

DANGEROUS STATUS QUO: ON CONTINUING HOSTILITIES IN MANIPUR

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Eight months after ethnic violence broke out between the largely valley-dwelling [Meitei](#) and the hill-dwelling [Kuki-Zo](#) communities in Manipur, hostilities continue. The ethnic polarisation has persisted and displaced people on both sides are still unable to return to their homes; schooling and health care remain disrupted and the writ of the State government does not run in the Kuki-Zo hill areas. The government's inability to win peace and the failure of institutions such as the State Assembly to deliberate on the problem have compounded the conflict even as the Chief Minister, N. Biren Singh, continues to be seen more as an ethnic leader, preventing the possibility of any thaw in the pervasive hostility. Even media and civil society organisations seem to be divided on ethnic lines and, more dangerously, the role of the army and central paramilitary forces is being seen through this lens, evident in the utterances of the Chief Minister and representatives of ethnic chauvinist groups. The Union government's response has been to rely on a smoke and mirrors approach — a de facto assumption of powers related to law and order enforcement without publicly announcing the imposition of Article 355 that enables it to do so. There has been little follow-up on confidence-building measures between the representatives of the ethnic groups after visits by the Union Home Minister Amit Shah and others from his Ministry. The latest [visit by a Home Ministry team](#) is a reaction to a resolution by some MLAs to take collective action following fresh killings and violence in Moreh town.

The predominance of militant outfits is alarming. Militias such as the Meitei radical Arambai Tenggol have been allowed to act as "defence squads", brandishing weapons and being allowed to vitiate the already perilous discourse in the valley even as Kuki insurgents do the same in the hill areas. The arms looted from police stations and camps have still to be recovered, which suggests that there is a dangerous militarisation of non-state groups. The Union government must focus on addressing this key issue on either side of the divide. Meanwhile, Mr. Singh has tried to erroneously link the prevailing conflict and the ethnic polarisation to the refugee situation in Manipur with many, predominantly from the Chin communities, fleeing the civil war in Myanmar following attacks by the junta. This has led to the demand for ending the Free Movement Regime (FMR) enabling trade and people-to-people contact near the border. While the porous border has also enabled drug trafficking and the movement of insurgents, a cessation of the FMR would be a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

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