

India: popular agitation against army atrocities engulfs the northeast state of Manipur

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Since the middle of July, the small northeastern Indian state of Manipur has been convulsed by popular protests demanding the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), an Indian law that grants extraordinary coercive powers to the armed forces. These powers include unrestricted and essentially unchallengeable authority to arrest and kill people in “carrying out their duties.”

Passed by parliament in 1958, the APSFA automatically comes into force when the Indian Union government designates a territory as a “disturbed area.” The state of Manipur was declared disturbed in 1980, and during the subsequent quarter century, Indian security forces have repeatedly committed human rights violations and brutal atrocities.

Although the rage against the AFSPA and the Indian government as a whole has been simmering for many years, the latest bout of agitation was triggered by the vicious torture, rape and murder of a 32-year-old woman, Thangjam Manorama, following her arrest by a team of paramilitary Assam Rifles personnel. Around midnight on July 10, a group of Assam Rifles soldiers burst into the home of Manorama and dragged the sleeping victim to a veranda where they proceeded to beat her mercilessly in front of her family.

The arrest was prompted by suspicion that Manorama belonged to the banned People’s Liberation Army, a nationalist insurgent group that is seeking Manipur’s secession from the Indian union. The violent methods utilised in apprehending this young lady are the standard *modus operandi* of the security personnel. Mere suspicion of belonging to a banned organisation is sufficient reason for security personnel to run rampant.

Union Home Minister Shivraj Patil was greeted with a 12-hour general strike on his arrival at the state capital Imphal on September 5. The strike was called by the coordinating committee Apunba Lup, which unites 32 women’s, student and civic organisations, and succeeded in largely shutting down Imphal and surrounding areas.

Shortly after Manorama’s murder, several women protested naked in front of the headquarters of the Assam Rifles holding up a banner displaying the words “Indian Army, Rape Us.” Another young lady named Irom Sharmila began a fast unto death in protest. She has been arrested and force-fed by the Indian authorities.

On August 15, the 57th anniversary of India’s independence from Britain, a 19-year-old student leader, Pebam Chittaranjan Mangang, burned himself to death to dramatise, and demand an end to, the suffering that the people of Manipur have endured under the AFSPA. On August 17, a general strike called by Apunba Lup, in response to Chittaranjan’s death, paralyzed Imphal.

The Indian ruling elite has reacted to this popular agitation with a mixture of bewilderment and confusion. The state Chief Minister, Congress leader Ibobi Singh, proposed that the AFSPA be lifted in Imphal. However, he has also denounced Apunba Lup as a front for

extremists and ordered the arrest of several of its leaders. The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance central government recently did announce the lifting of the AFSPA in Manipur’s capital. But it has also threatened to impose “President’s rule” in Manipur, which would suspend the state legislature and government and place Manipur under the direct administration of the central government.

Elements of the Congress leadership in Manipur have denounced Ibobi Singh for conciliating the opposition in a patent attempt to destabilise his government. This could provide the requisite reason for the ruling Congress coalition government at the center to impose President’s rule.

The Assam Rifles has refused to cooperate with an enquiry commission—set up, in response to the protests, by the state government—to examine the circumstances surrounding the death of Manorama. The accused Assam Rifles personnel have repeatedly ignored orders to testify. So emboldened do they feel under the AFSPA that they accuse the state government of not having obtained the necessary permission from the central government to hold such an enquiry. They even petitioned the Gauhati

(capital of Assam) High Court to issue a stay order against the commission. Only after much wrangling were four soldiers who took part in the arrest compelled to appear before the commission.

Meanwhile, the military high command has strongly objected to the relaxing of the AFSPA in Manipur, claiming that it will weaken the fight against “extremists.” Chief of Army Staff N.C. Vij and other senior military officers are reported to have told the Home Minister that the order lifting the AFSPA in Imphal is compromising security. They also expressed concern that the government’s concession to the anti-AFSPA agitation in Manipur could lead to similar movements elsewhere in the northeast and in the troubled state of Jammu and Kashmir. According to the Sept. 14 *Hindu*, “Sources said that the Army officers who made the presentation to [Home Minister] Patil indicated they were simply forwarding their assessment of the situation and it should not be read as an ultimatum of any sort.”

The main security force in Manipur is the Assam Rifles, a paramilitary force that is subject to the administrative control of the Indian Home ministry and the operational control of the Indian military. It is the main enforcer of the AFSPA in northeast India. Created by the British colonialist regime in the nineteenth century to put down a rebellion of tribal peoples in the northeast, the Assam Rifles have been greatly expanded since 1947 and now number 40 battalions.

The AFSPA is fashioned after the 1942 Armed Forces (Special Powers) Ordinance passed by the British colonialists in their bid to squash the “Quit India” movement—a mass agitation initiated by Mahatma Gandhi and the leadership of the Indian National Congress, but which quickly went beyond the prescribed limits of civil disobedience and became a

quasi-insurrection in many parts of India. The 1942 act granted special powers to commissioned officers of the rank of Captain and above to issue, in writing, shoot-to-kill order to soldiers under their command if, in their opinion, the situation so required.

In 1955, the state of Assam passed an even more odious law termed the Assam Disturbed Areas Act allegedly to combat an insurgency in Nagaland, then part of Assam. Whereas the British act required a written order from an officer holding at least the rank of Captain, the Assam legislature granted these powers to an ordinary soldier just above the rank of Sepoy (the lowest-ranked soldier in the Indian army); while the 1942 act stipulated that the order be written, no such requirement was contained in the Assam Disturbed Area Act of 1955.

In 1958, the Indian parliament, under the stewardship of Prime Minister Nehru, passed the AFSPA ostensibly to maintain “internal security.” In six sections, this law uses similar wording to the 1955 act passed by the Assam legislature. In 1990, the Indian parliament passed legislation termed the Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act extending these repressive powers to the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

These acts have provided legal cover for the Indian armed forces to act with impunity in attempting to crush various insurgencies. Indeed, the violent and arbitrary violence of the security forces have become one of the principal popular grievances fuelling secession movements both in the northeast and in Jammu and Kashmir.

The United Nations Human Rights Committee (UNHRC) determined that Section 4 of the AFSPA, which expressly grants the unrestricted power to kill, is incompatible with three articles of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), ratified by India in 1979. Many members of the commission expressed shock at the existence of such legislation in India. But no government at the Center, whether dominated by the Congress party or the Hindu-chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) or made up of “third” parties, has sought to repeal this odious legislation.

Northeast India currently comprises seven states—Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh. Nagaland, Mizoram and Tripura were all formed from areas carved out of post-1947 Assam.

The pristine forests, mountains and valleys in this region have given rise to the most varied ethno-cultural groups with distinct cultural imprints. The northeast is also rich in minerals, forest resources and biodiversity. The region receives high rainfall from both the southwest and the returning northeast monsoon rains, resulting in a lush flora and fauna with many unique medicinal plants.

As a region, the northeast is demarcated by India’s international boundaries with China, Myanmar (formerly Burma), Bhutan and Bangladesh, and internally by the boundary between Assam and a very narrow strip of northern West Bengal known as the “chicken’s neck.” The 1947 communal partition of British India thus further enhanced the region’s relative isolation from the rest of India and created new barriers to the free movement of its many peoples, who historically have interacted with China, southeast Asia and the Indian core, absorbing and in turn influencing their respective cultural traditions.

Considered among the least developed of India’s regions, the northeast is inhabited by both tribal and non-tribal people, with the tribes generally inhabiting the mountainous regions and the non-tribal people inhabiting the valleys.

Within the limits of the validity of ethnic classification, three main ethnic groups can be distinguished in Manipur: the Meitei, the Kuki and the Nagas. Historically, the Kukis and the Nagas have inhabited the mountains and the forests, whereas the Meitei are valley-dwellers. While the tribes communicate amongst themselves in their own dialects, Meitei, is the official language of the state and is spoken by a majority of its people.

Historically, one of the most distinguishing characteristic of tribes is that they form local self-contained economic units. Goods that are not indigenously produced are acquired from neighbouring tribes through barter exchange. Though tribal economies in the northeast previously displayed this characteristic, this is no longer the case due to the penetration of capitalist relations into the region, a process that began under British rule but which has advanced rapidly since 1947. Today, the northeastern tribes deal in cash and purchase many modern conveniences such as televisions.

The disruption of the economic base of tribal society under conditions of growing economic insecurity and social inequality has undoubtedly fuelled national-ethnic resentments and conflicts. The rise to political prominence of the Hindu-chauvinist BJP since the mid-1980s has also further exacerbated ethnic tensions, since many of the tribal peoples in the northeast are Christians.

The varied natural resources of this region such as coal, forests, minerals and petroleum are of great economic importance to the Indian ruling elite. For example, Assam accounts for at least 15 percent of domestic petroleum and 50 percent of tea production.

The Indian ruling elite, largely ignorant of both the history and cultures of the northeast, has treated the region with contempt. The central government has allocated meagre resources to it in successive five-year plans. The region is far less industrialised than other parts of India and suffers widespread poverty and unemployment. When the masses have attempted to protest, the Indian government has reacted with military repression.

Manipur acquired statehood in 1972, but has been under martial law since 1980. Many of the unemployed and student youth, having no political outlet for their grievances, have become ready recruits to the various insurgent groups, which advocate ethnic nationalism and separatism as the solution to the inequities produced by the rule of the Indian bourgeoisie.

Although many insurgent groups in Manipur identify with or spring from a particular ethnic group, it would be incorrect to characterise them along purely ethnic lines as is frequently done by the Indian media. Some insurgent groups profess to “unite” several or all of the peoples of the northeast into a separate state, whereas others recruit on an exclusively ethnic basis and demand the denial of basic rights or even the expulsion of others whom they deem to be outsiders. Some of the more prominent insurgent groups in Manipur are the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and People’s Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK).

The alliances that these groups form are ever-shifting, and many have undertaken ethnic cleansing. None of them reach out for unity with the working class and oppressed masses of the subcontinent. While some use socialist phraseology, all advocate a variant of petit-bourgeois nationalism based upon ethnic, national and linguistic identities, and seek nothing more than a reshuffling of the reactionary, capitalist, nation-state system in South Asia.

The Indian elite has reacted to these insurgencies by giving its security forces unrestricted power. As a result, these forces essentially function as a terrorist state-sponsored gang. Over the decades, they have committed murders and rapes, destroyed dwellings, subjected people to arbitrary arrest, and humiliated people.

The victims have no recourse to courts or any other remedial measure unless prior permission has been obtained from the central government, which is next to impossible. This has created mass resentment and anger against both the security forces and the government authorities.

Traditionally, India’s mainstream media has neglected to cover the struggle for basic human rights in the northeast. Most of the press coverage has been confined to reporting encounters between insurgents and the security forces, thus painting a picture of this region as one racked

by insurgency and violence. Lost in all this has been people's day-to-day struggle for existence and dignity and the repressive character of the Indian state.



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