

# Modi's BJP foments ethno-communal violence in India's northeastern state of Manipur

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Since early May, the northeastern Indian state of Manipur has been convulsed by violent attacks on innocent civilians by roving bands of ethno-chauvinist vigilantes. Over 120 civilians, most of them from the minority Kuki ethnic group, have been killed and thousands injured in targeted attacks in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ruled, majority-Meitei state.

A further 40,000 persons have been made homeless, with churches and whole villages razed by armed gangs of Meitei youth patronized by the BJP state government. If the violence remains unabated after a month and a half, it is because both the BJP state government and India's national BJP government—led by the Hindu-supremacist Prime Minister Narendra Modi—are complicit, and view it as in their political interest to allow the attacks on the largely-Christian minority Kukis to continue.

According to many victims of the violence and other eyewitnesses and observers, most of the attacks have been carried out by two reactionary vigilante groups based among the majority Meitei. These are known as the Arambai Tenggol (AT-Arrowhead) and Meitei Leepun (ML).

Both of these ethnic-chauvinist outfits, which describe themselves as cultural organizations, have close links to the BJP state government, including Manipur's Chief Minister, Biren Singh. They are modelled after the BJP's parent organization, the fascistic Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and the allied Bajrang Dal, which is the violent youth wing of another RSS-affiliate, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad or World Council of Hindus.

The state of Manipur with a population of 3.2 million lies in India's northeast and borders Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, which is ruled by a brutal military regime. The majority of the state's population live in the Imphal Valley, which lies in the centre of the state. It is surrounded by forested hills, which make up 90 percent of Manipur's land area.

The state is home to two major ethno-linguistic groups, the Meitei, who are overwhelmingly Hindu although a small percentage of them are Muslims and Christians, and the Kukis. Historically, the Kukis have lived in the forested hills that surround the Imphal Valley, and the majority of them still live there in their traditional villages, making their living from hunting and agriculture.

The Kukis (and other tribal groups including the Naga and Chin) are overwhelmingly Protestant Christians and have strong ties to

other states in India's northeast, Bangladesh and Myanmar, all of which are home to Kuki minorities. Meiteis comprise about 53 percent of Manipur's population, whereas the Kukis and other tribes comprise about 37 percent.

Historically, India's northeast has been ignored and abused by India's central government and dominant bourgeois factions, which have valued the region solely for its natural resource wealth. The Kukis and other tribes are particularly impoverished because the state government—and this has become even more blatant since the BJP came to power in 2017—has deliberately starved the tribal areas of funds for economic development.

According to the Wire news website, from 2016 to 2021, out of a planned budget allocation of Rupees (Rs.) 220 billion (approximately \$3.2 billion), the tribal areas received less than Rs. 5 billion (\$72 million) for socioeconomic development.

The trigger for the latest violence was a May 3 protest march organized by the All Tribal Students' Union, Manipur (ATSUM) after a Manipur High Court judge directed the already highly communally-partisan BJP state government to recommend to the Modi government that Meiteis be classified as Scheduled Tribes (ST). Such a classification would allow persons from Meitei households to compete for government jobs, university admission and other benefits under a special quota reserved for STs. This in turn would intensify the competition for the meagre number of jobs and university places among those already classified as STs such as Kukis. ST designation would also enable wealthy Meitei to buy up tribal lands for capitalist development.

Subsequently, India's Supreme Court struck down this Manipur High Court directive while flaying the judge for issuing so provocative an order.

Although the May 3 march was peaceful, some Meitei chauvinists, acting as provocateurs, desecrated a war monument erected in commemoration of the Kuki victims of the 1917–19 Anglo-Kuki War, which was precipitated by the British Indian empire's attempts to press-gang Kuki men into serving as World War I military labourers. The attack on the May 3 protest triggered a wave of violent ethnic-communal attacks from both sides.

The BJP had little political presence in Manipur prior to 2017. But having captured the national government in 2014, it injected its foul Hindu communal politics into the region's ethnic divisions—which are themselves a legacy of British communal rule

and the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent—and co-opted sections of the Meitei elite to its Hindu supremacist agenda. This is in keeping with the BJP's modus operandi across India. It systematically incites communal and caste divisions, while whipping up a bellicose, Hindu supremacist-infused Indian nationalism to channel mounting social tensions behind reaction and divide the working class.

In "retaliation" for the government facilitated AT and ML vigilante attacks, some Kuki extremists have in turn targeted innocent Meiteis.

The Modi-led central government has deployed at least 10,000 heavily armed Indian army troops and a further 10,000 paramilitary forces to the state, but this has largely been for show. Significantly, Modi has himself remained silent and, as in numerous other instances of Hindu supremacist violence, he has not denounced the attacks on civilians. Nor has he called upon the state authorities to take rigorous steps to protect the innocent.

Chief Minister Biren Singh, a nasty bourgeois politician who defected from the Congress Party to the BJP, has been openly communally partisan in his public pronouncements. This has included terming Kukis "terrorists." He has previously denounced them as illegal immigrants and opium growers. Many rural Kukis are so impoverished that they are compelled to grow opium poppy just to get enough money to feed themselves. Opium poppy is the raw material for the production of both opium and heroin.

The Chief Minister has seized upon this complex reality to justify deploying security forces to destroy fields and evict peasants from their hill-forest lands. He and the Modi government are now waging a "war on drugs" whose victims are mainly poverty-stricken Kuki peasants.

He has also besmirched Kukis as drug dealers, despite the fact that the drug trade is reportedly controlled by politicians and others connected to his own party. In fact, there are reports that one of Biren Singh's relatives is himself a major drug lord. In 2020 a senior police officer in Manipur filed an affidavit before the Manipur High Court alleging that the Chief Minister had pressured her to release a major drug lord.

The police officer, Ms. Thounaojam Brinda, also stated to a newspaper that "The drug business—smuggling and production—in Manipur is run by a combined force of powerful politicians, militants, drug lords, top police officials and bureaucrats who manipulate the police administration and judicial institutions to cover up crimes and escape punishment."

Modi's chief henchman, India's Home Minister Amit Shah, finally made a trek to the state at the end of May ostensibly to bring "peace." After meeting with several organizations representing Kukis and Meiteis he promised that a commission of inquiry would be set up to probe the violence.

Subsequently, the Modi government set up a so-called "peace commission" nominating its handpicked cronies, including the Chief Minister and the state's BJP-nominated governor, without any democratic consultation. Kuki groups have denounced this and promised to boycott the commission.

A petition filed by the Manipur Tribals' Forum, an umbrella organization, before the Supreme Court of India on May 8 directly accuses the Modi government and the BJP state government of

having orchestrated the attacks. The petition states, "the attacks had the full support of the party in power in the State as well as the Centre which supports the dominant group and has planned the attacks on account of a non-secular agenda."

It also expressed a total lack of trust in the BJP national and state governments as well as the Manipur police and accused them of permitting ethnic-cleansing of Kukis.

Since the 1980s, the state has been declared a "disturbed area" and has come under the iron heels of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). This law grants the Indian armed forces extraordinary powers to arrest and even kill with blanket immunity. India's security forces are notorious for their long record of wanton human rights violations.

During the six years the BJP has ruled Manipur, it has left the state economically backward and overwhelming impoverished, while deliberately exacerbating the economic inequality between the Imphal Valley and the tribal areas, to the benefit of a tiny capitalist elite that exploits the entire population and their petty bourgeois hangers-on. It has deliberately stoked ethnic divisions between the Meiteis and the Kukis and further inflamed and sought to "nationalize" them, by investing the conflict with a more explicit Hindu versus non-Hindu dimension.

Several of the Kuki politicians, including some aligned with the BJP, have called for the imposition of President's rule, that is the dismissal of the state government and establishment of temporary direct rule from New Delhi. They have also called for "autonomy" of administration for the Kuki areas in Manipur.

All of these proposals are reactionary. Moreover, there is absolutely no progressive solution to this and similar conflicts within the existing rotten bourgeois nation-state frame-up. Unable to provide any progressive solution to the myriad problems resulting from colonialism, India's belated capitalist development and continuing imperialist oppression, the national bourgeoisie has continued and further developed the divide-and-rule policies of the British Empire. Under the BJP, whose avowed aim is to transform India into a Hindu *rashtra* or state, this has reached a qualitatively new level, with the Modi government whipping up communal reaction while employing autocratic methods of rule.

Only though the development of a mass working class movement for socialism, that mobilizes the toilers behind it in struggle against the Indian bourgeoisie and is oriented toward mounting a joint struggle with workers around the world against global capitalism, can social equality be established, caste-ism and communalism eradicated and the democratic rights of all ethno-linguistic groups secured.



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