



THE HINDU CENTRE

for

Politics and Public Policy



Why Violence in Manipur May Recur

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Sep 9, 2015



A policeman fires tear gas on the agitators demanding Inner Line Permit System, during the 48-hour band called by the students' wing of the Joint Committee on Inner Line Permit System (JCILPS) in Manipur, in Imphal West on Aug 8, 2015.

PTI

*Behind the recent violence in Manipur, sparked by fears over loss of tribal land through legislation, lies deep rooted rivalries between the insurgent groups. Moreover, as **Namrata Goswami** points out, unless governance improves and the confidence of the tribals won over, the northeastern State will continue to remain on a short fuse.*

Tragically, eight people died last week in Manipur's Churachandpur district due to the misrepresentation on social media of three Bills passed recently in the State Assembly. These were the Manipur People's Bill, 2015, the

Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms (Seventh Amendment) Bill, 2015, and the Manipur Shops and Establishments (Second Amendment) Bill, 2015.

The primary fear that led to the protests mostly by Kukis, Hmars and Nagas, and the subsequent deaths, was that tribal land will be misappropriated by these bills by letting outsiders grab ancestral land easily. The second fear was that the cut-off year of 1951 was sacrosanct, and that those minorities who arrived later were to be deported. As explained by those who have considered the Bills ¹, this was a tragic distortion, as they do not change the status of tribal lands (Scheduled Areas), protected as they are by special legislations ², and apply only to those areas not under such legislation.

That the passage of these Bills by a Meitei-dominated Assembly would lead to subsequent violence was predictable. Manipur suffers from multiple ethnic armed insurgencies, each fighting for a separate ethnically slanted homeland: Naga homeland and Kuki Homeland. Distrust between Nagas and Kukis, Nagas and Meiteis, and Meiteis and Kukis is embedded in the social atmosphere vitiating day-to-day life. Hence, minorities like Kukis, Hmars and Nagas do not trust the Meitei-dominated State Assembly to cater to their interests. In this scenario of social and political distrust, armed conflicts and individual stress, it is rather easy to stoke mistrust and anger simply by starting rumours. This was compounded by the fact that the State Assembly perhaps did not publicly explain the Bills in a transparent and inclusive manner thereby opening them to misrepresentations.

To understand the ground reality of why this kind of violent scenario emerges, it is appropriate for me to reflect on a few ground facts that I have gathered over the years during my field work in Manipur.

The year was 2008. It was a crisp autumn morning. The air felt gently warm and the mountains leaned back against the blue sky. As part of my research on the 'Look East' policy and its possibilities for Manipur, I was in Moreh interviewing and engaging numerous local business groups, civil society organisations like the Meitei Council, the Hill Tribal Council-Moreh, and the Tamil Sangam, to gauge their perspective on the policy.

The mood in Moreh itself was sombre as the town had lost its status as a bustling trade post due to its deteriorating security situation to Namphalong across the border in Myanmar. Local business people told me that they had to pay 'protection money' to insurgent outfits like the Kuki National Army (KNA), the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah) [NSCN (IM)], and the United National Liberation Front of Manipur (UNLF), for carrying out day-to-day business. I asked them what would happen if they refused to pay. My question seemed to disturb my interviewees; I saw the helplessness in their eyes and wondered where the Indian state was. What about its obligation to protect its citizens and ensure it had full monopoly of legitimate violence?

I was soon to experience this sense of physical insecurity myself that crisp autumn day, on my journey from Moreh to Imphal, at Tengnoupal, infamous now for the June 4, 2015 ambush by the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang) that killed 18 personnel of the 6 Dogra regiment.

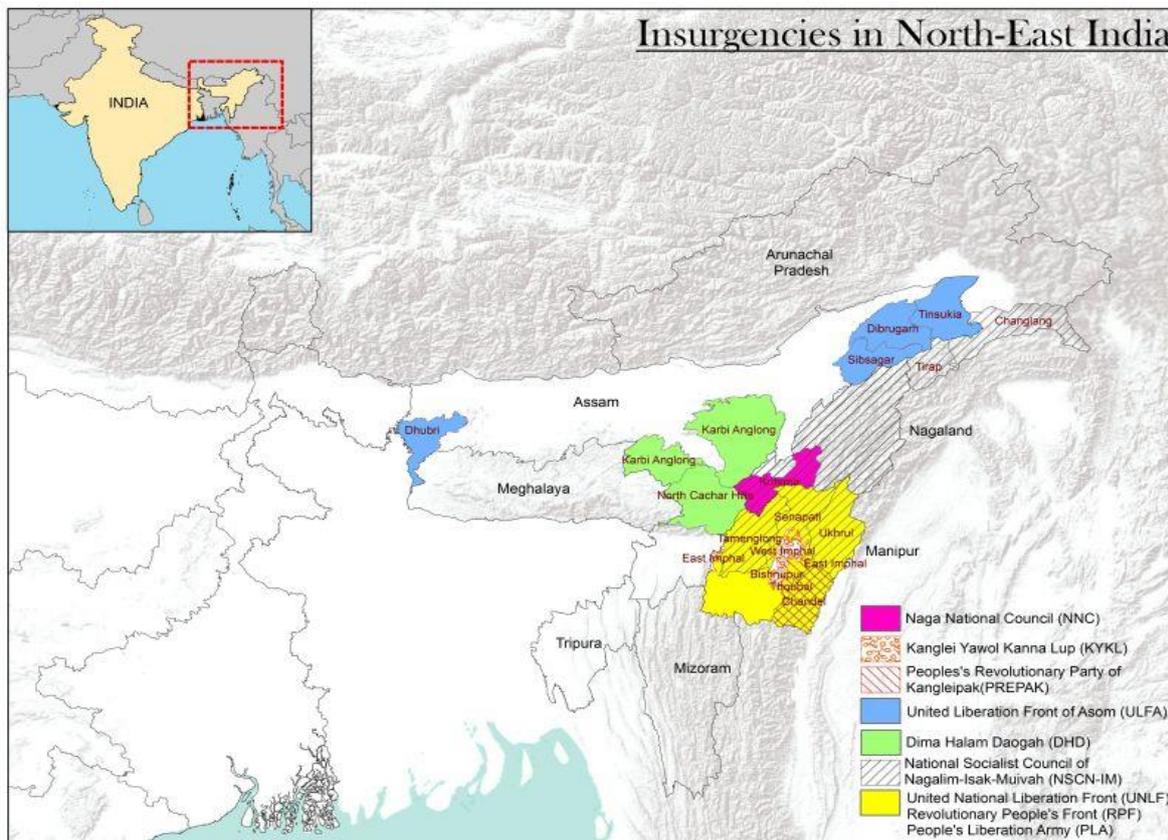
As I travelled to Imphal from Moreh in a hired taxi, on reaching Tengnoupal, I requested the taxi driver if he could get me some maize, 'makoi' as it is called in the local dialect. He readily agreed and went out to a woman selling it. It was raining that day and through the thin mist of soft rain, I saw a few young men approach the driver. I did not think much of it at that moment but to my surprise, the men approached the taxi, opened the door and jumped inside. There were three of them. Instinctively, I knew they were insurgents. My driver was ordered to drive on a narrow road going downhill, away from the National Highway, now called the Asian Highway 1 (AH1). I still did not utter a word, neither did the insurgents, though I could sense the fear building up within me. In all my years of

fieldwork in the northeast, in the remotest areas, in territories dominated by insurgent groups like the NSCN (IM) or the Dima Haram Daogah (DHD), I had never been coerced to change route. It was a unique experience for me but my gut instinct advised me not to resist or create a scene.

After about half an hour of travel, our vehicle stopped in a hamlet. The men got out and entered a small concrete house. I saw a few village women walking by and felt slightly reassured. After sometime, a young man in his 20s, who appeared to be in command, came out of the house with the others and approached us. He identified himself as the self-styled local Kuki National Army (KNA) leader, then under Suspension of Operations (SoO) with the Government of India. He questioned me for long hours on my research; why was I at all interested in Manipur's development. I knew I had to resist showing the fear I felt and negotiate my release. Finally, to cut a long story short, I told the self-styled KNA leader my background, my childhood in Haflong, Dima Hasau district of Assam, and about my work in this field for the last several years. A few hours later, we were released. As I reached the AH1, my driver (a Meitei) and I got out of the car in shock, in reaction to what could have been a near death encounter.

I recount this incident, something I have not written about until now, to demonstrate how insecure and dangerous that highway is, and life in general in Manipur is, for its inhabitants. Home to 30 different armed insurgent groups, common people have to walk the steps of life very carefully as any wrong step could lead to death or physical harm. Added to this are the counter-insurgency operations facilitated by the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, which offers way too much liberty to the security personnel to arrest and interrogate anyone on mere suspicion without much concrete evidence and little judicial respite.

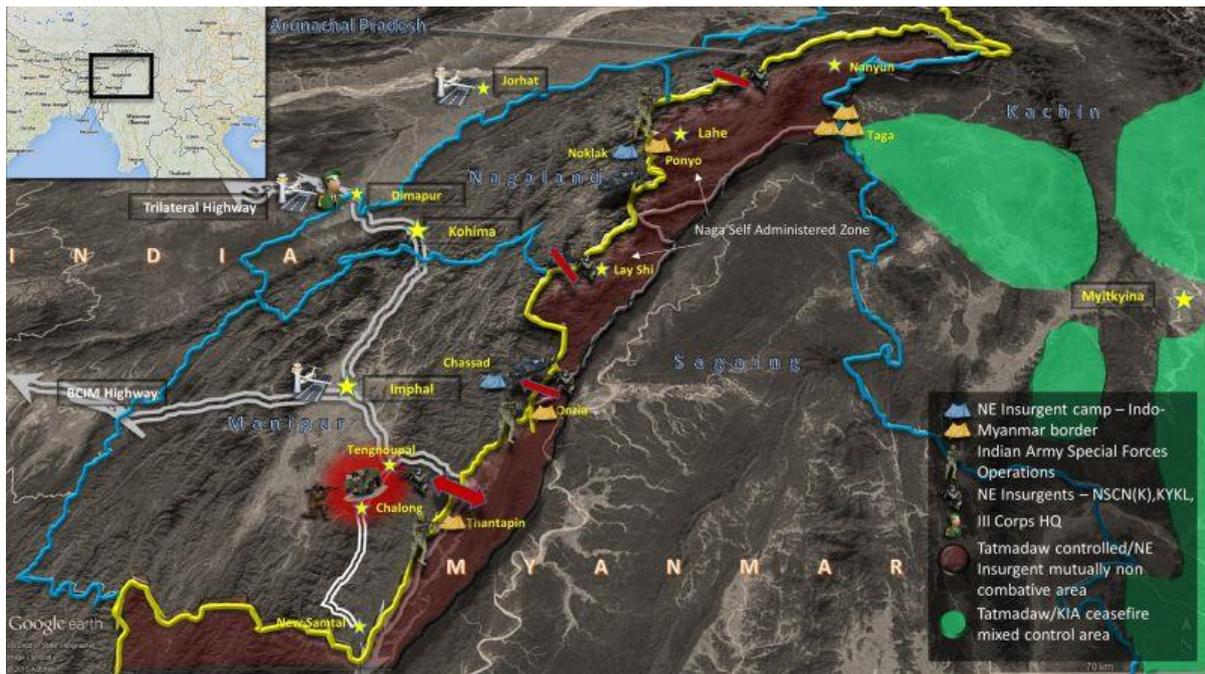
Figure I: Insurgencies in Northeast India



Source: Namrata Goswami, map made at IDSA GIS Lab.

The June 4 ambush has further complicated the situation. For long, Manipur has been home to three major insurgent actors, and a few other smaller groups. Amongst the three major ones are the UNLF founded in 1964, the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) and its political wing, the Revolutionary People's Front (RPF), founded in 1978, and the NSCN (IM) formed in 1988. Besides these three groups, we have the KNA, the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), the Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL), the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP), and others. Both the KYKL and the KCP, along with the NSCN (K), claimed responsibility for the June 4, 2015 ambush.

Figure II: Site of June 04 Ambush and the Counter-Attack by Indian forces across the Indo-Myanmar Border



Source and Copyright: Namrata Goswami, 2015

Of critical note was the involvement of the NSCN (K) in the attacks in Manipur. Traditionally known to function in the Mon district of Nagaland and Tirap and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh, the presence of the NSCN (K) in Manipur demonstrates that the outfit has changed strategy and, in cooperation with Manipur-based insurgent groups, is starting to make its presence felt in Manipur. That the NSCN (K) would target security forces is not new. What is, however, distinctly new is its ability to utilise joint operations under the ambit of CorCom (Coordination Committee), an umbrella organisation of six insurgent groups in Manipur, namely the KCP, the KYKL, PREPAK, the RPF, the UNLF, and the United Peoples Party of Kangleipak (UPPK).

CorCom outfits have established base areas and training camps in Myanmar's Naga Self-Administered Zone where the Myanmar government granted autonomy to the NSCN (K) and allowed the outfit to remain fully armed. Critically, the NSCN (K) has been losing ground in Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, its traditional operating areas, after its internal split in March when two of its senior India-based leaders, Y. Wangtin Naga and P. Tikhak, were expelled from the outfit, who went on to form the NSCN (Reformation). The NSCN (Reformation) along with the NSCN (Khole-Kitovi) now claims to represent Konyaks in Nagaland. Hence, it is realistic to assume that Khaplang has negotiated operating space in Manipur with the Manipur insurgent outfits within the framework of CorCom, in exchange for base areas in his controlled territories in Myanmar.

This emerging scenario is, however, not good for Manipur. A State already reeling under violence, the change of theatre by the NSCN (K) to Manipur will throw it into a deeper abyss. In my visits to Manipur in 2012 and 2013, I got the sense that local people wanted change, a life free of violence and extortions, and space for peaceful growth for their children. Local insurgent groups like the PLA and the UNLF, though utilising illegal means like extortion and violence, could at least be held to some measure of social control as they belonged to local ethnic bases.

This is not true of the NSCN (K), which is external to Manipur, and with no ethnically linked Naga base, will not be accountable to any social base. Nagas in Manipur, dominated by the Tangkhul tribe, feel more loyal to the NSCN (IM), whose major leader, Thuingaleng Muivah is also a Tangkhul. We already know about the deep seated ethnic rivalry between the NSCN (IM) and the NSCN (K) as to who represents the Naga people, and one of the major reasons for the latter abrogating the cease-fire with the Union government in March, 2015 was for not being included in the NSCN (IM)-Government peace negotiations.

What could be the best response to this situation? Disproportionate use of state force is not the answer. It will only alienate people further and create conditions for more violence. Already, in the immediate aftermath of the recent ambush, villagers near the ambush site abandoned their villages for fear that they may be suspected by the army of being complicit in the attack.

Moreover, as long as governance failures such as frequent state closures due to bandhs, ineffective policing, and weak public institutions continue, this situation will recur. Finally, we should not forget that Tengnoupal falls in the much talked about Asian Highway route raising serious doubts on its feasibility thereby requiring urgent interventions for peace. The latest round of violence also brings home to us the urgent need for open debate and discussion on issues that are seen as affecting the minorities in the State for dispelling myths and rumours that could have fatal consequences. It also drives in the necessity of inter-ethnic dialogue and civil society engagements to assuage years of hatred and distrust.

Views expressed here are solely that of the author.

(This article was updated on September 30, 2015. The expansion of NSCN (IM) was changed to National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah).

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1. [^] **Laithangbam, Iboyaima and Bagchi, Suvojit. 2015.** "8 Killed as Bills Triggers Fury in Manipur". *The Hindu*, Accessed Sept. 3, 2015
2. [^] **Government of Manipur, n.d.** **Decentralisation, Governance and the Institutional Framework of Development in Different Regions of Manipur** (Original URL:http://manipur.nic.in/planning/DraftMSDR/Draft_SDR_pdf/Chapter%2018_Decentralisation.pdf). Accessed Sept. 3, 2015.

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