

Finding a Way Out of Festering Conflict in India's Manipur

February 2025



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Principal Findings

What's new? After close to two years of violence, the Indian government has imposed President's Rule in Manipur, putting it directly in charge of the troubled north-eastern state's affairs. New Delhi might seize the opportunity to quell an ethnic conflict that has killed more than 260 people and displaced some 60,000.

Why does it matter? Insurgent groups have resurfaced in Manipur over the past year. Failure to resolve the conflict could not just lead to more bloodshed and displacement, but also derail dialogue with the militants. It also risks destabilising other parts of north-eastern India, upsetting the hard-earned peace in neighbouring states.

Executive Summary

Nearly two years after clashes first erupted between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities, ethnic conflict continues to simmer in India's north-eastern state of Manipur. More than 260 people have been killed and 60,000 displaced in a dispute that revolves around the question of tribal rights. Manipur is deeply polarised, with the police and media divided along ethnic lines. The state government that was in power until recently was largely perceived as being pro-Meitei. Overwhelmed by the onset of fighting, the federal government split the state into two exclusive ethnic zones, separated by a buffer that central security forces patrol – a measure that reduced violence but failed to put an end to it. After the head of the state government resigned in early February, New Delhi went on to impose President's Rule, putting the state directly under central control.

Violence erupted in May 2023 during a march organised by the state's tribal communities. Led by representatives of the Kuki-Zo, the participants were protesting a court decision that had ruled in favour of the majority Meitei community's demand to be recognised as a Scheduled Tribe, a status which confers affirmative action benefits such as protection of land and quotas for government jobs. The Kuki-Zo, who are mostly Christian and have long been recognised as a tribal group, oppose this move, arguing that the Meitei, who are mostly Hindu, already hold most of the political and economic power in the state. Drawing on deep mistrust between the two sides of Manipur's ethnic divide, scuffles between Kuki-Zo and Meitei on the sidelines of the march spread at lightning speed, escalating to unprecedented levels of unrest across the state.

With rumour and disinformation rife, the floodgates of ethnic hostility opened, leading to large-scale sexual violence against women. The majority Meitei, who had looted state armouries, had the upper hand over the Kuki-Zo at first; the latter accounted for two thirds of deaths in the first couple of weeks, though they later struck back. Unable to quell the clashes, New Delhi partitioned the state between the Meitei, who live in the valley where the state capital Imphal sits, and the Kuki-Zo, who reside in the surrounding hills. Spatial segregation reduced the number of clashes but failed to stop the violence, as both parties regularly breached the buffer zone to attack the other side. In parallel, the central government tried to establish a peace dialogue, but the initiative collapsed before it began when it was revealed that the committee created for the purpose included Manipur's then-chief minister, Biren Singh, a Meitei widely perceived as biased by the Kuki-Zo.

Despite the deployment of an additional 40,000 troops in the state, people quickly lost faith in the authorities' capacity to restore order. Both communities have formed village defence forces to protect themselves and, even more concerning, militant groups from both sides, which had been dormant for years, have resurfaced. On the Meitei side, well-armed militias born of socio-cultural organisations have also gained dangerous prominence.

Tensions over tribal rights had been brewing for years in Manipur. In 2015, tribal communities – including the Kuki-Zo – had denounced the state government's attempt, without having consulting them first, to pass several laws that they perceived as infringing upon their constitutional rights. The bills were eventually scrapped, but the Meitei agenda got a boost again when the Hindu nationalist

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in the state in 2017. Re-elected in 2022, the BJP state government is largely perceived as siding with, if not actively backing the Meitei in the current violence. As a result, the Kuki-Zo have revived their demand for a separate administration in the form of a federally run Union Territory. The Meitei vehemently oppose the proposal.

The Myanmar conflict, just across the border, has complicated the situation further. Manipur's political fluctuations have always been tied to Myanmar due to the kinship ties that span the porous frontier, but the impact has been particularly visible in the past year. The outgoing chief minister fanned ethnic tensions by pointing to the arrival from Myanmar of Chin refugees, tribal kin of the Kuki-Zo, claiming that the latter were fostering illegal immigration. Though all of Manipur's ethnic groups are involved in the illicit drug trade originating in Myanmar, the former chief minister singled out the Kuki-Zo as "narco-terrorists", accusing them of collaborating with the new Chin arrivals.

A painful, protracted conflict is possible. If communal grievances are not addressed, Manipur's divides could cause still more bloodshed.

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Finding a Way Out of Festering Conflict in India's Manipur

I. Introduction

Eight states comprise India's north east, sharing more than 5,000km of borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, the Tibet Autonomous Region and Myanmar. While Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya, Sikkim, Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur are tiny compared to other Indian states, both in terms of size and population, they are rich in diversity, being home to more than 200 ethnic groups, most of them recognised as tribes under the Indian constitution. The region's tribal composition sets it apart from the rest of India, as does its dominant religion: most of the population is Christian, having been converted by missionaries over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries.

This cultural and ethnic mosaic also led to the emergence of dozens of separatist insurgencies, many of which date back to the 1950s, in the immediate wake of India's independence.¹ Over the years, the Indian government has largely managed to contain these insurrections, at times through brutal means. Its use of military force to maintain control of these distant borderlands has created a groundswell of popular resentment of the centre.

Today, a separate homeland, the goal espoused by most of these insurgencies, seems a distant prospect. But many of the conflicts remain unresolved, making durable peace elusive. After wearing them down through military force, the Indian state has been pushing the rebel groups toward seeking compromise with New Delhi via democratic politics. The weaker ones have either signed peace agreements or remained dormant, while the more robust ones have been locked in prolonged negotiations with New Delhi. Even so, the spectre of insurgency continues to stalk the region, and violence can flare at the slightest provocation.

The ethnic conflict raging in the state of Manipur since May 2023 between the dominant Meitei community and the Kuki-Zo tribal community is one such outbreak. This report explores how intercommunal tensions at the local level, political influences at the national level and the conflict in Myanmar next door have combined to inflame the fighting. The report draws on dozens of interviews conducted in Manipur and New Delhi between May and October 2024. Most of the interlocutors in Manipur were members of civil society organisations and political representatives of the Meitei and the Kuki-Zo communities, alongside a number of government and security officials. Given the prominence of women as victims and protagonists in the conflict, particular attention was given to their voices and experiences. Interviewees in New Delhi included journalists, former diplomats, think-tank analysts, and current and former government and security officials.

¹ With smaller numbers in parliament, due to their size, the ethnic groups resorted to armed struggle to gain bargaining power with the federal government. Staging insurgencies also gave them a sense of strength during conflicts with other ethnic groups. See Subir Bhaumik, "Insurgencies in India's Northeast: Conflict, Cooption and Change", East West Centre Washington Working Papers, no. 10 (July 2007).

II. A Crisis Foretold: Meitei vs. Kuki-Zo

While the intensity of the violence that erupted in May 2023 took most observers by surprise, ethnic tensions are hardly new to Manipur. Located on the India-Myanmar border, the state is a patchwork of ethnicities that gives rise to recurrent intercommunal frictions.²

A. Manipur's Ethnic Fault Lines

Spanning an area of about 23,000 sq km, with a population of roughly 3.5 million, Manipur is made up of a large valley, where the capital Imphal is located, and its surrounding hills. The Meitei, a predominantly Hindu community, represent about 60 per cent of the state's population and are mostly settled in the lowlands around Imphal.³ The rest of the population consists of dozens of tribes, who are mostly Christian and live in the highlands that constitute 90 per cent of the state's surface area. The largest tribes are the Kuki-Zo and the Nagas, themselves made up of many subtribes.

Due to their demographic clout, the Meitei have always dominated the state's politics. In their view, today's Manipur state is the remnant of an ancient kingdom, ruled by a Meitei king, which existed until 1949, when it merged with independent India.⁴ Hence, they consider it a duty to protect the state's territorial integrity, including the hills where tribes reside. This thinking has led to the emergence of Meitei militant groups, which have been fighting for a sovereign state since 1964 on the grounds that, in 1949, the erstwhile king was forced to accept Indian rule under duress.⁵

Manipur's tribal groups, who remain outside the fold of Hinduism, believe that the hills they inhabit were never part of this Meitei kingdom. They also contend that, after Manipur merged with India, the Meitei conspired to deny them inclusion in the Sixth Schedule of the constitution, which offers safeguards to many of India's north-eastern tribes by setting up autonomous institutions to protect their rights, including access to land.⁶ Since 1972, all the state's tribes have nevertheless benefited from another constitutional provision: Article 371C, also designed to protect tribal rights.⁷ This clause led to creation of the Hill Areas Committee, comprised of all the tribal legislators in the state assembly. On paper, this committee can weigh in on any matter relating to the hills, but tribal groups maintain that successive state governments, dominated by the Meitei, have denied it any real

² See Praveen Donthi, "Ethnic Clashes Roiling Manipur Pose Test for India's Modi", Crisis Group Commentary, 26 July 2023.

³ The community also includes a small number of Christians and Muslims (called Pangal).

⁴ Crisis Group interview, Khuraijam Athouba, spokesperson, Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity, Imphal, May 2024. When the kingdom of Manipur formally merged with India in 1949, it was first turned into a federally run Union Territory and later, in 1972, into a state. See Sudeep Chakravarti, *The Eastern Gate: War and Peace in Nagaland, Manipur and India's Far East* (New York, 2022), pp. xxvii; Nameirakpam Bijen Meetei, *Autonomy, Ethnic Politics and Conflict in North-East India* (New Delhi, 2015), p. 251.

⁵ Crisis Group interview, Rajkumar Meghen, former chairman of United National Liberation Front, Imphal, May 2024.

⁶ See Chakravarti, op. cit., p. 33.

⁷ "Facts about Article 371C: Attempts to tinker with it could trigger a tribal vs. non-tribal conflict", *Ukhrul Times*, 15 February 2024.

power by bypassing it and starving it of funds. The perception that the Meitei want to dilute safeguards and take over tribal lands has created perennial friction between the tribes and the state's majority community.

The conflicting political goals of the state's three main ethnic groups – the Meitei, Kuki-Zo and Nagas – have kept Manipur on edge for decades. All three have given birth to insurgent groups: Naga and Meitei groups started seeking separate homelands soon after India's independence in 1947, while the Kuki-Zo groups emerged to defend the community from Naga militants.⁸ Many of these groups have bases across the border in Myanmar, prompting Indian forces to carry out cross-border raids with support from the Myanmar military.⁹

Over the years, Kuki-Zo and Naga outfits have also engaged in ceasefire talks with New Delhi and negotiated over autonomy and territorial concessions.¹⁰ In 2008, 25 Kuki-Zo groups signed a Suspension of Operations agreement with the central and state governments.¹¹ The militants have since lived in designated camps, with their weapons under lock and key, while continuing dialogue with the central government about creating an autonomous entity with a separate administration. But these talks have failed to make headway, largely because of firm opposition from the powerful Meitei community, which de facto controls the state government. In 2023, the state government pulled out of the 2008 agreement, though the federal government did not.¹² The agreement eventually lapsed in February 2024, however, New Delhi having apparently given in to pressure from the state government not to renew it (see Section IV).

For their part, the Nagas of Manipur and the neighbouring state of Nagaland have been involved in a decades-long insurgency for a sovereign homeland called Nagalim (Greater Nagaland), which would stretch across several of India's north-eastern states and parts of Myanmar. In 1997, the largest Naga insurgent group, the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah), based in both Nagaland and Manipur, committed to a ceasefire and entered peace talks with New Delhi.¹³ Close to three decades later, the talks have reached no conclusion.

All these demands for autonomy make the Meitei anxious. Meitei militant groups – about ten active outfits numbering a dozen to a few hundred cadres before the current conflict erupted – continue to fight for a sovereign Manipur state, citing the Meitei kingdom's history. Only one group among them has agreed to engage in talks with New Delhi, a decision it made in 2023. The others remain steadfast in their combative approach, for which they enjoy the support of Meitei nationalists and civil society groups who refuse to accommodate the state's tribal

⁸ The Naga insurgency was the first to emerge in the 1950s, followed by the Meitei in the 1960s. The Kuki-Zo only formed militant outfits in the 1990s, following a violent campaign by the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah), a Naga militant group, to push the community out of what it claims is Naga territory in Manipur.

⁹ See Nitin A. Gokhale, *Securing India the Modi Way* (New Delhi, 2017).

¹⁰ See Chakravarti, *op. cit.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹² "Manipur government withdraws from Suspension of Operations agreement with militant groups", *The Hindu*, 11 March 2023.

¹³ In parallel, the Nagas of Manipur have been seeking autonomy through a direct administrative relationship with the central government instead of the state government, as an interim arrangement pending the creation of Greater Nagaland. See Chakravarti, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

communities' aspirations for autonomy.¹⁴ In practice, the Meitei's communal sentiment thus pits them – and, by extension, the state government – against Manipur's tribal groups. Meitei socio-cultural organisations, such as Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun, double up as promoters of ethnic pride; since the eruption of violence in 2023, they have also turned into armed militias. Arambai Tenggol, named after the erstwhile Manipur king's unique dart-wielding cavalry, boasts over 60,000 cadres; Meitei Leepun is a smaller group of around 15,000.¹⁵

B. Escalating Tensions: Land, Drugs and State Power

While tensions between the Meitei and tribal communities have simmered in Manipur for decades, the acrimony began to intensify in recent years. Since 2015, in particular, resentment has been brewing among the Kuki-Zo over what they perceive as "anti-tribal moves" by the state authorities.¹⁶ At the time, the Meitei were demanding a change in land laws to benefit from the same protection the tribal groups enjoy in the hills, with the goal of barring non-Meitei – including tribal groups – from acquiring land in the Imphal valley. They also sought introduction of the Inner Line Permit, a travel authorisation required for foreigners and Indians from other parts of the country to enter some of the north-eastern border states.¹⁷

In an apparent attempt to bolster his pro-Meitei credentials in the run-up to the 2017 state elections, the elected head of the state government, Chief Minister Okram Ibobi Singh, pushed three controversial bills through the legislature without consultation.¹⁸ Ostensibly meant to protect the state's Indigenous people, the bills defined who could claim to be from Manipur and sought to regulate the entry of non-Manipuris through the Inner Line Permit. Fears spread among tribal communities, especially the Kuki-Zo, that their identity as Manipur natives could be questioned, especially since the Meitei have branded them as foreigners in the past.¹⁹ The bills also introduced reforms related to land ownership, which tribal groups suspected was a ploy designed to give the Meitei access to their lands.²⁰ Within weeks, protests erupted, and police killed nine Kuki-Zo demonstrators in Churachandpur, the state's main Kuki-Zo town. Demanding a rollback of the proposed laws, the Kuki-Zo refused to bury the dead for more than 600 days, eventually forcing the state government to withdraw the bills.²¹

¹⁴ In November 2023, the United National Liberation Front (Pambei) became the only Meitei outfit to sign a ceasefire agreement with the Indian and state governments, after months of informal negotiations. See Chakravarti, op. cit., p. 177.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, security officials, Manipur, May 2024. See also "In Imphal, the state's surrender to an armed Meitei militia with 'Taliban-like' grip", *Scroll*, 26 January 2024.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, John Simte, Lawyer, New Delhi, June 2024. See *The Inevitable Split: Documents on State-Sponsored Ethnic Cleansing in Manipur*, vol. 1, and *Institutionalised Political Violence in Manipur*, vol. 2 (Churachandpur, 2023).

¹⁷ The Inner Line Permit, a colonial-era mechanism, is an official document foreigners and Indians from other parts of the country require to visit protected border areas. In north-eastern India it applies to the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram.

¹⁸ Chakravarti, op. cit., p. 183.

¹⁹ The Meitei claim that they and the Nagas are native to the state, while the Kuki-Zo came from Myanmar. Crisis Group interviews, Meitei civil society organisation representatives, May 2024.

²⁰ "Manipur: Why state's dominant Hindu Meitei community wants Scheduled Tribe status", *Scroll*, 12 March 2019.

²¹ "How a Manipur town finally buried its dead, 632 days after they were killed", *Hindustan Times*, 28 May 2017.

The rise to power in the state of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) nourished perceptions that the Meitei were intent on acquiring more power and territory. After the party won office in 2017, and more so after it secured a second term in 2022, the new chief minister, Biren Singh, a Meitei, portrayed himself as the protector of his ethnic group's interests. From early in his tenure, he faced pressure to resign, which he defied for years. Singh finally capitulated, however, as word spread of a motion of no confidence by opposition parties in the state assembly that allegedly had the backing of dissident legislators from his own party. He stepped down on 9 February.²²

By questioning tribal land ownership, using the tropes of illegal immigration from Myanmar and stirring up Meiteis' insecurities over land, Singh had sought to drive a wedge between the Meitei and the Kuki-Zo. From 2021 on, his government carried out evictions of Kuki-Zo households, and at times entire villages, alleging they were illegally using woodlands – a charge the community denied.²³ After a protest turned violent in March 2023, Singh went further, accusing the Kuki-Zo of “encroaching [upon] protected forests ... for [the] poppy plantation and drug business”.²⁴ He then pulled the state government out of the Suspension of Operations agreement with the Kuki-Zo militant groups, holding them responsible for the protests.²⁵ The Meitei lauded the move.²⁶

Authorities in Manipur also weaponised renewed conflict across the border in Myanmar since 2021 to fuel the state's ethnic tensions. The Kuki-Zo enjoy kinship ties with the Chin across the border, and while Chin armed groups are fighting the junta, Meitei outfits with rear bases in Myanmar have been cooperating with the regime to attack them.²⁷ The war has also triggered refugee flows into Manipur, prompting Singh to claim that the Chin crossing over are setting up new villages and engaging in the drug trade, including poppy cultivation on Indian territory.²⁸ Although the number of refugees in Manipur is much smaller than in neighbouring Mizoram, their presence has also stoked Meitei fears that the new

²² See “Biren Singh quits as chief minister 2 years after Manipur violence began”, NDTV, 9 February 2025.

²³ The Kuki-Zo reject these allegations, contending that the state government has unilaterally declared their tribal lands part of protected forests in violation of the constitution. Crisis Group interview, Muan Tombing, secretary, Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum, Churachandpur, May 2024. See also Kham Khan Suang Hausing, “Manipur – Institutionalised violence repeating itself, with a catch”, *The Quint*, 6 May 2023.

²⁴ Singh's war on drugs included confiscation of narcotics, busting up factories, arresting those involved in the trade and destroying poppy fields. “Manipur: Why the civil war is being linked to the narcotics trade”, *Scroll*, 13 June 2023.

²⁵ Angshuman Choudhury, “Targeting of Kukis the main reason behind Manipur violence”, *Frontline*, 27 June 2023.

²⁶ The Meitei fear that any agreement resulting from peace talks between New Delhi and the Kuki-Zo and Naga militant outfits could involve ceding territory. When New Delhi extended the ceasefire with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland from Nagaland to Manipur in 2001, the Meitei protested, leading to eighteen deaths. The government was eventually forced to withdraw Manipur from the agreement, limiting it to Nagaland. See Chakravarti, op. cit., p. 42.

²⁷ Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°168, *Taking Aim at the Tatmadaw*, 28 June 2021.

²⁸ “Northeast Live: Manipur CM Biren Singh speaks to editor-in-chief Wasbir Hussain on Manipur protest, 2023”, video, YouTube, 10 March 2023.

arrivals are part of a strategy for altering the state's demographic balance to the Meiteis' disadvantage.²⁹

While it is difficult to ascertain whether immigrants are indeed setting up villages, the state government has yet to provide evidence for the claim, and it is very likely that new hamlets are emerging for other reasons. First, the Kuki-Zo follow a unique tradition called *inchon*, according to which the village chief, who controls all his community's land, can at any point allow his younger brother to start a new village nearby.³⁰ Secondly, the Kuki-Zo were forced to vacate as many as 350 villages in Naga-dominated areas and create new ones during the Naga-Kuki clashes that raged in the late 1990s and early 2000s; these new hamlets may simply not be listed in the state government's older records.³¹

Likewise, Singh's allegations that the Kuki-Zo are involved in the drug trade seem to have been politically motivated, even if there is no denying that opium from across the Myanmar border has been making its way into Manipur in increasing quantities over the last twenty years.³² Although poppy is grown mostly in the Kuki-Zo and Naga-dominated hills, evidence suggests that all communities and the associated militant outfits are involved in trafficking.³³ Sections of the political, bureaucratic and security establishments also feed off this illicit economy.³⁴ Militant groups from all ethnicities view the trade as a means of funding their insurgencies, and they have regularly clashed in the past to gain control of territory and trade routes. Singh's campaign against drugs, however, was mostly directed at the Kuki-Zo.

Singh's claims have been understood by the Kuki-Zo as attacks with political ends. They also allege that he publicised his war on drugs as a distraction from a scandal in which he was directly involved, after a police officer accused him of pressing her to withdraw a case against a drug lord in July 2020.³⁵ Singh called the allegations baseless and filed a defamation suit against the officer in response.³⁶

²⁹ "Myanmar displacement overview", UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 11 November 2024. According to this data, there are 70,100 refugees from Myanmar in India's north east, mostly in Mizoram but also in Manipur.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, president and general secretary of Kuki-Zo Women's Organization for Human Rights, Churachandpur, May 2024. See also "They came with 6 JCBs: How eviction of a tiny village sparked fires across Manipur", *The Print*, 16 May 2023.

³¹ See Chakravarti, op. cit., p. 69.

³² Manipur's location made it a convenient transit point for the drug trade originating in the Golden Triangle region of South East Asia. See "Manipur: Why the civil war is being linked to the narcotics trade", op. cit.

³³ Crisis Group interview, Thounaojam Brinda, former police officer, Imphal, May 2024. See also Chakravarti, op. cit., p. 14.

³⁴ See Chakravarti, op. cit., pp. 14-18; and Nandita Haksar, *Shooting the Sun: Why Manipur Was Engulfed by Violence and the Government Remained Silent* (New Delhi, 2023), p. 124.

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, Thounaojam Brinda, former police officer, Imphal, May 2024. See also "Pressure from Manipur CM Biren Singh to drop drugs case: Cop to court", *The Indian Express*, 17 July 2020.

³⁶ "Manipur court directs cop against making defamatory remarks against CM", *Hindustan Times*, 23 July 2020.

III. The Conflict Erupts

More than 260 people have died and 60,000 have been displaced since violence erupted between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo over a year and a half ago.³⁷ The violence broke out on 3 May 2023, when the state's tribes organised a "tribal solidarity march" in the ten hill districts to protest the state High Court's ruling in favour of the Meiteis' demand to be classified as a Scheduled Tribe, a status which confers affirmative action benefits such as protection of land and quotas for government jobs.³⁸ The Meitei argue they require this classification so their land will be "protected at par with the hills, as the living space in the valley is diminishing".³⁹ But the Kuki-Zo suspect the Meitei of a ruse aimed at acquiring tribal lands in the hills, since such a status would mean all the state's communities would be categorised as tribal. The authorities have rejected the Meitei for Scheduled Tribe status twice, in 1982 and 2001, after concluding that the community does not meet criteria such as geographical isolation and "backwardness".⁴⁰

Tensions had been rising since the day before, as Meitei civilians and militia groups had been blocking roads leading to the hill districts in anticipation of the tribal mobilisation. When the march came to an end, the two communities clashed in the foothills of Churachandpur, after suspected Meitei miscreants tried to set fire to the Anglo-Kuki War centenary memorial, which holds historical significance for the community.⁴¹ The fact that the chief minister allowed the tribal march to go ahead despite the obvious risks – the Meitei were organising a counter-protest nearby – has led to speculation about whether state authorities deliberately allowed tempers to flare for political ends.⁴² Given that the state government was tacitly backing the Meitei's demand for tribal status, a spike of unrest would have given it an excuse to crush the tribal protests, allowing Singh to consolidate his political support among the Meitei in the process.⁴³

News of the clashes spread fast, fuelled by disinformation and rumours, leading to eruptions of violence across the state. The next 48 hours, starting on the evening of 3 May, witnessed a complete breakdown of law and order, with angry mobs resorting to lynching, arson and destruction of government property,

³⁷ Women and children have suffered immensely since the beginning of the conflict as they have become easy targets for retaliatory attacks.

³⁸ The march was organised by the All Tribal Students' Union, Manipur. See "Opposed to Meitei/Meitei ST inclusion in Manipur, ATSUM to hold 'tribal solidarity march' on May 3", *Ukhrul Times*, 1 May 2023.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, Col. Laishram Lokendra Singh, Schedule Tribe Demand Committee of Manipur, Imphal, May 2024. Not all Meitei are keen on the Scheduled Tribe status, but those not in favour remain a silent minority. Crisis Group interviews, Meitei civil society figures, May 2024.

⁴⁰ The Indian constitution, following independence, envisioned a system of positive discrimination to address inequalities based on the criteria of "social and educational backwardness". "ST status for Meitei was considered and rejected in 1982 and 2001, government records show", *The Hindu*, 18 October 2023.

⁴¹ The Anglo-Kuki war centenary memorial is an important symbol of Kuki-Zo pride, marking the community's battles against the British colonial rulers from 1917 to 1919.

⁴² There are conflicting versions of why the clashes erupted on 3 May. Crisis Group interview, Mary Jonesvung, Zomi Council Steering Committee for Separate Administration, Churachandpur, Manipur, May 2024.

⁴³ At first, Singh had difficulty establishing his authority within party ranks due to opposition from old-timers, as he had joined the BJP only in 2016, just before the state elections. Crisis Group interview, BJP member of the Legislative Assembly, Imphal, May 2024.

vehicles, business establishments and religious sites. Meitei mobs raided the state armouries with little resistance from the police and made off with sophisticated weapons, including light machine guns, AK-47s, assault and self-loading rifles, rocket launchers and mortars.⁴⁴ The Meitei militias, which reportedly enjoyed Singh's backing, led the attacks against the Kuki-Zo people.⁴⁵

In the first few days, most casualties were among the Kuki-Zo, as a sizeable number of the tribe's members were residing in Imphal, while far fewer Meitei were living in majority Kuki-Zo areas. The Meitei-dominated police force soon divided along ethnic lines, with personnel backing their communities, leading the Kuki-Zo living in the valley and the Meitei in the hills to take refuge in the camps of the central government's forces in the area.⁴⁶ Police also fled to their respective communities' lands, where they were later officially transferred. New Delhi deployed additional units and appointed a central government official to head the unified command, which is responsible for key decisions and coordination between the central and state security forces.⁴⁷ On the second day of fighting, the administration issued "shoot on sight" orders to deal with flagrant acts of violence as the unrest spiralled out of control.⁴⁸

Allegations of sexual assault against women from both communities played a major part in fuelling violence.⁴⁹ On the first day of clashes, a false rumour about the alleged rape of Meitei women in a Churachandpur college infuriated the Meitei community.⁵⁰ Circulated along with an image of a dead young woman wrapped in a plastic sheet from an unrelated crime scene, the rumour led to numerous cases of retaliatory sexual assault on Kuki-Zo women.⁵¹ In some cases, a group of Meitei women social activists known as Meira Paibi (Torch Bearers) aided the attackers

⁴⁴ See "Fire and blood: How the BJP is enabling ethnic cleansing in Manipur", *The Caravan*, 1 August 2023.

⁴⁵ In June 2024, Singh defended Arambai Tenggol, stating that they are the youth of Manipur and that he is "trying to console them saying prevention and protection will be done by the state and central government". Leishemba Sanajoaba, a BJP member of parliament who is titular king of Manipur, also reportedly has strong links to Arambai Tenggol. See "Manipur CM Biren hopeful centre's decisions will help resolve conflict", *The Print*, 28 June 2024; "Saviour complex: Why the Biren Singh government gives a freehand to Arambai Tenggol", *The Caravan*, 15 April 2024; "Biren Singh is a dictator": Yumnam Joykumar Singh, former deputy CM and DGP Manipur", *The Week*, 1 December 2024.

⁴⁶ As a border state where various insurgencies continue, Manipur permanently hosts a sizeable number of military personnel. See "Armed gangs and a partisan state: How Manipur slipped into civil war", *Scroll*, 6 June 2023; and Haksar, op. cit., p. 158.

⁴⁷ Traditionally, it is the chief minister who heads the unified command, so the appointment was seen as a dilution of Singh's powers, which he reportedly protested. The appointed official, however, still reported directly to him until his resignation. Many observers saw that arrangement as a way for the central government to avoid admitting the failures of a chief minister from the ruling party. Crisis Group interview, Meitei civil society figure, June 2024.

⁴⁸ Although the clashes overwhelmingly happened along the Meitei-Kuki-Zo ethnic divide, Meitei Christians in the valley were attacked by both sides, with their churches destroyed. The Kuki-Zo attacked them because they were Meitei, and the Meitei attacked them because Christian faith is associated with tribal communities.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, woman Kuki-Zo journalist, May 2024.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, woman Meitei journalist, Imphal, May 2024.

⁵¹ Over a year later, many Meitei still believe this incident occurred, despite the lack of evidence. Crisis Group interviews, Pramot Chand Singh Mayengba, chief of Meitei Leepun, Imphal, May 2024; Meira Paibi of Apunba Manipur Kanba Ima Lup, Imphal, May 2024; Meitei journalist, Imphal, May 2024; Kuki-Zo journalist, Churachandpur, May 2024.

with the goal of seeking vengeance for their community.⁵² In July, a video capturing the physical abuse of two naked Kuki-Zo women by a mob of Meitei men sparked national outrage.⁵³

Although the violence dropped in intensity after the first two days, the state was paralysed for a week, with the authorities finding no other solution than physically separating the two communities. Unable to stop the attacks, the central government arranged for the exchange of survivors from each community who were stuck in the camps of central security forces in the other's territory. The unified command also established a buffer zone between the hills and the Imphal valley, with multiple layers of central forces keeping Meitei and Kuki-Zo apart.⁵⁴ The spate of mob assaults, when the two ethnic groups were still intermingled, gave way to occasional gunfights, arson and attacks in the foothills. Backed by militants, Meitei and Kuki-Zo continued to raid each other in spots near the buffer zone.

Soon after the outbreak of violence, men on both sides formed armed village defence forces to guard against attacks while women took up supporting roles.⁵⁵ On the Meitei side, the Meira Paibi took a proactive part in the conflict by obstructing security personnel in pursuit of Meitei militants or militia members. Kuki-Zo women were less directly involved in fighting; for example, many staff checkpoints to prevent alcohol or drugs from getting into their communities.⁵⁶

In June 2023, after Home Minister Amit Shah visited the state, the central government established a peace committee to kickstart dialogue between the two sides, but disputes over its make-up killed off the initiative. The 51-member committee was meant to be headed by the governor – the central government's representative in the state – and feature elected political representatives, ministers, former bureaucrats, social workers and representatives of different ethnic groups. Its standing was undermined from the outset, however, as it did not include a powerful representative from the central government, whereas Singh, whom the Kuki-Zo saw as “the very perpetrator of the current violence”, was given a seat at the table.⁵⁷ The Kuki-Zo immediately rejected the committee's legitimacy, and it never met.

While physical separation of ethnic groups has reduced violence, it has failed to quell the unrest entirely. Manipur now faces a dangerous stalemate. Since the

⁵² Meira Paibis emerged as a grassroots movement in the 1980s to fight abuses committed by the armed forces, especially against women, in counter-insurgency operations. The group had a positive image until it interceded in the current conflict. “Feminist icons or violent vigilantes? The contentious role of Meira Paibis in Manipur conflict”, *Scroll*, 4 August 2023.

⁵³ The assault happened in the very first days of the unrest, in early May 2023, but came to light only when a video surfaced in July. See “Video of women attacked in Manipur breaks silence on systematic gang rapes in India”, *The Guardian*, 22 July 2023.

⁵⁴ These layers of central security forces check every passing vehicle, but after these checkpoints, it is Meitei and Kuki-Zo volunteers posted farther down the road who have the final say on who can enter their respective territories. Crisis Group observations, May 2024.

⁵⁵ “When women became the main spectacle in Manipur's civil conflict”, *Behanbox*, 28 December 2024.

⁵⁶ Ibid. The Kuki-Zo women did so to make sure that the government cannot hurl more accusations at the community of sponsoring illicit drug production. Crisis Group observations, May 2024.

⁵⁷ Under India's constitution, the governor is the official who is technically the executive head of the state, but in practice his or her role is largely ceremonial, while real power lies in the hands of the state's chief minister, who is the head of the state government. Manipuris expected a federal minister or senior official from the Home Ministry to be part of the committee. “Kuki members to boycott peace committee over Manipur CM Biren Singh's presence”, *The Hindu*, 12 June 2023.

buffer zone was put in place, the Kuki-Zo say the “emotional distance” that already separated the two communities has been reinforced by “physical distance”.⁵⁸ With the two now completely segregated, the Kuki-Zo consider the conflict “a war for survival”, and they are arming themselves in preparation (see Section IV).⁵⁹ They are more determined than ever to pursue the goal of an autonomous administration. All ten Kuki legislators in the state assembly insist on this reform, arguing that “the state miserably failed to protect [the community]”, adding that living with the Meitei is “as good as death”.⁶⁰ Kuki-Zo militant groups, who wield significant communal influence, have now made recognition of a separate administration a precondition for resuming peace talks.⁶¹ The Meitei, for their part, are dead set against any change that affects Manipur’s territorial integrity.

Both sides allege that the violence was pre-planned. The Meitei argue that, by organising the tribal march on 3 May 2023, the Kuki-Zo “were in reality creating circumstances to raise the demand” for a separate administration in the state.⁶² This argument places all the blame on the Kuki-Zo, suggesting they knew that any such demand would provoke an angry reaction from the Meitei. The Kuki-Zo, for their part, point out that their demand for autonomy is far from new, adding that two thirds of the conflict’s victims have come from their community, which indicates they were unprepared for an outbreak of fighting.⁶³ They aver that it was the Meitei militia who attacked them first. The tribal march was little more than an excuse for this onslaught, they also say, since these same militias did not attack Naga who also took part in the protest.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, Muan Tombing, secretary, Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum, Churachandpur, May 2024.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Kuki-Zo civil society figures, Churachandpur, May 2024.

⁶⁰ At first after the outbreak of the conflict, the Kuki-Zo did not specify the type of separate administration they sought. “Ten Kuki MLAs from Manipur demand ‘separate administration’”, *The Hindu*, 12 May 2023.

⁶¹ Before the conflict broke out, the Kuki-Zo militant groups had reportedly reached a settlement with New Delhi on a model of autonomous territorial councils in Manipur. They have since rekindled their demand for an administration separate from Manipur, now specifying that it be a federally run Union Territory with a legislature. “Centre yet to list violation of ground rules by Kuki-Zo insurgent groups: Senior leader of Kuki national organisation”, *The Hindu*, 28 August 2024; “Manipur: Kuki-Zo MLAs demand separate administration as condition for peace talks”, *Scroll*, 16 October 2024.

⁶² Crisis Group interview, Khuraijam Athouba, spokesperson, Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity, Imphal, May 2024.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, Kuki-Zo civil society organisation representatives, Churachandpur, May 2024.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Albert Renehlie, convener, Zo United, Churachandpur, May 2024.

IV. The Perils of Inaction

Over a year and a half into the Manipur conflict, the two communities find themselves entirely cut off from one another, while the state and central governments are no closer to putting an end to the violence. All sides voice anger and disappointment at the actions of the state administration and the ruling party. Regardless of ethnicity, Manipur's residents have been surprised at the authorities' failure first to foresee the eruption of ethnic clashes and then to bring them under control.⁶⁵ The authorities' inability – critics would argue unwillingness – to temper Manipur's crisis is now fuelling the risk of protracted conflict.

A. *Militant Groups*

Resurgent militant groups on both sides have added to the roster of parties involved in the conflict and heightened the risk of prolonged violence. The presence of trained militants on both sides is dangerous not just because they participate in fighting, but also because they train village defence volunteers and, in the case of the Meitei, militia members in the use of firearms.⁶⁶ Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun, the Meitei militias, are socio-cultural organisations made up of young adult civilians with minimal or no training in using weapons or carrying out lethal attacks. The fact that these outfits, armed with sophisticated weapons stolen from the armouries, have joined forces with established Meitei militant groups has increased the chances that deadly ethnic violence will recur.⁶⁷

When the conflict broke out, Meitei militant groups were at their weakest in decades due both to New Delhi's counter-insurgency operations and their waning appeal to young people. Back in 2019, the Indian armed forces and the Myanmar military had destroyed most of their training camps in a joint operation on the Myanmar side of the border. Following the 2021 coup in Myanmar, however, Meitei militants regrouped, siding with the Myanmar military to fight anti-junta forces.⁶⁸ As violence has flared in Manipur, these militants have found fertile ground for recruitment on their home turf. Security officials estimate that the most prominent outfit, the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), now has more than 2,000 cadres in the valley – compared to a mere handful a year and a half ago.⁶⁹ The group is also alleged to be sharing cadres with the Arambai Tenggol militia,

⁶⁵ According to a former police officer, there were "more than 20 intelligence agencies in the state". Crisis Group interview, Thounaojam Brinda, former police officer, Imphal, May 2024. India's 2024 national elections provided a clear indication of this discontent: though the BJP secured a third term for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, it lost both seats in Manipur despite the party running the state government.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, security officials, Manipur, May 2024.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group Briefing, *Taking Aim at the Tatmadaw*, op. cit. See also "Indian rebel outfits regrouping in Myanmar again", *The Diplomat*, 3 January 2022. Developments in Myanmar since the February 2021 coup have upended New Delhi's historical approach to dealing with these outfits: while part of its calculus in maintaining good relations with the Myanmar military was to have leverage over rebel groups operating in its north-eastern states that have rear bases across the border, since the coup the Myanmar junta is no longer supporting counter-insurgency efforts or even controlling the border.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, security officials, Manipur, May 2024.

leading to fears that the latter's members could be absorbed into the UNLF, becoming more hardened insurgents, even if today's violence comes to an end.⁷⁰

The Kuki-Zo militant groups' involvement in the fighting also bodes ill for a return to stability in the state, especially because it threatens to unravel the ceasefire they agreed to in 2008. Many of these militants are officially part of peace negotiations with New Delhi under the Suspension of Operations agreement, meaning they should be confined to designated camps, with their weapons under lock and key. During the conflict, however, they have allegedly stepped out to participate in the violence.⁷¹ When the agreement came up for renewal in February 2024, the central government gave in to pressure from former Chief Minister Singh and the Meitei community and declined to renew it. Singh had been demanding that New Delhi scrap the agreement and dismantle the camps, having already pulled the state government out of the arrangement in 2023.⁷²

The state government's position on the Suspension of Operations agreement introduced an additional layer of complexity. The agreement is now in limbo, with no clear indication as to when or whether the central government will revive it, though New Delhi is reportedly reviewing its terms, in part with the aim of relocating the camps farther away from Meitei-dominated areas.⁷³ Kuki-Zo militant leaders, for their part, have remained steadfast in their demand for a separate administration in the form of a federally supervised Union Territory with a legislature.⁷⁴

To complicate the situation further, ever since they signed the Suspension of Operations agreement, Kuki-Zo militant groups have reportedly collaborated with Indian forces in covert operations against other insurgents, including Meitei militants.⁷⁵ Whereas before the conflict most Meitei cared little about how the Indian military dealt with Meitei militants given their lack of popular support, outrage at how Kuki-Zo armed groups were harnessed to wage a counter-insurgency is now widespread.⁷⁶ The perception that the central state is determined by fair means or foul to finish off Meitei rebels has fanned the community's antipathy for the counter-insurgency force in the north east, the Assam Rifles, which has long been deployed in the Kuki-Zo hills. Accusing the force of being pro-Kuki-Zo, the Meitei have demanded that New Delhi replace it with another central security force.⁷⁷

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, security officials, Manipur, May 2024.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, Khuraijam Athouba, spokesperson, Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity, Imphal, May 2024. See also "The return of Meitei insurgents marks a new turn in Manipur conflict", *Scroll*, 2 September 2023.

⁷² "Status quo on suspension of operations pact with Kuki-Zo insurgent groups", *The Hindu*, 14 April 2024.

⁷³ "Centre reviews ground rules with Manipur's Kuki insurgent groups", *The Hindu*, 22 August 2024.

⁷⁴ "Centre yet to list violation of ground rules by Kuki-Zo insurgent groups: Senior leader of Kuki national organisation", op. cit.

⁷⁵ Bhaumik, op. cit.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, Khuraijam Athouba, spokesperson, Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity, Imphal, May 2024.

⁷⁷ In August 2024, the central government replaced two Assam Rifles battalions with other para-military forces in parts of the state, though it did not withdraw the entire force. "Kuki-Zo tribals oppose centre's move to replace Assam Rifles battalion with CRPF in Churachandpur", *The New Indian Express*, 1 August 2024.

B. *New Organisations in the Conflict*

The emergence of new armed and unarmed organisations adds another layer to an already complex security challenge. One worrying new development is the rise of civil militias. Although it is difficult to prove, there is a widespread perception among the Kuki-Zo and sections of the Meitei that the Meitei militia have the tacit backing of the state government. Even security officials suspect they owe allegiance to former Chief Minister Singh.⁷⁸ Arambai Tenggol has become particularly popular among the Meitei, with every wave of violence lending it more sway. Its members feel so emboldened that they roam Imphal in jeeps, holding guns. They have attacked police officers, who are increasingly unhappy with this extra-legal threat to their power and responsibilities.⁷⁹

The militias enjoy communal support because they provide a sense of security and because they fervently espouse the Meitei cause. Arambai Tenggol reached peak popularity in January 2024 when it summoned all the Meitei members of the state legislature – along with a member of the federal parliament and a central minister, who were both on an official visit – to take a public oath to protect “[Meitei] community and religion”.⁸⁰ This episode, which saw these elected officials vow under duress to work on getting New Delhi to scrap the Suspension of Operations agreement with the Kuki-Zo militant groups, fence the Myanmar border to stop illegal immigration and replace the Assam Rifles with another force, captured the extent of the state’s retreat in the Manipur conflict.⁸¹

Village defence committees on both sides are a second concern. On the Meitei side, the militants, militias and village defence volunteers now work in collaboration. On the other side, the turmoil has brought together various Kuki-Zo tribes, making them a more powerful fighting force.⁸² At first, the Kuki-Zo fighters used slingshots or crude firearms of their own manufacture, taking extra care to conserve ammunition. But now they have built up their arsenal through various means, including smuggling and looting of state armouries in the hills.⁸³ They have thus been able to shift from a defensive posture to more of an offensive one, carrying out retaliatory attacks, sometimes causing large-scale damage. Well aware that the Meitei have greater firepower – and convinced that they enjoy state government support – the Kuki-Zo village defence force volunteers, who are training in secret camps, talk of “sacrificing today for a better tomorrow”.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interviews, security officials, Manipur, May 2024. See also “Why the Biren Singh government gives a free hand to Arambai Tenggol”, *The Caravan*, 15 April 2024.

⁷⁹ “In rare pushback against Arambai Tenggol, Manipur police personnel lay down arms to protest cop’s abduction”, *The Indian Express*, 29 February 2024.

⁸⁰ “Abject surrender of the state to armed militia in India’s Manipur”, *The Diplomat*, 27 January 2024.

⁸¹ Ibid. The legislators who refused to take the oath were beaten up. Observers say the fact that a militia could openly intimidate lawmakers symbolises the collapse of law and order. Crisis Group interview, Keisham Meghachandra Singh, president of Manipur State Congress Party, Imphal, May 2024.

⁸² Pramot Chand Singh Mayengba, chief of Meitei Leepun, told Crisis Group that the Meitei did not differentiate between the various Kuki-Zo tribes, attacking all of them in the wake of the 3 May 2023 clashes. “[The Kuki-Zo] got united as a result”, he said. Crisis Group interview, Manipur, May 2024. The Kuki-Zo community comprises more than 30 tribes spread across the north-eastern states of India, as well as parts of Myanmar and Bangladesh.

⁸³ Crisis Group interviews, security official, Manipur, May 2024.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, village defence volunteers in camp near Churachandpur, May 2024.

Central security forces are also struggling to respond to the actions of the Meitei women's group, Meira Paibi.⁸⁵ In several instances, group members physically shielded Meitei militia members or militants who were carrying out attacks and blocked their arrest by security forces, who were uneasy acting forcefully against women.⁸⁶ On one occasion, they led a mob of 1,500 people, compelling the army to release twelve militants of a banned insurgent group.⁸⁷ The women justify their actions by saying it is their “responsibility as *ima* (mothers)” to keep the militants safe from harm, since the security forces are “not protecting” their community.⁸⁸ Not all the vigilante work by Meira Paibi is voluntary; some members are paid, and some are coerced.⁸⁹ In certain areas, “if a woman refuses to join the group, she is forced to pay a fine of 200-500 rupees”, a Meitei journalist explained.⁹⁰

C. Perceived State Bias

The central government's inaction over the past year and a half has allowed for speculation about New Delhi's intentions to take root in Manipur. Central security officials in the state say the violence is “between two ethnic communities” in a remote corner of the country “and not directed against the Indian state or government”.⁹¹ As a result, central authorities have approached the conflict as a law enforcement challenge, tending to overlook its social and political dimensions, despite expressing a general commitment to dialogue, and waiting for it to peter out.⁹² Aggrieved at the lack of a robust response, Manipuris ask whether New Delhi would have been so indifferent if the same violence had occurred in a state more relevant to political considerations in New Delhi.⁹³ Both sides, meanwhile, perceive the central government as guided by preference for one ethnic group over another.

Among the Meitei, it is an article of faith that New Delhi has deliberately let the conflict fester as part of a bigger plan. They allege that by allowing the militant outfits that had signed the Suspension of Operations accord to join the clashes, the government empowered the Kuki-Zo and thereby forced Meitei militant groups to return from Myanmar; according to this theory, the Indian forces then intended to press these groups to sign a peace agreement ahead of the 2024 national elections.⁹⁴ They believe the scheme backfired because the rise of Meitei militias meant

⁸⁵ Meira Paibi made international headlines when twelve of its members, aged between 45 and 75, demonstrated entirely naked in front of the Imphal headquarters of the Assam Rifles to protest the alleged rape and murder of a Meitei woman by soldiers. See Haksar, op. cit., p. 167.

⁸⁶ “Army's biggest challenge in Manipur: Women blocking convoys, policing breakdown”, *The Print*, 27 June 2023.

⁸⁷ “Army releases 12 Manipur insurgents after stand-off with women-led mob”, *The Indian Express*, 26 June 2023.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Meira Paibi members, Imphal, May 2024.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, security official, Manipur, May 2024; woman Meitei journalist, Manipur, May 2024.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, woman Meitei journalist, May 2024.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interviews, security officials, Manipur, May 2024.

⁹² Home Minister Shah said: “Unless there is a dialogue between the two communities, no solution can be arrived at. We are in discussions with both the Meitei and Kuki groups”. “Roadmap ready for Manipur, no solution unless there is a dialogue between two communities”, *The Hindu*, 17 September 2024.

⁹³ Crisis Group interviews, Imphal, Manipur, May 2024.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Pradip Phanjoubam, senior journalist, Imphal, May 2024.

the militants did not need to join the fighting in full force.⁹⁵ This interpretation of events, however, overlooks crucial gestures by the central government to the Meitei, such as its decision to fence the Myanmar border to address fears about alleged illegal immigration.⁹⁶ The central state agency responsible for building the fence is planning to complete the project in ten years.⁹⁷

The Kuki-Zo, on the other hand, believe New Delhi has shown partisanship toward the Meitei. They cite moves such as selective enforcement of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act.⁹⁸ They believe the central government dragged its feet amid their pleas for Chief Minister Singh's removal. At the same time, it is conceding Meitei demands, such as not renewing the Suspension of Operations agreement and replacing the Assam Rifles with other forces.⁹⁹

Whether accurate or not, the accusations of bias levelled by the two sides reflect the state and central government's inability to bring violence under control and the resentment it has engendered. Both militant outfits and militias have gained support among their respective communities due to the authorities' perceived failure to staunch the bloodshed. People on both sides are convinced that, in self-defence, they have no alternative but to take up arms, which are abundant due to the looting of state armories and the conflict in Myanmar next door. Even Naga youth, who are not part of the fighting, are acquiring weapons because "when the majority community arms itself, it makes every minority community feel insecure".¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Khurajam Athouba, spokesperson, Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity, Imphal, May 2024.

⁹⁶ The government announced in February 2024 that it will fence 1,643km of the border between India and Myanmar. Tweet by Amit Shah, @AmitShah, home minister, 6:12pm, 6 February 2024.

⁹⁷ "Myanmar border fencing gathers pace, BRO to complete project in 10 years", *The Times of India*, 9 December 2024.

⁹⁸ This controversial Act gives legal immunity to the Indian armed forces in some of the country's conflict-affected areas, including Manipur. The central government partially revoked the law in the state a few years ago, but after the conflict broke out, it reimposed the Act in the hill districts, but not in the Imphal valley. It eventually extended the law to some Meitei-dominated valley districts as well after violence escalated in November 2024. See "Extended exclusion: On AFSPA in Manipur", *The Hindu*, 30 September 2023; "Centre reimposes AFSPA in six police station limits in Manipur", *The Hindu*, 14 November 2024.

⁹⁹ Another central government force has replaced two battalions of Assam Rifles in the Kuki-Zo hills of Manipur. See "CRPF to replace two battalions of Assam Rifles in Manipur; Kuki-Zo groups oppose the move", *The Hindu*, 1 August 2024.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, Naga legislator, Imphal, May 2024.

V. Conclusion

Close to two years after Manipur descended into ethnic turmoil, the state's Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities are locked in a deadly conflict that shows no signs of ending. Unable to bring the unrest under control, the central government has informally partitioned the state, with security forces patrolling the buffer zone separating the two groups. Violence has decreased but there is no peace, merely a precarious stalemate between the sides. The resurgence in their respective communities of militant groups – and in the case of the Meitei, armed militias – suggest that the lull in violence may be only temporary.

The two communities share existential insecurities triggered by the fear of losing land. The Meitei have demanded safeguards by seeking status as a Scheduled Tribe, arguing they need to preserve their territory and unique culture not just from non-Manipuris but also from the state's recognised tribes. The latter, including the Kuki-Zo, fear that this measure would open the way to the Meitei acquiring land in their areas. As a result, the conflict has reinvigorated the Kuki-Zo demand for a federally administered Union Territory, which would have no relationship with state authorities in Imphal.

New Delhi has proven reluctant to take vigorous action to tame the conflict until now, partly to avoid undermining the state government, which is run by the same political party. This delay in addressing the stalemate has allowed the state's militant groups, which had been facing terminal decline, to come back stronger. Now that it has imposed President's Rule, the Modi government has an opportunity to intervene far more decisively. Otherwise, the Manipur conflict could rumble on, deepening the state's ethnic divide and causing a dangerous ripple effect in neighbouring states.

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