Political Space, Civil Society, and Conflict of Interest: The Case of Kuki Tribes of Manipur

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Abstract: *Political space in democracy provides opportunity to civil societies important roles to play. While this role can strengthen democracy, it can also, at the same time, create certain exclusive space for such civil societies themselves within the larger ambit of political system. Civil societies also influence political authority and governance for intended benefits. In Manipur's context, every recognised tribe are befallen with three contestations or conflict of interests. One is the problem of asserting one's tribe identity within the existing system and another is the exertion put on them toward building a larger indigenous or imagined nationality for better political space, and thirdly, they are under the bondage of their traditional institutions. This is more so amongst the Kuki tribes of Manipur. This article discusses the role of civil societies as manifested by the assertions of different Kuki tribes and that of the chieftainship in the process of building stronger Kuki nationality and the unfolding conflict of ideas and interests therein.*

Key words: *political space, civil societies, conflict of interest, tribe, nationality, Kuki*

I. Introduction

Political space in democracy provides opportunity to civil societies important roles to play. While this role can strengthen democracy, it can also, at the same time, create certain exclusive space for such civil societies themselves within the larger ambit of political system. Civil societies also influence political authority and governance for intended benefits. In Manipur's context, every recognised tribe are befallen with three contestations or conflict of interests. One is the problem of asserting one's tribe identity within the existing system; and another is the exertion put on them toward building a larger indigenous or imagined nationality for better political space, and thirdly, they are under the bondage of their traditional institutions. This is more so amongst the Kuki tribes of Manipur.

I will here discuss the role of civil societies as represented by various recognised Kuki Tribes in Manipur in the light of recent socio-political unfolding. Before doing so, it is of paramount importance to understand what the term 'Kuki' is really meant in this article. By "Kuki Tribes" I mean to give a *legislative definition* with the intention to include those tribes in North-East India who come under the term of "Chin-Kuki Linguistic Groups". And it is to attach the true national character, in the anthropological understanding, with the nomenclature 'Kuki' as oppose to 'one-dialect community' as being understood or meant by some among them which this article is very critical about. The assertive experiences of various Kuki tribes in the process of building the dubbed 'Kuki Nationalism' or a 'stronger' Kuki nationality are interesting in the sense that while 'nationalism' or 'nationality' is taking root by and large at least in the social and political psyche of the people, the tangibility of the 'nation' that is sought for is still absurd, at least with some of them. Secondly, how far building of Kuki nationalism for obtaining 'better political space' under the existing democratic system in India is possible or not will be looked into. It is hypothesised here that nationality for the Kuki group of people remains a farce due to the fact that the political space that is being sought through a process of building Kuki nationality has been marred by conflict of interests among themselves mainly due to failure to recognise their 'minor' differences following the hegemonic attitude built up by sections of elite class and the State system; and due to the absence of real and broader contestation with other non-Kuki communities; and due to confining their perspective at what they called 'clannish' end. So, the purpose of the article is to discuss the role of different Kuki tribes as civil society in relation to the role of some elites who wanted to create political space; and to find out whether their role can be healthily directed toward obtaining political space for themselves on the basis of tribe or for the larger nationality in one way or the other, and the apparent conflict of interest arising out of such role.

Of late, tribe recognition has become a means for asserting 'undefined' group identity and these tribal groups also act as and play the role of civil society in a democratic setup. The role thus played may be seen as an edifying mechanism for strengthening democracy. The same may also underplay the merit of democracy itself. Such role also however entails the process of eking out a space where and from which the working of democratic constitutionalism can be affected either for good or bad. When such space is created, it can be objective as well as subjective and such 'space creation' has become a mode of struggle to assert rights and also

to influence government to the advantage of a particular tribe or other interested group, in a political sense. Thus various such 'spaces' are being created by different tribes in the North-Eastern Indian States without the government having any healthy mechanism to channelize them to the Indian mainstream. Experience in India's North-East indicates that the 'space' failed to provide meaningful democratic role to the 'recognized tribes'.

II.   Theoretical discussion

Political space is defined as "the possible range of arenas of contestation by a variety of actors at various levels of society usually over mutually valuable resources and interests" (Chinsinga 2006). Political space thus offers "protagonists the opportunity to contest, challenge and influence the way in which decision about mutual interests and concerns are formulated, executed and even controlled" (Ibid, 2006). It is further stressed on "who creates, occupies and controls the entry to different types of spaces determines whose voice is heard and who accesses resources and decisions" (Ibid, 2006).

When these three theoretical propositions on political space are embodied in one it gives another three interesting mood points, namely "valuable resources and interest"; "opportunity for protagonists" in political space; and 'relation between political spaces and who creates, occupies, controls, and determines access to resources and decisions'. These theoretical references neatly cover present political and social environment of the Kukis in North-East India in general and Manipur in particular. Common culture, origin, history, legends, common system of chieftainship and traditional administrative system, and religious system comprises the "valuable resources" while building a strong 'political State or space' and sharing equal status in the 'space' as well as in the process of making it comprise the "interest". The "opportunity" to "protagonist" are such things like the 'constitutional provision of recognizing tribe' in an undefined manner, the coming of Christianity and the growth of Christian denominations and sects, growth of literatures, and of course, formation of political parties and social organisations, including underground movements, are the "opportunities" to protagonists to contest, challenge and influence the existing socio-political system.

Today the word 'political space' is used in conjunction with revolutionary movements and voices of civil societies including social and religious organizations resulting in such space being opened or closed. 'One definition current in the Anglo-European literature on social movements defines [political space] in terms of political opportunity structure [...] (Flint 1998, 5) It is summarized by Charles Brocket as "the presence of allies and support groups; the availability of meaningful access points in the political system; the capacity of the State for repression; elite fragmentation and conflict and the temporal location in the cycle of protest" (Brockett 1991). Human rights movements, students' movements for better education conditions, and the frequent articulations of other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Manipur such as Kuki Inpi Manipur (KIM) and (UNC) United Naga Council, are a few examples of supposedly highest level of civil organisations that are fighting for better political space within the existing political space provided by democratic governance. It also appears that "group identity" exists "as the chief medium of political mobilization" (Meetei 2014, 99). It may also be added that 'group identity' became one 'chief medium' for religious as well as denominational mobilization among the Kuki tribes.

Flints is of the opinion that "Democratization with equitable and sustainable grassroots development is a necessary condition for the creation of a stable and robust civil society" (Flint 1998, 2). The dichotomy is that while tribe recognition or identity is considered as a democratic provision the same utility of the provisions strongly slackens the grips of civil society of political space as individual tribe has less bargaining power in democratic process where number matters. In talking about 'interests', it is to be noted that the various Kuki tribes espoused interest which are more political than economic, welfares, and developmental, which are the hallmark of globalized societies.

The Latin term "tribus" has been transformed to mean "a group of people, families, clans or communities who share social, economic, political, etc ties and often a common ancestor and who usually have a common culture, dialect and leader" (Chambers 21st Century Dictionary, 2000, p. 1509). 'Tribe' that is given as a name to identify a group of people, who are 'supposedly' different from others in one way or the other, is the creation of the government with pre-defined intentions. One of the intentions is to develop and uplift them, and another could be preservation of mosaic Indian cultures as part of constitutional duty or as human right protection. In today's North-East Indian States tribe recognition or identity became a leitmotif but misnomer to the extent that they seem to be intractable. On the other hand, 'development', which is one of the most important reasons for recognising one as 'tribe' is far from being realized or it is given less thrust than it deserves. Seeking to get good reservation in jobs seems to be the most striking development against tribe recognition.

III.   Tribe recognition as a new structure of Civil Society

We see that spaces created by Indian system always lead to restructuring of society based on tribe identity mainly for political purposes than the socio-economic development perspective. It is necessary here to discuss why tribe recognition is more political and a matter of identity assertion than welfarism and a means of

mainstreaming the backwards. To do that, it is put this way: Tribe identity as provided in the constitution of India is a fluid. It simply swims according the political tides. It is not a permanent identity simply because it can be changed at political will. A recommendation of a State government culminating to a constitutional amendment can easily change or remove any such identity and they shall simply stand unrecognised and changed. Nevertheless, the sought for tribe recognition under the constitution remains very important for some. Again, nothing is mentioned in the Indian constitution about the role and function of 'tribes' except a way of identifying underdeveloped and backward sections of the Indian society. So here, it must be argued that historical identities and age-old relationships appear to be more important than that constitutional recognition as long as employing the purposes of tribe recognition for socio-economic uplifting and unifying the arbitrarily divided national group are concern because the people who are identified as 'tribe' prospers not in alien culture but in their own style of living. If cultural or identity recognition is supposed to be, as Meetei (201499) rightly pointed out, the "remedy for injustice as it redistributes socio-economic benefits" the story of tribal communities in North-East India during the last six decades of India's independence give different pictures. This is because, as opposed to what is anthropologically and historically understood, 'Tribe' under the Indian Constitution is a kind of new social structure to take the place of original 'society' and its system. Although we know that 'society', whether apolitical or otherwise, are based on culture, language and customs, the recognition of tribe in Indian system is not basically on these considerations and that is how it is more political than developmental.

So far, benefits accruable from 'tribe recognition' evade most of the tribes in Manipur. 'Tribe recognition' appears to be more about identity assertion for achieving certain space than socio-economic benefits among the Kuki tribes. Politicization of 'tribe' for seemingly 'nationality' idea pervades as seen from the apparent contemporary intention. But surprisingly, 'nationality' of the Kukis appears to be more durable before 'tribe-identity' came on the centre stage for nationality than it is today. Till recently, the civil population of a tribe were not even much aware of what their tribe organizations were doing at the grassroots levels.

It is worth recalling here that before Kukis were recognized into smaller tribes they were under one single body called then 'Kuki National Assembly' (KNA) as a socio-political platform for all the Kukis irrespective of minor differences in their dialects. Even in the religious arena also they united themselves based mainly on geographical considerations than dialect based. Kuki Baptist Association (KBA) was one such religious organisation the members of which comprised people from all dialect groups among them. In contrast, what we see today after tribe recognition based on dialect came is more appalling. The members of KBA are now divided into Thadou Tribe, Mate Tribe, Any Kuki Tribes, Kom Tribe, Vaiphei Tribe, Gangte Tribe, and non-recognised 'Khongsai' tribe and many more. On the other hand, tribe-based socio-political as well as religious organisations, that were so passionate about their distinct and separate tribe identities, could not hold all their tribe-members together within their respective folds. This indicates that tribe recognition is not a social necessity but political space for bargaining powers to control authority within and without. So the role of civil societies among the Kukis is nothing more than the dictates of the social, political and religious elites. Social, religious, and political organisations based on tribe identity exist at the expense of civil societies in its true sense.

Kuki Inpi Manipur (KIM) does not represent all the Kuki tribes. So are also the Hmar Inpui and Zomi Council, which are the three latest civil organisations on the fray to represent the whole Kuki tribes. It must be noted that KIM and Zomi Council are purportedly formed to act as the common socio-political platform for the whole 'Chin-Kuki Linguistic Groups'. Zomi Council serialized its constituent tribes, namely, Paite, Simte, Sukte, Vaiphei, Zou and Komrem while KIM does not have such serialization of its constituent tribes and simply draws its authority from some interested village chiefs, especially from Thadou tribe or Thadou-Kuki speaking groups. On one hand, KIM does not subscribe the 'Kuki nationality' and categorically stated that 'Kuki' is not a 'nation'. This stands of the KIM is opposed to the notion propounded by the so-called Kuki underground organisations whose ultimate objective is the unification of the 'Nation' who temporarily scattered along tribe identity for better political space. It is perhaps surprising as to how two opposing trajectories go hand in hand. Meetei (2014) contends that "groups that fail to obtain what they consider to be sufficient access to resources and opportunities with them [larger group] weave a narrative about their distinct identity and challenge the dominance of the other groups, often leading to further conflict" (Meetei 2014, 105).

'Tribe recognition' "closed" opportunities for civil societies to strongly assert themselves as a homogeneous entity in one hand. On the other hand, it also "opened" a space for the elite groups or vested individuals to challenge and contest the existing system mainly for non-homogeneous and exclusive gains. This is because 'tribe recognition' especially among the Kukis is haphazardly defined. In the present context, the writer can claim to belong to any one of the recognized Kuki tribes in an oscillating manner depending upon where his interest is.

Ngalengam (2014) opines that "the post independence ethnic political conflict emerged only with the emergence of the political elite from both communities [Kuki and Naga]. Ethnic based nationalism is employed as the most dominant ideology and tools by the election contesting elites to mobilize their ethnic masses in order

to draw them in his/her favour". During the British rule and before Manipur attain her statehood the "ethnic based nationalism" of the Kukis was undisturbed. However, the political space created after Manipur became a full-fledged State under the Indian Constitution ushered in diversities of interest among the ethnic Kukis. The leaderships among the Kukis are blinded in putting extreme faith in the Indian political system of tribe recognition with its developmental promises without realizing that they would be crippled today. Looking at this, it seems that the problem of the Kukis, to a great extends, is about 'elite bargaining'.

IV. Divided or Undivided Kukis

In the absence of any permanent social or political situations being reached that can bind them together the Kukis have nothing more than their blood to bind them. The President of KIM, Mr. Thangkhosei Haokip, once categorically stated that "we [Kukis] try at various level to be separated and difference from one another but we could not do so because we are of the same blood and thus inseparable". Yet if their trajectories remain to be 'policy' to assert one's identity above the others base on Indian system of categorization of tribe, it is not far that tribe-base identity would be thicker than their blood relations. So, unless they can project certain social and political trajectories which shall be beyond the "given identity", the Kukis would be cocooning themselves in, a condition which may be best described as 'the narcissism of minor differences' (Suan, 2011).

After India's Independence, the Kukis have been recognised as a homogeneous nationality in the name of 'Kuki' as 'Any Kuki Tribes'. Later in 1956, the 'any' of them were separately recognised into 29 tribes based on dialect. What was the reason or factor behind such sudden and unexpected policy change of the Union Government is best known to them but what resulted the breaking down of the 'united Kukis' is allegedly attributed to two factors: 1) the undivided Kukis was dominated by the Thadou-Kuki speakers who has been indeed numerically stronger if not otherwise, 2) adopting 'divide and rule' policy by the Government of Manipur State may be another factor. The Kukis are united at least at the village level in a primordial sense. But they are still fighting for their political rights because choosing "one's representatives [which] are a fundamental and basic human right in contemporary democracies" (Chinsinga 2006), is still denied to the villagers by the traditional political system. And the same institution does not give room for civil society to play democratic roles. It is true that traditional authorities "are strongly opposed to the introduction of alternative structures of leadership that appear to challenge the hegemony of their power, prestige, influence and authority" (Chinsinga 2006). Thus, Kukis are united in a sense and divided on the other. How far Kuki chieftainship and tribe-base organisations can fill the political space provided by democracy is a big question here.

Many historical events have taken place during the last decades to find an identity and, at the same time, organisation, that will represent the whole national group or as a means to assert separate national identity, namely, Vaiphei National Organisation (1944), Kuki National Assembly (1947), United Zoumi Organisation (1940), Paite national Council (1949), Hmar National Congress (1957), Simte National Council (1957), Tedim Chin Union (1961), Khul National Union (1947), Zomi Council (1993) (Suan 2011, 180), Kuki Inpi Manipur (1995), Indigenous Tribal Leaders' Council (ITLC) (2003), ZORO, etc. etc. But as discussed elsewhere, they all have failed to organise mass-based awakenings. ITLC, was formed by three major groups, namely, KIM, Hmar Inpui and Zomi Council but could not bring any tangible solution in bringing the estrange tribes together under one common platform except re-stressing that they are 'one people', 'one nation'. The success of these organisations in unifying tribes, if any, may be mutate and exclusive to a small sections only. In the final peace settlement following the violent clash between KNF and ZRA also, it was agreed that both nomenclatures 'Zoumi' and 'Kuki' should not be imposed upon others without being wilfully subscribed by any members (Suan 2011, 181). Does this has meant that the so-called 'Zoumis' and 'Kukis' have disowned their blood relationship? So, as long as the debate on the existing identities or names continues, the notion of 'Kuki nationality' and political space, which is discursive in recent literatures, may not see light of the day.

One prominent problem is that the Kukis had already fell victim of the State hegemony and so began creating parochial political spaces even before stabilizing their social system under the Indian political dispensations and this is only fuzzy. While parochial feeling looms large at one level, notice may be made that Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and United People's Front (UPF), the two umbrella underground organizations of the Kukis, have provided yet another kind of political space. Each of them is being supported by almost equal number of other smaller Kuki underground groups (UGs) for many reasons. This is why Suan (2011175) contends that "[...] the idea of a pan-Zo [Kuki] ethnic identity is very much alive as is borne out by their contemporary ethnic manoeuvres in Hills Areas of Manipur".

All the Kukis claimed to have been originated from a place called Khul or Khulpui and secondly they speak dialects of the same language. These are very strong materials rarely available around for asserting common identity and for formation of 'nationality'. However, their inability to communalize these traditional and cultural values is another big problem for them. There seems to be no much attention being paid on these values and the common principles culturally available could provide the frameworks for deeper and wider unity among them. Almost at every level, emphasis is on unity but at the same time they could not handle their minor

differences. This is simply a misleading situation. It must be remembered that unity is pre-defined by diversities at different levels. Wilkinson (2002) states that "[...] the very real cultural differences that exist not only between but within nation-states[or tribes-nation] are translated and formally recognised at political, institutional and even constitutional levels in features such as subsidiary, flexibility, differentiated integration, recognition of sub-state level of governance, and less formally in terms of competing claims to ultimate authority". Although Wilkinson gave it in different context, conceptualizing of 'unity' and 'diversities' can still be drawn from the statement. "Flexibility" in approach of unity and 'recognition' of the "subs" within them in the process of restructuring of their nationality may be the first step toward reconciliation and more importantly re-building of their 'nationalism'.

In the opinion of Nameirakpam Bijen Meetei (2014103) "...the larger groups such as Nagas and Kukis [in Manipur] attempted to expand their ethno-cultural boundary by bringing other ethnic groups, either through coercion or cultural absorption or both, within their own fold". There may be some truth in it but as far as the Kukis are concerned, the ethno-cultural elements defining them as 'one people' are not similar with other cases. And he simply is trying to belittle the Kukis. Because it is the 'given identity' in the Indian system that 'randomised' them and it worth to note here that time and again they called themselves as 'Eimi', 'Unao', which literally means 'our people', 'brother' and, as stated elsewhere, they re-affirmed, very recently, that they are 'one and the same people'. Kukis need not absorb or coerced any dialect group among them because they are bound together by culture, language, and more importantly, by blood. Nevertheless, when Meetei (2014103) says that "groups that had been subsumed under the larger 'identity' wanted to extract themselves and demanded what they saw as proper recognition of their own distinctive cultural and political identities", the hegemonic tendency hold by some of the Kuki elites and the failure to recognise and consider the diverse concomitant differences as a national group is of course admitted. The practices of democratic constitutionalism including 'tribe recognition' given to the people will stay while the aspiration to create a better political space under the influence of the influx of globalized world would not go and the search for viable nationhood under a name will push them to continue the search for one.

V. "Low-intensity Democracy"

Robinson's (1996) 'Low-intensity democracy' is "a system in which a small group actually rules and mass participation in decision-making is confined to leadership choice in election carefully managed by the competing elites". In the context of the Kukis, the Thadou tribe constituted the largest population along with at least 4 to 5 Members in Manipur Legislative Assembly and so always appear to have upper hands in the socio-political arenas. The truth is that there are some very small sections among them who are not willing to identify themselves with Thadou as the name of their tribe in spite of speaking the same dialect. In the absence of any alternative tribal name to denote them they underplay tribe recognition base on dialect and wanted to identify themselves as Kuki and fooled the Government to recognize them as 'Any Kuki Tribes'. This group wanted to articulate that their dialect is 'Kuki language' knowing very well that there are many other Kuki dialects. Such choice of identity assertion and the tendency to monopolize and manipulate 'Kuki Nationalism' flatly undermines 'democracy' and became the divisive line among the Kukis. On the other hand, Kuki tribes, other than the Thadou, wanted to aloof themselves off from Kuki nationalism because of the hegemonic attitude discussed above yet they are unable to formulate an identity that can stand against the influx of State hegemony and the policy devices of the majority community – the Meeteis.

Similar thing is the practice of traditional institution in the form of chieftainship which equally spoiled and closed the 'space'. It is necessary to highlight some demerits of chieftainships among the Kukis. There is no doubt that the existence and functioning of Kuki chieftainship is discursive than directive. Chieftainship cannot come under the term 'civil society' and neither can it be a 'State' or political institution as far as contemporary practices of the institution in democratic societies is concerned. The institution has so far failed to protect the interests of the people. Even though the institution of chieftainship among the Kukis has not yet been either removed or democratized, it has created another space for the people to play the role of civil societies and use the space for its own good. This assertion can be clearly illustrated: The Kukis have been victims of the pogroms of Manipur Nagas' 'National Socialist Council of Nagaland' (NSCN (IM)). The unquestionably subjects or villagers of the Kuki chiefs have been victims in the hands of their chiefs and NSCN (IM). When the NSCN (IM) in Manipur during the 1950s unleashed wanton human right violation against the Kukis by killing, uprooting their villages, the Kuki chieftainship could do nothing nor could fight back successfully. Nor could protect the Kuki populations from their adversary but got killed in hundreds with many of their villages burnt and uprooted. Neither could the chiefs protect their 'subjects' either in the 1990s 'ethnic cleansing pogrom' of the same NSCN (IM). In this case, the Kukis were butchered in hundreds and the lost of the so-called chief's land and villages was tremendously higher than the previous pogrom. And what happened today is more appalling. The so called protectors and providers, as claimed to be so by many in the true sense of the position of chiefs, have generally siphoned, pocketed and hijacked most of the developmental funds and programmes

mean for the general populace. One reason, however, for the chiefs to be so un-benevolent is that they are not paid from the State exchequer as is the case with their valley counterpart for their administrative role at the local level (see, Dena, 2008, p. 168).

The emergence of revolutionary organisations in the late 20th century is due to the failure of the chieftainship. However the emergence of revolutionary outfits does not deter the continued existence of chieftainship as traditional institution. At the same time, while politicizing chieftainship as their source of authority or political base, Kuki undergrounds don't seem to give much role to the chiefs.

This 'low-intensity democracy' seems to have work well among the Kuki tribes at different levels. At the same time, it must be remembered how Flint (1998) observes regarding building of nationality in the globalized world that "Globalization from below that takes racial, ethnic and gender inequalities seriously while constructing new and democratic forms of political practices, most people live and act locally even if they are thinking and networking at the global level as well" (Flint 1998, 20).

VI.   Concluding Remarks

Tribe-based identity assertions will persist among the tribal communities, particularly in Manipur, because minor differences among them will linger. But these differences do not seem to pose any big challenge in their national formation. At the same time, politics of 'national formation' among the Kuki tribes is also not likely to stop. It must be remembered that in recent years various interest groups among them have experienced failures in asserting their parochial rights and interests. Devising new nomenclatures that can encompass all dialect groups for national formation has also not seen any success. To give equal account of every group base on their dialects in the process of nation building by accommodating and giving each of them equal and same social and political status is what has not yet been tried. This is proposed because under democratic dispensation, rethinking tribe identity may rather become a nemesis for undoing tribal unity and it will not augur well for the idea of building 'nationality' that most tribal communities in the north-east India are aspiring for, for "[...] we must not forget why all politics is local" (Flint 1998, 21). So, the punch line for them is to adopt federalist approach by recognising diversities that has been manifested in their assertions of interest' among them. Then only will their struggle for bigger political space takes place at least for a better narrative discourse, if no reality of 'nationality of tribes' comes about.

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