

ENDING AFSPA

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It augurs well for the future that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has given the first authentic indication that the operation of the [Armed Forces \(Special Powers\) Act \(AFSPA\) may come to an end](#) in the whole of the north-eastern region, if ongoing efforts to normalise the situation bear fruit. Mr. Modi's remark that a good deal of work is being done in that direction, not only in Assam but also Nagaland and Manipur, may be rooted in his keenness to demonstrate the level of progress achieved in the region under his regime; but it will bring immense relief to the citizens, nevertheless. Areas notified as 'disturbed areas' under AFSPA have been progressively reduced in the last few years, mainly due to the improvement in the security situation. About a month ago, the Union Home Ministry reduced such notified areas considerably in Assam, Nagaland and Manipur. There was a substantial reduction in Assam, where AFSPA was removed entirely in 23 districts and partially in one. In Nagaland, after the removal of the law from 15 police stations in seven districts, it remains in areas under 57 police stations, spread across 13 districts. Areas under 82 police stations are still notified under the Act in Manipur, even though 15 police station areas were excluded from the notification from April 1. Mr. Modi, who spoke at a 'peace, unity and development rally' in Diphu in Assam last week, cited "better administration" and the "return of peace" as the reasons for the removal of AFSPA in these areas in a region that has seen insurgencies for decades.

AFSPA was revoked in Tripura in 2015 and in Meghalaya in 2018. It is not unforeseeable that other States will also be excluded from its purview at some point of time. It is convenient to link the exclusion of an area from AFSPA's purview with reduction in violence by armed groups, improvement in the security situation and an increase in development activity, but what is important is the recognition that the law created an atmosphere of impunity and led to the commission of excesses and atrocities. It was hardly four months ago that 15 civilians were killed in Mon district in Nagaland in a botched military operation. Therefore, alongside the gradual reduction in the areas under the Act, there should be serious efforts to procure justice for victims of past excesses too. On the political side, it is indeed true that much headway has been made in moving towards a political solution to some of the multifarious disputes in the region, in the form of peace accords, ceasefire and creation of sub-regional administrative arrangements. The removal of AFSPA from the entire region will be an inevitable step in the process. But irrespective of the security situation, AFSPA should not have allowed such impunity to the armed forces.

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