

### ETHNIC VIOLENCE IN INDIA'S NORTH EASTERN STATE MANIPUR REMAINS UNHANDLED

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



Manipur, the northeastern state in India, has been experiencing serious ethnic clashes between the Meitei and Kuki groups since May 2023. The violent operations largely erupted over the grant of Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to the Meitei tribe, which the Kukis opposed. The move deepened long-standing rivalry over economic benefits and land ownership, which triggered unrest causing infrastructure losses and large number of casualties. According to recent reports, the clashes in the State resulted in over 260 casualties with around 1500 injured and 70,000 people displaced.<sup>1</sup> Prime Minister Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been criticized for its ineffective response and political insensitivity that have impeded any reconciliation efforts. The BJP government has failed to either take protective measures or any steps to de-escalate the tensions, resultantly extending the conflict with wider ramifications for social and economic stability. Following criticism for his government's inability to overcome the crisis, Manipur's Chief Minister Biren Singh resigned, following which the state assembly has been suspended since Feb 13. Recently a group of 10 MLAs met the Governor to discuss

<sup>1</sup> 'Two Years of Manipur Conflict: Thousands wait to go home', Times of India, May 04, 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/imphal/two-years-of-manipur-conflict-thousands-wait-to-go-home/articleshow/120842226.cms>

**the formation of a popular government in Manipur with the support of 44 MLAs, while the total strength of the state assembly stands at 60.<sup>2</sup>**

### **Delayed Government Actions**

The governments in the Centre and the State have faced severe criticism for the lackluster attitude towards resolving the conflict. The BJP government's response to the Manipur crisis has been inadequate and insufficient.<sup>3</sup> For several months, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said nothing about the escalating violence. On the 77<sup>th</sup> Independence Day of India, August 15, 2023, PM Modi briefly talked about the situation but the reference was largely ceremonial and lacked a specific action plan. He said *"In the past few weeks, during the period of violence in the North East, especially in Manipur, many people lost their lives, and the honor of mothers and daughters suffered a lot, but in the last few days, there are reports of peace. The nation is with Manipur. The people of Manipur should build on the peace that has been restored over the past few days. The path to a solution will be found through peace in Manipur."*<sup>4</sup> The BJP-led state government in Manipur is accused of an allegedly biased response throughout the crisis, supporting the Meitie community because of religious and political interests.<sup>5</sup> The law enforcement agencies have also been accused of not safeguarding citizens, with allegations surfacing that state arms are being utilized in attacks against the Meities community in Manipur.<sup>6</sup> The government did impose curfew and Internet bans to bring the situation under control. But the security personnel themselves are found involved in human rights violations, looting, and instances of sexual violence and assaults.<sup>7</sup> People in the state are not satisfied with PM Modi's response, as they believe he has been unable to bring peace to the state.

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2 G. Sampath, 'Is Manipur Ready for a "Popular Government" yet?', *The Hindu*, June 02, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/podcast/is-manipur-ready-for-a-popular-government-yet/article69648697.ece>.

3 "PM Manipur Visit: Congress Slams PM Modi's "hypocrisy" over Statehood Day Post", *The Times of India*, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/stubbornly-refused-to-visit-manipur-congress-slams-pm-modis-hypocrisy-over-statehood-day-post/articleshow/117414257.cms>.

4 "Country Is with Manipur, Situation Improving: PM Modi on 77th Independence Day", *India Today*, 15 August 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/independence-day-2023-pm-modi-manipur-situation-violence-2421272-2023-08-15>.

5 Zohran Baig & Muhammad Ahmad Khan, "Exploring the BJP's Role in the Manipur Conflict", *South Asian Voices*, 29 August 2023, <https://southasianvoices.org/exploring-the-bjps-role-in-the-manipur-conflict/>.

6 "India: Investigate Police Bias Alleged in Manipur Violence", *Human Rights Watch*, 30 May 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/05/30/india-investigate-police-bias-alleged-manipur-violence>.

7 'Manipur Violence: What Is Happening and Why', 20 July 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-66260730>.

## Government Failure & Presidential Rule

Under Article 355 of the Constitution, the Union is obligated "to protect every State against external aggression and internal disturbance and to ensure that the government of every State is carried on under the provisions of this Constitution".<sup>8</sup> The obligation for the Union to perform its duties and ensure that the governance is carried out in accordance with the Constitution is given in Article 356, which has the heading, "Provisions in case of failure of constitutional machinery in States."<sup>9</sup> With the BJP's failure in the state, President's Rule was imposed in Manipur after Chief Minister Biren Singh resigned following a meeting with the Central leadership in Delhi, which was unable to suggest an alternative name for the CM. The BJP's Northeast coordinator, Sambit Patra, held various meetings in Imphal to discuss the next Chief Minister. Some BJP leaders did emerge as potential replacements for Biren Singh, including Yumnam Khemchand Singh, Speaker Thockchom Satyabrata Singh, and Thongam Biswajit Singh.<sup>10</sup> The party tried to reach a consensus on the next Chief Minister and announce the name at the earliest to avoid President's Rule. The BJP has 37 MLAs in the 60-member Assembly, seven of whom are from the Kuki-Zo community who have not been participating in Assembly sessions since the start of the conflict in May 2023. The imposition of the President's Rule indicates the inability of the BJP government in its core functioning.

## Human Rights Violations in World's 'Largest Democracy'

The ongoing ethnic violence in Manipur has also drawn international attention, with concerns over India's inability to protect its minority communities. *"We are appalled by the reports and images of gender-based violence targeting hundreds of women and girls of all ages, and predominantly of the Kuki ethnic minority. The alleged violence includes gang rape, parading women naked in the street, severe beatings causing death, and burning them alive or dead,"* said UN experts.<sup>11</sup>

The U.S. State Department's annual human rights assessment found "significant" abuses in India's Manipur state, *"The outbreak of ethnic conflict between the Kuki and Meitei ethnic groups during the year in India's northeastern state of Manipur resulted in significant human rights abuses. Media*

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<sup>8</sup> 'Explained | President's Rule in Manipur: When and Why It's Imposed, How It Works', Deccan Herald, accessed 13 April 2025, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/manipur/explained-presidents-rule-in-manipur-when-and-why-its-imposed-how-it-works-3407468>.

<sup>9</sup> 'Explained | President's Rule in Manipur: When and Why It's Imposed, How It Works', Deccan Herald, accessed 13 April 2025, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/manipur/explained-presidents-rule-in-manipur-when-and-why-its-imposed-how-it-works-3407468>.

<sup>10</sup> 'As BJP Pushes for Consensus on next Manipur CM, Who Can Succeed Biren Singh?', The Indian Express, 11 February 2025, <https://indianexpress.com/article/political-pulse/manipur-president-rule-bjp-cm-consensus-9828647/>.

<sup>11</sup> "India: UN Experts Alarmed by Continuing Abuses in Manipur", OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/09/india-un-experts-alarmed-continuing-abuses-manipur>.

reported at least 175 persons were killed and more than 60,000 displaced between May 3 and November 15. Activists and journalists reported armed conflict, rapes, and assaults in addition to the destruction of homes, businesses, and places of worship.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Aakar Patel, Chair of Board at Amnesty International India, said: "The state and central governments' blatant failure to end abuses, protect people and hold suspected perpetrators to account in Manipur have left communities terrified and devastated. The authorities' 14-month long course of inaction and impunity must end immediately."<sup>13</sup> A report published in 2024, by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, highlighted the higher level violence and hate crimes against religious minorities in India such as hatred, property demolitions, and arbitrary killings, calling upon the government to prohibit hatred and discrimination against minorities in India.<sup>14</sup> Global media have reported on the conflict and draw attention to the accounts of human rights abuses, internet shutdowns, and large-scale displacement. The BJP's inaction as well as inability to deal effectively with the Manipur crisis is a manifestation of its general governance issues, especially its style of dealing with religious and ethnic minorities.

## Conclusion

Ethnic violence in Manipur is a clear manifestation of India's multi-dimensional socio-political problems and the limitations of the BJP model of governance to address internal issues. Government failure to act decisively, the appearance of bias, and shying away from serious dialogue have worsened the situation. To seek a path out of the current crisis, the Indian government will have to establish an independent investigation commission to review the violence and suggest policy remedies, and redress grievances from the Meitei and Kuki communities through inclusive policy initiatives. The government would need to retrieve stolen guns and strengthen security measures to get law and order back on track. Furthermore, the state must organize systematic peace negotiations among community leaders, civil society, and international monitors, promote balanced approach, and push back from the steps causing ethnic strife in Manipur. In the absence of these measures, the violence in Manipur would likely continue, eventually affecting public confidence in the ability of New Delhi to govern further aggravating state-center tensions.

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<sup>12</sup> Kanishka Singh, "US Rights Report on India Cites Abuses in Manipur, Harassment of Media and Minorities", *Reuters*, 22 April 2024, sec. India, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/us-rights-report-india-cites-abuses-manipur-harassment-media-minorities-2024-04-22/>.

<sup>13</sup> "Authorities "Missing-in-Action" in Manipur, India', Amnesty International", 16 July 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/india-authorities-missing-in-action-amid-ongoing-violence-and-impunity-in-manipur-state-new-testimonies/>.

<sup>14</sup> Sema Hasan, 'Increasing Abuses against Religious Minorities in India', *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*, October 2024, <file:///C:/Users/Le/Downloads/2024%20India%20Country%20Update.pdf>