

MIZORAM CM'S STAKE IN MANIPUR CONFLICT

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Mizoram Chief Minister Zoramthanga and members civil society organisations take part in a demonstration in Aizawl on July 25, 2023 to express solidarity with the Zo people in ethnic strife-torn Manipur. | Photo Credit: PTI

The ruling Mizo National Front (MNF) suffered a setback in central Mizoram in April. The extremist outfit-turned-political party, which won 26 of the 40 Assembly seats in 2018, lost all 11 seats in the Lunglei Municipal Council to the Zoram People's Movement (ZPM).

The ZPM had given the MNF a scare in 2021 by penetrating areas in Chief Minister [Zoramthanga's](#) Assembly seat – Aizawl East-1 – although it bagged six of the 19 Aizawl Municipal Corporation seats. Mr. Zoramthanga, a former extremist hardened by guerilla warfare, is also the president of the MNF.

The Lunglei loss, eight months ahead of the Assembly polls later this year, was an indication for the MNF and Mr. Zoramthanga, battling a fiscal crisis and charges of nepotism, that the 2023 polls may not be a cakewalk.

And then, Manipur happened.

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Ethnic affiliation is said to have made Mr. Zoramthanga vocal about the Kuki-Meitei ethnic conflict in Manipur that killed some 150 people and displaced about 60,000 since May 3. A drive against drugs and a 'tribal solidarity march' to protest a move for granting Schedule Tribe status to the majority Meiteis were said to be among the triggers.

Mr. Zoramthanga is a Mizo, the dominant community of Mizoram ethnically related to the Kukis and Zomis of Manipur, the Chins of Myanmar, and the Kuki-Chins of Bangladesh. They belong to the greater Zo community, sharing the same ancestry, culture, and tradition and speak almost the same language.

People aware of such ethnic bonding among indigenous communities in the northeast were not surprised when Mizoram protested the violence in Manipur, particularly after a video showing two Kuki women paraded naked in the Meitei-dominated Imphal Valley and allegedly raped went viral in July, two months after it took place on May 4.

Mr. Zoramthanga took the lead in expressing the Mizo angst against the alleged ethnic cleansing of the Kuki-Zo people in Manipur and supporting the demand for a separate administration for them. He tweeted: "...There is bloodshed all over. With no iota of doubt, those victims are my kin, my own blood. Should we quieten the situation by just being silent?"

There was another reason: more than 12,500 displaced Kukis from Manipur had taken shelter in Mizoram, adding to some 40,000 others who fled the conflicts in Myanmar and Bangladesh.

But the strongest of his critics acknowledged that Mr. Zoramthanga stole a march over his rivals in capitalising on Manipur's misery, reportedly keeping the Assembly elections in mind. He won many hearts by walking along with protestors on the streets of Aizawl. It inevitably drew comparisons with the response of other parties to the Manipur issue. While the once-formidable Congress has been facing a leadership issue in Mizoram, ZPM chief Lalduhoma, a former IPS officer, is believed to have lost the Manipur plot.

Mr. Zoramthanga did not just grab the opportunity that Manipur presented him. Holding his Manipur counterpart N. Biren Singh responsible for the ethnic violence, he expressed solidarity with the Kukis of Manipur, thereby – as his critics say – increasing the chances of the MNF to retain power in Mizoram.

Mr. Singh asked Mr. Zoramthanga not to "interfere" in Manipur, expressing his disappointment at his Mizoram counterpart's participation in a rally where abusive slogans were shouted against him. "A CM should not interfere in other States' affairs. I cannot meddle in something happening in Assam or Mizoram without the chief ministers' consent," Mr. Singh said.

Meitei organisations in Manipur have been burning Mr. Zoramthanga's effigies, advising him to focus on his own State. They reminded him of the "atrocities" the Mizos inflict on minority tribes such as the Chakma and the Bru, many of whom fled to Tripura following ethnic violence in 1997. They also pointed out how Mizoram reduced the quota for Chakma students in higher technical courses from 4% to 1%.

Many in Mizoram believe Mr. Zoramthanga's concern for the Kuki-Zomi people in Manipur could force the Manipur government to work toward peace. They also feel the "interference" in the affairs of another State could help the MNF ward off challenges in the 2023 Assembly polls.

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