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Kuki rebel groups are wary of central gov't's talks with NSCN (I-M) and delay in their own talks due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which they label 'procrastination'.

As the union government and leaders of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah) continue their attempts to complete the Naga peace talks, Kuki outfits of Manipur have raised a demand for a Kukiland Territorial Council to be carved out of their ancestral lands. Kuki outfits are engaged in tripartite talks with the central government and the Manipur government, and want the territorial council to be modelled after the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in Assam. The BTC was constituted under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution in 2003 after the central government, the Assam government and Bodo Liberation Tigers signed a memorandum of settlement.

The executive and legislative powers of the BTC were later also derived from provisions in the Bodoland Peace Agreement 2020, signed between the central and Assam governments on one side and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), the All Bodo Students' Union and United Bodo People's Organisation on the other. The BTC was formed in recognition of the land rights, the

socio-cultural and ethnic identity of the Bodos living within the Bodoland Territorial Region. Now, the Kuki National Organisation (KNO), one of the two umbrella bodies, comprising 17 of the 23 Kuki rebel outfits with more than 2,000 cadres, said the Kukis want their issues to be settled within the framework of the Indian Constitution. “We are asking for our self-determination within Manipur under the Sixth Schedule and territorial status. We are highlighting our issues in an amicable manner and not through any armed offensive. We are not secessionist or anti-national. We want our constitutional rights, which the government ignored for long,” said Dr Seilen Haokip, spokesperson for the KNO.

Who are the Kukis?

The Kukis are spread out in Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya and Manipur, where they have the bulk of their population. The Meitei, Kuki and Naga communities in Manipur lived in peaceful coexistence since India’s Independence, but gradually moved apart due to separate aspirations and insecurity

stemming from difference in perception of territorial lands and overlapping boundaries.

The ethnic Kuki population in Manipur is about 30 per cent of the 28.5 lakh population, according to the 2012 Census.

The Kukis believe they do not have adequate representation in the legislative assembly dominated by the Meiteis. In the 60-member House, 40 seats cater to the Meitei-dominated areas of Imphal Valley, while only 20 seats are reserved for the Hills dominated by the Kukis and Nagas that together constitute 45 per cent of the total population in Manipur. The Kukis increasingly saw in the Nagas both a competitor and a threat.

The Kuki Rising, 1917-1919' – also seen as the anti-colonial freedom struggle of the Kukis – was fought against the British to preserve their land. During WWII, the Kukis joined the Indian Army to fight the British again. The community today feels that despite never bowing to the British, their contribution in overthrowing the colonialists

has never been acknowledged, rather it has left them vulnerable even after India gained Independence.

In the early 1990s, the NSCN (I-M) allegedly masterminded a series of ethnic cleansing against the Kukis. And as a counter-hegemonic action against the Nagas of Manipur, a number of Kuki outfits were later formed. There are apprehensions that a settlement with the Nagas will escalate tensions of drawing district boundaries in areas of overlap.

“As the district boundaries are purely for administrative convenience, there are overlapping areas in the Naga and Kuki demands. Kukis have submitted a political map to the government interlocutor, as well as a detailed physical map showing villages in the districts of Manipur that will comprise the Kuki Territorial Council,” said Seilen Haokip.

‘Kukis are united’

The Kuki groups signed a Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement with the Centre and the state government in August 2008. The cadres

of these 23 groups have since been housed in 13 designated camps, with the government periodically extending the tripartite SoO agreement with both the 17-outfit KNO and the six-outfit United People's Front (UPF).

The agreement was set to expire on 29 February 2020, but was extended until 31 August 2020 during a joint meeting of the representatives of the three parties held in New Delhi earlier this year.

“Talks have been going well, but it all got delayed because of the pandemic. However, the Centre should take everyone on board. We are asking for a territorial council comprising existing three autonomous district councils – Churachandpur, Chandel and Kangpokpi (formerly Sadar Hills) – out of the six ADCs in Manipur,” said Seilen Haokip.

The United Naga Council (UNC), the apex body of the Nagas of Manipur, pointed out that the two Kuki bodies, KNO and UPF, have raised different demands in the past.

“The Kuki groups do not have a common demand placed on the table. While people in Churachandpur want a Kuki homeland, those in Kangpokpi want the Sadar Hills district. These two groups cannot come together,” said UNC vice-president, Stoneson Ringkangmai. The Sadar Hills District Demand Committee (SHDDC) was formed in 1974 for full-fledged revenue district status for the Sadar Hills ADC. The election of new SHDDC leaders in June 2011 led to the revival of the demand for Sadar Hills district, and this demand continues to be a bone of contention between the Kukis and Nagas of Manipur. The Nagas see it as an attempt to encroach upon their territorial land.

However, Seilen Haokip said: “Over a period of time, there were different deals, but it is all consolidated now. The KNO and UPF are together – a joint document on our demands has already been submitted through the Government of India interlocutor A.B. Mathur.”

The Kuki Inpi Manipur (KIM), the apex community organisation in the state endorsing

the demand for a separate Kukiland Territorial Council carved out of Churachandpur, Pherzawl, Chandel, Tengnoupal, Kangpokpi and Kamjong districts, also claimed that there has been “a sense of unity among the Kukis unlike the Naga factions”.

“The Kukis are united and it is on this basis that we are fighting for the territorial integrity of our land. We want the territorial council to be carved out of the districts of Kamjong, Senapati and Tamenglong, also taking into consideration the 13 contiguous Kuki areas in these districts that are dominated by the Nagas,” said Paolienlal Haokip, spokesperson for the KIM’s media cell.

“In the wake of the ceasefire with the Centre and their aspiration to carve out greater Nagalim, the NSCN (I-M) wanted to openly cleanse Kukis from certain districts like Tamenglong, Senapati, Ukhrul and Chandel. That genocide campaign and subsequent retaliation by the Kukis is what caused much of the ethnic battles in Manipur,” Paolienlal Haokip said.