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India

Radical Socialist Statement on Manipur

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It is crystal clear that it is the March 27 ruling of the Manipur High Court to award Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to the majority Meitei community (mostly Hindu) that led to mass protests by Zo-Kukis in early May which in turn led to violent attacks by Meitei vigilante groups and then a spiral of violence on both sides but with the Kukis easily the principal sufferers. Not the least reason for this being that the ruling BJP government and its Chief Minister Biren Singh have in various ways favoured the Meiteis. Consider the following:

1. The main though not only purpose of giving ST status to Meiteis is the land question. Kukis reside mostly in the Hills comprising some 90% of the state (much of which is forested) and is deemed their ancestral lands which even the government cannot easily encroach upon yet has tried to do so through arbitrary declarations of 'reserved forest' areas. The longer term aim is to extract mineral and forest wealth from the region via public-private partnerships with Indian big capital e.g., Adani, Ambanis, etc.
2. Ethnic, religious and demographic dimensions also play a part. Economically, giving ST status to Meiteis can pave the way for them and the government to acquire land in the Hills. Politically, the BJP in the longer term knows it will have to live with Christians in the northeast but seeks politically not just to subordinate Christian groups and parties through alliances based on Central patronage but ultimately to diminish as much as possible their political influence and social power. This is where the portrayal of a growing number of Kukis as illegal migrants comes in since they have strong kinship bonds with Chin tribes in Myanmar and there is cross-border traffic and activities. There are Meitei Christians and it is revealing of both ethnic pulls and religious hostilities that on the worst nights of May 3-4 while not a single Meitei Christian was killed some 240 odd churches of different Meitei denominations were destroyed, along with 50 others in and around Imphal where sections of the better-off and government employed Kukis also live. Panic-stricken, Kukis have left the Valley for the Hills and similarly Meiteis have moved in the reverse direction.
3. The duplicities of the BJP at the Centre and of Manipur government and the police it controls are self-evident. (i) Well after the earlier outbreaks of violence, on May 17 the Biren Singh government tells the Supreme Court on May 17 that the origin of this is the "crackdown on illegal Myanmar migrants... and drug business in the hills". On May 28 Biren Singh again lies declaring that the clashes are not between the two communities "but between Kuki militants and security forces". The nefarious role of two major Meitei vigilante groups with alleged links to the RSS, responsible for the one-sided violence against Kukis, namely Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun, are not brought into the picture. Subsequently, the Chief of Leepun had to be formally investigated by the police for possible crimes but both organisations are not outlawed. (ii) Why has President's Rule not been implemented for so long? Why did Modi himself remain silent for so long? ---The answer is obvious. There is a BJP government in the state and how can the Centre by such action indict its own party-led government, and implicitly, its biased support to the Meiteis. [No surprise—in this over two month period Modi ignores domestic church destruction but screams about Hindu temple destruction in Australia.]
4. It is the recent video revelation of the shocking rape and murders that took place in early May of Kuki victims that has forced the BJP's hand and made Modi speak out for the first time. Please note the following facts. The victims were abducted from the police. How could this happen and nothing subsequently made of it! A complaint to the police is made in mid-May but the FIR is registered only a month later in mid-June and investigation begun only after the video became public in mid-July. The police operate under orders from the state government and BJP state governments are always alert to what the BJP Central government wants.

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5. It is clear that relations between the Meiteis and the Kukis have now reached a point where there can be no reconciliation without recognizing that either the ST status to Meiteis (already recognized as constitutionally highly dubious if not unjustified) be withdrawn quickly by legal process; and more importantly, the Kuki demand for a separately administrated geographical area with substantial autonomous powers (including their own police) be set up. In creating this, due care should also be taken to consider the legitimate territorial concerns of the Nagas. Here, the question of land rights (inclusive of forest regions) must be protected so that this cannot be dis-alienated in the name of the government's claim to "eminent domain" against the will of the great majority of the Zo-Kuki people of that administration.

6. The fundamental reason for why, not just Manipur but J&K, Nagaland and parts of Mizoram, are from time to time undergoing great turmoil especially under the reign of the BJP should be obvious. Even other governments in New Delhi have sought to undermine the asymmetric character of Indian federalism which it is crucial to preserve. This is because colonial rule through brutality against diverse peoples and regions created the singular geographical unit of India that post-colonial governments have wanted to preserve, often through forcible forms of incorporation of peoples and regions having very different histories. Any effort to establish a humane and truly democratic India must endorse an asymmetrical federalism respecting these diverse histories, sentiments and rights. The two parts of India which have had distinctive and special powers of autonomy have been the only Muslim majority state of J&K and the states of the Northeast where there is a substantial Christian population, indeed a majority in some states. And no prizes for guessing who are the biggest culprits in seeking to diminish and eventually eliminate this asymmetrical federalism and furthermore to go on to establish the kind of Central domination that would undermine (they are already doing so) the more uniformly distributed powers of autonomy that other Indian states currently have—yes, it is the Sangh Parivar/BJP guided as it is by its *raison d'etre* of Hindutva Nationalism.

7. We demand impartial punishment of all those who have violated human rights in any form.

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