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Upcoming Elections in Manipur: A review of the Political and Cultural Relationship between the State and the Center

The Northeast Indian state of Manipur will be undergoing Legislative Assembly Elections by March 2017. Media reports and recent defections of Congress MLAs to the BJP indicate that there is a high probability that the BJP would unseat the 15-year Congress rule in Manipur. The reasons for BJP's optimism and the particular strategies it has adopted has to be examined in light of how political and cultural relationship between the state and the Center has developed since Manipur became a part of the Indian union. In this paper, I will discuss how the Central Government's policies towards Manipur over the past six decades has exacerbated ethnic conflict and insurgency problems in the state. Moreover, a lack of cultural and psychological integration with the rest of India has left Manipuris experiencing a sense of alienation from the Center. Despite this, the experiences of the Manipuri diaspora, recent initiatives in investments in cultural and educational institutions, and ongoing projects to improve transport and communication linkages with India and Southeast Asia, has fostered optimism which has translated into calls for political change. The state's traditional support for the party in power and the BJP's allegations of corruption in the incumbent Congress party promises a closely contested election.

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Background

Manipur is situated in a strategic position between South Asia and Southeast Asia and is just south of the Brahmaputra valley which used to be a significant trade region between the ancient Indian and Chinese civilizations.² It is surrounded by Nagaland in the North, Mizoram in the South, Assam in the West and by Myanmar in the East as well as in the South. By road, Imphal to New Delhi is approximately 2,386 km (1,483 miles) while Imphal to Bangkok is just 1942 km (1206 miles). Manipur also boasts a pristine natural environment and a rich ancient culture. The Indian government often showcases Manipur's colourful performing arts as part of India's diverse cultural heritage. The Manipuri drum dances, known as *Pung Cholom* and the Manipuri classical dance Raas Leela, designated as one of the classical dances of India, and entered in UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, were featured as the main items in the opening ceremony of 11th Commonwealth games hosted in Delhi 2010. A number of cultural arts troupes from India regularly perform Manipuri dances around the world, often with sponsorship from the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and even as part of diplomatic goodwill missions.

While Manipur's cultural performances have allowed it to assert a distinctive identity within the cultural mosaic of India, politically the state has been marginalized by the Central Government, leading to decades of anti-India sentiments among sections of the population and the emergence of insurgency movements. Despite the rhetoric of India's "Look East" policy of the 1990s, and after more than fifty years of being a part of the Indian Union, Manipur has not fulfilled its potential as an economic gateway to Southeast Asia. Rather, it has earned the reputation of being one of the most violent states in India. Currently, Manipur faces problems related to insurgency, tribal uprisings, clashes with security forces, economic blockades, and the regular shutdown of roads, schools, and businesses. The dire sociopolitical situation in Manipur has to be understood in terms of the history of the post-independence relationship between the state and the Center.

Relationship between the state and the Center

² A map of Manipur and neighboring states in Northeast India can be found in the Ministry of Development of Northeast Region website at <http://www.mdoner.gov.in/content/ne-region>

According to the 2011 census, the population of Manipur is 2,721,756. The valley of Manipur is inhabited by migrants from Bengal, Tripura, Assam, China and Myanmar. Different tribes merged over hundreds of years and the people of the valley came to be known as the Meiteis. The hill areas surrounding the valley are mainly inhabited by tribal communities comprising about thirty different ethnic groups who are loosely categorized as “Naga” and “Kuki”. For most of its history, spanning over twenty centuries, Manipur existed as an independent kingdom ruled by kings from the Ningthouja clan, who controlled both the valley and the hills. From the 18th century, Manipuri kings converted to Bengal Vaishnavism which became the state religion, thus sharing cultural and religious ties with other parts of India. In 1891, after the victory of the British in the Anglo-Manipur war, Manipur became a princely state and the British divided the administration of the hills and the valley. The British also brought in Marwari traders who took over control of the sale and export of rice from the Manipuris.

In June 1948, full independence returned to Manipur and a democratic government with the King as the Executive Head and an elected legislature was formed. The Central Government of India did not recognize the elected government and in 1949, sought to take full control over Manipur, culminating in the forced signing of the merger with the Indian Union by placing the King under house arrest. The Central Government deleted a number of concessions put in place in the merger agreement which were intended to protect the interests of Manipuri citizens.³ These included giving priority to Manipuris in government employment within the state, restrictions on immigration from India, and Manipuri control of imports and exports. Manipuris, particularly the youth, were very unhappy with the way Manipur, an independent state with a Constitution of its own and an elected Assembly, was annexed to the Indian Union. Moreover, there was a subsequent influx of top civil servants appointees from other parts of India. In 1950, Manipur was relegated from a being the first state in the region to exercise adult franchise to a Part ‘C’ state, which was centrally administered under the rule of a Chief Commissioner who appointed its functionaries. The elected assembly of Manipur was also dissolved. In 1953, the Nehru Government made the unpopular decision of handing over Kabaw valley, which Manipuris had a

³ Parrat, John, *Wounded Land: Politics and Identity in Modern Manipur*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2005, 118.

justifiable claim over, to the Burmese without any compensation. In October 1956, Manipur became a Union Territory under the States' Re-Organisation Act, and only in 1972, did it become a fully-fledged state of the Indian Union.

In response, the 1950s saw the rise and fall of the Communist Party, which was led by social activist Hijan Irabot, who formed the Red Guards to engage in armed struggle against the Indian Government. The focus of the opposition to merger began to shift to underground armed resistance movements ushering in an era of heavy military presence. Since the 1960s, numerous underground movements emerged. These include the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), whose avowed aim was to secede from India through armed struggle, and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland/Nagalim (NSCN), whose objective is to integrate all the Naga inhabited areas of the Northeast as a sovereign Christian state. These groups frequently resort to extortion from civilian populations to fund their demand for weapons and organize economic and road blockades.

Both military and para-military forces were brought into the state to counter these insurgency movements. Border Security Forces, special divisions of the Indian Armed Forces, and paramilitary Central Reserve Police Forces continuously patrol the streets of Manipur. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) which was imposed on Assam and sections of Manipur in 1958, was expanded to include all of the territory of Manipur in 1980. AFSPA gives army officers special powers which include the power to arrest or search anyone suspected of committing an offense, with legal impunity. AFSPA's impact on relations between the Centre and Manipur has been disastrous, not only because of the large number of killings but also because Manipuris perceive it as indicative of a neo-colonial and racist bias against the Mongoloid northeast, and the suppression of their identity by force of arms.⁴

The political and legal treatment of Manipur alienated the state from the Center. These were implemented despite the warnings of the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru who realized that the Northeast region of India did not share a sense of national consciousness as the other parts of India. This is because the Indian nationalist movement that fostered a sense of national unity among other Indian states was not allowed to carry out its activities in the Northeast. In a speech he made after visiting the Northeast frontier in 1952, he said "the greatest problem of

⁴ Parrat, John 2005, 160.

India today is not so much political as psychological integration and consolidation...we must approach the tribal people with affection and friendliness...we must let them feel that we come to give and not to take anything away from them. That is the kind of psychological integration India needs”.⁵ To this effect, the Central Government sponsored the establishment of the Jawarharlal Nehru Dance academy to preserve and promote Manipuri arts, but little else was done to bring about this psychological integration. Instead, a number of politically charged social movements in Manipur, like the Meitei Apokpa Marup, feeling alienated from the rest of India, sought to divest the state of Indian elements. They did this by reviving the pre-Hindu indigenous religion, now known as Sanamahism and castigating Hinduism as a foreign religion. The Bengali script that was officially used since the 18th century was replaced with Meitei-mayak, a constructed indigenous script in the 1980s. Hindi movies are banned in Manipur, and many schools do not sing the Indian national anthem. As part of the same rhetoric, Manipuri media regularly feature stories of how Manipuris are abused in other parts of India.

The Need for Social and Political Change

The competition for social and geographical space among the religious and ethnic groups has contributed to conflicts over space leading to insurgencies and internal tensions. For example, territorial disputes between the Nagas and Kukis over the Sadar Hills area has been going on since 1974 without a solution. These issues have led to other problems like a lack of investment, growing unemployment, frequent shutdowns of roads, businesses and schools, corrupt politicians and civil service, non-fulfillment of the people’s democratic aspirations, lack of development of infrastructure, large numbers of illegal migrants from Nepal, Myanmar and other parts of India, and drug abuse amongst the youth. In recent years, large-scale protests have been organized to implement the Inner Line Permit (ILP), which allows Indians outside the state to enter only for a limited period. Much to the chagrin of Manipuris, the implementation of the ILP has been refused by the Central Government but is in place other Northeast Indian states like Nagaland, Mizoram, and parts of Arunachal Pradesh.

⁵ Jawarharlal Nehru’s Speeches 1949 – 1953 “The Tribal Folk” *krishikosh.egranth.ac.in/bitstream/1/2027566/1/HS2299.pdf*

Frustrated with the social and political conditions, a number of Manipuris have banded together to call for change. In October 2016, a group called “Progressive Manipur” comprising Manipuris from diverse professions such as bankers, transporters, vendors and students marched in protest against the frequent bandhs, strikes and blockades that severely affect the lives of people.⁶ In September 2016, lawyers from the Manipur Bar Association had organized a similar rally. There are also several Manipuris who after having experienced staying in some of the bigger cities in India and abroad, are longing for political and economic change in Manipur.

In recent years however, there have been some promising developments. There is an ongoing Jiribam-Tupul-Imphal railway project to connect Manipur with the rest of India. This project, which had been expected to be completed by 2012, had seen some delays. However, the Union Minister of State for Railways claimed that the Jiribam-Tupul railway line will be completed by December 2018. Since coming to power in the Center, the BJP Government has initiated some projects that are likely to bring about better psychological integration with the India.⁷ For example, in 2016, a Manipur University of Culture was established to teach Manipuri dance, martial arts and music. In 2015, after a visit to Manipur, PM Modi announced that a National Sports University will be built in the state. This was to reciprocate with Manipur producing some of the most successful athletes in India. However, the project has been delayed because of the failure on the part of the State Government to facilitate acquisition of land for the purpose.

Upcoming Elections

In the upcoming elections, the BJP has sets its sights on Manipur as its base in the Northeast. This could be because 41.39% of the population are Hindus, whereas the Christians are the majority in most Northeast Indian states.⁸ The BJP’s main strategy has been to blame the Congress party for the problems in Manipur. Specifically, BJP leaders are playing up the corruption scams of the incumbent Ibobi Singh Government. These would include the “Lok Tak Lake” scam, where 500 crores of rupees had gone unaccounted in the name of cleansing the lake. The BJP is promising a

⁶ http://www.telegraphindia.com/1161003/jsp/northeast/story_111578.jsp#.WB8fIYVYxRY

⁷ http://e-pao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=news_section.News_Links.News_Links_2016.Manipur_will_be_on_railway_map_by_Dec_2018_Gohain_20161102

⁸ Census 2011. See <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/manipur.html>

firm commitment to provide corruption-free governance and to ensure that the various development schemes for the state initiated by the Modi Government at the Center will be implemented. The Congress Party on the other hand, has been unable to stop in-fighting within the party between senior members and junior members vying for their posts. Nor have they been able to convince the people of any changes to the status quo. Besides the two parties, Manipur's iconic Irom Sharmila who had recently broken her 16-year fast to repeal the AFSPA, has formed a new party called the "Peoples Resurgence and Justice Alliance" (PRJA) to contest the next elections. She is unlikely to get much support because Manipuris seem to have become disillusioned by her breaking fast.

Despite the lack of a clear manifesto from both the Congress and BJP parties to deal with issues like migration, unemployment, ILP, AFSPA, strikes, and insurgency the upcoming election promises to be keenly contested. On one hand, the Congress party has been the dominant party in Manipur's history, winning 13 out of the 16 Lok Sabha elections, and it currently occupies 48 out of 60 seats. On the other hand, the BJP has a high chance of winning because Manipuris have a tradition of voting for the party in power at the Center. This is because the state is heavily dependent on funding from the Central Government. Moreover, the BJP's recent victory in Assam, its 2015 by-election victories of two districts in Manipur, and the defection of 5 MLAs from the Congress and its ally the Trinamool Congress within the past year all indicate a BJP victory. Whichever party wins, there is an urgent need to integrate Manipur psychologically with the Indian Union through culture, sports, and larger political involvement of Manipur in the center. The Indian army could also recruit more Manipuri contingents. These measures will create a sense of awareness necessary to restrict the activities and recruitment of insurgency movements. When political stability is restored, investments can be attracted to create jobs. PM Modi's promise to transform India's redundant "Look East" policy to "Act East" policy at the East Asia Summit in 2014, should then involve Manipur in a major role.⁹

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⁹ <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/look-east-policy-now-turned-into-act-east-policy-modi/article6595186.ece>