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## PEACE AUDIT NORTHEAST

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# THE ROAD TO PEACE IN MANIPUR

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## Contents

Introduction	03
Peace in Manipur?	04
The Status of Peace Talks	05
Overtures and Responses	09
Road to Peace	10
References	11

## PEACE AUDIT NORTHEAST

# THE ROAD TO PEACE IN MANIPUR

**Chitra Ahanthem**

*Imphal Free Press, Manipur*

Manipur, a sovereign Kingdom came under British rule as a princely state in 1891 after its defeat in the Khongjom war. Following the defeat, the Assam Rifles occupied the Kangla and Manipur became the last independent kingdom to be incorporated into British India. When the British left the Indian sub-continent in 1947, Manipur also regained its independence with the Manipur Constitution Act, 1947, leading to the establishment of a government with an elected legislature and the Maharaja Bodhchandra as the Executive Head. However, in 1949, Maharaja Bodhchandra was summoned to Shillong, the capital of the then Indian province of Assam, and on 21 September 1949 signed a Treaty of Accession under which Manipur was to be formally merged to India on October 15, 1949. Manipur was a union territory from 1956, becoming a full-fledged state in 1972.

But the signing of the Merger agreement was considered by a majority to be under duress and the first seeds of rebellion were sowed when Hijam Irabot who opposed the merger went underground and raised a band of revolutionaries. Irabot sought the support of Communist Party of Burma but died before his efforts could bear fruit in 1951. The first Meitei revolutionary movement died with Irabot. It was not until the mid-1960s that Manipur experienced another upsurge in violent, anti-government activities. On 24 November, 1964, the first resistance group was formed with the emergence of the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) which stated as its aim not only an independent, socialist republic in Manipur but also that it had a 'historic mission' to liberate Manipur 'from colonial occupation in the larger context of liberating the entire Indo-Burma region, for a common future' (Bertil Lintner, New Delhi Harper Collins, p. 146-147). But the UNLF was not be the sole group that would espouse the cause of a 'sovereign Manipur' for over a period of time, there came into being other major groups like the People's Liberation Army (PLA), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) and offshoots from these groups due to ideological differences, leadership issues etc.

Apart from the Meitei outfits that are active in the Imphal Valley, the major Naga insurgent group - National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) has a strong base in four of Manipur's five hill districts, namely, Ukhrlul, Senapati, Tamenglong and Chandel. The Nagas who have had a long struggle for their unique place in history and sovereignty with its insurgent

movement fragmenting in the journey into the Naga National Council, NSCN (IM) and the NSCN (K) of which, the later two are more active politically and in terms of their role in the prevailing armed conflict in the state. The ongoing talks between the NSCN (IM) and the Government of India has meanwhile triggered off an active civil response from various groups from among the Meiteis and the Kukis with the main spotlight being territorial integrity.

The demand for Kukiland (land for the Kukis) is a direct challenge to the demand for Greater or southern Nagaland by the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM). 'Greater Nagaland' as projected by the NSCN (IM) would have to be inclusive of all Naga inhabited areas, thereby forking out major chunks if not the entire districts of Chandel, Senapati, Tamenglong and Ukhrul, to be integrated with the neighbouring Nagaland State.

The intention to drive out Kukis from these four hill districts in fact led to an intense and prolonged "ethnic cleansing" by the NSCN-IM in the 90's. While Meiteis oppose the creation of either a Kuki homeland or a greater Nagaland, the Kukis and Nagas are unable to establish any kind of coordination or cooperation. Thus, the ethnic conflict between the Nagas and the constitutes another problem of the State. Clashes between the two groups are now not heard of. A number of Kuki outfits like Kuki National Army (KNA), Kuki National Front (KNF) and many others had been struggling for a separate State within the Indian Union since the late 80s (SATP backgrounder).

### PEACE IN MANIPUR?

The very idea of 'peace' in Manipur in its current situation is layered. If at one level, we are to look at the frequency and number of occasions now, in which armed groups or non-state armed actors (various armed groups) have engaged with state armed actors (security personnel) or undertaken attacks and ambushes, there is indeed a decline of such confrontations as compared to the early 80 and 90's. Such confrontations between the state and non state forces lead to a state of fear, harassment and trauma for security personnel would undertake what are called 'combing operations' in the immediate vicinity of sites where attacks took place or where there was suspicion of the movement of the non state actors. It was in the context of such 'combing operations' undertaken by paramilitary forces who were protected under the impunity of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) that the civilian population of Manipur came to grapple with numerous cases of their civil rights being violated: with numerous cases of forced disappearances, torture in custody, illegal detention, rape and fake encounters even as human rights groups and civil society took to the streets and various other forums to protest against the arbitrary actions. It was the public outrage and agitations but more specifically, the Kangla protest where 12 Meira Paibi women stripped themselves to protest in the wake of the brutal rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama, an alleged former underground care that the situation in the state came under national and international media and human rights groups. Though 'combing operations' still continue, they are done so under an arrangement called 'joint

operations' where paramilitary forces and state police forces work in tandem. Such a move is aimed at deflecting criticism of paramilitary forces and their manner of operations and to co-opt the state police force into the battlefield. This circumstantial marriage has now brought about a situation where the state police force now stands accused of being responsible for a majority of extra judicial killings. Even as the number of confrontations between the state and non state security forces have decreased, there has been a rise in the number of cases where the civilian space has been terrorized by bomb blasts, extortions, kidnappings for ransom and kidnapping of minors for induction as child soldiers. On the other hand, the triangular conflict status quo arising in the state due to the demands of political identity and territorial status among the Meiteis, Kukis and Nagas has led to a situation where the civil sphere has been infringed. The state Highways which are predominantly in areas inhabited by Kukis and Nagas and hence under their control are often used to hold the state to ransom over various 'demands' ranging from Kuki statehood calls to protests over the entry of the NSCN (IM) leadership to Ukhrul and other Naga inhabited areas.

### THE STATE OF PEACE TALKS

According to the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC), a partnership of research institutes, think-tanks and consultancy organisations with expertise in governance, social development, humanitarian and conflict issues:

'Peace agreements are formal agreements aimed at ending violent conflict and creating the conditions for durable peace. They include ceasefire agreements, interim or preliminary agreements, comprehensive and framework agreements, and implementation agreements. The way in which the conflict ends - whether by compromise, or a one-sided victory, for example - typically has implications for the nature of the peace. The signing of a peace agreement is often considered to signal the end of the conflict. Much of the literature argues instead that this signals only the beginning of a process toward ending the conflict given that relapse into violence is common, full implementation of the peace agreement is seen as another key milestone. Key parties to the conflict may agree to peace agreements for tactical reasons, without being genuinely committed to the peace process (Ending violent conflict: peace agreements and conflict transformation).'

In the context mentioned above, the various 'peace process' or 'peace talks' as they are described are at best in a convoluted state in Manipur. Manipur's armed and political conflict is a mix of the fight between armed state actors and non state actors on one hand and the infighting between the various non state forces. Broadly put, the non state forces constitute of two main groups: the valley based ones and the hill based groups. Of these two categories, the hill based ones are again sub divided into the Naga insurgent groups and the Kuki groups while a new entrant that is making its presence felt is a Zeliangrong armed group.

With the Kuki groups, the first Suspension of operations (SoO) was signed in 2005 with only the Indian army, a fact that speaks volumes of the manner in which the civil administration is kept aside by the armed forces in the region. It

was only in 2008, that the existing tripartite agreement came to be signed between the Govt of India and the Manipur state Govt on one side and various Kuki underground groups on the other side. The Kuki groups that are in a tripartite SoO with the Central and the Manipur state government are again splintered into two umbrella groups: the Kuki National Organisation and the United Peoples Front (UPF). Official sources stated that more than 30 militant groups from both the hills and the valley have entered the peace process since 2008 (Over 150 Manipur rebels surrender, The Telegraph, September 10, 2013).

However, there is no real information available on the public domain about the exact number of groups. Interestingly, the term used for peace talks with the valley based groups is 'Memorandum of Understanding' (MOU) though the terms of agreement are on similar lines and just as similarly not disclosed to the public. A few of the hill based groups have a designated camp area where the cadres who have laid down arms are put up but mostly, the cadres who have 'given up arms' are put up in what are called 'designated army camps' in Assam Rifles camps. Out of the scratchy terms of ground rules that are in public knowledge, there is mention that the cadres are not to carry arms and ammunition out of their designated camp area and that they be present in the camp everyday. These ground rules are flouted with total nonchalance as evident from the various media reports that have documented all too clearly the manner in which cadres from designated camps have indulged in extortion bids, physical harassment to civilians etc.

The very nature of the peace talks are suspect for a variety of reasons: On February 24 this year, one day after top cadres of the Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup, MDF were arrested for violating the recently signed peace talks agreement by trying to barge inside the office chamber of the Regional Institute of Medical Sciences Director's office; two persons came forth to claim that they were unwittingly made to join in the surrender and signing of the Memorandum of Understanding program as cadres of the United Revolutionary Front (URF).

The MoU in question was signed on February 13 at the 1st Manipur Rifles banquet Hall between representatives of the state government, centre and three militant outfits- Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup, MDF; United Revolutionary Front, Manipur and the Kangleipak Communist Party, Lamphel. In a press conference, the two said that they had no idea that they will be made to join in the surrender program and had been hired by one person for masonry work at the Headquarter of 57 Mountain Division, Leimakhong (Two claim they were made part of surrender drama, IFP, 25 February).

The process leading to SoO and MOUs or the requirements specified for armed groups to be a part of the 'peace talks' in Manipur are not made clear while there is no specification on what happens in case ground rules are flouted. In a Kuki designated camp located in Churachandpur district, this author saw the presence of child soldiers thereby throwing up the issue of whether numbers are the sole criteria for armed groups to be recognized as one that can enter into the 'peace process'. In another camp in the interiors of Imphal East district, there were two very cramped rooms meant to house 40 cadres each when it was clear

that not more than 10-12 cadres could fit into them. A separate room with double locks was meant to house the arms and ammunition of the armed group but the few cadres at the designated camp carried the most sophisticated assault rifles. With a paltry sum of Rs 4000 made out for every cadre made out that armed groups say is supposed to cover the monthly food rations and other essential items, there is a growing incidence of cadres who have taken part on the 'laying down of arms' which incidentally the media has been asked not to term as 'surrender programs' taking to extortion. If there is any criteria at all for insurgent groups to enter into 'peace talks' with the state and central governments are in place, that information is out of public domain. Apart from the Kuki armed groups, the valley based Meitei armed groups have not entered into peace talks with the Government as a unified party but rather as factions with cadres of the same group operating actively.

In another incident that mirrors the lack of transparency and any seriousness on the part of the Government to regulate how former insurgents are being paid their stipends, newspapers in the state reported that Lallumba, the President of the KCP (MC) Lallumba group decamped from the 7th MR Khabeishoi camp on June 9 along with a huge amount of Rs 1,92,68, 800 meant for a one time rehabilitation package from the government. The amount including monthly allowance of eight months, bank deposits of 114 cadres and 10 polit buro members of the outfit which had signed a tripartite peace talk with the central and the state governments on August 6, 2010 at the 1st Manipur Rifles Banquet Hall (Lallumba of KCP (MC) Lallumba group "decamps" with Rs 1.92 crores, IFP, July 8, 2013).

Even as the remaining cadres submitted 'complaints' to the state Principal Secretary Home with copies being submitted to the Joint Secretary Home, IGAR (S), GOC 57th Mountain Division, IGP (CRPF) and DIG, there has been no word from the concerned over the fate of the cadres in the camp or in term of the whereabouts of the former leader of the group. There have been numerous incidents when residents in the areas around the AR camps where cadres of various underground groups are kept after entering into SoO and MOU have demanded that the cadres be shifted out of their areas. Such calls have come up on the basis of the cadres 'disturbing the peace' with their involvement in cases of harassment of people in the area, physical intimidation and extortion. To cite an example here: when it came into the public domain that cadres of the KYKL (MDF) who were earlier lodged with the 20th Assam Rifles camp at Chandel Headquarter would be shifted to the Khongjom area of Thoubal district, locals of Khongjom and surrounding villages in Thoubal district including from Sapam, Chingtham, Samram, Langthabal, Langathel, Tekcham took to the streets protesting the move. This came about even as the people of Chandel head quarter district were protesting against the said cadres of the group being stationed at the district (Cadres in 'peace talks' unwanted in both Chandel and Khongjom, IFP). The modalities of the ongoing 'peace' processes in the state clearly shows that what are being undertaken are only superficial events centered 'signing ceremonies' that are dressed up under the term 'home coming ceremonies' with no real meaning or value in the lives of the common man or any perceptible step towards limiting the level of violence arising out of the conflict situation. Rather, the ambiguity of the terms of the various peace

initiatives taken up by the state and central government with the armed groups on one hand and the fact that major valley based armed groups are yet to bite the peace bait shows that such initiatives do not look to be bringing about any tangible change to the theatre of conflict in the state. The political gains if any of the ongoing 'peace process' in Manipur with various armed groups of the hills and the valley are yet to emerge but already the fissures arising out of the overlapping demands by the Kukis, Nagas in terms of carving out territorial areas with the Meiteis insisting on their territorial integrity has changed the tone of various civil society groups on community lines. On October 10, 2012, when the Union Home Minister Sushil Kumar Shinde, hinted that a 'solution' to the 'Naga issue' was likely before March 2013, when Assembly polls in Nagaland were due, the Kukis opposed the talks, threatening to renew their demand for statehood, even as the Meiteis vehemently rejected the talks, claiming that settlement proposals would disturb the 'unity of Manipur or its territorial integrity'. Further, on November 2, 2012, the Kuki National Organization (KNO), an umbrella organization of 16 Kuki militant groups, threatened to resume armed struggle and to 'secede from Manipur' if the Centre did not begin talks with them.

On the other hand, the United Committee Manipur (UCM), an apex body of the Meiteis, on October 18, 2012, categorically stated that it would demand 'pre-merger status' of Manipur if the ongoing political dialogue between NSCN-IM and GoI disturbed the unity or territorial integrity of Manipur in any way. On October 26, 2012, the United Naga Council (UNC), the main apex body of the Nagas, asserted that a peaceful parting of the Nagas in Manipur and the Meiteis as good neighbours, was the only way to avert a catastrophic situation that would arise out of the prolonged 'forced union of the two (Manipur Assessment - Year 2013 by the South Asia Terrorist Portal)'.  
 Assessment - Year 2013 by the South Asia Terrorist Portal)

## OVERTURES AND RESPONSES

Apart from the major Naga groups and the Kuki armed groups, none of the major Meitei insurgent groups have come forth to the peace table with ritual appeals being made by the Government on occasions such as Republic day and Independence Day observations and the groups dismissing the offer.

In September 2006, during a session of the Manipur Assembly, Chief Minister Okram Ibobi Singh made a clarification on the floor of the Assembly that in the sixteen years that the state government had introduced a surrender policy for insurgents, only 377 underground activists from nineteen different organizations had actually bitten the bait, an average of twenty persons per organization in the said sixteen years or a little over one person in a year, per organization (Pradip phanjoubam, Oxford University Press New Delhi, p-149). Earlier, while responding to the then Manipur Governor S.S. Sidhu's appeal to militant groups to come to the negotiation table, the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) 'chairman', Sana Yaima (now in NIA custody), in a press statement in Imphal on January 31, 2005, came up with a four-point

proposal to "end the conflict satisfactorily once and for all." The proposals mooted were:

1. To hold a plebiscite under the aegis of the United Nations aegis so that the people of Manipur can exercise their democratic right to decide on the core issue of the conflict – the restoration of Manipur’s sovereignty and independence.
2. To deploy a UN Peace Keeping Force in Manipur to ensure free and fair conduct of the Plebiscite.
3. UNLF to deposit all its arms to the UN Peace Keeping Force and India to withdraw all its regular and para military forces from Manipur before a deadline prior to the Plebiscite date to be decided by the UN. Also, the UN Peace Keeping Force to call upon all other armed opposition groups in Manipur to follow suit.
4. The UN to hand over political power in accordance with the result of the Plebiscite (UNLF response to Manipur Governor's appeal for dialogue).

The state government rejected the proposals and that was the end of the peace offer. Similarly, when the Manipur Chief Minister, Okram Ibobi Singh reached out to the PLA to shun violence and come forward for peace talks in 2012, the PLA President, Irengbam Chaoren rejected the offer and instead appealed to all armed groups in the Northeast to join in a united fight against the Indian state (RPF's chief greets on outfit's 29th B'day Sangai Express, 25 February).

According to Ceety Khongsai in the Manipur Chapter of ‘Liberation Movements in the North East in the Journal of NE India studies): The Peace initiative of the Government of India in the northeast suffers from ambiguities. The matter becomes more confusing when the GOI-NSCN (IM)’s Ceasefire Agreement intentionally nullifies the repeated “Manipur Territorial Integrity Bills” passed in the Manipur legislative Assembly by appending the words, “without territorial limits. Sensing the impending inter community fracas the GOI was left with no other options but delete the controversial words from the text of the agreement. However, the public are still in disbelief regarding the sincerity and honesty of the central government in handling the fluid social atmosphere in Manipur; in the backdrop of the UNC’s Alternative Arrangement for the Nagas gaining momentum fresh clouds of apprehensions grips the entire northeast by questioning New Delhi’s honesty on the issue. On the other hand, the announcement made by Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh that “there’s enough room in the constitution to accommodate the demands of the northeast insurgents” categorically invalidate the hypothesis of possible outside-the-constitution solution to the decades old Naga political problem (Ceety Khongsai, Journal of NE India studies).

## ROAD TO PEACE

Given the context of the ongoing peace initiatives in the state, it is no surprise that there is no real change on the ground. The absence of any of the major armed groups stepping forth to enter into peace talks with the Government casts shadows on the intent of the Government and its various ongoing processes. Writing under the pen name of Yenning (Manipuri word for 'spring'), a leading columnist writing in the Sangai Express on the nature of 'Peace talks as counter insurgency measure' has this to say: If at all the government is interested to resolve the conflict in Manipur through peaceful and democratic means, then the first and the foremost step is initiation of a process for identifying the common problems, which are acceptable to both the conflicting groups, through an inclusive mechanism. Mere appeals for peace talks from time to time along with military engagements cannot bring about any tangible solution and least of all, addressing the problem. A charter of demands submitted by United NGOs Mission-Manipur, a conglomerate of over 100 grass NGOs operating in both the hill and valley area pointed out specific pre negotiating measures to be adopted by the government: (i) "Constitute an Independent Commissions for Conflict Resolution in the state; (ii) develop a framework on pre-negotiation, negotiation and post negotiation with special monitoring mechanisms with due representation from civil society, NGOs and also by engaging International Community as a Third Party to settle the long standing political conflict in the state". The most important one is to constitute the committee to identify a possible common meeting point within a time frame. However, the process of constituting the committee should be done under the Prime Minister Office or Ministry of External Affairs with the state government particularly the Home Minister and/or elected legislators as facilitators. This will increase the commitment of the government to the AOG (armed opposition group) (Hoi Polloi And Mundanity, Peace talks as counter insurgency measure).

Writing for IDSA, Namrata Goswami asks this rather pertinent question: what could be a feasible formula for peace talks in Manipur? For one, it has to deeply engage with the societal issues that have led to these multiple armed conflicts. Fears of loss of land, demands for political empowerment and economic development, ethnic identity assertion, cultural exclusivity, hill-plain divide, divide between the ethnic communities and the rest of India further fuelled by the absence of an inclusive politics, have created a web of alienation and loss of self-worth. Moreover, the politicization of ethnic differences for electoral gains, rampant corruption in development projects, fears of discrimination, and ethnic distrust creates the structural conditions for armed conflicts aligned along exclusivist ethnic lines. Merely, a mechanical process of peace talks may not salvage years of traumatic experience of conflict, killings, kidnappings and social stress in Manipur since the 1960s (Peace Gestures in Manipur - Will it Work?, IDSA Publication).

With various 'civil society groups' and pressure groups already taking their stands on the nature of peace processes operating in the state on ethnic lines and their affiliations, the road ahead for real term peace looks challenging to say the least given the number of armed groups operating in the state and the ethno centric politics driving them. The onus lies with the Government to come clean on the mandates of the peace talks that they are currently engaged in along with

a time frame and what concrete steps the talks are aiming to arrive at for without these in place, the event centric approach of SoO and MOU being signed and armed cadres being left to languish in army camps can only backfire, putting the talks and the fragile 'peace' in peril.

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