

# IDSA

## *Policy Brief*

# **Naga Peace Accord and the Kuki and Meitei Insurgencies in Manipur**

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## **Summary**

Kuki and Meitei insurgencies in Manipur have deep rooted connections with the NSCN(IM)-led Naga insurgency. The Naga Peace accord will have a definite and positive impact on them. With the non-territorial resolution framework agreement in place, the demands for a sovereign Manipur and Kukiland have lost their relevance to a large extent. There is, however, a need to rehabilitate Kuki cadres housed in Suspension of Operations (SoO) camps and surrendered Meitei cadres, along with NSCN (IM) cadres, to attain lasting peace in the state. Engaging Meitei leaders in peace talks should be the next logical step. While negotiations are on with Anup Chetia, the General Secretary of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) in Assam, prudence demands that Rajkumar Meghen, the Chief of the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) presently lodged in jail, should also be invited for peace talks. There is also need to have a flexible policy on surrenders and peace talks.

Manipur is a melting pot of diverse cultures and ethnicities and has gradually evolved into a dynamic multicultural society. Naga, Kuki and Meitei stayed together side by side for centuries and developed their heritage in parallel within their respective ethno-social boundaries. But the 'divide and rule policy' of the colonial administration in relation to administering the hills and plains of Manipur and the introduction of Christianity widened the cultural gap among these communities. Although they continued to coexist peacefully in the aftermath of independence, over a period of time separate aspirations and perceived insecurity regarding overlapping claims over natural resources led them to gradually move apart. Developments like the demands for Nagalim and Kukiland as well as divergent aspirations for cultural identity and land rights deepened prejudices and led to inter-community clashes. These clashes also hastened the formation of various armed groups affiliated to the respective ethnic communities.

Merger with India in 1949 is a political, social and emotive issue for the Meiteis. The NSCN(IM)'s demand for the formation of Nagalim, which included four districts of Manipur (Chandel, Senapati, Tamenglong and Ukhrul) was seen as a threat to Manipur's territorial integrity. Till date, Meitei insurgent groups continue to wage insurgency in the name of self-determination and restoration of lost sovereignty. For their part, Kuki insurgents want a state within-a-state under the Constitution while Naga insurgents are still divided between the demand for greater Nagalim (a separate entity carved out by merging the Naga-inhabited areas of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur and Myanmar) and shared sovereignty under the Constitution. Since the Kuki and Meitei insurgencies have primarily gained ideological strength and relevance as tools to safeguarding their respective community interests, the Naga Peace accord with its non-territorial resolution framework is likely to have a definite and positive impact on the Kuki and Meitei insurgencies in Manipur.

### **Kuki Insurgency**

#### **Nagalim and Kuki Insurgency**

The areas in Manipur which NSCN(IM) is demanding be merged with Nagaland as part of greater Nagalim included large areas of Kuki inhabitancy. Kukis in Manipur consequently felt the need to organise themselves so to protect their interests more forcefully. Kuki insecurity also stemmed from the reciprocal distrust and dislike for the Meitei community due to non-inclusive development, the absence of a clearly defined space for Kukis, and a feeling of alienation which has only been fanned by their perception the recently passed Protection of Manipur Peoples Bill 2015<sup>1</sup> is partisan in nature.

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<sup>1</sup> The Manipur Legislative Assembly unanimously passed the Protection of Manipur People Bill, 2015. There are apprehensions among the tribal people, particularly the Kukis, that many of them may be listed as outsiders because of the stringent criteria in the new bill and thus lose the benefit of service, facilities and amenities.

The Kuki National Army (KNA) was formed in 1958 to address the social, economic and political interests of Kukis. But the Kuki movement could not take concrete shape, as elements within did not associate with the Thadou tribe that was spearheading the movement for an Autonomous State. Paites and Hmars formed their own political parties, namely, the Paites National Council (PNC) and Hmar National Union (HNU). PNC's political aim was to establish an Independent State of Chinland comprising areas inhabited by the people of Chin origin in Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Myanmar and Bangladesh. At the same time, differing aspirations led to the formation of a large number of Kuki groups with varied interests and political alignments.

### **Naga-Kuki Clashes**

In the backdrop of continued socio-political rivalry, Naga-Kuki clashes erupted in 1992-94 due to the refusal by the Kukis to pay land tax to NSCN(IM) as well as their share of the Maphau Dam compensation. As a follow up to these clashes, on September 13, 1993, a major incident took place known as the Joupi massacre in which 88 Kukis were killed. This day is marked as a "black day" by the Kukis. These were followed by the Kuki-Zomi<sup>2</sup> clashes in 1997-98, during which the worst affected area was Churachandpur. This led to large scale migration of the Kuki population.

### **Suspension of Operations (SoO) Agreement**

Subsequently, 20 militant groups under two umbrella organizations, fifteen with Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and five with United People's Front (UPF), were formed to negotiate with the Government. The historic tripartite Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement was signed between the Government of India, Government of Manipur and the KNO UPF in New Delhi on August 22, 2008 under a certain set of ground rules.<sup>3</sup> The SoO agreement was extended by one year on August 22, 2009 and the agreement is being extended periodically, although intermediary problems led to a period of non-extension of SoO. Presently, there are ten SoO camps with approximately 1400 cadres. But these cadres have not completely stopped their illegal activities like tax collection, extortion and kidnapping, which has also often led to inter-factional clashes owing to competing areas of dominance.

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<sup>2</sup> This conflict involved two ethnic groups, the Paite and the Thadou language speaking Kukis. The Paites prefer to call themselves "Zomi" rather than "Kuki", while local Thadous prefer to call themselves "Kuki".

<sup>3</sup> The Security Forces (SF) and Kuki armed groups agreed to declare Suspension of Operations (SOO) till the commencement of a political dialogue. During this period, the armed groups agreed not to carry out any hostile or violent activity against the Security Forces as well as not carry out any unlawful activity or act in a manner that causes harassment/injury/death to, and loss of property of, the civilian population. The Security Forces, in turn, agreed not to carry out any unilateral offensive operations against these groups.

### **Demand for Kuki Land/Kuki State**

The Kuki State Demand Committee (KSDC) was formed on November 2, 2010 to seek statehood for the Kukis. This Kuki-land / Kuki state is to be carved out of their ancestral land in Manipur. Central to this demand is the motive of historical revenge on the Nagas. According to social scientist Homen Thangjam, the message the Kukis were sending was that the Nagas could not hope for a political solution to their problem bypassing the Kukis, meaning that the existence of Kuki pockets in Naga areas was a reality that would have to be accounted for. At the same time, the idea of a Kuki state comprising areas covering Ukhrul, Senapati, Tamenglong and Chandel districts, which the Nagas have been claiming as part of Greater Nagalim, makes the demand for Kuki-land appear farfetched under the present circumstances.<sup>4</sup> This is substantiated by the Sadar Hills tussle, wherein the Kukis were not able to convert the Kuki-dominated area as a full-fledged revenue entity due to opposition of the Nagas who consider Sadar Hills as part of the Senapati District, which they claim as part of Greater Nagalim.

### **Demand for Sadar Hills District**

The demand for the creation of the Sadar Hills district first came from the Kuki Chiefs' Zonal Council at its meeting held on September 3, 1970. Numerous rounds of talks with the government that followed the raising of this demand failed to produce any result. Under the auspices of the Kuki National Assembly, the Sadar Hills District Demand Committee (SHDDC) was formed in 1974 to demand full-fledged revenue district status for the Sadar Hills Autonomous District Council. The election of new SHDDC leaders in June 2011 led to the revival of the demand for Sadar Hills district. The Sadar Hills District Demand Committee was thereafter renamed as Sadar Hills District-hood Demand Committee. The demand to upgrade Sadar Hills to full-fledged district status continues to remain as a bone of contention between the Kukis and Nagas of Manipur. While the Kukis term the delay in granting district status as "justice denied" and feel ignored by the state government, the Nagas see it as an attempt to encroach upon their traditional land.<sup>5</sup> The Meiteis, who are in a majority in the government and administration, view this development very warily and have been conveniently trying to maintain the status quo on the issue.

The SHDDC requested the state government to declare Sadar Hills a full-fledged district before July 31, 2011. The lack of response from the government led SHDDC leaders to impose a blockade on the two life-lines of Manipur, NH-2 and NH-37, with effect from August 1, 2011, which was later converted to an economic blockade. This led to the imposition of a counter blockade by the United Naga

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<sup>4</sup> Imphal Free Press, "The search for Kukiland", December 15, 2012, <http://kanglaonline.com/2012/12/the-search-for-kukiland/> (Accessed on December 20, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Thongkholal Haokip, "District Status for Sadar Hills in Manipur", *Man and Society*, Vol. IX, Winter 2012, pp. 92-112, [http://www.academia.edu/1481619/District\\_Status\\_for\\_Sadar\\_Hills\\_in\\_Manipur](http://www.academia.edu/1481619/District_Status_for_Sadar_Hills_in_Manipur) (Accessed on 24 December 2015).

Council (UNC) on August 21, 2011, to stall the Manipur government's alleged attempt to bifurcate the Naga-dominated areas to create new districts. After 120 days, the longest ever blockade in Manipur, the UNC lifted the blockade on November 29, 2011. The blockade led to the loss of innocent lives, government property and caused immense inconveniences to innocent locals.<sup>6</sup>

### **Important Implications**

To sum up, there are three important implications of the Naga Peace Accord for the Kuki insurgency:

- The relevance of Kukiland in the backdrop of the Naga non-territorial agreement.
- The viability of opposition by the United Naga Council for the creation of Sadar Hills as a district.
- The consequences of the existence of Kuki SoO designated camps on closure of NSCN (IM) "Taken-Note-Off camps".<sup>7</sup>

## **Meitei Insurgency**

### **Background**

The Meitei insurgency has its origin in Meitei revivalism, which started in 1930 against Hindu Vaishnavism imported from Bengal into Manipur. Subsequent to the accession of Manipur to India, the movement spread and gained prominence under the banner of 'Meitei Marup'. A strong feeling that domination by outsiders in all spheres of activities including administration was responsible for the economic ills of Manipur spread among the Meiteis. The non-inclusion of Manipuri language in the eighth schedule of the Constitution until as late as 1992 also caused alienation among the Meiteis.

### **Nagalim and Its Relation**

The present Meitei insurgency traces its origins to the foundation of the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) on November 24, 1964. Radicalism spread further after the formation of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1978. The PLA has a leftist ideology, and it wanted to unite all ethnic groups in the North East. Meiteis also feel that the denial of Schedule Tribe status led to discontent and increase in insurgent activities as employment avenues for Meiteis were reduced significantly.

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<sup>6</sup> Sushil Kumar Sharma, "Dynamics of Bandhs and Blockades in Northeast India A Study of Manipur and the Way Ahead", Manekshaw Paper No. 48, 2014, [http://www.claws.in/images/publication\\_pdf/1017393661\\_MP48-DynamicsofBandhsandBlockades.pdf](http://www.claws.in/images/publication_pdf/1017393661_MP48-DynamicsofBandhsandBlockades.pdf) (Accessed on December 20, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> NSCN (IM) Camps in Manipur are called "Taken Note off Camps" as the ceasefire with the NSCN (IM) was not extended to Manipur.

With the Nagas demanding Naga dominated areas, the very existence of the state of Manipur was being questioned, which the Meitei population vociferously resisted. As a result, numerous other groups were formed primarily in the Imphal valley region. On June 14, 2001 the ceasefire between NSCN(IM) and the Centre was extended to all Naga inhabited areas outside Nagaland. This led to the eruption of an upsurge among the Meiteis. Although the ceasefire was retracted from Naga inhabited areas outside Manipur on August 1, 2001, it acted like fuel to the fire of Meitei insurgency, which gained momentum and became unbridled. This rift between Nagas and Meiteis continues to date and manifests in violence on the slightest of provocations.

For instance, the proposed visit of Th Muivah, the NSCM(IM) leader, to his native village after 47 years, approved by the Central government on April 29, 2010, was perceived by the valley people as a threat to Manipur's territorial integrity owing to the well-publicised demand of NSCN (IM) for merger of all Naga inhabited areas into one political unit – Nagalim. Taking a cue from their past experience and apprehending a divisive political agenda behind the visit, the State government, in its wisdom, turned down the proposed visit, citing law and order problems, reflecting the deep rooted apprehensions and positions of the opposing parties.

### **Surrender and Memorandum of Understanding Camps**

The Meitei insurgent groups have been most active in Manipur. But they are under pressure because of the intensive operations launched by the security forces. There have been surrenders by the cadre of many Meitei insurgent groups. These cadres are housed in six camps, also called the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) camps, with an approximate strength of 390 to 400 cadres. Like Kuki militants, they are also continuing their unlawful activities.

### **Apprehension of Meitei Leaders**

A large number of senior Meitei insurgent leaders have been arrested. The arrest of Rajkumar Meghen, head of India's oldest and richest militia, the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), on November 30, 2010 was a big blow to the outfit. Meghen posed a much larger threat as he, by virtue of his acceptability among the 25 biggest militant organisations in the Northeast, was working on a unification plan and had been articulating on certain international aspects of the movement.<sup>8</sup>

### **Important Implications**

To sum up, there are two main implications of the Naga Peace Accord for the Meitei Insurgency:

- Relevance of the demand for sovereign Manipur and continuation of insurgency.

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<sup>8</sup> NDTV, "Manipur Top Rebel's leader Meghan Arrested", December 1, 2010, <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/manipurs-top-rebel-leader-meghen-arrested-440718>, (Accessed on December 20, 2015).

- The need to engage with Meitei Leaders like UNLF Chief Raj Kumar Meghan in the peace process in order to progress towards peace in Manipur.

### **Recommendations**

#### **Closure of Kuki Designated Camps and Rehabilitation of Cadres**

If the proposal for closure of NSCN(IM) Taken-Note-off Camps is accepted in Manipur, then it is important that the Kuki SoO camps in Manipur should also be closed and the cadres located there rehabilitated. If this does not take place, it may give rise to the formation of another Naga splinter group to safeguard the interests of the Nagas of Manipur. The fact is that most of the cadres in these camps want to join the mainstream, stay with their families, obtain a government job and lead a peaceful life. There is a need to plan the comprehensive rehabilitation of Naga, Kuki and Meitei cadres in designated camps to ensure peace in Manipur.

#### **Engage Meitei Leaders in Peace Talks**

Many Meitei leaders have been apprehended and are in jail, including Rajkumar Meghen. This is the right time to initiate talks with them. They can be given general amnesty, as has been done with other insurgent leaders in the Northeast, a recent example being the self-styled Chairman of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) Ranjan Diamery and the General Secretary of ULFA Anup Chetia. Such negotiations have brought peace to Mizoram, Nagaland and Assam in the past.

#### **Creation of Sadar Hills District**

Sadar Hills has the requisite infrastructure in place, including the Sadar Hills Autonomous Council. In view of this, the conferment of district status to Sadar Hills may be considered and expedited in the light of the Naga Peace Accord. At the same time, the apprehensions and sensitivities of the Nagas of Senapati District should be addressed in consultation with the Naga leaders.

#### **Policy on Apprehension/Surrender**

In a clear message to insurgent groups in the Northeast, the Union government has temporarily suspended the surrender and rehabilitation policy in Manipur. It is an extension of a strategy which was adopted in Assam a few months ago to successfully crack down on the Songbijit faction of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland.<sup>9</sup> Presently, no surrenders are being accepted in order to convey a strong message to the militants and discourage fake surrenders. However, there

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<sup>9</sup> "Manipur ambush: Surrender and rehabilitation policy in northeast put on hold", The Economic Times, June 08, 2015, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/manipur-ambush-surrender-and-rehabilitation-policy-in-northeast-put-on-hold/articleshow/47579115.cms> (Accessed on December 20, 2015).

is need to have a flexible policy in this regard. During the field survey conducted by this author, it emerged that more than 80 per cent of cadres join militant groups because of coercion or compulsion and not for the sake of ideology. As a policy, the surrender of such cadres should be accepted and insurgents groups should be encouraged to engage in peace talks.

### **Conclusion**

The Naga peace accord is a historic step. It needs to be followed up by correct policy interventions that serve to undercut the relevance of the Kuki and Meitei insurgencies and thus usher in peace in Manipur.

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