# For a Just Peace in Manipur

*To restore peace in Manipur, there is a need to ensure accountability and justice.*

***Thongkholal Haokip writes:***

After being largely left politically unattended by New Delhi for 21 months since the conflict broke out on 3 May 2023, Manipur received its due attention only after N Biren Singh resigned from the post of chief minister on 9 February 2025. This late attention to the strife-torn state came not because it was considered long overdue but because of the failure to address the internal political struggle among the members of the ruling party in the state, and a no-confidence motion against the government was moved by the state's opposition party, the Congress. The second tenure of Singh's government has been rife with dissidence. This struggle for leadership among the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) members of the legislative assembly (MLAs) added fuel to prevailing tensions. When no consensus candidate for the post of the new chief minister was reached among the 32 BJP MLAs, President's rule was imposed in the state on 13 February 2025. This is the 11th time that the President's rule has been imposed in this state and is the highest number in India since independence.

Now that the President's rule is in place, the attempt to restore law and order is largely authoritative. After chairing a crucial review meeting on the security situation in Manipur on 1 March 2025, the union home minister instructed "free movement to be ensured for people on all roads in Manipur from March 8, 2025" and to "take strict action against anyone attempting to create obstructions" in order to restore "lasting peace in Manipur." The unduly late constitutional intervention is contrary to the much-acclaimed slogan of "minimum government, maximum governance." In Manipur, retaining the government was the maximum priority despite the total failure of constitutional machinery, while on the other hand, daily governance challenges were swept under the rug. It left over 60,000 people displaced and their homes destroyed, more than 300 people killed, and the two conflicting communities totally separated. This was the first partition-like situation in independent India in which two million people who had lived together for centuries were divided by buffer zones and were left to defend themselves.

When the riots broke out and were not effectively controlled for a week, it turned into an ethno-political conflict with a new demand for separate administration within the Constitution of India. Only through this new political arrangement do the Kukis think that their systematic subjugation, marginalisation, and dehumanisation will end. To them, the full operation of political impunity and the complete lack of accountability in the state were exacerbated by the delayed application of constitutional measures despite the apparent failure of the law-and-order situation. Instead of trying to address the grievances through dialogue, the union home ministry's approach appeared to be partisan. Treating a political situation as merely a law-and-order problem is not without resentment as the structures of domination are intended to be perpetuated. This attempt at political face-saving by the union government through a quick, overpowering, and authoritative approach, apart from the indignities that the aggrieved community has suffered and endured under the state government, has met with strong opposition. A raw and undiplomatic rejection of the demand for political autonomy leads to an unexpected and open defiance of the centre's directives. This act of open defiance by the public through the blockade of roads and their assertiveness is symbolic as it represents a powerful straw in the wind. Civil disobedience to the directives of political executives from the centre came due to the perceived injustice and "as a final expression" of their case. To the protesters, open defiance is the only way of getting their voices heard.

Exclusionary assertions denying the rights of the Kukis and positing them as the "other" continue to be prevalent with impunity and no accountability having been fixed so far. Such assertions coming from the persons holding responsible positions in civil society organisations or political parties do not sit well with the need for a just peace and, in fact, contribute to aggravating the conflict. The haste for peace intends to cast a long shadow on the demand for justice. Unlike what is being perceived, the highways have been free for the movement of essential goods even during the peak of the conflict, except for the movement of the two warring communities. The enforced peace resulted in the death of one man and injuries to over 40 others. In response, women enforced shutdowns in the following days. Trying to suppress the political longing with an enforced peace will only alienate further and the existing sentiment prevalent against the state government can only be worsened.

To "restore lasting peace" in the state, there is a need for accountability and justice. There should be accountability from the top to the bottom of the political and administrative machinery of the government. It also requires the recovery of all the looted arms, and all those responsible for such easy lootings, including police personnel, should be tried under the law. Otherwise, safety and security are a far cry in the midst of thousands of uncontrolled sophisticated weapons. The instituted

inquiry commission should not only submit its report on time but also ensure impartiality. Ensuring justice now is not merely about restorative, distributive or social justice, it is also about the long five-decade-old demand for political autonomy—currently expressed as a demand for the status of union territory with a legislature—in the hill areas of the state. Peace requires dialogue in democratic societies in the first place, and it cannot be enforced at the cost of justice.

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