

ULFA PACT: AN ACCORD OF SAFEGUARDS?

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United Liberation Front of Asom chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa arrives at Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport in Guwahati on December 31, 2023 after the signing of a peace accord between ULFA and the central and Assam governments in New Delhi. | Photo Credit: PTI

Can a peace pact with a faction of an extremist organisation do what six years of agitation to drive out 'Bangladeshis' and a follow-up exercise to update the National Register of Citizens (NRC) could not? Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma believes it can while conveying a narrowing gap between the Assamese and Bengali communities through a formula to determine who qualifies to be labelled indigenous.

On December 29, 2023, the pro-talks faction of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) [signed a tripartite peace deal](#) with the Centre and the Assam government. Unlike similar pacts with other Assam-based outfits, the formal agreement with the ULFA faction did not signal the end of extremism in Assam. This is because the hardline ULFA (Independent) faction headed by Paresh Baruah continues to wage war against the "Indian occupational forces" from its hideouts in Myanmar.

The Chief Minister, however, has claimed the accord with the 1979-born ULFA has paved the way to ensure legislative and land rights for the Assamese people. He said the pact has two major clauses – a commitment to following the principles applied for the 2023 delimitation exercise for future delimitation exercises in Assam and checking demographic changes by preventing people of one constituency from being registered as voters in another.

Opposition parties in Assam cried foul after the Election Commission (EC) published the final delimitation notification. The poll panel kept intact the number of Assembly and Lok Sabha constituencies at 126 and 14 while renaming one parliamentary and 19 Assembly seats. Most of the constituencies were reshaped too – Muslim areas from some mixed-population constituencies were attached to Muslim-dominated constituencies and non-Muslim areas were sliced off Muslim-heavy constituencies apparently to consolidate the voting strength of non-Muslims in certain constituencies. The number of reserved seats was also increased. The exercise was panned for aiming to reduce the representation of Bengali-origin Muslims in the Assembly. Muslims, often vilified as Bangladeshis, constitute more than 34% of Assam's total population and have been a deciding factor in at least 35 Assembly seats.

Editorial | [Endgame: On the tripartite agreement between the pro-talks faction of the United Liberation Front of Asom, Union government and the Assam government](#)

Soon after the presidential assent to the delimitation notification on August 16, 2023, Mr. Sarma said: “Assam should not be taken over by unfamiliar persons. We have thus worked religiously to protect *jati* (community), *mati* (land), and *bheti* (foundation) to retain the political power in the hands of our people.”

Three days after the signing of the pact with the pro-talks ULFA group headed by Arabinda Rajkhowa, the Chief Minister thanked the EC for “preserving the rights of the indigenous people in the first phase” and the ULFA for solidifying the safeguards with its political demands in the “second phase”, indicating both toed the government’s line.

Mr. Sarma said while the delimitation ensured the representation of the indigenous communities in at least 106 seats — a minimum of 96 in the Assamese-dominated Brahmaputra Valley and eight in the Bengali-majority Barak Valley — of Assam’s 126 Assembly seats, the ULFA accord would make only the communities inhabiting Assam for 100, 200, or 300 years eligible for representation for at least 40 more years. Referring to the Assam Accord of 1985, which prescribes March 24, 1971, as the cut-off date for determining citizens, he said it was logical to move away from such dates and consider people living in Assam for at least a century as Assamese. “Let us not be narrow and consider all such communities as indigenous,” he said.

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Assam’s political history has been marked by conflicts with Bengalis over culture and language. Barring Barak Valley, Bengali Hindus first came to Assam with the British in the mid-1800s primarily for clerical jobs and petty trades while the first set of Bengali Muslims settled for farming in the 1890s. But while the sizeable Bengali Hindus are considered the BJP’s major vote bank, the Bengali Muslims are not because of the perception that a majority of them crossed over during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 and thereafter for greener pastures. The Chief Minister’s formula for determining indigeneity was in keeping with the BJP’s blueprint for consolidating the votes of the non-Muslims and polarising the Bengali Muslims, seen as loyal to Congress and the All India United Democratic Front, further.

Among the other safeguards sought in the ULFA accord, the Chief Minister underlined the demarcation of protected belts and blocks for general people on the lines of the British-era tribal blocks and belts where land rights are reserved for certain indigenous communities. Many tribal blocks and belts were allegedly taken over by “doubtful citizens” decades ago. He further highlighted the clause for reserving land within a 5 km radius of temples, *namghars* (prayer halls), and *satras* (monasteries) for the Assamese. Alleged encroachment of lands belonging to these religious institutions by “Bangladeshis” has been a major issue of the BJP.

The Chief Minister said implementing the ULFA accord was a matter of coming out with the necessary Bills. But with the Lok Sabha polls a few months away, he made it more than apparent that the BJP’s Hindutva agenda was at work. “Many things you cannot do by the law but by spirit,” he said.

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