

# Centre must pull Manipur back from the brink of ruin



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A BRIEF spell of fragile peace in the strife-torn Manipur was shattered by drone and rocket attacks early this month. The strikes were allegedly carried out by Kuki-Zo outfits against Meiteis. The fresh violence claimed 11 lives in just 10 days. Marked escalation led to widespread protests by locals. Students took to the streets demanding the resignation of state DGP Rajiv Singh and Security Adviser Kuldip Singh for their allegedly inept handling of the situation.

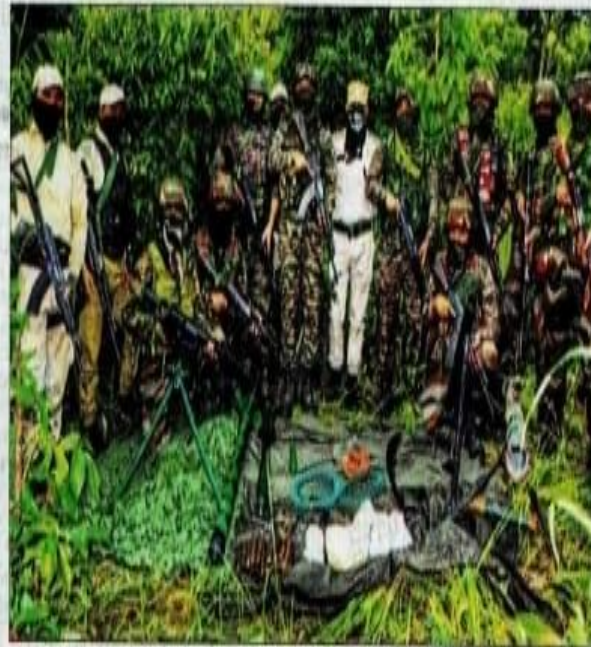
Manipur has been on the boil for the past almost one-and-a-half years, making it evident that the state government has failed to resolve the contentious issues. There is also a general impression of callousness on the part of the Central Government to solve the deep-rooted problems. In the absence of viable political initiatives, the Manipur crisis has aggravated sharply.

Known for its historic fault lines, Manipur has a diverse

cultural-religious profile, coupled with its demographic and economic asymmetries. Consequently, different communities have vied for the state's land and other natural resources. The underlying cause that led to the ongoing conflict was the controversial High Court order passed in March 2023, which recommended the inclusion of Meiteis in the list of Scheduled Tribes (STs). It implied that Meiteis, a majority and prosperous community, could purchase land and/or settle in the hill areas predominantly inhabited by the minority Kukis.

This contentious ruling was resisted by the Kukis, leading to the build-up of tension in the state. In the beginning of May last year, the situation took a serious turn, resulting in clashes between the two communities which had so far lived in harmony. Within days, over 100 persons were killed and around 60,000 displaced. The violence has been continuing since then, with the death toll mounting to around 240.

Due to the prolonged conflict, the divide between the two communities has fragmented the state. While Meiteis control the Imphal valley, Kukis dominate the hill districts of Churachandpur, Senapati and Tengnoupal. The Kukis are now demanding a separate hill state. Nagas are another major group in Manipur.



**HAUL:** Security personnel with arms and ammunition recovered from militants in Manipur. (m)

Although they have stayed away from the present conflict, the Nagas, too, harbour a longstanding demand for a separate administrative entity to include areas inhabited by them. Apparently, Manipur faces the threat of Balkanisation.

Meiteis and Kukis have heavily fortified their respective enclaves. The state looks like a war zone, with rival sides separated by buffer zones manned by the security forces to prevent clashes. Both communities have well-trained militias, largely composed of erstwhile militant outfits, armed with sophisticated weapons. These private armies often resort to savage killings and extortion.

Procuring modern arms is not a problem for any group, as there is a gun-running trail

originating from China and traversing through Myanmar. Further, the 'rebel groups' waging war against the military junta in Myanmar are also a lucrative source of weaponry. Besides, around 6,000 arms were looted from the state police armouries by locals with only a handful being recovered by the security forces till now.

It is obvious that the state and Central governments have chosen to override the problem, resorting to crisis management rather than finding a lasting solution. There is no roadmap to bring back normalcy in the region. The Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) is practically governing Manipur through the Unified Headquarters. Presently, the ground situation is such that the Chief

Minister and his cabinet colleagues are reportedly unable to move around even in Imphal city.

Further, the state authorities are not on the same page. The DGP has openly admitted to the inability of the local police to handle the situation and has sought Central forces to take over. On the other hand, Rajkumar Imo Singh, an MLA and the CM's son-in-law, has asked the MHA to remove Central forces as they have proved to be 'ineffective'. Incidentally, the CM has also made a representation to the Governor, demanding the control of the Unified Headquarters. There is a rift between the Assam Rifles and the police, with both often indulging in a blame game.

The current crisis is no longer a conflict between two communities but has turned into a serious national security issue. It is high time to avoid political posturing and put a comprehensive action plan in place to salvage the situation. The major reasons for the current mess are poor governance, political authoritarianism marked by a heavy-handed approach, polarised security forces, resurgence of militant outfits and heightened animosity between the belligerent communities. In addition, there is a strong perception among the locals that the Central Government is not serious about resolving the

conflict, but rather wants to keep it simmering.

To restore normalcy in Manipur, it is imperative that President's rule is imposed as people have lost faith in the state government, which is being seen as partisan. A new administrative structure needs to be put in place with a clear chain of command. The Unified Headquarters must be reconstituted. The Army needs to be given a free hand to undertake operations to disarm the militant groups and create a conducive environment for restoring peace. For this, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) will be required to be imposed in sensitive areas. Alongside, there is an urgent requirement for effective border management, given the turbulent conditions in the neighbourhood.

Above all, earnest efforts are needed to build trust between Meiteis and Kukis by involving civil society organisations. The ruling dispensation ought to shed its status-quo mindset and explore fresh alternatives. Manipur is on the edge, in a state of intense distress, deeply divided and bruised. It beckons the nation to take a call and resolve the long-pending conflict on priority, lest the situation deteriorate further, which would prove catastrophic.

President's rule should be imposed to bring the situation under control as people have lost faith in the state government.