

IDSA

Issue Brief

How Nagas Perceive the Creation of Seven Additional Districts in Manipur

Sushil Kumar Sharma

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S*ummary*

The creation of seven additional districts in Manipur in December 2016 has elicited a mixed response. While the decision was generally welcomed by the Meitei and Kuki communities, it was vehemently criticised by the majority among the Naga tribal community led by United Naga Council (UNC), the apex Naga Civil Organization. Reportedly, some Nagas in the newly created Noney district welcomed the move. Naga leaders have alleged that Naga villages have been merged with non-Naga areas to form the new districts and that the Manipur Government did not consult all stake holders including the Hill Area Committees before taking the decision. Agitations and road blocks called by the UNC are still continuing. The emotions associated with the creation of seven new districts run high, are palpable and continue to simmer. There is a need to understand the Naga perspective so as to initiate necessary policy interventions.

On December 9, 2016, the Manipur government issued a gazette notification creating seven new districts by carving out and bifurcating the state's existing nine districts. This took the total number of districts in the state to 16. The seven new districts are: Kangpokpi (a long standing demand by the Kukis for a separate Sadar Hills district carved out from parts of the predominantly Naga populated district of Senapati); Tengenoupal (carved out from the predominantly Naga district of Chandel); Pherzawl (earlier a part of Kuki-dominated Churachandpur); Noney (earlier a part of Naga-dominated Tamenglong), Jiribam (carved out from Imphal East), Kamjong (carved out from Ukhrul) and Kakching (in the Imphal Valley, to which some areas of Chandel have been added). The creation of these districts came against the backdrop of the ongoing indefinite economic blockade enforced by the United Naga Council (UNC) against an earlier proposal for creating two districts, Sadar and Jiribam.¹ The UNC had launched the blockade only after its attempts to interact with the Manipur Government on the issue was stone walled. The aim of the blockade was to make the UNC's voice on, and objections to the creation of the two districts, heard in New Delhi.

The Manipur government had announced the creation of the seven new districts post haste without having the basic infrastructure in place. While Chief Minister Ibobi Singh reiterated that the creation of these new districts is a response to the longstanding demands of the local people as well as for reasons of administrative convenience, Naga leaders feel that it was an attempt to divide the Naga people by merging them with non-Naga areas to form the new districts. Further, they have also taken exception to the Manipur government not consulting the Hill Area Committees before taking the decision. And they have questioned the timing of the decision, which, in their view, was driven by political considerations keeping the recently concluded assembly elections in mind.

Subsequent events in Manipur further aggravated the situation. On December 14, the day Chief Minister Ibobi Singh was to inaugurate the new Tengenoupal district (earlier part of Chandel district), three police commandos were killed and 11 injured in two ambushes. And on December 17, 70 NSCN(IM) militants reportedly attacked a police post in Tamenglong district and took away nine automatic weapons and ammunition.²

1 Manogya Loiwal, "7 new districts formed in Manipur amid opposition by Nagas," *India Today*, December 9, 2016, available at <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/manipur-7-new-districts-united-naga-council-okram-ibobi-singh-sadar-hills-nagas/1/830729.html>, accessed on February 15, 2017.

2 Esha Roy, "Simply put: Seven new districts that set Manipur ablaze," *The Indian Express*, December 20, 2016, available at <http://indianexpress.com/article/explained/manipur-violence-new-districts-okram-ibobi-united-naga-council-4436039/>, accessed on February 17, 2017.

Given these developments, there is a need to understand the perspective of the Nagas and the reasons for their agitation. That is essential for the governments at the Centre and the State to suitably address the issues involved and work towards bringing peace and harmony in Manipur.

The Sadar Hills Issue

The demand for the creation of the Sadar Hills District dates back to the time of Manipur attaining statehood in 1972. A little before Manipur attained statehood, Parliament passed the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act, 1971. This Act divided the hill areas of Manipur into six autonomous districts, with the ultimate goal of eventually establishing them as full-fledged districts, including Sadar Hills. The five other autonomous districts – Manipur South (Churachandpur); Manipur North (Senapati); Manipur East (Ukhrul); Manipur West (Tamenglong); Tengnoupal (Chandel) – have all been upgraded to full-fledged districts since then. Only the Sadar Hills continued to remain an autonomous district. Through a 25 May 1980 resolution, a cabinet committee of the Manipur government headed by Chief Minister Rishang Keishing resolved to make Sadar Hills a revenue district. This was followed by similar resolutions passed in the state legislature on 14 July 1982 and again on 17 November 1999. But no headway was made in this regard. In 2011, the demand for making Sadar Hills a full-fledged district intensified with the Sadar Hills District Demand Committee (SHDDC) imposing an economic blockade. This led to a counter blockade imposed by the All Naga Students' Association Manipur. The main problem in the creation of the Sadar Hill District has been the claim of Nagas, under the aegis of the UNC, that most parts of the Sadar Hills belong to the Naga people, and, therefore, a new district should not be carved out especially given that its headquarters would be located at Kangpokpi, a Kuki-majority urban town.³

The Unique Location of Jiribam

The other area about which Nagas are sensitive is Jiribam. An erstwhile subdivision of Manipur's Imphal East district and an assembly segment under the Outer Manipur Lok Sabha constituency, Jiribam was a subdivision located 226 km away from the district headquarters and 214 km away from Imphal. The people of Jiribam have often made representations for upgrading the sub division into a full-fledged district, citing alienation from the Imphal East district HQs and nearly eight to nine hours of travel from Jiribam to Imphal East which had to be undertaken for

3 “Manipur fails its people again on Sadar Hills,” *The Sangai Express*, November 03, 2016, available at <https://www.thesangaiexpress.com/manipur-fails-people-sadar-hills/>, accessed on February 18, 2017.

any work related to the District HQs. Also, it did not fit in the logic of having a sub division of a district not contiguous to the district boundary and virtually separated by Tamenglong district in between. Reportedly, a state cabinet decision in August 2006 agreed to award district status to Jiribam and the proposal was subsequently sent to the Delimitation Commission of India in September 2006.⁴ But Nagas have been making representations to the effect that the eastern part of Jiribam, which is inhabited by Naga settlements, be made contiguous with Tamenglong District. But without taking into account this Naga demand, the Manipur government upgraded Jiribam into a district through its December 9 notification.

Economic Blockade

The genesis of the present imbroglio between the Nagas of Manipur and the State Government goes back to October 2016 when the latter decided to elevate the subdivisions of Sadar Hills and Jiribam to full-fledged districts. The United Naga Council (UNC), being the apex civil organisation of the Nagas in Manipur, objected to the decision, stating that it should be done only after consulting all the tribal organisations. On November 1, 2016, the UNC called for an indefinite economic blockade of the two national highways, NH-2 and NH-37, which are the lifelines of the state. All transport vehicles carrying essential goods from the hills to the Imphal Valley were blocked. In response, on December 9, the Manipur Chief Minister announced the creation of seven new districts. The UNC vehemently objected to the creation of the new districts and intensified its economic blockade. In retaliation, the Meiteis imposed a counter-blockade, preventing vehicles carrying essential goods from moving to the four Naga-dominated hill districts from the Imphal Valley.⁵

The economic blockade has caused misery and untold sufferings to the common people and has fuelled ethnic tensions in Manipur. Nagas feel that their peaceful protests and appeals to the state as well as the Centre have been ignored. Thus, the economic blockade was seen as the only means through which they are able to raise the pitch.

4 “Jiribam subdivision demands district status” The Times of India, June 11, 2014, available at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/Jiribam-subdivision-demands-district-status/articleshow/36374863.cms> , accessed on February 18, 2017

5 Abhilash Mallick and Tridip K Mandal, “50 Days of Economic Blockade: The Manipur Crisis Explained,” *The Quint*, December 20, 2016, available at <https://www.thequint.com/india/2016/12/20/economic-blockade-to-attack-on-civilians-manipur-crisis-with-nagaland-districts-violence-all-you-need-to-know->, accessed on February 18, 2017.

Naga Perspective

Biased Political Structure

There is a perception amongst the tribal community (Nagas and Kukis) in Manipur that the political structure in the State is skewed against them, given that 40 out of 60 Assembly seats have been allotted to the Meitei-dominated areas in the Imphal Valley thus giving an overwhelming majority to the Meiteis in decision making. This political arrangement is seen as an instrument of continued domination by the Meitei over the hill people. The UNC has alleged that the assembly constituency delimitation exercise in 2011 was sabotaged, thus preventing the increase of tribal seats by five more in the State Assembly. The general feeling is that with almost two-thirds of MLAs coming from the Imphal Valley, the decision in the state assembly can be taken even if opposed by MLAs from the Hill Areas. Tribal communities in the state, therefore, feel the need for a constitutional provision to ensure at least an equal representation of MLAs from the hill areas, so as to ensure that due regard is given for any legal or administrative provision that affects the tribal areas.

Article 371C and the Hill Areas Committee

In the North Eastern State Reorganization Act, 1971, Parliament provided a constitutional safeguard for the interests of the Hill Areas. Accordingly, the Hill Areas Committee was constituted under article 371C. As per this article, the President may, by order made with respect to the State of Manipur, provide for the constitution and functions of a committee of the Legislative Assembly of the State consisting of members of that Assembly elected from the Hill Areas of that State. The Hill Area Committee is empowered by the Constitution to monitor law making for and administration of hill areas.⁶ Since the Hill Area Committees were formed to protect the rights of the hill people under Article 371C of the Constitution, the powers of the state legislature are limited by the Hill Areas Committee. The contention of the Nagas is that any law affecting the hill areas must be vetted by the committee, a rule that the state government overlooked when passing the three bills last year and again while creating the seven new districts. This is viewed by Nagas in particular as a violation of their tribal rights.⁷ Also, they feel that the state government has neither consulted the Hill Area Committee nor the Autonomous District Councils, thus disrespecting not only the constitutional provisions but also

6 Gangmumei Kamei, "Hill Area Committee (HAC) of Manipur Legislative Assembly: An assessment - Part 2," *E-Pao*, December 17, 2012, available at http://e-pao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=news_section.opinions.Politics_and_Governance.Hill_Area_Committee_of_Manipur_Legislative_Assembly_An_assessment_Part_2, accessed on February 25, 2017.

7 Ipsita Chakravarty, "The hills are alive: Why seven new districts have created mayhem in Manipur," *Scroll.com*, December 21, 2016, available at <https://scroll.in/article/824713/the-hills-are-alive-why-seven-new-districts-have-created-mayhem-in-manipur>, accessed on February 25, 2017.

the local self-governance institutions. The Nagas also contend that these Committees/Councils are denied funds and not consulted by the state government on vital issues pertaining to the Hill people. They demand that this aspect be made a mandatory constitutional requirement by passing an appropriate bill in the Assembly for equal representation of all the people.

Violation of Memoranda of Understanding

There were four Memoranda of Understanding signed between the Naga civil society and the Manipur Government. According to these, all stake holders would be consulted and the land rights of Naga people would be ensured.⁸ Given this, the Nagas perceive the creation of the seven new districts without consulting the stakeholders as a demonstration of utter disregard for the four memoranda as well as for the assurances given to them about consultations on matters affecting them.⁹

Fear of Encroachment upon Traditional Land Holdings

The institutional divergence and diversity in property rights is a unique phenomenon in Manipur and land has been the root cause of many conflicts in the state. Here the socio-economic and political systems are centred on the issue of land. Land, particularly for the tribals, has remained the single most important physical possession. Land also plays an important role in shaping cultural and ethnic identity. Furthermore, the tribal communities have a symbiotic relationship with land and forests on which their livelihood depends. Given all this, the Nagas see the creation of the seven new districts as a threat of encroachment on their tribal land rights.

The Naga Peace Accord

The framework of the Naga Peace Accord signed in 2015 between the Central Government and the NSCN(IM) has not been thrown open to public scrutiny. This troubles the average Meitei who fears that the Centre may accede to the NSCN(IM) demand for Greater Nagalim¹⁰ thus redrawing the state boundary, with the Naga-dominated districts going to Nagaland. Since the Government of Manipur is not a party to the Framework Agreement with NSCN(IM) and given perceptions of mistrust between the former Congress Government in Manipur and the BJP

8 Kandy Pamei, "Manipur Assembly Elections 2017: State govt's act of creating seven districts unreasonable," *International Business Times*, February 7, 2017, available at <http://www.ibtimes.co.in/manipur-assembly-elections-2017-state-govts-act-creating-seven-districts-unreasonable-opinion-715157>, accessed on February 28, 2017.

9 "Naga people reject creation of 7 new districts in Manipur," *Morung Express*, December 12, 2017, available at <http://morungexpress.com/naga-people-reject-creation-7-new-districts-manipur/>, accessed on February 27, 2017.

10 The idea of Greater Nagalim includes all the Naga-inhabited areas neighbouring Nagaland, i.e., Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and some portions Myanmar.

Government at the centre, it is speculated by a section of the Nagas that the creation of seven new districts may be a step by the state government to ensure that Manipur does not get affected by any provisions of the Framework Agreement.

Inner Line Permit and Manipur People Protection Bill 2015

The colonial government had introduced the Inner Line Permit (ILP) in the North Eastern States to protect its own commercial interests. Independent India used it as an instrument to protect the tribal people and their cultures. Since Manipur is not officially a tribal state, there are constitutional challenges to implementing the ILP system there. But the recent demand in Manipur for introducing the ILP has deepened the hill-valley divide. Nagas and Kukis have remained largely anti-ILP. On August 31, 2015, the Manipur Assembly passed three contentious bills – Land Reforms and Land Revenue (7th Amendment) Bill, 2015; the Manipur Shops and Establishment (2nd Amendment) Bill, 2015; and, the Manipur Protection of Peoples Bill, 2015. These three Bills led to violent protests in Churachandpur, during which nine people were killed in the police firing that ensued. There are apprehensions among hill people that these bills will be used to gain control over their land and that many of the hill people would be declared non-Manipuris.¹¹ The Nagas feel that this issue once again highlights the need for consultation of all stake holders.

Status of Autonomous Hill Councils

There is also a feeling among Naga leaders that even the autonomous district councils were not consulted while creating the new districts in December 2016. Further, the status of the Autonomous District Councils amongst the newly created hill districts is also not clear. This has led to the apprehension that Manipur's basic administrative structures are being compromised.

No Progress in Tripartite Talk

The UNC alleges that the Government of Manipur has refused to conduct a dialogue to resolve the issue of new districts and wilfully absented itself at the November 15, 2016 tripartite talks at Delhi convened by the Centre. They also allege that the representatives of the Manipur Government who attended the tripartite talks on February 3, 2017 at Delhi declined to discuss the core issue of arbitrary declaration of new districts on the plea that no political decision was possible with the election model code of conduct already in force.

11 Nehginpao Kipgen, "Mistrust in Manipur," *The Indian Express*, June 17, 2016, available at <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/okram-ibobi-singh-rajnath-singh-manipur-imphal-inner-line-permit-bills-2857397/>, accessed on February 28, 2017.

Conclusion

While many tribal groups spearheaded by the Naga fraternity have expressed reservations about the creation of the seven new districts, the majority Meiteis and even the Kuki minority have welcomed the move. The onus now remains with the new Government of Manipur to embrace the perspective of the Nagas and address their core concerns. The views of the Nagas on the formulation of the new districts must be considered and addressed to foster peace and harmony in the state.

About the Authors

Brigadier Sushil Kumar Sharma is currently posted as DIGP, CRPF in New Delhi.

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Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses
1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg
New Delhi 110 010 India
T +91-11-2671 7983 F +91-11-2615 4191
contact.idsa@nic.in www.idsa.in
Twitter @IDSAIndia
www.facebook.com/InstituteForDefenceStudiesAnalyses