute their share of opportunities in government reservations and open the door for Meitei encroachment into hill areas.⁴ This fear is fundamentally unfounded in nature because of the fact that even among ST groups, traditional territorial boundaries are fiercely protected. The sense of fear has nonetheless inflamed communal tensions and a sense of mistrust between the communities.

Citizenship: Illegal Immigration and war on drug

Adding to the complexity in Manipur is the nature of traditional land holdings in the Kuki-Zo villages. It is characterised by their dispersed, unstable, and often shifting settlements, which often have clashed with neighbouring communities over land. This pattern, which cannot support a large population, and has a tendency to splinter and proliferate, is further coupled with accusations of illegal immigration from Myanmar, forest encroachment, and poppy cultivation. All these cumulatively have intensified their alienation and sense of persecution.⁵

The political instability in Myanmar following the takeover of the *junta* in 2021 affected Manipur in ways that could have escaped ordinary eyes in the beginning. Issues of illegal immigrants from Myanmar, which are both perceived and real, an increasing poppy cultivation, and the subsequent rise of drug trade in Manipur, have all contributed to the ethnic tension. The Nagas and the Meiteis believe that Burmese illegal immigration post 2021 *junta* takeover threatens the demographic balance of the state. This is coupled with the sudden spike in massive poppy cultivation in and around Kuki-Zos dominated areas in the hills and the consequent rise in drug trade. For India, the issue of illegal immigrants can complicate bilateral relations between India and Myanmar as ethnic rebels seek to use Indian soil to attack *junta* forces or procure weapons. This complication could further drive the *junta* into Chinese embrace.⁶

The Kuki-Zos, however, reject these claims. They claim that these are narratives pushed by Meiteis to serve their majoritarian agenda.⁷ For the Meities, Kuki-Zos are pushing to shift the demography of Manipur to capture more political power. The Kuki-Zos view policies of the government such as the “war on drugs,” newly constituted Population Commission to identify illegal immigrants, the demolition and eviction drive in various parts of Manipur as being targeted against them. The

state assembly in the budget session 2022, along with the establishment of the Population Commission, had resolved to implement National Register of Citizens (NRC).⁸

However, government data presented told an entirely different story. Of the 2,518 arrests made under the Narcotics Drugs and Psychotic Substances (NDPS) Act between 2017 and 2023, 1083 were Meitei Pangals, 873 were Kuki-Zos, 381 were Meiteis, and 181 were from other communities. Moreover, Kuki-Zos in Manipur cultivated around 13,121 acres of land for poppy growing while the Nagas cultivated around 2,340 acres.⁹ Again, the official figures of the eviction drive between October 2015 and April 2023 evicted a total of 413 households from the reserved forests of Manipur. Of these, 143 were Meiteis, 137 were Meitei Pangals; 59 were Kuki-Zos; 38, Nagas; and 36 were Nepali households.¹⁰

The ethnic clash: Its immediate causes

The immediate trigger for the violent conflict was a March 27, 2023, ruling by the Manipur High Court. It directed the state government to recommend ST status for the Meiteis to the Union government. On May 3, the Nagas and Kuki-Zos took out a rally opposing the court's decision. Igniting long-standing grievances, this rally devolved into widespread violence in Churachandpur and further spread to the Imphal valley.¹¹

The state's response could have been more adequate. Despite the deployment of over 60,000 security personnel, both the central and state governments still need to address the underlying factors of the long-drawn conflict. The establishment of buffer zones by the security forces has hugely contributed to the segregation of populations based on clear ethnic lines. Thus, the Meitei-dominated valley from the Kuki-Zo-dominated hills areas has been entirely bifurcated by an imaginary line that somehow resembles an international boundary line between hostile neighbouring countries. This segregation has only entrenched ethnic divisions, with both communities engaging in mutual ethnic cleansing.

Amidst all the mayhem, social media platforms became breeding grounds for fake news, propaganda, and inflammatory rhetoric from both sides of the involving parties. Reports of attacks, counterattacks, and alleged infiltration of 900 armed Kuki-Zo fighters from Myanmar circulated widely, creating an atmosphere of paranoia and confusion.¹² The authority of the Unified Command tasked with managing the crisis

has struggled to present a coherent response. Whether all operations under the command lay with chief minister N. Biren Singh or its head Kuldiep Singh, a retired IPS officer appointed by Delhi, while it was meant to ensure coordination between different forces present in the state, including the state police, Army, Assam Rifles, and various Central Armed Police Forces, it came under harsh criticism from many quarters of the for its inability to stop the killings. Instead of presenting a single voice on events and intelligence, they projected their own versions of narratives. This happened with the videos surfacing on social media of Kuki-Zo armed groups using weaponised drones and the intelligence report of the state government of 900 trained Kuki-Zo armed fighters infiltrating Manipur from Myanmar.

In an unprecedented development in the country's history, drone attacks on Indian soil on September 1, 2024, broke a brief lull of three months. The attack on Koutruk in Imphal West, contiguous to Kuki-Zo dominated Kangpokpi district, came from the neighbouring hills and killed two people and injured nine others. The Manipur Police termed the attacks as "unprecedented" and said it marked a "significant escalation" in the conflict in the state.¹³

The prolonged violence in Manipur has begun to exhibit patterns described by economist Paul Collier in *Breaking the Conflict Trap*: emotionally driven strife often evolves into a "market of war," sustained by material and political interests.¹⁴ In Manipur, a burgeoning "military-industrial complex" emerged, with vested interests profiting from the ongoing breakdown of law and order. These actors, ranging from small armed extortionist groups to arms suppliers to political opportunists, have little incentive to allow the return of normalcy.

If one were to argue that the state government was found incapable in the first weeks of the conflict to reign in the violence, the central government should have used the state's monopoly over legitimate violence, to use Max Weber's terms, to clamp down on the mobs.¹⁵ The additional central armed of approximately 60,000 in number brought into the state were merely used to create a "buffer zone" to separate the central valley from the surrounding Kuki-Zo hills. This strategy of creating a buffer zone was, however, not accompanied by complementary steps to de-escalate the perpetual cycle of killings.

The state's failure to assert its monopoly over legitimate violence was immediately taken over by armed militias on both sides. Operating as "village volunteers," these groups filled the void left by ineffective governance and military action. Disarmament has not been carried out

in both camps to restore normalcy or at least a semblance of peace. Though this has remained a daunting task, it should be effectively implemented simultaneously and impartially to avoid further fuelling resentment in both the valley and hills dominated by the Kuki-Zos.

Speculations have also arisen that the conflict may be a deliberate strategy to draw out Meitei insurgents hiding in Myanmar and force them to enter into peace talks with the government ahead of the 2024 parliamentary elections. Meitei insurgent groups and the United Liberation Front of Asom–Independent (ULFA-I) of Assam are the only two left out of the negotiation table with the Indian government. While the Naga insurgents, without disarming, are in ceasefire with the “Framework Agreement,” which is in place for over three decades now, there are a total of 25 Kuki-Zo militant groups under two camps – Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and United Peoples Front (UPF) – engaged in what is called Suspension of Operation (SoO), though no Kuki-Zo insurgent groups have never fought the Indian state.

This SoO agreement was first formalised with the Indian security forces in 2005. It came to the knowledge of the public only three years later in 2008 when the central and state government became a party to the agreement. A wide consensus emerged amongst the Meiteis and Nagas that the SoO agreement with the Kuki-Zo insurgent groups was a move to counterbalance the Meitei and Naga insurgents,

Assuming the above speculation is true, this approach surely has come at an immense human cost, with deeply entrenched animosities likely to persist for generations. One could ask, if this strategy can justify the level of public loss and misery, mutual hatred and bitterness never seen in history?

Geopolitics and Western interest in the conflict: Question of National Security

The crisis in Manipur has yet to escape the attention of international actors. Former Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina revealed on May 23, 2024, a proposal from a foreign representative—believed to be American—to establish an airbase in Bangladesh.¹⁶ This, coupled with rumours of a Western agenda to create a Christian nation encompassing parts of Myanmar, Bangladesh, and India, has added a geopolitical dimension to the conflict. Had it not been for this statement, the theory about western powers, in particular the US, having a deep strategic interest in the region would have passed as some wild and sensational internet conspiracy. She had told her 14-party coalition

partners that just before the country's January 2, 2024, parliamentary elections, a "white" foreign national had approached her with a promise of smooth victory for her party if she opened Bangladesh for an air base.

Former Indian diplomat and columnist M.K. Bhadrakumar has likened the situation to Pakistan becoming a safe haven for Afghan Pashtun fighters during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, warning against India's involvement in Myanmar's domestic turmoil.¹⁷ Such similarities highlight the risks of external interference by a nation, which eventually could aggravate an already volatile situation. He argued that Myanmar's instability provided a fertile ground for western power's gameplan to encircle China, aimed further at countering Russia's influence over the *junta*. He further went on to hint at a US offer to mediate the ethnic conflict in Manipur not long after it broke out in May 2023.

Arbitrary colonial boundary-making, like the McMahon Line, and colonial policies which emphasised imperial commercial and military interests over local stability have left a legacy of unresolved conflicts.¹⁸ This is exemplified by the periodic border skirmishes, most notably the Doklam incident in Sikkim in June 2017 and the never-ending dispute over the McMohan Line. In short, Manipur's current misfortune is emblematic of the region's fraught geography and history, all shaped by the British Empire's "Great Game" strategy. The US strategic interest in the region has been here for a long time, though for a different reason than now. When Bangladesh was East Pakistan, and Pakistan was an ally of the US, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the mid-1950s had a secret air command base in Cumilla, which was once the capital of the erstwhile Tripura kingdom. This base was used for clandestine operations in Tibet and for transporting Tibetan Khampa insurgents to the US via another US military base in Okinawa.¹⁹ Not only in Bangladesh but on Indian soil too, Kalimpong in West Bengal, where the 14th Dalai Lama's elder brother Gyalo Thundup took refuge, the CIA too had a massive presence.

These lessons from the Cold War period underscore the fact that historically, the U.S. has viewed the Northeast India as a strategic asset against China. It was then Mao's communism; it is now China as an economic and military adversary. Secret operations, such as the CIA training of Tibetan insurgents, exemplified how external powers exploited the region of "Great Game East" in the pursuit of larger geopolitical goals, often to the detriment of local populations.²⁰ Present-day Northeast finds itself at the crossroads of global power struggles as the West's rivalry with China shifts to economic and military dominance.

The point is that while a single theory cannot entirely explain an ethnic conflict, the possibilities of western powers seeking a strategic military in the Northeast should not be taken very lightly.

Election amidst the chaos: The Congress victory

Many instances of violence hit the battles of the Manipur 2024 Lok Sabha election.²¹ They were also fought against the backdrop of one of the state's most challenging times in recent history. Traditionally, election fever in Manipur is normally reserved for state assembly elections, which are fought on local issues. However, parliamentary elections figure distantly in the minds of the people. Truly so, as only two seats are reserved for the state, there is a near complete consensus that the two seats make little or no impact on the number game of India's democracy, with 543 Lok Sabha seat counts.

In the Inner Manipur constituency, traditionally dominated by the Meitei community, the BJP faced significant backlash for its handling of the ethnic conflict. The Congress candidate, JNU professor-turned-Congress leader Angomcha Bimol Akoijam, fought against BJP's Basanta Kumar Singh. The Congress campaign revolved around promises of reconciliation and justice. It had earlier expressed confidence in winning the two seats and had blamed the BJP government at both the centre and in the state for failing to curb the year-long ethnic conflict.²² It mainly appealed to the people who were grappling with the trauma of the violence, which seemed to never end.

Despite the deployment of 198 companies of central armed police forces and 140 army columns in the state, polling day on April 19, 2024, was marred by tension and reports of irregularities. Armed groups in black allegedly disrupted voting, attempting to intimidate voters and influence outcomes. In Moirang Kampu and Thamnepokpi, instances of booth capturing and violence highlighted the fragile security situation. Repolls had to be carried out in many poll booths, which came under attack from armed men. Many voters had stormed polling booths and destroyed ballot boxes to ensure repolls as they believed that votes had been tampered with by the armed men.²³ Despite these instances, Inner Manipur recorded a high voter turnout of more than 71 per cent.

Bimol Akoijam of the Congress party secured a massive victory with a margin of over 109,000 votes. He defeated BJP candidate and state (Manipur) Education Minister Thounaojam Basanta Kumar Singh. The result was the public's declaration of rejection of the BJP's approach to governance during the crisis and their hope for a change under Congress leadership.

The Outer Manipur constituency, which is reserved for Scheduled Tribes, presented a peculiar contest. There were four Naga candidates, and surprisingly none from the Kuki -Zo tribes. The latter had decided to boycott contesting but not voting. The BJP-backed Naga People's Front (NPF) candidate Timothy Zimik, a former IRS officer, faced Congress' Alfred Kanngam Arthur. Outer Manipur's electorate was divided along ethnic lines, comprising Nagas, Kuki-Zos, and other smaller tribal groups.

In this constituency, voter turnout was significantly lower at around 52 per cent, reflecting the boycott's impact. Still, the NPF took the lead in the Naga districts. In a dramatic outcome, Congress' Alfred Kanngam Arthur won by a margin of over 85,000 votes, propelled mainly by near-unanimous support from Kuki-Zo-dominated districts like Churachandpur and Pherzawl.

The dissatisfaction of the Meiteis and the Kuki-Zos in the current ruling government is manifested in the Congress' victory in both the Inner and Outer Manipur. Both communities see the BJP government as responsible for the crisis. At another level, many Kuki-Zo civil society groups have blamed the Biren Singh-led government for carrying out what they called a deliberate "state-sponsored genocide." Simultaneously, many Meiteis and Kuki-Zos see the state government as incapable or even unwilling to end the violence. For many Meiteis, the conflict has totally shattered the social and political fabric of a multilingual, multi-religious and multi-ethnic Manipur society.

Despite the deployment of nearly 200 companies of central armed forces and 140 army columns, polling day saw multiple instances of violence, including booth capturing and attacks on voters. The Election Commission ordered re-polling at several booths in Inner Manipur following allegations of vote tampering and intimidation.

At both the state and central levels, the Congress electoral victory surely has wider implications. The outcome of the election for Manipur signalled a significant rejection of the BJP government, particularly in terms of the manner in which the ethnic conflict has been handled.²⁴ It is also a call for an immediate return to peace and reconciliation.

The election, at the national level, reflects the difficulty of governing a region such as the Northeast, which is hugely diverse and often engulfed with conflict and instability. The alarming case of thousands of civilian population arming up with sophisticated foreign weapons and those looted from state armouries has never been witnessed in the nation's history.

More than civilians, ethnic militants from across the national border from both sides of the groups have actively participated in the conflict. This raises a serious question of national security. The political instability in Myanmar also provides a fertile environment for militant groups to carry out their activities and for arms and drug smugglers to profit from the conflict.

The Congress victory might offer a glimmer of hope to both the communities that have gone through the trauma of the conflict for a long period. The election was not merely a battle of vote counts between political parties. It was a public plebiscite on governance, justice, and the future of a state whose wounds never seem to subside.²⁵

For the ruling dispensation at both the centre and the state, it's a clear message that the people of the state are immensely dissatisfied with how both have handled the long-drawn conflict. The BJP party saw its defeat in a manner hitherto unseen in the state's electoral culture. The public mandate of the election reveals the complex tasks of governing a society which has been divided by ethnic and communal forces.

Conclusion

More than settling the difference in terms of political demands from both the Meitei and the Kuki-Zo communities, healing the scars etched in the psyche and memory will remain a daunting task. Bringing about long-lasting peace will test the government's capability and cleverness to navigate complex political and social issues.

For anybody, breaking the cycle of perpetual violence in conflict-torn Manipur requires an honest addressing of issues which are both immediate and structural. The state and Union governments must take decisive steps to restore order, disarm militia groups, and foster community dialogue. Rather than strictly adhering to their demands, whether it is the ST demand of the Meiteis or the "Separate Administration" of the Kuki-Zos, what must be prioritised is immediate reconciliation efforts. The first and foremost step should be a dialogue aimed at bridging the deep-seated mistrust that divides the Meiteis and Kuki-Zos.

India, on the other hand, must carefully navigate the larger geopolitical implications of the ethnic conflict. For the region, as some have pointed out, to become a focus of global powers in their games of expanding spheres of influence would only compound its instability in an already volatile atmosphere. Manipur's proximity to Myanmar, the porous nature

of boundary between the two, and China's influence in the crisis in Myanmar should all be considered in looking at the Manipur conflict. The Northeast should be envisioned as a bridge of cooperation, both within India and with its neighbours.

In the longer term, land reforms and establishing a common legal framework for land ownership could mitigate many of the tensions rooted in competing claims over territory. Addressing economic disparities between the valley and the hills without keeping ethnicity as the yardstick of understanding economics and development would also go a long way in reducing resentment.

The Manipur crisis is evidence of how seemingly minute and localised ethnic politics can spiral into a concern for regional stability and more significant national security questions. The crisis reflects a deep structural challenges, colonial historical legacies, and postcolonial governance failures.

For peace and harmony to return, the central and state governments must reclaim their authority in establishing the rule of law, rebuild community trust, and resist any intrusion of external interests, if there is one. Failure to do so could deepen Manipur's crisis and undermine the stability of not only the state but the entire Northeast region. The hope for a peaceful Manipur with a shared geographical destiny can only be ensured when political and community leaders from both the communities prioritise peace, empathy, and unity. Only then can Manipur move beyond its troubled past and towards a future of stability and cooperation.

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