

# The Case of Separate Administration for the Kuki/Zo People in Manipur: Historical, Political, and Human Rights Perspective

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## Abstract

The survival and dignity of the Kuki/Zo people in Manipur hinge on the urgent demand for separate administration. This paper outlines the historical marginalisation, systemic political exclusion, and ongoing human rights violations faced by the Kuki/Zo people, arguing that these conditions have rendered them a vulnerable minority on the brink of cultural and physical extinction. In light of international legal frameworks, such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and various case studies, the Kuki/Zo people's call for separate administration is not merely justified but necessary for their survival. The world must listen and act upon, for the future of an entire people depends on it.

**Keywords:** Kuki/Zo, Manipur, Separate Administration, Historical and Political Perspectives, Human Rights, Indigenous People's Rights.

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## Introduction

The political and ethnic landscape of Manipur in Northeast India has been defined by deep-seated conflicts rooted in both historical legacies and contemporary issues of governance, identity, and resource control. The state of Manipur, in India's ethnically diverse Northeast, is home to multiple ethnic groups, primarily the Meitei, Naga, and the Kuki/Zo people. The region as a whole and the state in particular has witnessed long-standing ethnic conflicts rooted in historical grievances, political exclusion, and territorial disputes; and central to these sufferings are the Kuki/Zo people of Manipur, whose calls for self-administration have largely been ignored, even as their lands and lives remain under constant threat.

The Kuki/Zo people, a transnational ethnic group with historical ties across India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, have long sought recognition of their unique identity and the right to govern their ancestral lands. However, the Indian state's post-colonial policies toward the region, particularly in Manipur, have been inadequate, to say the least and failed to address the aspirations of the group. Instead, they have resulted in a political and administrative setup that consolidates power in the hands of the majority Meitei population, leaving the hill tribes, including both the Naga and Kuki/Zo peoples, with marginal political representation and economic development.

Between the plight of the prominent ethnic groups in the state, the Kuki/Zo people have been central to the ongoing discussions on autonomy, self-governance, and the reconfiguration of administrative units, as they have always been victim to political foul play since way back from the time of the imperialist British, who exact their will through political agents and any

lord/Chief who dared defy their tenets were met with the fierce wrath of the Iron fist of the British Military might. For the Kuki/Zo people of Manipur, the dream of autonomy has been more than a political aspiration; it is a must for survival, looming pertinently ever more, given the recent violent ethnic cleansing they face that is systematically being orchestrated by the majority Meiteis with their Government in Imphal.

Nestled within the larger ethnic mosaic of Northeast India, the Kuki/Zo people have faced generations of marginalisation, ethnic violence, and systemic political exclusion. Each day without a separate/self-administration in its sincerest form for the Kuki/Zo people brings them closer to the complete erosion of their identity, land, and culture. Their demand for a separate administration has gained momentum in recent years due to continued marginalisation, systemic inequalities, and ethnic violence that has led to their sudden and violent exodus en masse from the Imphal valley, severely impacting their socio-economic and political standing in present-day Manipur.

This paper seeks to explore the urgency behind the Kuki/Zo people's demand for a separate administrative region, presenting an urgent case grounded in their history of resistance to the British, political disenfranchisement, and ongoing human rights abuses. It will do so by analysing the historical context of ethnic relations in Manipur, the impact of colonial and post-colonial policies on the Kuki/Zo people, and the contemporary political and economic challenges they face. The future of the Kuki/Zo people is not an abstract concern but a dire reality shaped by decades of suffering and systemic exclusion. Drawing upon international legal frameworks and examples from other indigenous communities, this paper offers a

pathway for the preservation of the Kuki/Zo people's rights, land, and cultural heritage. Examining these important factors, this paper will argue that the creation of a separate administrative unit for the Kuki/Zo people is not only justified but necessary to address their long-standing grievances and ensure their socio-political survival in the largest Democracy in the world.

### **Historical Context and Ethnic Composition of Manipur**

#### *The Ethnic Landscape of Manipur*

Manipur is a state characterised by its extraordinary multi-ethnic diversity, with a population composed of three dominant ethnic groups: the Meitei, the Nagas, and the Kuki/Zo people. These groups are distinguished not only by their unique cultural practices, religion, languages, and traditions but also by their geographical distributions within the state. The Meitei, who constitute the largest ethnic group in Manipur, predominantly reside in the fertile plains of the Imphal Valley, which is the political and economic heart and powerhouse of the state. The valley's resources, fertile land, and strategic position have historically afforded the Meitei population significant political power and influence over the whole state.

In contrast, the Nagas and the Kuki/Zo people inhabit the surrounding hilly regions, which are geographically isolated and less economically developed than the valley. These hill tribes have historically maintained a degree of autonomy due to the geographical isolation of their territories and their distinct cultural practices. However, this apolitical autonomy has been steadily eroded by the post-colonial state's policies, which have sought to integrate the hill tribes into a calculated centralised

administrative framework crafted to be dominated solely by the dominant valley's Meitei population.

The Kuki/Zo people, in particular, occupy the southern and western hilly regions of Manipur. These areas are less developed in terms of infrastructure and economic opportunities, which has further exacerbated the socio-political divide between the hill tribes and the Meiteis. The Kuki/Zo people are part of a larger transnational ethnic group, with historical ties to communities in Myanmar and Bangladesh. This transnational identity has made it more difficult for the Kuki/Zo people to achieve political unity within the Indian state, as their communities are divided by international borders and have often been sidelined in the broader political arrangement of the region.

#### *The Impact of Colonial and Post-Colonial Policies*

The roots of the Kuki/Zo people's political marginalisation can be traced back to the British colonial administration of Northeast India. During the colonial period, the British recognised the distinct identity of the hill tribes and implemented a policy of indirect rule in these areas. The Kuki/Zo people, along with other hill tribes, were administered separately from the valley-dwelling Meiteis, and their internal governance systems were largely left intact. This policy allowed the hill tribes to maintain a degree of quasi-autonomy and control over their own affairs, even as the British exerted control over the region's resources and strategic interests.

The British policy of separate administration for the hill tribes was largely driven by pragmatic considerations. The hilly regions were difficult to govern directly due to their rugged terrain and strong resistance from the local tribes to any external interference in their affairs. As a result, the British

adopted a hands-off approach, allowing the tribal chiefs to retain control over local governance in exchange for their co-operation in maintaining the established order and facilitating British economic exploitation and political interests in the region.

However, this system of separate administration began to unravel in the post-independence period. Following India's independence in 1947, the Indian state sought to integrate the diverse ethnic groups of Northeast India into a unified national framework. In the case of Manipur, this meant incorporating all hill tribes into the state's centralised political and administrative structure, which was dominated by the Meitei majority. The abolition of the colonial-era system of indirect rule and the imposition of a more centralised governance model led to the gradual erosion of the hill tribes' quasi-political autonomy and authority over their land.

For the Kuki/Zo people, this transition represented a significant loss of political power and control over their ancestral lands. The Indian state's policy of integration often failed to consider the unique socio-political structures of the hill tribes, leading to a sense of alienation and marginalisation among these communities. Over due course of time, the Kuki/Zo people became increasingly disillusioned with the Indian state's approach to governance in Manipur, as their political representation remained limited and their economic development lagged behind that of the Meitei-dominated valley.

#### *The Kuki Rebellion and Ethnic Struggles*

The discontentment among the Kuki/Zo people is not a recent phenomenon but has deep historical roots. One of the most significant events in the history of the

Kuki/Zo people's struggle for autonomy was the Kuki/Zo Rebellion of 1917–1919. This uprising was a response to British attempts to recruit Kuki/Zo men into the labour corps for World War I, which the Kuki/Zo leaders saw as an unacceptable infringement on their autonomy (Haokip, 2017). The rebellion, though ultimately unsuccessful, was a defining moment in the Kuki/Zo people's historical consciousness and their ongoing struggle against external domination.

After India's independence in 1947, the political landscape of the Northeast was restructured without proper consultation of all stakeholders, including the Kuki/Zo people, leading to their further disenfranchisement. The Manipur Merger Agreement of 1949, which integrated Manipur into the Indian Union, ignored the Kuki/Zo people's autonomy claims, leading to their subsequent political exclusion (Kipgen, 2013). The carving out of administrative regions, particularly with the creation of the state of Nagaland in 1963 and the later reorganisation of Manipur, led to further fragmentation of the Kuki/Zo population across international borders, diminishing their political voice.

Left behind during the political reorganisation of the North East region, the Kuki/Zo people felt left out, underrepresented and unprotected in the new political set-up, leading to friction between the Kuki/Zo and Naga communities who otherwise had always been close neighbours. The raising and subsequent formation of the NSCN IM, also known as the mother of all insurgent groups in North East India, during the latter part of the 1980s has brought imbalance in the power structure between the two ethnic tribes in the hill areas of Manipur. This ultimately led to a simmering friction between the two ethnic groups,

where villages of both ethnic groups existed adjacent to each other and where there were overlapping claims over ancestral lands.

The lack of timely intervention and unchecked growth in the strength of the NSCN-IM has led to the over-exaggeration and exercise of power over the Kuki/Zo people and led to an open Naga-Kuki conflict, which escalated in the 1990s. As digressed earlier, this conflict was rooted in overlapping territorial claims over the hill districts of Manipur, resulting in significant violence, displacement, and the entrenchment of ethnic divisions in the area with the Kukis suffering tremendous loss as they were unprepared and unorganized to meet the full force of an Insurgent backed by a country no less than China. The Kukis were slaughtered in thousands, till today observe 13 September every year as "Black Day" as the well-armed Naga Insurgents, particularly the NSCN-IM, unleashed an unabated violence over the unarmed and unorganised Kuki population.

The Naga-Kuki conflict also had a profound impact on the Kuki/Zo people's political aspirations and ushered in a political reawakening to the need for a separate administration. The Indian government's attempts to negotiate a settlement with the Naga insurgent groups, including the demand for a separate Naga administrative unit (Greater Nagalim), further alienated the Kuki/Zo people, who felt that their own necessity for survival in the form of a legitimate political demand for autonomy were being sidelined in favor of the Naga agenda. This sense of political marginalisation has continued to fuel the Kuki/Zo people's demand for a separate administrative region that would allow them to govern their own affairs and protect their lands and rights from encroachment and infringement, respectively.

### Political Marginalisation of the Kuki/Zo People

#### *Limited Political Representation and Power Disparities*

The political marginalisation of the Kuki/Zo people in Manipur is a reflection of the broader structural inequalities that exist within the state's governance framework. Despite constituting a significant portion of the population in the hill districts, the Kuki/Zo people have historically been underrepresented in the state assembly and other political institutions. This underrepresentation is a direct result of the intentionally structured Manipur state's electoral system, disproportionately favouring the valley-dwelling Meitei population. There is also the impractical and imbalance distribution of the state budget/funds where the larger area of the tribals which require more development of geographically isolated/remote areas as compared to the conveniently reachable valley districts being accorded disproportionately larger sums of funds while tribals have to make do with the meagre leftovers of the developmental funds of the Meitei dominated few valley districts.

Manipur's legislative assembly is composed of 60 seats, 40 of which are allocated to the valley constituencies, where the Meiteis form the majority. The remaining 20 seats are reserved for the hill districts, which are home to the Naga and Kuki/Zo tribes. This unequal distribution of seats means that the hill tribes, despite their significant population, have little influence over the state's political decisions. The Meitei-dominated assembly has consistently sidelined the demands of the hill tribes, particularly those related to land rights, development, and political autonomy. Besides, the constant effort to pry into the land

holdings of the tribals by the dominant Meiteis is an ongoing concerted effort of the 40 Meitei MLAs, headed by the Chief Minister himself, in that campaign.

This political imbalance is further exacerbated by the fact that the Meiteis hold a dominant position in the state's politics, bureaucracy and security apparatus. The concentration of political and economic power in the hands of the Meiteis has led to a situation where the hill tribes, including the Kuki/Zo people, are often excluded from key decision-making processes. Even constitutional bodies such as the Hill Areas Committee (HAC) under the guardianship of the Governor himself is rendered powerless like a toothless tiger, having bestowed tremendous authority only on paper and practically lacking any exercisable power due to lack of crucial financial autonomy, the state cabinet inversely resides over tribal matters than the empowered HAC itself. As a result, the Kuki/Zo people have little control over the allocation of resources and the implementation of development projects in their own territories.

The lack of political representation for the Kuki/Zo people has also manifested in the state's approach to land governance. The hill districts of Manipur are governed by a system of customary land tenure, which is distinct from the land laws that apply to the valley. However, the state government has repeatedly attempted to extend its control over the hill districts by imposing valley-based land laws, which are seen as a direct threat and infringement of tribal land and rights in the hill districts.

### *Land and Resource Conflicts*

The issue of land and resource conflicts lies at the core of the tensions between the Kuki/Zo people and the state government of Manipur. The Kuki/Zo people, unlike other hill tribes in the region, have traditionally followed the system of land ownership that is unique to them, in which the land/village belongs to the Chief who reigns supreme on matters relating to governance and administration of the village. In essence, the Chief is the lord of the land, and the community rents land with a meagre payment of a few bushels of their yearly produce. Every field to be cultivated by each household is chosen through a lottery system to ensure fairness in allocation, and the whole process is presided over by the Village authority, a committee formed by Village elders to look after every affair of the village with the Chief at its head. This system of land tenure is deeply intertwined with their cultural and social identity, as it not only determines fair and equal access to resources but also preserves the hierarchical and social structures within the tribe.

The hill districts, where the Kuki/Zo people are concentrated, are rich in natural resources, including forests, minerals, and arable land. Historically, these areas were largely left untouched by the valley-based Meitei population, due to the rugged terrain and the traditional authority of tribal chiefs over the land. However, in recent decades, the state's efforts to extend centralized governance to the hill areas have been accompanied by multiple attempts to alter land ownership patterns through various Bills passed by the state cabinet, which in itself is an abuse and over empowerment of the cabinet that enjoyed excessive power over the state assembly and eventually the people. The state government, dominated by the Meiteis, has repeatedly sought to bring the hill districts

under the same land laws that govern the valley, which would undermine the customary system of land ownership. These moves have been seen as an attempt to facilitate greater exploitation of the hill districts' resources for the benefit of the valley, without adequate consultation or consent from the hill tribes. For the Kuki/Zo people, such policies represent not just an economic threat but also an existential one, as they jeopardise their ability to maintain control over their ancestral lands and, by extension, their cultural and social autonomy, however insignificant it may be.

The Government's land acquisition efforts are often framed in the language of "development" and "modernisation," with the stated goal of integrating the hill areas into the broader economy of the state. However, the Kuki/Zo people view these initiatives with suspicion, as they have historically been excluded from the economic benefits of such development projects. For instance, infrastructure projects like industrial estates, medical colleges, all important offices headquarters, sports facilities, transportation hubs etc. are concentrated in the congested valley districts, even the roads connecting all districts of the state are designed to be intercepted and transit in Imphal valley while the hill districts remain underdeveloped and underserved in terms of basic amenities like healthcare, education, and transportation.

This unequal distribution of development resources has only deepened the sense of marginalisation among the Kuki/Zo people. The imposition of valley-based land laws would further exacerbate this inequality by allowing outside investors and state actors to encroach on the hill tribes' lands, potentially leading to displacement and loss of livelihoods. The fear of land alienation is not unfounded, as similar processes have

occurred in other parts of India, where tribal communities have been dispossessed of their lands in the name of development, often without adequate compensation or rehabilitation.

In response to these threats, the Kuki/Zo people have mobilised to protect their land rights. Local resistance movements, often led by tribal chiefs and community leaders, have emerged to challenge the state's land policies. These movements argue that the extension of valley-based land laws to the hill districts would violate the Kuki/Zo people's rights under the Indian Constitution, as well as international agreements like the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which recognizes the right of indigenous communities to maintain control over their lands and resources.

In addition to legal and political mobilisation, there has been a resurgence of traditional practices of land management and resource conservation among the Kuki/Zo people. By reaffirming their connection to the land and their customary systems of governance, the Kuki/Zo people are seeking to assert their sovereignty in the face of external pressures. This has led to a renewed emphasis on collective land management, sustainable agricultural practices, and the preservation of forests and rivers that are central to their way of life.

The land conflict is not just an economic or legal issue, but a deeply political one. It touches on questions of identity, belonging, and self-determination as a tribal lives off his land and the land flourishes under its care; there has always been a symbiotic relationship between a tribe and the land, and neither can seem to exist in harmony without the other. For the Kuki/Zo people, the struggle to retain control over their land is inseparable from their broader demand for political autonomy and separate administration. Without the

power to govern their own territories, they fear that they will continue to be marginalised in the state's development agenda, with their lands and resources exploited for the benefit of others.

### *The Naga-Kuki Conflict and its Aftermath*

The ethnic conflict between the Naga and Kuki communities is another major factor that has shaped the contemporary political landscape in Manipur and influenced the Kuki/Zo people's demand for separate administration. The conflict, which reached its peak in the early 1990s, has its roots in long-standing territorial disputes and overlapping claims and dissidence between the two groups, as well as broader political aspirations for autonomy.

Historically, both the Nagas and the Kukis have claimed portions of the hill districts as part of their ancestral homeland. These overlapping claims have led to frequent tensions, particularly in areas where the two communities live in close proximity. The conflict has been further aggravated by the rise of ethnic-based insurgent groups first initiated by the Nagas during and after independence, which have sought to carve out separate political entities for their respective communities ranging from outright sovereignty to a little more autonomy than existing state cabinet controlled autonomous district councils that lack any form of financial power.

The Naga insurgent movement, which picked up steam during the 1950s, initially sought independence from India but later shifted its demand to greater autonomy within the Indian state. The demand for a "Greater Nagalim"—a contiguous territory that would include all Naga-inhabited areas across several Northeastern states, including parts of Manipur—has been a central

goal of the Naga movement. However, this demand has been met with resistance not only from the Kuki/Zo people but also from all the people residing all over the North Eastern states, whose proven fear that their own territories could be subsumed under renewed and constitutionally recognised Naga control.

The tension between the two groups escalated into open conflict in the 1990s, when violence broke out between the Naga outfit NSCN IM and the Kuki people. The conflict led to the displacement of thousands of Kukis, destruction of a number of villages, and a deepening ethnic division in the region, with the Kukis falling victim on a much larger scale as compared to the Nagas fighting under the banner of the well-organised NSCN IM. The Indian government's handling of the conflict, which many Kukis perceive as biased toward the Nagas, further alienated the Kuki/Zo community.

One of the key flashpoints in the conflict was the Indian government's peace negotiations with the Naga insurgent groups, particularly the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN IM). The Kuki/Zo people have long suspected that the Indian government is more willing to accommodate the Naga demand for autonomy, while ignoring the Kuki/Zo people's own aspirations for self-governance. This perception has only heightened the Kuki/Zo people's sense of political marginalisation and fueled their demand for separate administration.

The legacy of the Naga-Kuki conflict continues to shape the politics of the region today, while the violence has largely subsided, the underlying tensions remain unresolved. The territorial claims of the two groups continue to overlap, and there is little trust between the two communities. In this context, the

Kuki/Zo people see the creation of a separate administrative unit as a way to protect their interests and prevent further encroachment on their lands. Moreover, the conflict has had a profound impact on the Kuki/Zo people's political mobilisation. In the wake of the violence, several Kuki insurgent groups emerged, demanding either separate statehood or greater autonomy for the Kuki-inhabited areas of Manipur. While most of these groups have since entered into ceasefire and tripartite agreements under the aegis of the Suspension of Operations (SoO) with the state of Manipur and the Indian government, the political question of Kuki/Zo autonomy and to what extent remains to be seen.

The Kuki/Zo people's demand for separate administration is, in part, a response to the perceived failure of the Indian state to address the root causes of the Naga-Kuki conflict. They argue that only by having control over their own political and administrative institutions can they ensure that their lands, resources, and cultural identity are protected. For the Kuki/Zo people, the conflict with the Nagas is not just about territory but also about their right to self-determination and their place within the Union of India

### **The Case for Separate Administration**

#### ***Legal and Constitutional Frameworks for Autonomy***

The demand for a separate administration for the Kuki/Zo people is grounded in both legal and constitutional precedents within the Indian system. India's Constitution recognises the distinct status of tribal communities, particularly in the Northeastern region, where multiple autonomous administrative arrangements have been established to accommodate the unique cultural, social, and political needs of indigenous groups.

One of the key constitutional provisions relevant to the Kuki/Zo people's demand for autonomy is the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The Sixth Schedule, which applies to certain tribal areas in the Northeastern states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram, allows for the creation of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs). These councils have significant legislative, executive, and judicial powers over matters such as land ownership, resource management, and cultural practices.

While Manipur's hill districts are governed by Autonomous District Councils, the powers and resources allocated to these councils are far more limited than those provided under the Sixth Schedule. The Kuki/Zo people argue that the existing ADCs in Manipur do not provide them with sufficient autonomy to manage their own affairs. They contend that the ADCs lack the financial and administrative capacity to implement development projects or address local grievances effectively.

The Kuki/Zo people's demand for separate administration, therefore, goes beyond the mere extension of the ADCs' powers. They seek a more robust form of political autonomy that would allow them to govern their own territories, control their resources, and protect their cultural identity. This could take the form of a separate state within the Indian Union, or an autonomous region with greater powers than those currently granted under the Sixth Schedule or in the form of a Union Territory (UT) with legislative powers which slightly differs from the Union territory of Delhi where power resides mostly to the Lieutenant Governor and not the Civil Government. .

### *International Human Rights Perspectives*

The demand for self-determination by the Kuki/Zo people is also supported by international human rights frameworks that recognise the rights of indigenous communities to autonomy and control over their lands and resources. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007, is one of the most comprehensive international instruments that affirm the rights of indigenous peoples, including the right to self-determination. Article 3 of the UNDRIP explicitly states that indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination, by virtue of which they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development.

For the Kuki/Zo people, the demand for separate administration aligns with this international standard, as they seek to determine their own political and administrative structure within the framework of the Indian Union. The Indian government, as a signatory to UNDRIP, is obliged to respect the principles enshrined in the declaration, particularly the rights of indigenous peoples to control their lands, territories, and resources.

Article 26 of the UNDRIP further emphasises that indigenous peoples have the right to their lands, territories, and resources, which they have traditionally owned, occupied, or otherwise used or acquired. It also mandates that the states it should give legal recognition and protection to these lands, territories, and resources. The failure of the Indian government to fully recognise and protect the land rights of the Kuki/Zo people has been a significant driver of their demand for autonomy.

Moreover, Article 19 of the UNDRIP stipulates that states must consult and co-operate in good faith with indigenous peoples before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect them. The Kuki/Zo people argue that the Indian government and the state of Manipur have often failed to meaningfully consult with them on issues that affect their land, resources, and political rights. For instance, the imposition of valley-based land laws on the hill districts has been done without adequate consultation or the consent of the Kuki/Zo people, in violation of this international norm.

In addition to UNDRIP, other international human rights instruments also support the Kuki/Zo people's case for autonomy. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which India is a party, recognises the right of peoples to self-determination in its Article 1. The covenant also guarantees the protection of minority rights, including the right to enjoy their own culture, profess and practice their own religion, and use their own language. The Kuki/Zo people's demand for separate administration can be seen as a way to safeguard these rights in a context where they feel politically and culturally marginalised.

Human rights organisations and advocacy groups have increasingly highlighted the plight of the Kuki/Zo people, urging the Indian government to recognise their legitimate aspirations for self-governance. Reports by international organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have documented the discrimination, human rights abuses, and neglect faced by the Kuki/Zo and other tribal communities in Manipur. These reports call for greater protection of indigenous land rights, meaningful political representation, and the creation of

mechanisms for self-governance in line with international human rights standards.

The Kuki/Zo people's demand for separate administration is thus framed not only as a local political issue but also as a matter of international human rights. By asserting their right to self-determination, the Kuki/Zo people are seeking to align their struggle with global movements for Indigenous Rights and Autonomy. The recognition of these rights by the Indian Government would not only address the Kuki/Zo people's immediate grievances but also enhance India's standing as a country that respects International Human Rights norms.

### **Socio-Economic Justifications for Separate Administration**

Beyond the legal and political dimensions, the demand for separate administration for the Kuki/Zo people is also driven by socio-economic factors. The Kuki/Zo-inhabited areas in the hill districts of Manipur remain some of the most underdeveloped and neglected regions in the state. Despite being rich in natural resources, these areas suffer from a lack of infrastructure, basic services and amenities, and economic opportunities, leading to widespread poverty, neglect and underdevelopment.

The disparity between the valley and hill regions of Manipur is stark. While the Imphal Valley, where the Meitei population is concentrated, enjoys better access to roads, healthcare, education, and other essential services, the hill districts remain largely underdeveloped. This inequality has been aggravated by the state's political and economic structure, which disproportionately favours the valley regions in terms of resource allocation, political power in the form of

disproportionate representation and many fewer development projects.

The Kuki/Zo people argue that the state's neglect of their territories is a direct consequence of their political marginalisation. Without adequate representation in the state assembly and other decision-making bodies, the Kuki/Zo people have little influence over how development resources are distributed. As a result, their communities continue to face poor living conditions, with limited access to clean water, electricity, healthcare, and education.

The demand for separate administration is thus seen as a way to address these socio-economic disparities by allowing the Kuki/Zo people to take control of their own development agenda. With greater political autonomy, the Kuki/Zo people would be able to prioritise on their own the needs of their communities, allocate resources more equitably, and implement development projects tailored to their specific cultural, traditional and geographical context.

For example, the creation of a separate administrative region would allow the Kuki/Zo people to design and implement policies aimed at improving infrastructure in the hill districts, which could include building roads and bridges to connect remote villages, improving access to healthcare by establishing clinics and hospitals, and expanding educational opportunities by constructing schools and colleges. These initiatives would not only improve the quality of life for the Kuki/Zo people but also reduce the economic dependence of the hill districts on the valley.

In addition to infrastructure development, separate administration would enable the Kuki/Zo people to develop their own economic strategies based on the sustainable use of their natural resources. The hill

districts, being rich in forests, minerals, and agricultural land, have not witnessed to date these resources being utilised or exploited in ways that would benefit the local population. With greater control over their own resources, the Kuki/Zo people could pursue economic activities that are environmentally sustainable and culturally appropriate, such as community-based forest management, agroforestry, and eco-tourism.

Moreover, separate administration would allow the Kuki/Zo people to address the issue of unemployment, which is a major problem in the hill districts. Many young people in Kuki/Zo communities are forced to migrate to other parts of India in search of work due to the lack of economic opportunities in their home regions. By creating an autonomous region with its own economic policies and development programs, the Kuki/Zo people could generate jobs in sectors such as agriculture, small-scale industry, and tourism, reducing the need for out-migration and contributing to the overall development of the region.

### **Pathways to Achieving Separate Administration**

#### *Legal and Political Pathways*

The demand for separate administration for the Kuki/Zo people can be pursued through various legal and political mechanisms within the framework of the Indian Constitution. One potential pathway is the creation of a new state within the Indian Union, similar to the creation of other Northeastern states such as Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. The Indian Constitution allows for the reorganisation of states under Article 3, which grants Parliament the power to form new states, alter the boundaries of existing states, or create union territories.

The creation of a separate state for the Kuki/Zo people would require political consensus at both the state and national levels. It would also necessitate negotiations with other ethnic groups in Manipur, particularly the Nagas and Meiteis, to ensure that their interests are taken into consideration. While the process of statehood would be complex and politically sensitive, it is not without precedent. The formation of new states in India has historically been driven by demands for greater autonomy, cultural recognition, and the equitable distribution of resources, all of which are central to the Kuki/Zo people's case for separate administration.

Another potential pathway is the granting of enhanced autonomy to the hill districts under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. As mentioned earlier, the Sixth Schedule in its sincerest form provides for the creation of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) with adequate legislative, executive, and judicial powers. While Manipur's hill districts are already governed by ADCs, these councils currently lack the genuine power that lies in the form of financial and administrative capacity to effectively govern the region.

The extension of Sixth Schedule provisions to Manipur's hill districts without any local adjustments and amendments would give the Kuki/Zo people greater control over their land, resources, and cultural practices. It would also provide a framework for local governance that is more responsive to the needs and aspirations of the hill tribes. However, this would require amendments to the Indian Constitution and political will at both the State and National levels, which would be difficult but not totally impossible given the ongoing ethnic cleansing against the Kuki/Zo people by the dominant Meiteis.

In addition to these constitutional mechanisms, the Kuki/Zo people could pursue political negotiations with the Indian government and other stakeholders in Manipur. The ongoing peace process with Naga insurgent groups provides a potential model for such negotiations. By engaging in dialogue with the Indian state, the Kuki/Zo people could seek to address their grievances and negotiate a political settlement that guarantees greater autonomy while maintaining the territorial integrity of Manipur if they so choose to.

#### *Role of Civil Society and International Advocacy*

The role of civil society in supporting the Kuki/Zo people's demand for separate administration cannot be understated. Local advocacy groups, tribal organisations, and human rights activists have been at the forefront of raising awareness about the Kuki/Zo people's plight and mobilising support for their cause. These groups have played a critical role in documenting human rights violations, organising protests, and lobbying the government for political and legal reforms.

International advocacy is also an important component of the Kuki/Zo people's struggle for autonomy. By building alliances with global Indigenous Rights Organisations, the Kuki/Zo people can highlight their case to the attention of the international community. This can help to exert pressure on the Indian government to comply with international human rights standards and engage in meaningful dialogue with the Kuki/Zo people.

Organizations such as the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Amnesty International and local advocacy efforts, through mentioned forums can provide a platform for the Kuki/Zo people to share their concerns globally, making it an International

issue rather than a mere inconvenience in local governance as portrayed time and again by the State Government. These bodies are adequately equipped to bring indigenous struggles to the attention of International Human Rights Institutions, applying pressure on the right spots in the Indian Government, insisting that it honour its commitments under International Law(s), such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). At the same time, civil society organisations within India, particularly those based in the Northeastern region, can amplify the Kuki/Zo cause at the national level. They can organise fact-finding missions, publish reports on land disputes, resource exploitation, and the cultural marginalisation of the Kuki/Zo people, and mobilise support from other marginalised communities in India. More importantly, these efforts can challenge the dominant narratives in Manipur and the rest of India, which often portray the demand for separate administration as secessionist, anti-national or a mere inconvenience in local Governance.

An essential role of civil society is to nurture the critical practice of dialogue between the Kuki/Zo people and other ethnic groups, especially the Nagas and Meiteis, to avoid ethnic divisions escalating into violence. Grassroots initiatives that promote inter-community dialogue, peacebuilding, and reconciliation are essential in addressing the long-standing tensions and in preventing further ethnic conflict in Manipur. By facilitating constructive dialogue, civil society organisations can work towards a political settlement that addresses the aspirations of the Kuki/Zo people while ensuring that the others are not miffed in the process, while ensuring peace and stability in the region. Moreover, these advocacy efforts are crucial in influencing policy at both the

State and National levels. Activism and lobbying can bring attention to the region's socio-economic disparities and highlight the necessity for Self-Governance structures that are better suited to the unique needs of the Kuki/Zo people. International advocacy, in particular, can also open up avenues for foreign diplomatic engagement, where pressure from Human Rights Organisations may compel the Indian Government to consider necessary reforms to usher in development and devolve power to the grassroots.

At the regional level, positive dialogues, interactions and co-operations among tribal groups across the Northeast region—through mechanisms like the North East Students' Organization (NESO) or other frontal tribal councils/organizations such as the United Naga Council (UNC), Kuki Innpi, Zomi Council (ZC), Hmar Innpu (HI) etc.—can strengthen the political demands for autonomy. Such regional cooperation adds weight to the Kuki/Zo people's claims, acts as a measure from gauging any potential hostile situation between two neighboring communities with similar claim over stretches of lands and enabling them to unite with other Indigenous tribal communities with similar aspirations in a common cause for greater recognition of their rights and autonomy.

#### ***Obstacles and Challenges to Achieving Separate Administration***

Despite the compelling case for separate administration, several significant challenges lie in the path of realising this goal. One of the primary obstacles is the complex, volatile and highly charged ethnic landscape of Manipur, which involves multiple competing claims for territory and political authority. The demand for a separate administration for the Kuki/Zo people inevitably raises concerns among the

Meitei and Naga communities, both of which have their own aspirations for autonomy and control over land and resources. Achieving a political solution that satisfies all of these groups will require delicate negotiation and a willingness on all sides to open to compromise for the greater good.

For the Meitei population in the Imphal Valley, the creation of a separate administration for the Kuki/Zo people is viewed as a threat to the territorial integrity of Manipur. Many Meitei political leaders have expressed opposition to any division of the state, fearing that it could lead to further fragmentation and weaken the political power of the valley-based population, while it also serves as a convenient political agenda for election and re-election for an ace and aspiring Meitei politician. The Meiteis, as the dominant group in Manipur's political system with the highest number of electorates, also use their influence to sway political parties, thereby blocking any potential proposal for separate administration in the state assembly or in political negotiations with the Central Government.

Similarly, the Naga community in Manipur also views the Kuki/Zo demand for separate administration with suspicion due to the existence of overlapping territorial claims, as well as the potential to undermine their own demand for autonomy. The Nagas have long sought the creation of a "Greater Nagalim," a proposed Naga homeland that would encompass Naga-inhabited areas of Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and Assam. Any move to create a separate administration for the Kuki/Zo people is being viewed as a threat to this goal, particularly in the mentioned areas where Kuki and Naga territorial claims overlap. This could lead to a serious implication of renewed tensions between the two communities and complicate efforts

in the search for an inclusive and lasting political solution. Another significant challenge is the Indian Government's reluctance to grant further autonomy to ethnic groups in the Northeast. While the Indian Constitution provides mechanisms for the creation of new states and autonomous regions, the central government has historically been cautious about encouraging separatist movements or granting political concessions that could be perceived as weakening the unity and authority of the Indian state. The Indian government's experience with insurgent movements in the Northeast, as well as in other parts of the country like Kashmir and Punjab, has made it wary of demands for autonomy that could potentially lead to further fragmentation or secession.

Moreover, the Indian Government may be hesitant to grant autonomy to the Kuki/Zo people due to concerns about setting a precedence and commencing a domino effect for other ethnic groups in the region, in particular and the whole country in general. The Northeast is home to a wide array of tribal communities, many of whom have their own grievances and aspirations for greater autonomy. Granting separate administration to the Kuki/Zo people could embolden other groups to make similar demands, potentially leading to a proliferation of autonomous regions or new states in the country. The central government may therefore prefer to maintain the status quo rather than risk further complicating an already complex and volatile political landscape.

The lack of political unity among the Kuki/Zo people themselves may also pose a challenge to achieving separate administration. While there is broad consensus within the community on the need for greater autonomy, there are differences of opinion on what form this autonomy should take. Some factions

within the Kuki/Zo community advocate for full statehood, while others prefer the creation of an autonomous district councils under the Sixth Schedule or the BTC model of state within state, whereas some quarters voice a demand to be included in the list of the Union Territory to be bestowed with special legislative powers. There are also divisions among different Kuki/Zo tribes and clans, which could hinder efforts to present a united front in negotiations with the Indian government.

In addition to political challenges, there are practical obstacles to the creation of a separate administrative region for the Kuki/Zo people. The hill districts of Manipur, where the Kuki/Zo people are concentrated, are geographically remote and underdeveloped. Establishing a viable autonomous region would require significant investment in infrastructure, governance institutions, and economic development. Without adequate resources and support from the central government, the Kuki/Zo people may struggle to build a functioning autonomous region that can provide for the needs of its population.

### Case Studies

#### 1. The Anglo-Kuki War (1917-1919) and Marginalisation of the Kuki/Zo thereafter

The Anglo-Kuki War is a critical moment in Kuki/Zo history, reflecting their resistance to British domination and attempts to preserve their territorial integrity. It is an often-overlooked yet significant episode that underscores the long-standing fight for autonomy. The war, which resulted in the death of thousands of Kuki/Zo fighters and civilians, reveals a deep-seated desire for self-administration (Haokip, 2017).

The war ended in British victory, and the subsequent punitive actions by the colonial government included the confiscation of lands and forced labour, further entrenching the Kuki/Zo people's marginalisation.

#### ***Historical Context: Marginalisation of the Kuki/Zo People***

The Kuki/Zo people have faced systematic marginalisation since the British colonial era. Their struggle for self-determination can be traced back to the Anglo-Kuki War (1917-1919), during which the Kuki/Zo people resisted British efforts to enlist them in World War I and fought for the protection of their lands (Haokip, 2017). Unlike other anti-colonial movements, the Kuki/Zo people's resistance was primarily about protecting their autonomy, cultural identity, and land. Despite their defeat, the Anglo-Kuki War became a symbol of resilience and pride for the Kuki/Zo community, shaping their continued demands for self-determination.

#### ***Post-Independence Marginalisation***

After India's independence in 1947, the political landscape of the Northeast was restructured without proper consultation of the Kuki/Zo people, leading to their further disenfranchisement. The Manipur Merger Agreement of 1949, which integrated Manipur into the Indian Union, ignored the Kuki/Zo people's autonomy claims, leading to their subsequent political exclusion (Kipgen, 2013). The carving out of administrative regions, particularly with the creation of the Nagaland state in 1963 and the later reorganisation of Manipur, led to further fragmentation of the Kuki/Zo population across international borders, diminishing their political voice.

#### ***Political Dimension: Disenfranchisement and Exclusion***

The political landscape in post-independence Manipur has continued to be unfavourable to the Kuki/Zo people. Despite being a significant ethnic group, the Kuki/Zo people have consistently been sidelined in state politics, both in the Manipur Legislative Assembly and in local governance structures. Political power has remained concentrated in the hands of the dominant Meitei and Naga groups, leaving little room for Kuki/Zo representation (Rajkumar, 2015). This political disenfranchisement has exacerbated ethnic tensions, as seen in multiple violent clashes over land and political rights.

The political dynamics in Manipur are further complicated by the inter-ethnic competition for resources and land. The Scheduled Tribes (ST) status granted to the Kuki/Zo people has not translated into meaningful political gains. Instead, ST status has often served as a tokenistic gesture, doing little to alleviate the deeper structural issues, such as unequal access to resources and political power (Kipgen, 2015). The Kuki/Zo people's attempts to gain greater political autonomy through initiatives like the Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and United People's Front (UPF) have largely been stifled by both the state and central governments.

#### ***Resistance to Autonomy***

Efforts to negotiate political solutions through dialogue have consistently been met with resistance. For instance, in 2009, the Kuki State Demand Committee (KSDC) called for the creation of a separate state for the Kuki/Zo people within the Indian Union. However, this demand was rejected by both the

state government and central authorities, reflecting the unwillingness to address the legitimate concerns of the Kuki/Zo people (Haokip, 2017). This ongoing refusal to grant the Kuki/Zo people political autonomy leaves them vulnerable to violence and displacement.

## 2. The Churachandpur Uprising (2015)

The 2015 Churachandpur uprising provides a stark example of the political disenfranchisement faced by the Kuki/Zo people. In response to the passage of three controversial land reform bills in the Manipur Legislative Assembly, which were perceived as threats to Kuki/Zo land rights, protests erupted across the Kuki/Zo-dominated districts. The bills were seen as attempts by the Meitei-dominated legislature to seize tribal lands, fueling unrest that left nine Kuki/Zo people dead (Kipgen, 2015). The protests were not just about land; they were a manifestation of the deeper frustration felt by the Kuki/Zo people regarding their lack of political voice in the state.

## 3. Human Rights Violations: The Case for Separate Administration

The Kuki/Zo people have experienced a pattern of human rights abuses, ranging from systemic discrimination to outright violence and displacement. These abuses have been enabled by the political marginalisation of the Kuki/Zo people and the failure of the Manipur state government to protect their rights. Despite the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which guarantees the rights of indigenous peoples to self-determination, the Kuki/Zo people continue to face violations of their basic rights (United Nations, 2007).

## *Forced Displacement and Land Grabs*

One of the most egregious human rights violations faced by the Kuki/Zo people is the forced displacement from their ancestral lands. Encroachment by both the Meitei and Naga communities has significantly reduced the land available to the Kuki/Zo people. The Manipur Land Reform Act (1960), which was supposed to regulate land ownership and protect tribal land rights, has instead been used as a tool for land grabs by dominant ethnic groups (Rajkumar, 2015).

## 4. The Kuki-Naga Conflict (1992-1997)

The Kuki-Naga conflict of the 1990s was a bloody episode that resulted in the displacement of thousands of Kuki/Zo people. Tensions between the two communities over land claims and political power erupted into violent clashes, leading to the destruction of hundreds of Kuki/Zo villages and the displacement of over 100,000 people (Kipgen, 2013). The conflict was marked by massacres, forced evictions, and targeted ethnic violence. To date, many displaced Kuki/Zo people remain in makeshift camps, unable to return to their ancestral lands.

## *Ethnic Violence and Security Concerns*

Ethnic violence against the Kuki/Zo people has persisted, despite claims of peace-building initiatives by the state. In the absence of a separate administration, the Kuki/Zo people are forced to rely on state security forces that have often been complicit in or indifferent to the violence. For example, during the 2015 Churachandpur riots, reports emerged of police inaction, with some witnesses accusing state security forces of siding with Meitei groups in the violence (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

## 5. Human Rights Watch Report (2021)

In its 2021 report, Human Rights Watch documented the ongoing ethnic violence in Manipur and the failure of the state to protect minority groups, including the Kuki/Zo people. The report highlighted multiple instances where the Kuki/Zo community was targeted for attacks, and the state's response was either inadequate or outright negligent. This failure to ensure the safety of the Kuki/Zo people underscores the need for separate administration (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

## 6. The International Legal Framework: UNDRIP and Indigenous Rights

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) provides a robust legal framework for understanding the Kuki/Zo people's claims to separate administration. Articles 3 and 4 of UNDRIP explicitly recognise the right of indigenous peoples to self-determination and autonomy in matters concerning their internal affairs (United Nations, 2007). These rights include control over their land, resources, and governance structures, which the Kuki/Zo people have long been denied in the context of Manipur. UNDRIP's provisions apply directly to the situation of the Kuki/Zo people, as they align with their demands for separate administration and self-governance.

### a. Right to Self-Determination

Article 3 of UNDRIP states that "Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right, they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development" (United Nations, 2007). For the Kuki/Zo people, this principle underlines their right to

establish a separate administrative region within India, where they can govern themselves and protect their cultural identity and resources. This call for autonomy is not a demand for secession but rather for a recognition of their distinctiveness within the Indian Union, similar to arrangements made for other indigenous communities globally, such as the Inuit in Nunavut, Canada (Smith, 2010).

### b. Rights to Land, Territory, and Resources

Article 26 of UNDRIP further affirms that "Indigenous peoples have the right to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired" (United Nations, 2007). In the context of Manipur, the Kuki/Zo people's ancestral lands have been gradually encroached upon, not just by state policies but also by competing ethnic groups. The political exclusion of the Kuki/Zo people has made them vulnerable to losing their traditional lands, a violation of their internationally recognised rights. A separate administration could provide the legal and political framework necessary to protect these lands from further encroachment.

## 7. Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR)

The Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) in Assam provides a strong precedent for the kind of arrangement the Kuki/Zo people are seeking. The BTR was created after years of violent struggle by the Bodo people, who demanded recognition of their cultural and political rights within Assam. The Bodo Accord of 2003 granted the Bodo people limited autonomy over specific districts, allowing them to manage their own affairs while remaining part of the Indian Union (Sharma, 2013). Although the Bodo Accord has not

resolved all tensions, it has provided a framework for self-governance that has reduced ethnic violence and empowered the Bodo people politically. A similar arrangement for the Kuki/Zo people could lead to stability and long-term peace in Manipur.

#### ***Economic and Social Development***

Separate administration would not only enhance political rights but also promote economic and social development. The Kuki/Zo people have long suffered from underdevelopment, in part due to their marginalisation in state politics. By having their own administrative region, they would be able to tailor development policies to their specific needs, including the preservation of their traditional agricultural practices, the promotion of education, and the development of infrastructure. This would allow the Kuki/Zo people to participate more fully in the Indian economy, while also ensuring that development projects are aligned with their cultural values and needs (Kipgen, 2015).

#### ***8. The Bodo Accord (Assam)***

The Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) in Assam provides a strong precedent for the kind of arrangement the Kuki/Zo people are seeking, the two

groups of communities shares several parallels in terms of their demand for political autonomy and cultural preservation. The Bodos, a large tribal group, have long sought autonomy to protect their identity and resources, which led to violent insurgencies in the late 20th century, demanding recognition of their cultural and political rights within Assam. The Indian government responded by signing the Bodo Accord in 2003, which led to the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR). The Bodo Accord of 2003 granted the Bodo people limited autonomy over specific districts, allowing them to manage their own affairs while remaining part of the Indian Union (Sharma, 2013). Although the Bodo Accord has not resolved all tensions, it has provided a framework for self-governance that has reduced ethnic violence and empowered the Bodo people politically.

**Relevance:** The Bodo Accord provides a successful example of a negotiated settlement between the Indian government and a tribal community, resulting in a degree of political autonomy within the Indian Union. The BTR has its own autonomous council, which controls important aspects of governance, such as education, agriculture, and cultural affairs. This model could serve as a blueprint for similar arrangements for the Kuki/Zo people, demonstrating that political autonomy within India is achievable through negotiation and legal frameworks.

#### ***9. The Nagaland Peace Process***

The Naga insurgency, one of the longest-running conflicts in India's Northeast, has led to decades of negotiations between the Naga leaders and the Indian government. In 2015, the Indian government signed a Framework Agreement with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM), aimed at reaching a final settlement to the Naga issue. This agreement

recognises the Nagas' unique history and political rights, though a final solution is still in negotiation.

**Relevance:** The Naga peace process illustrates the complexities of addressing ethnic grievances in the Northeast. The Indian government's willingness to engage with the Nagas, including discussions on greater autonomy and territorial adjustments, is a positive precedent for the Kuki/Zo people. It shows that the Indian state can be flexible and open to negotiated settlements that respect the distinct identity and political aspirations of indigenous communities.

## 10. Indigenous Autonomy in Mexico's Chiapas Region

In 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in the state of Chiapas, Mexico, launched an armed rebellion demanding greater autonomy for indigenous communities. Although the Mexican government did not fully accede to all their demands, negotiations led to the establishment of autonomous indigenous municipalities, where indigenous groups exercise control over local governance, land management, and cultural affairs.

**Relevance:** The situation in Chiapas highlights the global struggle of indigenous peoples for political autonomy and cultural preservation. The Zapatistas' fight for land rights and self-governance resonates with the Kuki/Zo people's demands for separate administration. This case study shows that, even in complex political environments, indigenous peoples can achieve degrees of autonomy through both negotiation and advocacy, without full secession from the state.

## 11. The Creation of Nunavut (1999)

A comparison can be made with the creation of Nunavut, a self-governing territory in Canada established to protect the Inuit people's land rights and autonomy. Nunavut was the result of decades of negotiation between the Inuit and the Canadian government, with the final agreement ensuring Inuit control over land use and governance (Smith, 2010). This case serves as a model for the Kuki/Zo people, demonstrating how a carefully negotiated arrangement can lead to peace and prosperity for indigenous groups without compromising the sovereignty of the state.

### *Proposed Solutions: The Case for Separate Administration*

Based on the historical, political, and human rights arguments outlined above, the need for a separate administrative region for the Kuki/Zo people becomes undeniable. The proposal for a separate administration is rooted in the understanding that the current governance structure in Manipur is inadequate to protect the rights, lands, and safety of the Kuki/Zo people.

#### *Autonomy and Local Governance*

A separate administrative region would allow the Kuki/Zo people to exercise control over their own political and legal systems. As seen in other regions where indigenous autonomy has been granted, local governance allows for better protection of cultural rights and resources. The Kuki/Zo people would be able to govern themselves according to their traditional customs and practices, while still being part of the larger Indian Union. This model of governance has been implemented in several regions worldwide, including the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) in Assam, India (Sharma, 2013), and the autonomous

regions in Adivasi areas of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh.

#### *Representation and Political Rights*

One of the most immediate benefits of a separate administrative region would be increased political representation for the Kuki/Zo people. In the current political setup, Kuki/Zo representatives in the Manipur Legislative Assembly and local bodies are often outnumbered and outvoted by Meitei and Naga representatives. By creating a separate administrative entity, the Kuki/Zo people would be able to elect their own leaders who would have the power to address their specific concerns, including land rights, cultural preservation, and economic development (Kipgen, 2013).

**Relevance:** This case serves as a model for the Kuki/Zo people, demonstrating how a carefully negotiated arrangement can lead to peace and prosperity for indigenous groups without compromising the sovereignty of the state.

#### **12. Greenland's Autonomy under Denmark**

Greenland, an autonomous territory of Denmark, presents a highly successful example of indigenous autonomy within a sovereign state. Greenland's Home Rule Act of 1979 and subsequent Self-Government Act of 2009 granted the island significant control over its domestic affairs, while Denmark retained control over foreign policy and defence. Greenlanders, mostly Inuit, govern their resources, education, and health systems, and have the right to full independence should they choose to pursue it.

**Relevance:** While Greenland's context is different, its path to autonomy under a larger nation-state offers valuable lessons for the Kuki/Zo people. The

Greenland model shows that a high degree of political autonomy and cultural preservation can coexist within a broader national framework. This could inspire a similar framework for the Kuki/Zo people, where their distinct identity and political aspirations are respected within the Indian Union.

#### **Conclusion:**

The Kuki/Zo people's demand for separate administration is not just a political aspiration but a necessity born out of decades of marginalisation, conflict, and the threat to their identity, culture, and existence. The Kuki/Zo people have been systematically excluded from the political and economic power structures of Manipur, and their land and resources have been exploited without adequate compensation or consultation. Their demand for self-governance is a legitimate response to these challenges and is supported by both Indian Constitutional principles and International Human Rights standards.

The creation of a separate administration for the Kuki/Zo people is urgent for several reasons. First, it would address the long-standing socio-economic disparities between the hill districts and the Imphal Valley, in essence bridging the hill valley divide, allowing the Kuki/Zo people to take control of their own development and ensure that resources are distributed more equitably. Second, it would protect the Kuki/Zo people's cultural and political identity, which is under threat from land encroachment, resource exploitation, and political marginalisation. Third, it would provide a mechanism for resolving the conflicts and tensions that have plagued the region, including the Naga-Kuki conflict and the ongoing Kuki/Zo – Meitei conflict and disputes over land and political control.

The pathway to achieving separate administration will not be easy. It will require persistent advocacy, legal reforms, and political negotiation, but the precedent exists, and the urgency is clear. The Indian government, along with international bodies and civil society organisations, must engage in a meaningful dialogue to ensure the survival of the Kuki/Zo people

However, the benefits of separate administration for the Kuki/Zo people far outweigh the challenges. By granting the Kuki/Zo people the autonomy they seek, India would not only fulfil its Constitutional obligations to protect the rights of indigenous peoples but also promote peace, stability, and development in a region that has long been neglected.

The demand for separate administration by the Kuki/Zo people is grounded in historical, political, and socio-economic realities that underscore the necessity of self-determination, which can in no way ever be overstated. The historical marginalisation, political disenfranchisement, and human rights violations they have endured over the decades make a compelling case for the creation of a new administrative structure that guarantees their autonomy and much-needed security.

As demonstrated through the appendices and case studies; International legal frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) guided by successful case studies from regions like Nunavut and the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) set adequate precedents, positively exhibiting that Indigenous groups around the world have successfully negotiated political autonomy within larger nation-states; and such cases can be developed as models that can be adapted to the Kuki/Zo situation in present day Manipur.

Granting the Kuki/Zo people a separate administration would not only address their legitimate grievances but would also contribute to the long-term stability and peace in Manipur in particular and the North East as a whole. Without such an arrangement, the systemic exclusion and violent targeting of the Kuki/Zo people are likely to continue, exacerbating ethnic tensions and further destabilising the region. Therefore, it is in the best interest of the Indian Government, as well as the international community, to support the establishment of a separate administrative region for the Kuki/Zo people.

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