

NAGALAND'S FRAGILE PEACE: NEED FOR A SETTLEMENT

For all these years, Nagaland has been a relatively peaceful state. The state saw long years of insurgency that ended, or so it seems, in 1997. The 1997 truce with the NSCN-IM was a turning point. The 2015 Framework Agreement promised a final deal. Eleven years on, it still remains a promise.

Three pressures now converge. First, patience is wearing thin. NSCN-IM leader Thuingaleng Muivah, 92, has repeatedly threatened a return to armed struggle. Such warnings are partly a bargaining tactic, and a people weary of bloodshed have little appetite for war.

Second, the Naga house is divided. The NSCN-IM faces a breakaway Eastern Flank, rival factions and the NNPGs, all competing for legitimacy, often through “taxation” of traders, contractors and residents. Fragmentation makes a deal harder to sign and militancy easier to justify.

Third, the social fabric is fraying. The October 10 clash between the Tikhir and Yimkhiong communities in Pungro, Kiphire, left one person dead, homes burnt and dozens displaced. Add Manipur’s turbulence, and the situation becomes even more fragile.

The Centre has made a sensible start. Appointing Ajit Lal as interlocutor and bringing a Union Minister into the talks addresses a long-standing demand, and the NSCN-IM has welcomed both. New Delhi cannot wish away Naga distinctiveness; Article 371A already protects Naga customary law and land.

A settlement could deepen that asymmetry through greater powers for Naga institutions, a recognised cultural flag and carefully drafted language on shared sovereignty, without a parallel constitution. The NSCN-IM, for its part, must accept that a sovereign flag and constitution are not on offer and stop treating them as the price of peace. Both parties should publish what has been agreed and what remains open; secrecy has bred suspicion.

Any deal must also include the NNPGs, the churches, the hohos and the eastern tribes, whose demand for greater autonomy deserves answers rather than delay. Locally, the state government must enforce the memoranda that settle inter-tribal disputes before the next festival becomes the next fire. Security forces must act with discipline and sound intelligence, since every Oting-style error hands insurgency a ready argument.

Naga fatigue with violence is the strongest safeguard against a relapse, but fatigue is not a policy. The window opened by Lal’s appointment is narrow. Delhi and Kohima should use it to turn a long ceasefire into a lasting peace before time and events decide for them.

CJP's real test: Resist the lure of electoral politics

Sabir Nishat

The Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) has reached a moment that could decide its future. Emerging as a student-led force against the failures of India’s examination system, particularly over the NEET controversy, the movement has achieved something few outside electoral politics ever do. It has put the government on the defensive and forced accountability at the highest level.

Its leaders have said they do not intend to enter electoral politics and will instead take up issues concerning the country, beginning with education reform. They should hold to that position, come what may.

The greatest danger to the CJP may not be failure. It may be success. As its leaders grow in popularity after mobilising students and young people around examination reform and other grievances, political parties will begin to see them as electoral assets. Offers, invitations and overtures are likely to follow.

The temptation will be considerable, and the CJP must resist it. If it wants to become a force to be reckoned with, it should stay outside the political establishment and use its growing public influence to compel governments, irrespective of which party is in power, to listen.

There is a fundamental difference between a movement and a party. A movement can question everyone; a party eventually has to defend someone. A movement can demand that a government act; a party in government must explain why it could not. A movement can remain uncompromising on an issue; a government must contend with laws, courts, bureaucracy, finances and competing interests. The transformation does more than give a movement access to power; it changes its nature. Assam offers a cautionary tale. The All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) spearheaded the Assam Movement against illegal immigration

from 1979 to 1985, mobilising a generation and gaining extraordinary public support. The signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 marked a historic moment, forcing the political establishment to negotiate with student leaders on the foreigners issue. Then came the decision that changed everything: the student leaders entered electoral politics.

The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) was formed by leaders associated with the Assam Movement and won the 1985 Assembly election. The very people who had stood outside the government demanding action became the government. But in winning the power to govern, the movement lost something that is often invisible until it disappears: the freedom to stand outside power and hold it to account.

The foreigners issue, the movement’s principal plank, did not vanish with an AGP government. Implementing the Accord proved far more complicated than the slogans of an agitation had suggested. Detection and deportation involved constitutional provisions, courts, tribunals, administrative machinery and, eventually, negotiations with the Centre. Four decades on, the Accord remains an unfinished chapter.

None of this means that every shortcoming of the Assam Movement can be traced to its leaders entering politics, or that electoral politics was itself a mistake. But the experience shows that once a movement becomes the establishment, its relationship with the people changes. Those who once demanded answers are suddenly required to provide them.

This is the trap the CJP should avoid. Today, it can tell the government that students deserve a fair examination system. It can demand accountability for paper leaks, question examination agencies and ask why students are repeatedly made to pay for administrative failures. It can back a reform introduced by one government and oppose another introduced by its rival. Nobody can dismiss it as just another

Opposition party.

That independence is enormously valuable, and it would not survive a move into electoral politics. Every demand would acquire a political colour. If the CJP criticised the government, opponents would say it was doing so for electoral gain. If it supported the government, critics would call it compromised. The very ambiguity that gives a movement its influence would vanish.

India already has hundreds of political parties. What it needs is a strong, independent civil society and youth movements capable of keeping governments under pressure. The CJP can become precisely that.

Its education campaign could grow into a national movement for examination reform: greater transparency in competitive examinations, accountability for testing agencies, stronger safeguards against paper leaks, time-bound investigations and institutional changes that stop students’ careers from being repeatedly disrupted. It can build expertise rather than candidates, produce research rather than manifestos, and mobilise students rather than voters. It can make governments compete with one another to address the issues young citizens raise. That would give the CJP something more valuable than a handful of Assembly or parliamentary seats: sustained public leverage. Political power does not necessarily mean occupying office. It can also mean being able to force those in office to respond.

A movement with no minister, MLA or MP can sometimes achieve what a small party with elected representatives cannot. It can mobilise public opinion without defending an electoral record and raise an issue without worrying about losing a constituency.

The CJP has already shown a version of this power. Its greatest achievement is not that one minister resigned. It is that students discovered that sustained collective action could force the establishment to acknowledge their concerns. That is the

power the movement should cultivate.

AASU’s leaders once held precisely this kind of influence. They could bring the state to a standstill, command enormous public respect and lend their words a weight far beyond any formal position. Once they entered electoral politics, that relationship changed.

The lesson is not that they should never have entered politics; history cannot be rewritten so simply.

It is that a movement’s greatest strength can sometimes be its distance from power. The CJP should understand this before parties begin turning its leaders into recruits.

Young leaders who have suddenly become nationally recognisable will attract political attention. Parties will see their organisational skills, popularity and ability to connect with young voters as assets. Some will be offered tickets. Some may be invited to join established parties. Others may be told they can achieve much more from inside the system. The argument will sound convincing. But the CJP should ask itself a simple question: is it better to become one more participant in India’s crowded electoral marketplace, or to remain an independent force capable of influencing every government?

Once a movement becomes a party, it must make compromises to survive. Once its leaders become politicians, they will have constituencies to protect, alliances to manage and electoral calculations to make. The movement will gradually become what it once challenged.

The CJP has an opportunity few student movements get. It can become a force multiplier, amplifying the concerns of students and young Indians and carrying them into national political discourse without becoming captive to any party. It can be the voice of people whose hopes too often disappear beneath the noise of electoral politics. It can make governments listen. And it can remain free to tell every government, whatever its colour, when it is wrong.

THE COST OF CHOOSING CONVENIENCE OVER QUALITY

Siddharth Roy

A crack in a bridge rarely begins on the day it becomes visible. It may begin years earlier, in a cheaper material, a hurried inspection, an overlooked calculation or a decision to postpone maintenance. Construction teaches a sobering lesson: what appears to be a saving today may simply be an expense transferred to tomorrow. Yet individuals, institutions and governments repeatedly choose immediate advantage over lasting value.

The reason is not always ignorance. Human beings are drawn to rewards they can see now and costs they can postpone. A contractor may protect a profit margin; an official may need to finish a project before a deadline; a government may prefer a ribbon-cutting ceremony to the less visible work of maintaining an old road.

This is the moral hazard of the shortcut. Those who make the decision are not always those who bear its consequences. A poorly built drain may flood homes years later, long after the engineer, contractor or administrator has moved on.

A road laid without adequate preparation



may require repeated repairs using public funds. Citizens pay twice: first for the original work, then for its failure. In extreme cases, the price is not money but lives.

Engineering offers a different philosophy. A structure is not judged only by what it costs to build, but by how safely and reliably it performs throughout its life. Materials, soil conditions, weather, maintenance and human use must be considered together.

The cheapest design on paper may become the most expensive in reality. Life-cycle costing, independent inspection and

preventive maintenance are therefore not bureaucratic burdens; they are forms of honesty towards the future.

The same principle applies beyond construction. Students may memorise instead of understanding, organisations may chase quarterly targets at the expense of resilience, and governments may favour visible announcements over patient institution-building. In each case, the shortcut confuses activity with progress. It rewards the appearance of success while weakening the foundations on which success depends.

The deeper problem is that our systems often measure what is easy to count, not what matters over time. A new bridge has a photograph; a bridge maintained for thirty years has no grand opening. Preventive

maintenance are therefore not bureaucratic burdens; they are forms of honesty towards the future.

tion attracts little applause because its achievement is an accident that never happens.

Public procurement should therefore reward durability, transparent quality checks and maintenance planning, not merely the lowest initial bid. Institutions must also make decision-makers answerable for foreseeable consequences.

Patience, however, is not an excuse for delay, nor is every cheaper option a shortcut. Innovation can reduce costs without sacrificing safety. The test is whether savings come from better thinking or from concealing risk.

A civilisation reveals its priorities not only through what it builds, but through what it is willing to maintain. The future cannot speak at today’s tender meeting or budget session. Its interests must be represented by people prepared to look beyond the immediate balance sheet. A shortcut may shorten the path to completion; it can also lengthen the road to regret.

The writer is a consultant to Rashtriya Raksha University under the Ministry of Home Affairs, a short story writer, columnist and contemporary affairs commentator; Views presented are personal.

Imran Khan’s last political foothold under siege

Bhopinder Singh

Pakistan’s “establishment” (read: military) has never been comfortable with political competition it cannot control. With Imran Khan incarcerated, his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) under sustained pressure, and Field Marshal Asim Munir presiding over an increasingly military-dominated political order, the prospect of Governor’s Rule in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) represents a decisive escalation. Khan’s remaining formal political power rests substantially in the province his party governs. Curtailing that authority would strike at the final institutional bastion of a politician whose popular appeal has survived imprisonment, exclusion and political pressure.

The immediate justification is national security. Following an emergency meeting chaired by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, the federal cabinet reviewed KP’s deteriorating security situation and cited the provincial government’s “deliberate disengagement from the fight against terrorism”. The Prime Minister’s Office said ministers proposed that the Prime Minister advise the

President to invoke Articles 232 and 234 of the Constitution, potentially enabling emergency measures and federal intervention in provincial administration.

The argument is politically potent. Pakistan faces a dangerous resurgence of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) violence, with militant attacks, fragile border security and deteriorating relations with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan placing enormous pressure on the state. No provincial government should escape scrutiny over its counter-terrorism performance. But a genuine security crisis does not automatically establish that extraordinary constitutional intervention is necessary, proportionate or politically impartial.

That distinction is where the controversy begins. For years, Khan’s opponents have branded him “Taliban Khan”, invoking his advocacy of negotiations with the Pakistani Taliban and opposition to certain military strategies. The TTP’s renewed violence now offers the federal government an opportunity to revive this association, portraying PTI as unwilling to confront militancy or sympathetic to forces destabilising Pakistan. Yet insinuation is not evi-

dence. The TTP, Afghanistan’s Taliban authorities and PTI’s provincial governance are related questions, but they are not interchangeable.

Allegations of deliberate accommodation or obstruction require substantiation. If the government possesses compelling evidence against the provincial administration, it should present that evidence and pursue lawful remedies. Otherwise, invoking terrorism to discredit political opponents risks transforming national security into an instrument of political management.

Articles 232 and 234 are not blank cheques for neutralising an inconvenient provincial government. Any intervention must satisfy constitutional requirements and withstand legal scrutiny. An emergency proclaimed in the name of national survival cannot become a shortcut around an electorate whose verdict has produced an unwelcome political outcome.

For the “establishment”, however, the strategic attraction is obvious. Khan’s incarceration has removed him from the immediate contest for executive power without extinguishing his political appeal. PTI’s provincial government provides an adminis-

trative platform from which the party can demonstrate its legitimacy, mobilise supporters and challenge the federal dispensation. KP is therefore more than a province. It is PTI’s remaining institutional sanctuary, a source of political visibility and an important base for sustaining its organisation.

Removing or subordinating its government would narrow the party’s capacity to translate popular support into practical influence. It would also diminish Khan’s leverage in future negotiations concerning his imprisonment, political rehabilitation or return to national politics.

The proposed intervention could complete, at the provincial level, what the broader pressure campaign against Khan has pursued nationally. His personal liberty is curtailed, his party’s federal political space is constrained, and now its last major governing platform faces potential federal control. The distance between electoral popularity and the exercise of power would become even more glaring.

Who benefits from that distance? The PML-N and PPP sustain the formal civilian governing arrangement, but the military remains Pakistan’s

most consequential power centre. Under Field Marshal Munir, its influence over national security and political competition remains central to understanding the country’s direction. Civilian institutions carry responsibility for governing, while unelected power retains enormous influence over the political environment.

The critical question is whether intervention in KP reflects constitutional necessity or a convergence of interests between a vulnerable federal coalition and a military “establishment” determined to prevent Khan’s political resurgence.

The government’s stated security concerns deserve examination, but so do the political consequences of its proposed remedy. None of this diminishes the suffering of KP’s citizens, who deserve protection from militant violence and competent administration. Effective counter-terrorism requires intelligence, policing, prosecution, coordination with federal agencies and a coherent strategy towards Afghanistan. It does not become more effective simply because an opposition party loses its provincial government.

Indeed, political exclusion may

deepen the instability the state claims to confront. If PTI supporters conclude that electoral victories are provisional, subject to reversal whenever they threaten entrenched interests, faith in constitutional politics will erode further. A state that confuses opposition with subversion risks making democratic dissent harder to distinguish from genuine security threats.

Ultimately, emergency rule in KP must be judged by evidence, constitutional necessity and the public interest, not political convenience. Strangling PTI’s last governing foothold might consolidate control in the short term, but it will neither defeat the TTP nor stabilise the Afghan frontier. Pakistan’s “establishment” may succeed in shrinking Khan’s formal domain of power. It cannot assume that coercion will extinguish his popular appeal or manufacture lasting legitimacy.

The deeper crisis remains a political order in which electoral mandates appear subordinate to unelected authority. Until that contradiction is addressed, Pakistan may achieve another consolidation of power without achieving the stability it desperately needs.