
Militancy and Negotiations: A Study of Suspension of Operation in Manipur

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*To resolve conflict and avoid the use of force, it is said, one must
negotiate - Fred C. Iklé*

Abstract

One of the most striking features of militancy in Northeast India in general and Manipur in particular is how infrequently the two sides (Government and the militants) attempt peaceful negotiation. Very often, the government refuses to grant the militants legitimacy as a bargaining partner. On the other, militants in the region are averse to go into negotiation with the government whom they confront. However, in spite of this phenomenon, confrontations do reach a point at a certain stage where both sides agree to negotiate rather than confront each other. Remarkably, the present tripartite truce popularly known as Suspension of Operation (SoO) between the Government of India and the state government of Manipur on one side and the Kuki militants on the other turns out to be a significant development. The paper discusses how this negotiation can be attributed as a technique of alternative dispute resolution in a multi-ethnic situation particularly in a conflict-ridden state like Manipur.



Right since the dawn of independence of the country, Northeast India has been witnessing a series of challenges such as unceasing demands for autonomy and even outright secessions by

various militant ethnic groups. Although Naga militancy was the first to make its headway in the region, movements by other ethnicities followed it. Notably, the militant activities of the Nagas, the Kukis, the Bodos, and the Assamese

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etc. have continued for a long time.

Of late, the demands for self-determination in the Northeast, where people are increasingly identifying themselves on the basis of ethnic alliance, language and territoriality, have turned the region into an inferno. Today, there are demands for not less than 20 new states by different ethnic militants inhabiting the region, which aggravate inter-ethnic relations and complicate the task of governance.

Over the years, Manipur presents itself as one of the most troubled states in India, wracked by inter-ethnic strife and militarization of ethnic groups in the pursuit of different causes. The situation is further escalated by competing claims and clashing ideologies. On the one hand, sections of Meitei youth demand secession from India, whilst the Nagas and the Kukis demand their respective ethnic homelands to be carved out of their areas of inhabitation. Not only does Manipur have the highest number of ethnic militias in the country but also it has the highest incidence of inter-ethnic conflicts. These were unknown in Manipur in earlier decades, but they have turned out to be an integral part in Manipuri politics since the 1980s, making the state one of the most panic-stricken in the region.

Over the years, militancy in the region has become the most resorted means of ethnic assertion and bargaining even for securing economic and political advantages from the centre. Although militancy or terrorism has been considered to be the bane of the region, its precise connotation still eludes the analysts worldwide. Generally, militancy is considered as use of violence by a discontented group to achieve its desired goal.¹ However, it is not the same as an association of armed robbers or dacoits; but rather it is born out of some committed ideologies of a particular group, a tribe, a community, religious or secular.²

In spite of impediments associated with militancy the signing of tripartite truce popularly known as Suspension of Operation (SoO) between the Government of India and the state government of Manipur on one side and the Kuki militants under two camps— Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and United People's Front (UPF) on the other as a process of negotiation is a significant development for the state of Manipur. Negotiation as a process of peaceful settlement of disputes is thus expected to result in concrete settlement of ethnic conflict. In simplest terms, negotiation may be termed as a discussion between two

or more disputants who are trying to work out a solution to their problem.³ It is a process of communication in which the parties aim to “send a message” to the other side and influence each other.⁴ This interpersonal or inter-group process can occur at a personal level, as well as at a corporate or international (diplomatic) level.

Negotiations typically take place because the parties wish to create something new that neither could attempt on their own, or to resolve a problem or dispute between them.⁵ The parties acknowledge that there is some conflict of interest between them and think they can use some form of influence to get a better deal, rather than simply taking what the other side will voluntarily give them.⁶ It is a search for agreement rather than to fight openly, give in, or break off contact.⁷

Further, negotiation can be termed as a dialogue intended to resolve disputes, to produce an agreement upon courses of action, to bargain for individual or collective advantage, or to craft outcomes to satisfy various interests. It is a form of decision-making with two or more actively involved agents who cannot make decisions independently, and therefore must make concessions to achieve a compromise. It is the

primary method of alternative dispute resolution. Fred C. Ikle defines negotiation as ‘a process in which explicit proposals are put forward ostensibly for the purpose of reaching agreement on an exchange or on the realization of a common interest where conflicting interests are present’. Negotiation is also a method of conflict resolution, and as such, it is used in modeling of decision process. Mutual adjustment is one of the key causes of the changes that occur during a negotiation. As negotiations evolve, each side proposes changes to the other party’s position and makes changes to its own.⁸

Ethnic Equations in Manipur

Manipur is inhabited by numerous ethnic communities and it has been noted as the most notorious spot for violent conflicts and as a minefield of militant activities. A very large proportion of ethnic groups have formed their militant outfits and asserting their identities in the state. Manipur presents itself as a classic case of linguistic and ethno-cultural diversity. Political mobilization along ethnic lines seems to have deepened the process of ethnic separation and self-identification and much of the politics in Manipur today thus appears to swivel around the question of preserving one’s ethnic identity.

In spite of all its limitations, the democratic experiment in Manipur has come a long way. What we witness at present is perhaps not the revival of primordial identities of the past; but it is the construction of modern ethnic identities vis-à-vis the newly created nation-state of India. The Annual Report of the Indian Government's Ministry of Home Affairs in 2007-08 states, "Manipur continues to be affected by the activities of a large number of militant/insurgent outfits divided on ethnic lines with competing demands. In Manipur, every ethnic group no matter how small, wants to protect, preserve and cherish its identity at all cost". Today, every tribe⁹ maintains a distinct socio-political organization working for the consolidation of linguistic-cultural uniformity; for example, the Tangkhul Naga Long (TNL) was formed in 1929, the Komrem Union in 1937, the Zeliangrong Naga Union (ZNU) in 1947, the Vaiphei National Assembly (VNA) in 1947, the Pangan Union (PU) in 1947, the Paite National Council (PNC) in 1949, and the Zomi National Congress and the Mao Union (MU) in 1971

The emergence of distinct ethnicities in Manipur is believed to be a consequence of the following factors: (i) distinctive social and cultural identities manifested by all

social groups in the state; (ii) limited social and cultural interaction between the different ethnic groups despite the physical and linguistic affinities among them and (iii) heightened importance of historical and religious differences in political struggles against the dominance of larger and more powerful ethnic groups.¹⁰ Consequently, the process of ethnic realignment as 'Kuki' or 'Naga' for a collective identity is gathering momentum.

Today, Manipur is caught in ethnic quagmire with three main ethnic groups namely, the Meiteis, the Nagas and the Kukis indulging in a systematic and articulated campaign of ethnic assertion and consolidation in the process of expanding their respective spheres of influence. Currently, there are more than 40 militant groups in Manipur alone focusing on their separate ethnic and sub-ethnic identities.¹¹ Different ethnic groups have different aspirations invariably conflicting with each other.

Comparatively, Manipur appears to be an ethnic cauldron that has kept boiling for decades by the contradictory processes of assimilation and preservation of ethnic identity. The most striking feature of the social order of Manipur is perhaps its heterogeneity. The

situation is further aggravated by the complex demographic settings of Manipur. The hills which form nine-tenth of the total geographical area of the state are inhabited by the tribals, both Kuki and Naga, and the valley is inhabited by the majority Meiteis. By virtue of being the majority and occupying the most productive and fertile agricultural tracts and also on account of their historical association with Manipur's former monarchic state, the Meiteis occupy a dominant position in the state's economic, administrative and political domain. These groups inhabiting the state exhibit tremendous diversity "in terms of language and culture".

The issue of ethnicity came to be articulated in the wake of emerging conflict between the ethnic groups at various levels due to clash of interests and overlapping demands. The conflict of interest generated by a sense of deprivation and negligence motivates the elites of the ethnic communities to bring about emotional integration in their respective communities to counter-balance other dominant ethnic communities. Thus, this phenomenon resulted in the mobilization and counter-mobilization of ethnic groups in Manipur.

Presently, there are 33 recognized tribes of Manipur who are politically grouped as Kukis or Nagas.¹² The Kukis of Manipur include Aimol, Gangte, Hmar, Kom, Koireng, Mizo, Paite, Ralte, Simte, Sukte, Thadou, Vaiphei and Zou tribes.¹³ The settlement of these groups are spread in Churachandpur district, Sadar Hills area (comprising of three Kuki majority Sub-divisions) of Senapati district, western part of Tamenglong district, Southern part of Chandel district, and southeast area of Ukhrul district. However, the Kukis are majority only in Churachandpur district out of five hill districts in Manipur, although there are Kukis in almost all the districts.¹⁴ On the other, Naga tribes are concentrated mainly in the districts of Ukhrul, Tamenglong, Senapati and Chandel, while the Kuki-affiliated tribes are dispersed over the five hill districts, with larger concentrations in Churachandpur, Senapati and Chandel districts. Identity formation by the various communities and tribes harping on exclusivity, integration and dominance, often results in several forms of conflict and intensified autonomy demands.

Of late, Manipur appears to be heading for ethnic related violence due to intersecting and competing ethnic demands. Militant groups

clash among themselves for control over the public resources even at the cost of their own community they claim to be defending. It is also reported that conflicting demands of the militants are behind persistent inter-ethnic conflicts in Manipur. Besides this, the great divide resulting in the infamous Kuki-Naga clashes in the 1990s not only developed ethnic paranoia but also intensified ethnic identification and autonomy movements. In other words, the perceived traditional feeling of oneness among the three major communities is slowly disappearing giving rise to hatred and mistrust. Thus, it is difficult to foresee the shape of things in this land of jewels. Perhaps, all one can say is that, more turbulent times are lying ahead. With so much of hostility and acrimony, there is hardly any prospect for the various ethnic communities to live together in peace.

Rise of Militancy in Manipur

Manipur was a princely state and it was later merged with the Indian Union on 15 October 1949. Only after a protracted agitation interspersed with violence, it was declared a separate state in 1972. The emergence of insurgency in Manipur is formally traced to the emergence of the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) on 24 November 1964. The alleged

'forced' merger of Manipur and the delay in the conferring of full-fledged statehood to it was greatly resented by the people of Manipur. Since then several other outfits, like the People's Liberation Army (PLA), founded on September 25, 1978, People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) set up on 9 October 1977 and the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) that came into being in April, 1980 have emerged in the valley areas consisting of four districts of the State. All these insurgent groups have been demanding a separate independent Manipur.

Similarly, the hilly areas of the State, comprising five districts, are affected by different brands of militancy. The Kukis in the early nineties initiated their own brand of militancy for achieving and bargaining territorial concession to preserve their cultural and ethnic distinctiveness. Moreover, following ethnic clashes between the Nagas and Kukis in the early 1990s, a number of Kuki outfits were formed as a means to counter Naga hegemony and assertion. Similarly, several other tribes, such as the Paite, Vaiphei, Hmar and Kom have also established their own armed groups.¹⁵ Mention can be made of the Islamist outfits like the People's United Liberation Front (PULF), which have been formed to protect

the interests of the 'Pangals' (Manipuri Muslims).

On the other, militancy among the Nagas was apparent in the early fifties.¹⁶ Initially what appeared to be a demand for autonomy aimed at safeguarding Naga 'way of life' soon snowballed into a people's revolt led by a Naga National Council (hereafter NNC). Undoubtedly, Naga struggle is the oldest armed ethnic movement of the post-independence India, and for almost half a century now, is still battling to gain territorial concession against the might of Indian State.

Though the Indian State has shown marked resilience in trying to accommodate the Naga revolt within the ambit of Indian Constitution—the creation of the State of Nagaland¹⁷ and the drawing of the Naga people in the democratic process being major success points—yet the main issue raised by the Naga struggle remains largely unresolved. Today, National Socialist Council of Nagalim-Issac Muivah (hereafter NSCN-IM)¹⁸ spearheads the movement for collective identity for territorial concession among the Nagas though with other small factions. Today, reinterpretation of historical validity has not only given rise to ethnic movement for

autonomy but also proliferation of militant organisations.

Genesis of Kuki Militancy

The Kukis constitute a distinct ethnic group on the basis of common ancestry, shared history of migration and common cultural practices.¹⁹ The settlements of the Kukis are also noticeable in other Northeast Indian states of Assam, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya. In Myanmar, they are found in the Chin Hills, the Sagaing sub-division and parts of the Arakan tracts. In Bangladesh, they are found in the Chittagong Hill tracts. They are identified as 'Chins' in Myanmar, 'Lusei' or 'Mizo' in Mizoram and Kukis in Manipur, Assam, Nagaland, Tripura, and in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.²⁰ When the Government of India Act of 1935 created two independent nations of India and Burma, the Kabaw Valley inhabited by these Kuki-Chin tribes were included in Burma. The Indian Independence Act of 1947 simply confirmed the territorial arrangement made by the Act of 1935.²¹ This led to their ethnic and political disintegration.²²

The aspiration of having a separate political entity on the part of the Kukis for the protection of their identity and culture has been explicit since the formation of the Kuki

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National Assembly (KNA) on 24 October 1946 with the primary objective of fostering Kuki ethnic consciousness and making a single political unit.²³ The KNA initially raised the usual threat of secession but paradoxically, later changed this stand and took a typical integrationist stand.²⁴ In 1960, the KNA had demanded creation of a separate state for the Kukis within the Indian Union.²⁵ But, the demand of the KNA did not meet any positive response from the Government of India. Again, in 1964, the KNA and the Manipur Mizo Integration Council (MMIC) passed a resolution to achieve a single administrative unit for the ethnic (Kuki-Chin-Mizo) group.²⁶

On 15-18 January 1965, a convention of the various ethnic (Kuki-Chin-Mizo) groups took place at Khawnpui at Churachandpur (Manipur) and resolved to secure a 'Greater Mizoram' for the Ethnic groups. And when militancy broke out to realize this aspiration under the MNF, the Kukis were part of it.²⁷ The Kukis too, have demanded creation of Sadar Hills as a full-fledged district since 1972.²⁸ But the concept of Greater Mizoram was pushed to the background with the signing of the Mizo Accord in 1986 by the MNF and the Government of India. In fact, the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council

Act of 1971 had proposed for the Creation of Six Autonomous District Councils including Sadar Hills in the Hill areas of Manipur.²⁹ While the others have been declared as full-fledged districts, Sadar Hills has been ignored despite repeated assurance from successive Governments of Manipur till today.³⁰

In the mid 1980s, the Kukis too formed their own militant organizations to safeguard their interests and to preserve their identity.³¹ In fact, as early as October 1958, the Kuki National Volunteers (KNV), a militant organization was formed for the purpose of re-uniting all the Kukis residing in the Indian Union and its adjoining areas.³² However, the organization fizzled out soon. In the early part of 1988, the Kuki National Army (KNA) and its political wing— the Kuki National Organisation (KNO) were formed.³³ It strives for self-determination of the Kuki people which it defines as "the right of the Kukis to govern their own affairs within a defined territorial entity (statehood), one in India (Western Zalemang) and another in Burma (Eastern Zalemang).³⁴ During the same year, the Kuki National Front (KNF) was formed. Its main objective is to secure a separate 'Kuki state' within the Indian Union which would be comprised of parts of Ukhrul, Tamenglong, the whole of

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Sadar Hills Sub-Division of Senapati, Chandel and Churachandpur districts of Manipur.³⁵

During and after the 'Kuki-Naga ethnic Conflict' (1992-1997), numerous Kuki militant organizations were formed. The Kuki Defence Force (KDF) and the Chin-Kuki Resistance Force (CKRF) were organized by the Kukis to defend themselves from the onslaughts of the NSCN (IM) though they are inactive now. In 1992, the Kuki Liberation Army (KLA) was formed with an objective of securing a separate 'Kuki State' or 'Kukiland' too.³⁶ On 15 December 2000, the Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA) and its political wing Re-organization and Confederation of the Kukis (ROCK) were formed.

Its primary objective is to reunification of the ethnically and politically disintegrated Kukis and to form an independent 'Kuki State'.³⁷ Again on 29 March 2000, the United Kuki Liberation Front (UKLF) was also formed to uphold the interests of the Kuki community and to fight for a separate state of the Kukis – 'Kukigam'. In the later half of 2000, smaller militant groups like the United KomRem Revolutionary Army (UKRA), the Zou Defence Volunteers (ZDV), United Old Kuki Liberation Army (UOKLA), the

Hmar National Army (HNA) and Hmar Revolutionary Front (HRF), United Socialist Revolutionary Army (USRA), Zomi Revolutionary Front (ZRF) were formed on sub-ethnic interests. Besides, there are numerous factional groups such as the KNF (MC), KNF (Z), and KRA (U) etc.

In 2000, the Indigenous People's Revolutionary Alliance (IPRA) comprising of the KNA, ZRA, HPC and KNF (MC) was formed with the KNO's initiative. Its objective was to act as a bulwark against the infiltration of alien militant groups into their areas.³⁸ But, the IPRA soon fizzled out. Again, in 2002, the Kuki National Council (KNC) was formed as an umbrella organization of the KRA, the KNF and the UKLF which also did not last.

In 2006, six Kuki militant outfits namely, the KNF, KLA, HPC (D), KNF(S), ZRA and the UKLF submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister of India for recognition of its formation to fulfill the ethnic aspiration of the Kukis.³⁹ Also, the KNO, the political wing of the KNA have also made efforts to bring the various Kuki militant groups under its umbrella. In 2008, besides the KNA, eleven Kuki militant groups joined the KNO umbrella. They are KNF (MC), KNF (Z), USRA, ZRF, UOKLA, ZDV, HNA,

UKRA, KLA (Manipur), KLA (Assam) and KRA (U).⁴⁰ On 22nd August 2008, the KNO comprising of eleven armed groups and the UPF consisting of another seven armed groups entered into a Tripartite Agreement and signed the Suspension of Operations (SoO). The three parties included the armed groups that constitute the KNO and the UPF, the Centre and the Government of Manipur.⁴¹

On the other hand, the hill areas of the state, comprising of five districts has been affected by different brands of militancy. Kuki tribals initiated their own brand of insurgency in the early 1990s against what they termed as the oppression by the Naga outfits such as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM). Following the ethnic clashes between the Nagas and Kukis in the early 1990s, a number of Kuki outfits have been formed. But, the demand for a separate state was apparent since 1940s.

Proliferation of Militant Groups in Manipur

With its hill and valley divide in Manipur, there is a constant competition for resources among different ethnic groups which results in ever increasing split in society along ethnic lines. The state has

indeed become a battle ground for competing ethnic militant groups for a long time. The presence of one group led to the formation of another, either as a result of internal fragmentation or as a counter to the other. Even though almost all the tribal groups have militant groups that claim to represent them, broadly, militancy in Manipur is primarily divided among the three major ethnic militant groups, i.e., Naga, Meitei and Kuki. Continuous inter-ethnic struggles, local provision of protection and political extortion further trigger the proliferation process. Since these militant groups are based on ethnic lines, recruitment is also largely based on ethnicity.

As has been said earlier, there are more than twenty Kuki militant organizations operating in Manipur which are demanding separate state or autonomy for better protection and preservation of their ethnic identity. In the same way, Naga militancy in Manipur supports the demand for a sovereign Nagalim (Greater Nagaland), which includes the integration of Naga inhabited areas of Manipur with Nagaland. The notion of an exclusive territorial boundary led the Nagas, particularly the NSCN-IM, to drive out the Kukis, a significant ethnic group from Naga majority areas of Manipur, resulting in the Naga-Kuki clashes of the 1990s.

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This process of 'ethnic cleansing', which began around 1992, wiped out many Kuki villages from Naga majority areas and eliminated over a thousand Kukis. As a result of the fear generated by the NSCN-IM, some of the smaller Kuki tribes even assimilated into the Naga.

The clashes led to consolidation of the Kukis, who formed Kuki National Front (KNF) in 1988, the Kuki Liberation Army (KLA) in 1992, and the Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA) in 1999. Kuki armed insurgency is the result of the cumulative effect of Naga insurgency and its integration discourse. The Kukis not only question the NSCN-IM's claim over Naga inhabited areas of Manipur, but are also demanding a separate homeland called Kukiland comprising the Kuki areas of Senapati and Chandel district. Significantly, the Kukis continue to control the commercially important border town of Moreh, despite pressure from Naga and Meitei outfits.

Further, the Meitei insurgency hoped to restore Meitei pride and supremacy to pre-British period levels. The United National Liberation Front (UNLF) which was formed on November 24, 1964 under the leadership of Arambam Samarendra Singh strives to achieve

independence and establish socialism in Manipur. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) was formed by N. Bisheswar Singh on 25 September 1978 to achieve independence through armed struggle. The People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), led by R.K. Tulachandra in 1977, the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) in 1980 and Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL) in 1994 were also formed.

The Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA) and the People's United Liberation Front (PULF) are other ethnic insurgent groups operating in the Imphal valley. Consequently, the entire valley was declared a disturbed area and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) 1958, was imposed in September 1980. It can be said here that there is hardly any place for ideology and mass support for a population of just 24 lakh with three broad ethnic categories to be represented by more than 40 militant organizations. Today, with proliferations of different groups and factions almost as a daily phenomenon within the Meiteis, Kukis and Nagas it is difficult to find any particular group from each of these communities, which could be said to be representing the interests of the entire community.

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Table 1
Various Kuki Militant groups under
Kuki National Organisation (KNO)

<i>Sl. No.</i>	<i>Name of the Militants</i>
1.	Kuki National Army
2.	Kuki National Front (Military Council)
3.	Kuki National Front (Zogam)
4.	Kuki Liberation Army (Manipur)
5.	Kuki Liberation Army (assam)
6.	Kuki Revolutionary Army (Unification)
7.	United Old Kuki Liberation Army
8.	United Konrem Revolutionary Army
9.	United Socialist Revolutionary Army
10.	Zomi Revolutionary Front
11.	Zou Defence Volunteer (KNO)

Table 2
Various Kuki Militant groups under
United People's Front (UPF)

Sl. No.	Name of the Militants
1.	Hmar People Convention (Democratic)
2.	Kuki Revolutionary Army
3.	Kuki Ntaional Front (President)
4.	Kuki National Front (Samuel)
5.	Kuki Liberation Army (UPF)
6.	United Kuki Liberation Front
7.	Zomi Revolutionary Army
8.	Zou Defence Volunteer (UPF)

Source: The Telegraph - North East, December 20, 2008.

Prospects of Suspension of Operation (SoO)

In spite of such inherent problems there is a positive sign of peace and progress in the state as Kuki National Organisation (KNO) comprising of eleven militant groups and the United People's Front (UPF) consisting of another seven militant groups, formally entered into tripartite agreement and signed Suspension of Operation (SoO) on 22 August 2008. The three parties that entered into the truce included the 18 Kuki militant groups under two camps as KNO and UPF on one side and the Government of India and the state Government of Manipur on the other.

It is important to recall here that SoO agreement between the Indian army and various constituents of KNO and UPF was in force since 1 August 2001. However, with the state Government of Manipur not being a party to the previous SoO, the prospect of peace met with several hurdles. The government of Manipur continued to deal with KNO and UPF with a heavy hand, which was seen by the KNO and UPF as a sign of 'hesitancy' and 'half-heartedness'. Thus, the previous SoO agreement did not succeed.

However, with the government of

Manipur being a party to the SoO, it presents itself as a positive initiator to resolve ethnic problems and demands through dialogue and negotiation. This development may also be seen as a positive step forward which will allow ethnic groups to express their grievances and demands in a constitutional manner.

Most importantly, this truce effectively interlocks competing ethnic demands through dialogues and negotiations. In other words, it is an indication of how both the state and national governments and the Kukis (KNO and UPF) now seek to resort to peaceful means for settlement of their political claims. Most importantly, the truce can serve as a platform for bargaining and sorting out intersecting claims and conflict of interests in a non-violent, consultative and democratic manner.

The truce which was extended till 22 August 2010 led to relative calm in the state and a substantial drop in violence in the state. In fact, according to the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) database there was a dramatic fall in insurgency-related fatalities from 416 in 2009 to 134 in 2010 and it was held that Manipur was "likely to shed the dubious distinction of being the most violent among the troubled States of India's Northeast".⁴²

Further, this truce presents two major developments. Firstly, this initiative shows how both the governments want to sort out problems through peaceful dialogues and negotiations rather than resorting to violent means. Secondly, this initiative enabled various Kuki militants to be grouped in two camps more or less unifying them and making negotiation possible by overcoming micro-nationalist tendencies that have been persistent within. For a peaceful settlement and accommodation of ethnic aspirations of the Kukis in the region, the government should rather than using the present truce to consolidate its position and relaunch its counter insurgency operations it should take note of the genuine aspirations of the people, evolve a political mechanism to address their demands for autonomy and look for agreeable settlement of various issues under discussion.

Perhaps, cynics may underrate the ongoing truce in view of higher factional tendencies within the Kuki groups, however, the fact that they have consented to come together under two groups as KNO and UPF provides an opportunity for collective bargaining. Needless to say if this opportunity is squandered and the negotiations fail then the fractious nature of Kuki politics and reappear

again. It is pertinent to mention here that the Kukis' demands for a separate State may still remain an issue as there are conflicting interpretation of historical on this issue among the Kukis, the Nagas and the Meiteis. In spite of this, with each group expected to make some concessions during the course of negotiations, the talks may result in effectively addressing the present ethnic cauldron in Manipur. However, as no party in negotiation can expect all its demands to be fulfilled, both the signatories should be in a position to grant each maximum possible concession to reach a conclusive settlement without which the ongoing ethnic and political imbroglio may not be resolved. In fact, the government's willingness to bring militants to the table and particularly with Manipur Government consenting to embark on the path of truce paves the way for different Kuki groups (although with common objective) to come together and make the talks a success.

This truce is also an indication of the Kuki militants' desire for constitutional settlement of their demand. It reflects how the factions decided to put aside their internal differences and chose to pursue peace through uniting different Kuki groups, tribes and clans for a purposive negotiation. Interestingly,

this is the first move that has culminated in bringing the various Kuki militant groups under a unified platform for talks despite inter-ethnic contestations and decade-old movements for territorial autonomy and also in spite of the fact that centre was relatively passive towards the Kukis' demand for quite sometime. Unlike the Naga movement, the Kukis' demands had all along been through peaceful means though not as systematic and spontaneous as that of the Nagas. Nevertheless, in order for the process of peace to succeed, the government should be willing to offer negotiation to warring parties rather than believing in its military advantage and sidelining the militant groups. This move may obliterate the notion that the government often owes it to its citizens to engage them in talks and act substantively.

Conclusion

As the process of negotiation is relatively new it will take time before any group comes out with any concession in favour of the other parties involved. Nevertheless, it has to be acknowledged that this development has positively opened the path for political dialogues which presents a unique opportunity for negotiators from the government's side to acquaint themselves with the dynamics of identity-related

movements and ethnic aspirations. Even if the truce may not have led to absolute peace in the state, the fact that there has been a drop in violence leads one to believe that this trend has to be sustained. Today, with Manipur embarking on the first ever Suspension of Operation agreement with militant groups, it has to prove whether it would choose to be serious in finding a lasting solution despite the many odds it is confronted with. With big stakes involved, there is an immense need for all parties involved to tread all tracks and walk the talk. Henceforth, it will remain to be seen if the parties can reach an eventual settlement. Here, the government of Manipur must believe that even if it may take time, this strategy will work. Simultaneously, the process has to be given a certain kick-start, a certain momentum to ensure that the gains made so far are not reversed.

Most importantly, the government must refrain from terming the militant groups it is negotiating with as criminals, brigands or unworthy of the status of a legitimate peace partners to convince itself and these groups that the militants can or should be negotiated with. It should be noted that negotiation is a technique of alternative dispute resolution based on the willingness to compromise on both sides.

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However, none of the negotiating parties can expect to win all it wants. If all the sides negotiate in good faith, they can always find a fair solution. In fact, negotiation is a form of decision-making with two or more actively involved agents who cannot make decisions independently, and therefore must make concessions to achieve a compromise. The ongoing

truce should be actualized as a technique of dispute resolution and it could provide lessons for other conflicts in the region. However, unless the central and the state governments seriously attempt to develop appropriate schemes and policies, the issue of ethnic contestations in Manipur will continue to escalate. ■

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8. William Zartman, Conflict and Order: Justice in Negotiation, *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 1997. p.122.
9. The term 'tribe' here would mean to denote a more or less homogeneous group of people having a closely-knit way of life who are some-what falling under a close/communicable speech community.
10. U. A. Shimray, 'Ethnicity and Socio -Political Assertion: The Manipur Experience.' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 29 Sept, 2001. p. 3675.
11. Sub-ethnic identity is meant to denote assertion of identity resulting from fragmentation and division within the perceived bigger ethnic identity such as Kuki or Naga or more inclined to be recognised under its respective tribe/clan appellation.
12. Bhagat Oinam, 'Pattern of Ethnic Conflict in North-East: A Study of Manipur,' in *Economic and Politically Weekly*, Vol. 38, No. 21, May 24, 2003. p.2033.
13. Pukhrambam, 'The People of Manipur,' *Manipur Today*, Vol. 7, June 24, 2006. p.23.
14. Lhunkhosei Haokip, *The Kukis: A Socio-Cultural Study*, Unpublished Thesis, Manipur University, Imphal, 2003. p.23
15. Although culturally and linguistically, Paite, Hmar and Kom are Kukis however, fragmentation and division within Kuki identity has encourage micro-identity formation.
16. Trouble in the Naga Hill district of Assam broke out in the early 1953 when police action was initiated against the Naga National Council. Subsequently, it was followed by militant attack on police outposts and government officials. In 1956 armed forces were moved in. Thereafter, Naga movement took a violent turn.
17. The State of Nagaland was created by the thirteenth amendment of the Constitution of India (Act No. 73 of 1962).
18. Although NNC was the first Naga armed group today the movement is led by NSCN(IM) who is currently in talks with the Government of India.
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