THE PROBLEM OF POLITICAL STABILITY IN NORTHEAST INDIA

Local Ethnic Autocracy and the Rule of Law

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Abstract

Inter-communal and insurgent violence has been entrenched in Northeast India for decades. At present, however, attacks against central government forces are in abeyance. This downturn reflects the consolidation of local regimes of corruption and repression. New Delhi tolerates and even supports such localized autocracy as a means to manage security threats.

Northeast India has a history of long-running and violent autonomy movements on behalf of a number of ethnic groups. At present, however, relative stability prevails there.[1] New Delhi has been successful in using cross-border military cooperation with Bhutan and

1. Lawrence E. Cline, "The Insurgency Environment in Northeast India," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 17:2 (2006), p. 126.

Myanmar to put pressure on insurgents, and ceasefires are in place with some of the largest militant groups in the area.[2] At the same time, however, inter-communal and partisan violence remain common, and popular demands for local autonomy, boundary changes, and new states continue to proliferate, irrespective of the central state's supposed military "successes" in the region.

The combination of a low number of attacks on government targets and persistently violent local politics can be explained, in part, by the center's strategy for maintaining stability in the Northeast—a strategy based on support for localized autocracy.[3] New Delhi invests in state and group leaders in the Northeast by distributing substantial financial and coercive resources and by tolerating the erosion of democracy and the rule of law. This support allows local autocratic leaders to consolidate power and repress violence against what New Delhi considers the most sensitive targets, such as key infrastructure and industrial facilities. When successful, this strategy is a means for the Indian state to minimize pressing national security threats at relatively little cost to itself. However, investing in localized autocracy promotes corruption and localized political violence. This policy also gives elites incentives to organize violence against central government targets if the opportunity arises for their own parochial interests, as will be discussed below.

To be sure, there is vigorous debate over the quality of Indian democracy in general, and the country's democratic deficiencies are generally thought to be most severe on the sub-national level.[4] Flaws in democracy in Northeast India have been catalogued elsewhere.[5] This article goes beyond such a catalogue to focus on how the center *creates and sustains* localized autocracies in Northeast India. It argues that the trajectory of these local regimes determines much of the evolving security situation in the region. Instead of focusing on New Delhi's motivations and perceptions, this article analyzes the impacts of the center's policy in the Northeast. Thus, this article complements a growing literature critiquing the role

2. For details, see Renaud Egreteau, "India's Ambitions in Burma: More Frustration Than Success?" *Asian Survey* 48:6 (2008), p. 936; Arijit Mazumdar, "Bhutan's Military Action against Indian Insurgents," ibid., 45:4 (2005), p. 566.

3. On the generalized phenomenon of "subnational authoritarianism," see Edward L. Gibson, "Boundary Control: Subnational Authoritarianism in Democratic Countries," *World Politics* 58:1 (2005), p. 101.

4. Myron Weiner, *The Indian Paradox: Essays in Indian Politics* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1989).

5. Sanjoy Hazarika, "Ethnic Conflict and Civil Society in the Northeast," *The Little Magazine* (New Delhi) 3:5–6 (March 2003).

of ideology and misperception in India's Northeast policies[6] as well as sympathetic accounts of New Delhi's intentions.[7]

This essay proceeds as follows. The next section provides background on Northeast India and discusses the current security situation there. The third section introduces the center's reliance on localized autocracy and illustrates this phenomenon through a discussion of the Gorkhaland movement in West Bengal. The fourth section demonstrates how support for local autocracy to maintain political stability has become a generalized pattern of governance in Northeast India. This discussion concentrates primarily on a number of regional minority autonomy movements, although the description of localized autocracy is quite relevant to the states of Assam and West Bengal as well, if not to much of India. The fifth section discusses the potential long-term political impacts of the center's strategy of supporting local autocratic strongmen to maintain ethnic peace. The article's conclusion sums up its main conceptual arguments.

The Origins of Political Instability in Northeast India

Northeast India encompasses the states of Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim. Between Sikkim and Assam lie the Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, and Cooch Behar Districts of West Bengal. A narrow corridor in Darjeeling District is all that connects the Northeast to the rest of India. The Northeast region of India has seen decades of insurgency and is typically characterized as being exceptionally diverse, with a bewildering number of politically salient ascriptive identities.[8]

In terms of colonial background, the British East India Company conquered Bengal in 1757. To the northeast of these Bengal possessions lay the Brahmaputra River valley, heavily populated by ethnic Assamese. The valley was incorporated into the company's holdings in 1826 through war with Burma. Company control extended more gradually into hill areas

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6. For example, see Kamal Mitra Chenoy, "Nationalist Ideology, Militarization, and Human Rights in the Northeast," *Eastern Quarterly* 3:1 (2005), p. 20; and Girin Phukon and N. L. Dutta, eds., *Politics of Identity and Nation Building in Northeast India* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1997).

7. For example, see Lt. Gen. N. S. Narahari, *Security Threats to North-East India: The Socio-Ethnic Tensions* (New Delhi: Manas Publications, 2002); and B. P. Singh, *The Problem of Change: A Study of North-East India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987).

8. Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, India, 2005); Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers in the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast* (New Delhi: Viking, 1994); and Lt. Gen. J. R. Mukherjee, *An Insider's Experience in India's North-east* (London: Anthem Press, 2005).

surrounding the Bengal and Assam plains. After the British crown took over these regions, many of these hill areas and some zones in the plains were designated "tribal," closed to immigration, and kept under distinct administrative regimes. In addition, the Bengal and Assam region was interspersed with princely states, each of which had a discrete treaty relationship with the British, including Bhutan, Nepal, Sikkim, Tripura, Manipur, Cooch Behar, and the Khasi states. At the eastern end of the Brahmaputra valley, the British claimed parts of the Himalayas but never pushed into these more mountainous areas. This varied colonial-era map both reflected and reinforced tremendous political and ethnolinguistic heterogeneity.[9]

Both the British Raj and the independent Indian government created legal regimes around land, government employment, and local representation, with the intention of prohibiting new settlements or cultivation in lands occupied by the autochthonous population. Enforcement of these laws has always been uneven, particularly because of policies encouraging migration to areas opened to tea cultivation and other industries. The more remote hill tribes remained relatively isolated from migration and cultural integration, while the exposed plains tribes lost substantial areas to migration. Colonial northern Bengal was an exception, with many hill tribe areas converted into tea plantations and British hill stations.

The post-independence political status of the Northeast was settled in a piecemeal fashion. Partition in 1947 split hill tribes living on the new border with East Pakistan; further east, the separation of Burma from British India had already divided hill communities a decade earlier. The princely states of Tripura and Manipur acceded to India as centrally administered territories, while the Khasi states and Cooch Behar were dissolved into Assam and West Bengal, respectively.[10] On the other hand, Nepal remained sovereign, while Bhutan and Sikkim became monarchical protectorates. The latter was annexed to India in 1975.

Bringing these areas into newly independent India was sometimes a fraught process, often marred by coercion. Controversy over accession to India contributed to three separatist insurgencies within the first decades of the country's independence. In 1956, the Naga National Council (NNC)

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9. There are striking continuities between the colonial and post-colonial Northeast. The legacies of the colonial period, in fact, continue to be debated. For example, see Bodhisattva Kar, "When Was the Postcolonial? A History of Policing Impossible Lines," in Sanjib Baruah, ed., *Beyond Counter-Insurgency: Breaking the Impasse in Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 49; and Peter Robb, "The Colonial State and Constructions of Indian Identity: An Example on the Northeast Frontier in the 1880s," *Modern Asian Studies* 31:2 (1997), p. 245.

10. The Indian Constitution granted autonomous territorial councils to some hill tribe areas in Assam. What is now Arunachal Pradesh and part of contemporary Nagaland were previously the North East Frontier Agency, nominally part of Assam but directly governed by New Delhi.

declared independence from India; a separatist insurgency began in 1964 in Manipur; and, in Assam, the Mizo National Front (MNF) rebelled two years later. Tactical factors aggravated accession-related violence in the Northeast compared to, for example, Hyderabad, where resistance to accession was put down relatively quickly. In the Northeast, difficult terrain; the presence of international borders providing militants with access to external aid and safe havens; and, for some tribes, military training and access to arms as a legacy of participation in World War Two all helped sustain insurgent violence.

The center's response to these early challenges devastated the prospects for peace. Up until the 1970s, the Indian government used collective punishment, forcible relocation, and military occupation in an attempt to end insurgencies in the Northeast.[11] In addition to creating a severe sense of grievance among some groups, this strategy rendered civil and political institutions virtually meaningless by concentrating power over local affairs with the security forces. Even today, the military remains the only Indian institution with any significant presence in parts of this region.

Despite continuing anti-New Delhi sentiments, however, the core of contemporary conflict in the Northeast is local rivalries—particularly resource disputes between tribal areas; between hills and plains areas; and between "sons of the soil" and migrants from the Bengali plains, Nepal, or central India.[12] As elsewhere in India, economic and political concessions are generally earmarked for various sociocultural groups rather than, for example, economic classes. As a result, electoral politics in the Northeast is organized primarily around linguistic and tribal groups seeking reservations in employment or education, land protection, and autonomy arrangements, including special local councils or new states.[13] For example, Nagaland,

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11. For details, see Chenoy, "Nationalist Ideology," p. 20; Hazarika, *Strangers in the Mist,* pp. 90–97; C. Nunthara, *Mizoram: Society and Polity* (New Delhi: Indus Publishing Co., 1996); R. N. Prasad, *Government and Politics in Mizoram* (New Delhi: Northern Book Center, 1987); and A. S. Atai Shimray, *Let Freedom Ring: Story of Naga Nationalism* (New Delhi: Bibliophile South Asia, 2005), pp. 71–75.

12. Myron Weiner, *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1978); Myron Weiner, Mary Fainsod Katzenstein, and K. V. Narayana Rao, *India's Preferential Policies: Migrants, the Middle Classes, and Ethnic Equality* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

13. India's Parliament, state assemblies, civil service, most educational institutions, and government-run industries have quota systems that reserve slots for disadvantaged castes and tribes. In some cases, this quota system has also been extended to create employment and educational reservations for those who have lived in a particular area for an extended period of time. Land restrictions limit the transfer or sale of land to the members of certain groups. For all-India analysis of the reservation systems, see Weiner, Katzenstein, and Rao, *India's Preferential Policies.* On the Northeast, see Rajesh Dev, "Ethno-Regional Identity and Political Mobilization in Meghalaya: Democratic Discourse in a Tribal State," in Ramashray Roy and Paul Wallace, eds., *India's 2004 Elections: Grassroots and National Perspectives* (New Delhi: Sage, 2007), p. 240; Sandhya Goswami

Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, and Meghalaya were hived off from Assam; the union territories of Tripura and Manipur were elevated to statehood. New autonomous district councils have also been created below the state level in both Assam and West Bengal.

The Trajectory of Violence

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Naga, Manipuri, and Mizo insurgencies formed a belt of disorder in the hills south and east of the Assam plains. The 1971 civil war in Pakistan, which led to Bangladesh's independence, also had dramatic implications for the region's security. First, the war generated a massive wave of refugees into India. Along with subsequent economic migration of Bengali-speaking Muslims from Bangladesh and laborers from central India, this refugee crisis aggravated resource competition. In Tripura, a tribal movement against Bengali migration started as early as 1967, and there was significant inter-communal violence between tribal and Bengali militants in 1979 and 1980. Tribal insurgency continued even after the army was ordered into the state.[14]

In Assam, an anti-immigrant movement started in 1979 and generated several waves of severe violence and disorder. A 1985 settlement brought a student-led coalition of anti-immigrant activists to power in Assam. That government was largely ineffectual, in part because of continuing insurgency by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). ULFA's temporary dominance of many Assamese areas, which peaked in 1990, was a new and profound barrier to the center's projection of power into the minority regions of the Northeast. ULFA also began sponsoring insurgents from other communities such as the Bodos in northwest Assam and the Rajbanshis on the Assam/West Bengal border.

The 1971 war also had a major impact on the established hill tribe insurgencies in Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram. These militants temporarily lost a base of operations and foreign support from what had been East Pakistan, leading to increased numbers of surrenders and requests for negotiations. Most importantly for the contemporary security situation, in 1975, parts of the Naga insurgent movement—the NNC—signed the Shillong Accord.[15] This was New Delhi's first significant strategic victory against the Naga insurgency. The rebel hold-outs who refused to abide by the agreement

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and Monoj Kumar Nath, "Politics of Separatism in Assam," in ibid., p. 229; and Sandhya Goswami, "Assam: Mixed Verdict," *Economic and Political Weekly* 39:51 (2004), p. 5523.

14. Cline, "The Insurgency Environment."

15. The Shillong Accord was a ceasefire agreement. A portion of the NNC agreed to move into disarmament camps and begin negotiations for a settlement within the terms of the Indian Constitution. The Accord's important impact was in splitting the NNC, rather than containing any specific settlement of key issues in the Naga conflict.

spent the next 15 years in chaotic internecine rivalry. Starting in 1991, however, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak and Muivah (NSCN-IM) emerged as the most powerful Naga militant group.[16] Like ULFA, the NSCN-IM began aggressively to support insurgents beyond Nagaland by helping them obtain funding, arms, training, and cross-border sanctuaries. By doing so, both ULFA and the NSCN-IM have been able to substantially increase the territory over which the police and military must deploy, diluting the Indian government's security presence in the region. NSCN-IM has, in fact, been even more successful than the Assamese insurgents in promoting the proliferation of small rebellions.

Thus since the mid-1980s, Northeast India's security situation has been characterized by numerous atomized, violent movements. In 2006, one observer estimated that there were about 50 active insurgencies in the Northeast.[17] Conflict between militants includes internecine turf battles and violence aimed at rival ethnic groups. Northeast Indian militants tap into the myriad rivalries sustained by intense competition for land and employment and the system of community-based reservations used to allocate these scarce resources.

A more important factor behind ongoing insurgency is the weakness and corruption of formal political institutions in the region. Many of the small insurgent groups in the Northeast lack the capacity to launch attacks on central government targets. Instead, they flourish by simultaneously partnering with and preying on weak local governments through extortion, partisan clashes, and criminality. Politicians in the Northeast—especially in Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, and West Bengal—are routinely coerced or bribed by insurgents and, in turn, deploy militants to intimidate voters and rivals.[18]

The resulting pattern of violence in the Northeast is one of relatively little direct targeting of Indian security force personnel, but rather persistent attacks on civilians and between militant groups. For example, there were only 40 security force and police deaths in the Northeast in 2008, compared to 90 in Jammu & Kashmir and 214 in conflicts with left-wing Naxalite militants in central India.[19] The 2008 death toll for government

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16. The NSCN-IM is named for its leaders Isak Chisi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah. The NSCN-K designation refers to the leader of that group, S. S. Khaplang. The splits in the NSCN are described in detail in Sashinungla, "Nagaland: Insurgency and Factional Intransigence," *Fault Lines* 16 (2005), pp. 89–116.

17. Cline, "The Insurgency Environment."

18. For an in-depth discussion, refer to Hazarika, "Ethnic Conflict"; and Mukherjee, *An Insider's Experience*.

19. Unless otherwise noted, fatality data in the article are taken from the South Asia Terrorism Portal, available at <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/database/indiafatalities.htm>. The data include all insurgent violence in Assam. This source may underestimate civilian

forces in the Northeast also compared favorably to the region's average of about 165 security force and police deaths per year from 1994–2005. By contrast, the same area saw 1,014 civilian and militant deaths in 2008, close to the annual average of 1,018 militant and civilian fatalities during the period 1994–2005.

Compared to fighting elsewhere, the Northeast also has a far smaller proportion of security force deaths. Civilian and militant deaths in 2008 were 26 times higher than security force fatalities. In contrast, Jammu & Kashmir saw 451 civilian and militant deaths in 2008 and 90 security force fatalities—a five-to-one ratio. In leftist violence in central India, 424 civilians and militants were killed in 2008, compared to 214 security personnel—a two-to-one ratio. The present pattern of violence in the Northeast reflects not only a wave of small insurgencies but also the consolidation of localized autocracy in several key areas. This is examined in the next section.

The Gorkhaland Movement and Localized Autocracy in Darjeeling

Scholars have examined the development initiatives, formal institutional reforms, and security policies that New Delhi uses in the Northeast in the hopes of resolving various conflicts there.[20] However, the manner in which local elites are empowered by these arrangements is also and ironically central to understanding the persistence of regional violence.

The center's first response to minority violence in the Northeast is generally to support the existing state government's attempts at repression. For example, New Delhi resisted the division of Darjeeling or Cooch Behar from West Bengal throughout the 1980s and 1990s and also tried to prevent the reorganization of Assam throughout the 1950s and 1960s.[21] In addition to a large military presence, the Northeast also has much higher per capita levels of police than much of the rest of the country.[22] If a local conflict proves to be beyond the state government's control, the center may agree to a redistribution of political power, for example by creating new states or autonomous councils.

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and militant deaths, but comparing this source's figures between years and regions is nonetheless still informative because such undercounting likely holds constant for all observations.

20. For example, Baruah, *Durable Disorder;* and Mukherjee, *An Insider's Experience.*

21. On Assam, see Dilip Mukerjee, "Assam Reorganization," *Asian Survey* 9:4 (April 1969), pp. 297–311.

22. Home Ministry statistics for 2007 show an average of 303 civil police and 590 civil and paramilitary police per 100,000 people in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. These figures in non-Northeastern states average 166 and 204, respectively. All eight states have higher than average total police presence per capita. Data retrieved from IndiaStat, "State-wise Police Population and Area Ratio in India (as on 01.01.2007)," <http://www.indiastat.com>, accessed October 31, 2009.

Ceasefires and peace settlements also attempt to placate local rivals by temporarily stopping the violence and proffering massive economic transfers from the center. The center's financial and coercive support allow local leaders—ex-militants or civilians at the state level or below—to consolidate an area of control. In particular, diversion of public resources, repression of smaller groups, electoral cheating, and violence against rivals are important means by which local leaders establish themselves. A leader who has consolidated control has an incentive to repress attacks on sensitive targets in order to avoid the central government's interference in his locale. The result is a drop-off in attacks involving the security forces, although the leader may at the same time exploit internecine and inter-communal conflicts to enforce and expand local control. The extremely corrupt management of government funds flowing to these local autocratic leaders and their locales is well-documented.[23]

The case of the Gorkhaland movement, detailed below, in the Darjeeling District of West Bengal is presented here to illustrate the dynamics of localized autocracy.[24] In the 1980s, a movement of Nepali speakers demanding that the Darjeeling District be converted into a Gorkhaland state turned violent. The central and West Bengal governments reestablished stability by concentrating power in a single political party (the Gorkha National Liberation Front, GNLF) and, ultimately, a single person (the GNLF's leader, Subash Ghising). This leader's political demise has recently pitched the area back into turmoil, a possibility inherent in the use of local autocracy for conflict resolution.

Advocates of the Gorkhaland movement argue that the Darjeeling District along with areas of the neighboring district of Jalpaiguri should be made into a separate state within the Indian union. This would acknowledge the area's distinct linguistic and ethnic characteristics as well as its historically separate administration from Bengal during the colonial period. Proponents further argue that the West Bengal government has extracted wealth from the region for the benefit of Bengalis but invested little in return.

Demands for separation from Bengal date back to the early 1900s, but they came to national prominence at the beginning of the 1980s. As in

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23. For example, see Duncan McDuie-Ra, "Between National Security and Ethno-nationalism," *Journal of South Asian Development* 3:2 (October 2008), p. 185; Ajai Sahni and J. George, "Security and Development in India's Northeast: An Alternative Perspective," in K. P. S. Gill, ed., *Terror and Containment Perspectives of India's Internal Security* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing, 2001).

24. For detailed discussion, see Subhas Ranjan Chakrabarty, "Silence under Freedom: The Strange Story of Democracy in the Darjeeling Hills," in Ranabir Samaddar, ed., *The Politics of Autonomy: Indian Experiences* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2005), p. 173; and Dilip Kumar Sarkar and Dhrubojyoti Bhaumik, *Empowering Darjeeling Hills: An Experience with Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council* (Delhi: Indian Publishers Distributors, 2000).

most of West Bengal, the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) was politically dominant in the Darjeeling Hills at the time, although the All India Gurkha League (AIGL) controlled the Darjeeling state assembly seat. Both the CPI-M and the AIGL nominally supported greater regional autonomy for Darjeeling. However, the CPI-M proved ineffectual in pushing for a constitutional amendment to create a Gorkha autonomous council. In 1981, the AIGL's headman, Deoprakash Rai, passed away. Rai had long been the most powerful politician in Darjeeling and after his death, the AIGL fell into internal disorder.[25]

The AIGL's faltering created a political opening for a party that would push Darjeeling autonomy more aggressively than Rai and the AIGL had done. This opening was filled by the GNLF. Subash Ghising, who had served in the military and was also a popular author, was the charismatic head of this movement; C. K. Pradhan and Chhatrey Subba managed its militant wing, the Gorkha Volunteer Cell (GVC). The GNLF led strikes and demonstrations to put political pressure on both Kolkata, the West Bengal state capital, and New Delhi for negotiations. At the same time, Darjeeling CPI-M militias and the GVC launched attacks against each other, hoping to intimidate or drive away each others' cadres and supporters. By 1988, up to 300 people had died, most in GVC versus CPI-M violence.[26]

After a 40-day general strike in the Darjeeling Hills in 1987, both the West Bengal government and India's central government agreed to negotiations with the GNLF. Their 1988 Memorandum of Settlement called for a Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) to be created by a statute of the West Bengal government. The council had both legislative and administrative control over a variety of local matters, most related to economic development and management of natural resources.

The terms of this settlement and the manner in which it was implemented demonstrate the use of localized autocracy to create stability. Both the state and the center remained passive as the GNLF used violence and corruption to consolidate its power within Darjeeling politics after the accord. The GNLF continued to target Nepali-speaking CPI-M opponents as well as smaller political parties. In fact, the design of the DGHC legislation helped the GNLF eliminate its rivals. Elections to the council were, by statute, supervised by the West Bengal Ministry of Hill Affairs, headed by a political appointee, not the apolitical state election commission. In the second and third DGHC elections, GNLF intimidation of candidates and poll irregularities

25. For a discussion, see D. S. Bomjan, *Darjeeling-Dooars: People and Place under Bengal's Neo-Colonial Rule* (Darjeeling: Bikash Jana Sahitya Kendra, 2007).

26. This fatalities estimate is taken from "Political Murders Rock Darjeeling," *Nepali Times* (Kathmandu), June 15–29, 2003.

went unchallenged by officials. The state government also did not block Ghising's massive diversion of the council's resources into patronage networks. For example, the last external audit of the DGHC was performed in 1992—a means of oversight that neither the state nor the center has chosen to revive. Ghising repeatedly extracted small expansions of the DGHC's power and new financial transfers from both the state government and New Delhi.

By the mid-1990s, democratic political opposition to Ghising had been eliminated. Ghising also clamped down on threats of militancy to protect his own power—a course compatible with New Delhi's and Kolkata's preference for stability in the area. The GVC was disbanded, and the GNLF's enforcement wing was moved under Ghising's direct control. In 2000, Chhattrey Subba, one of the ex-leaders of the GVC, founded the Gorkhaland Liberation Organization (GLO). The group demanded an independent state and threatened a guerilla campaign. Subba was jailed in 2001 for alleged involvement in a plot on Ghising's life, although a case was never brought against him. In 2002, C. K. Pradhan, the other ex-head of the GVF, was assassinated. The Darjeeling police made no arrests.

As Ghising's reign continued, few in Darjeeling were willing publicly to criticize the DGHC regime because of the threat of violence against dissenters. However, the DGHC's corruption and failure to significantly improve Darjeeling's public services also made it and the GNLF extremely unpopular. Concerned that the GNLF might not be able to win another election, Ghising convinced the state government to repeatedly postpone the 2004 scheduled DGHC polls. Kolkata ultimately dissolved the council and appointed Ghising caretaker, giving him sole control of the institution's resources.

Ghising's explanation for this suspension of democracy was that the DGHC needed to be added to the 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which is the national list of tribal councils. This proposal was, however, unpopular with many Nepali-speakers. Creating such a body in Darjeeling would have necessitated a legal redefinition of Nepali castes as "tribes," which some in the region considered demeaning. Others feared that the change in designation would apply only to Hindus, excluding Buddhists and other religious minorities,[27] or that Nepali-speakers who belonged to "scheduled castes" entitled by the Indian Constitution to special concessions would lose these privileges.

Seizing an opportune political moment, Bimal Gurung, Ghising's second in command, broke from the GNLF in October 2007 to form the Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (Gorkha People's Freedom Front, GJMM or

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27. In central India, most groups that are designated as tribal have a mixture of Hindu and animist religious traditions. Hindu nationalists have argued that tribal and caste reservations should be forfeited if an individual converts to another religion.

GJM). The GJMM's goals were to block the 6th Schedule designation, remove Ghising from power, and obtain a Gorkhaland state. Gurung controls substantial coercive resources because, in the opinion of local informants, he was a leading political thug in the GNLF. He is also quite wealthy. The GJMM organized rallies, road blockades, general strikes, and sieges of government buildings in support of its platform.

In the months after the GJMM's formation, Kolkata and the central government attempted to restore Ghising's dominance by pushing for the DGHC to be added to the 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution as quickly as possible. The central government tried to ram the 6th Schedule amendment through the national legislature, asking a joint session to pass the bill without following usual procedures. When this move failed, the delay proved fatal. Massive GJMM-led protests throughout Darjeeling District forced Ghising to resign in March 2008.

Darjeeling is currently in a state of political limbo. The GJMM is the de facto local government, although there have been no elections for Darjeeling's local institutions since 1999. The party enforces periodic general strikes and moratoriums on some government offices. It therefore maintains a veto over the interfaces between the state government and the local population, such as provision of utilities or receipt of taxes. In essence, the GJMM has set about establishing its hegemony within Darjeeling, including harassing smaller parties and resisting public debate about its actions. In fact, several people have died, and rioting has been sparked by incidents between the GJMM and its remaining opponents in Darjeeling. The GJMM is also trying to build a following in the ethnically heterogeneous areas that surround the Darjeeling Hills, which has resulted in small inter-communal clashes between Bengali speakers, Nepali speakers, and tribal groups.

Kolkata and the center have already appeared to adjust to the change in leadership of Darjeeling's local autocracy. This is evident by the fact that the GJMM has held preliminary talks on greater autonomy with the state and national governments. In addition, both the ruling Indian National Congress Party and the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party, BJP) actually sought the GJMM's support for the 2009 national parliamentary elections. In early January, the police attempted to arrest GJMM Vice President Pradeep Pradhan on charges of assault but failed after Gurung threatened unrest. The Darjeeling police superintendent's comment to the *Times of India* is a telling indicator of the tacit support the state and national political leadership provide for the GJMM's localized autocracy: "Trying to arrest a GJM leader proves that police are still a force to reckon with. It's for the government to show interest and a strong will."[28]

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28. "Wanted GJM Man Freed after Gurung Threat," *Times of India,* January 6, 2009.

It is possible that opposition to the DGHC was inevitable. The council's status was well short of the GNLF's original demand for a union state, and Kolkata obstructed some of its funding and autonomy. Demographic pressures have also worked against the DGHC.[29] The Nepali-speaking population has grown in the plains areas of Darjeeling District (also called the Terai or the Siliguri subdivision) and in the northern areas of Jalpaiguri District, known as the Dooars. None of these areas fall within the jurisdiction of the DGHC, which has led to demands that the council's borders be expanded.

However, the state and center's focus on keeping Ghising and the GNLF in power helped to block democratic and peaceful channels of opposition to the DGHC. The reliance on Ghising was based on a belief that he would eliminate threats, a fear of anarchy if he fell from power, and a perception that the GNLF commanded more elite and popular support than it in fact retained. The center and Kolkata gave Ghising the tools to eliminate regular political competition in Darjeeling and allowed him to divert public funding from programs that might have addressed broad local grievances. As a consequence, effective opposition to Ghising could only emerge in the form of irregular, and potentially violent, politics. It is not an accident that the successful challenger to his rule, Bimal Gurung, has the very same type of resources—money and a reputation as a thug—that dominated Darjeeling politics under the GNLF.

Autocrats and Conflict in India's Northeast: A Five-Case Comparison

In Northeast India, violence against the central government has tended to abate when a centrally backed leader successfully consolidates local power through corruption and violence. This section reviews some of the major security problems in the Northeast and how they fit into the pattern of conflict management through localized autocracy. Some features of this pattern are well known including the center's support for state government repression of minority mobilizations, which has been seen recently in Mizoram, Tripura, and parts of Assam. Less widely researched are some of the explicit and implicit anti-democratic features of the ceasefires and peace agreements the center has made in the Northeast. Mizoram is discussed first because its recent history provides examples of the center's support for state government repression and also of how peace negotiations

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29. A. B. Sinha, "The Indian Northeast Frontier and the Nepali Immigration," in A. B. Sinha and T. B. Subba, eds., *The Nepalis in Northeast India: A Community in Search of Indian Identity* (New Delhi: Indus, 2003), p. 31; and A. B. Sinha, "The Indians of Nepali Origin and Security of Northeast India," in ibid., p. 360.

can enable localized autocracy. Other cases discussed subsequently are Tripura, the Bodo areas of Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur.

Mizoram

Mizoram is often described as one of the success stories of Northeast India. In 1986, the national government signed an agreement with the MNF creating the new state of Mizoram and ending decades of insurgency. Some of the features of that peace deal helped the MNF establish local power. The more notable failure of the Mizoram peace, however, has been the center's tolerance for repression of minority communities in the new state. Provisions of the 1986 treaty allowed the MNF—not the sitting, elected government of Mizoram or an independent electoral commission—to control the transitional body that would run post-conflict elections, which the MNF easily won.[30] The state Congress Party—the MNF's informal ally in the 1980s—and the MNF have rotated in power since then. However, the MNF's primary opponent in the 1980s, the People's Conference, was marginalized for the sake of the treaty.

The peace also established ethnic-Mizo hegemony within the state, and subsequent Mizo-led governments have repressed minority demands.[31] Thousands of Brus and Chakmas have been expelled into Tripura, and militant groups within both minority communities have been crushed, in part by Mizo youth organizations acting as an extralegal police force.[32] The state government has also resisted political accommodations for minorities. For example, an agreement in 1994 called for the establishment of a Hmar autonomous council, but the state government delayed establishing it. The body that eventually emerged, the Sinlung Hills Development Council, is much weaker than was originally proposed.[33] Talks between the Mizoram government and the Bru insurgents have made little progress on allowing displaced civilians to return.

Minority rebellion in Mizoram has been quiescent for several years now. Yet, to some extent, violence has only been displaced. Minorities pushed into Tripura, Assam, and Manipur have increased pressure on resources

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30. Hazarika, *Strangers in the Mist,* p. 118.

31. For a more optimistic analysis, see M. Sajjad Hassan, "The Mizo Exception: State-Society Cohesion and Institutional Capability," in Baruah, ed., *Beyond Counter-Insurgency*, p. 207.

32. Mukherjee, *An Insider's Experience;* Suhas Chakma, ed., *India Human Rights Report 2008* (New Delhi: Asian Center for Human Rights, 2008), pp. 118–20.

33. Subir Bhaumik and Jayanta Bhattacharya, "The Frontiers of Centralized Politics Autonomy in the Northeast," in Samaddar, ed., *The Politics of Autonomy: Indian Experiences;* M. Sajjad Hassan, "Explaining Manipur's Breakdown and Mizoram's Peace: The State and Identities in North East India," London School of Economics Crisis States Program, Working Paper, no. 79 (2006).

there, contributing to inter-communal conflict in these states. Hmar militants disappointed with the results of the 1994 treaty with Mizoram have shifted their attacks into areas in Manipur and Assam that they also claim for a Hmar state or autonomous area.

Tripura

In Tripura, state government repression has been the dominant response to minority violence. Insurgency by autochthonous tribes, collectively referred to as Tripuris, against Bengali migrants began there in the 1970s.[34] A 1988 ceasefire splintered the major rebel group, the Tripura National Volunteer Force, into dozens of smaller organizations. Throughout the 1990s, the state has seen a multiplicity of militant organizations with ties to the various political parties, acting primarily as criminal racketeers and political thugs.

In 2000, the state government, led by the heavily Bengali CPI-M, dramatically expanded the size and mandate of the state police.[35] After several years of repression, conflict deaths are down dramatically, from a high of 514 in 2000 to 27 in 2008.[36] Periodically, there are reports from Tripura of clashes between residual insurgent outfits, the largest of which is the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF), or between insurgents and CPI-M militias. State and tribal level CPI-M leaders are targeted for assassination, and there are reports of CPI-M attacks on militant sympathizers.[37]

A key factor in the success of the state government's campaign of repression has been cooperation with the government of Bangladesh, which borders Tripura on three sides. New Delhi has made a major push to install fencing on that border and pressured Dhaka to limit assistance to the ATTF and smaller Tripuri militant outfits. However, the primary insurgent leadership and a few hundred cadres are believed to remain in Bangladesh. Were relations between India and Bangladesh to take a turn for the worse, violence could surge in Tripura.

The Bodos of Assam

The Mizoram and Darjeeling cases show that negotiated settlements for minority rebellions can lead to localized autocracy. This pattern is repeated

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34. Tripuri, like Naga, is an umbrella term for a group of inter-related tribes. The label Tripuri was taken from the name of the Tipra tribe.

35. Bibhu Prasad Routray, "Tripura: The Peace Consolidates," *South Asia Intelligence Review: Weekly Assessments and Briefings* 6:31 (2008); Ajai Sahni and Bibhu Prasad Routray, "Tripura: Counter-Insurgency Success," ibid., 4:7 (2005), <http://www.satp.org>.

36. On human rights in Tripura, see Chakma, ed., *India Human Rights Report 2008,* pp. 144–47.

37. Sushanta Talukdar, "North-eastern Round," *Frontline* 25:5 (March 2008), Chennai, India.

in the northern portion of Assam, where a peace agreement with Bodo militants has reduced violence against state targets but created another pocket of autocracy in the Northeast.

The Bodos were categorized by the British as being plains tribes.[38] In the late 1960s, the success of the Khasis and Garos, hill tribes in the southwest of Assam, in winning a "sub-state" within Assam inspired the mobilization of the Assam plains tribes, particularly the Bodos.[39] The Assam state government addressed these demands by coopting the PTCA with patronage.[40] This arrangement broke down during the Assamese anti-immigration movement of the 1980s. Initially, leaders of that movement recruited the Bodos and other autochthonous groups into a coalition against immigration. Bodo political leaders were disappointed, however, with the 1985 Assam Accord's silence on tribal issues. Within a few years, a movement for a separate Bodo state reemerged.

After a period of agitation, the central and state governments agreed to the formation of a Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) in 1993. However, that agreement quickly collapsed because of insurgent violence by the Bodo Security Force (BSF), which denounced the ABSU's acceptance of an autonomous council rather than a state outside of Assam. As the BAC faltered, the BSF reorganized itself as the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). A rival insurgent group, the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) formed in 1995.[41] From 1995 to 2001, the two groups fought the security forces and each other while targeting other tribes and migrants in an attempt to ethnically cleanse Bodo areas of Assam.

In 2001, violence began to subside as a hegemonic Bodo leadership emerged. The BLT's ceasefire with the government in 2001 gave that group freedom to move within Bodo areas, increase its extortion activities, and launch attacks on its rival, the NDFB. Government security forces did not curb these ceasefire violations, nor did the central government revoke the

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38. In the colonial era, the term Bodo was used for all plains tribes whose languages were in the Kachari family. In contemporary usage, Bodo (or Bodo Kachari) refers only to the largest of these tribes. The Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), formed in 1967, advocated for a plains tribal state incorporating all tribal areas. In practice, however, the PTCA was Bodo-led and had little following in other tribes. The PTCA was eventually eclipsed by the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU), also started in 1967 but explicitly focused on Bodo political grievances rather than all plains tribes. See Sudhir Jacob George, "The Bodo Movement in Assam: Unrest to Accord," *Asian Survey* 34:10 (October 1994), pp. 878–92.

39. This "sub-state" was converted relatively rapidly into the full state of Meghalaya. For a very comprehensive review of the creation of the Meghalaya sub-state, see Mukerjee, "Assam Reorganization."

40. Shekhar Gupta, *Assam: A Valley Divided* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1984).

41. The BLT drew on ex-cadres of the Bodo Volunteer Force (BVF), a militant group that had battled the BSF in the 1980s but had largely demobilized when the BAC was announced.

2001 agreement. In 2003, negotiations between the government of Assam, the central government, and the BLT created the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). The center's choice to negotiate with the BLT bilaterally and its inaction in the face of BLT ceasefire violations seem to have been intended to allow the BLT to consolidate local power. Irrespective of motivation, this was certainly the result.

As in Mizoram, the interim body created to oversee the first elections to the BTC was headed by the ex-militants. About half of the surrendered BLT cadres were immediately recruited into the state paramilitary forces.[42] The BLT subsequently renamed itself the Bodoland People's Progressive Front (BPPF); it continues to use violence against rival political parties today.[43] NDFB and BPPF cadres clash periodically, and attacks on minorities are sporadic but ongoing. The NDFB has split under the pressure from the central security forces and the BPPF. One faction of the NDFB is in negotiations to start peace talks with the center, while holdouts are using inter-communal violence and attacks on rivals in an attempt to stall this process. Notably, the BPPF supports the center's negotiations with the NDFB, which, if they succeed, will likely extract new powers and resources for Bodo political elites.

Nagaland

Peace negotiations in Nagaland have been stalled for years. However, localized autocracy prevails in the state and has all but ended violence involving government security forces. The present dynamics in Nagaland have important similarities to the period of BLT ceasefire in Assam.

As mentioned earlier in the article, the Naga militant group NSCN split into the NSCN-K and the more powerful NSCN-IM in 1988. Because of the long history of insurgency in Nagaland, the NSCN factions are some of the most sophisticated militant outfits in the region in terms of their access to weapons and funding, level of training, and network of safe areas. In the late 1990s, the central government prioritized negotiations with the NSCN factions, fearing their ability to spread disorder by aiding other militant groups.[44]

In 1997, the NSCN-IM entered into a ceasefire agreement with the center. A probable motivation for this deal was the hope that the NSCN-IM

42. M. Amarjeet Singh, "Assam: Bodos Troubled Politics," *South Asia Intelligence Review: Weekly Assessments and Briefings* 4:44 (2006), <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/4_44.htm>.

43. Anand Kumar, "Assam: Ex-Rebels Turn Kingmakers," South Asia Analysis Group (*New Okhla Industrial Development Authority, Uttar Pradesh, India*), paper, no. 1836 (2006).

44. Mukherjee, "An Insider's Experience," p. 117.

would eliminate its rival, the NSCN-K. However, the survival of the NSCN-K forced New Delhi to agree to a separate ceasefire with that group in 2001. Subsequent negotiations have not been very successful with either faction. Both the NSCN-IM and the NSCN-K reject the other faction's right to negotiate with the center. They also claim that the Naga-inhabited areas of Assam, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh should be annexed to Nagaland—a demand that is bitterly resented by other groups in those states. As a result, signs of progress in the NSCN negotiations have touched off protests, rioting, and communal violence outside of Nagaland, particularly in Manipur, further complicating the issue.[45]

Yet, ironically, the ceasefire agreements with the government has freed up the two NSCN factions' resources for internecine and inter-communal struggles. The NSCN-IM and the NSCN-K are both well embedded in their respective fiefdoms, exercising powers of taxation and enforcing their own security dictates. Most of the continuing violence in Nagaland today is fighting between the NSCN rivals as well as their operations against politicians, civilians, and defectors, rather than attacks on government security forces. The 2008 state assembly elections were marred by violence against candidates and polling places. The two NSCN factions also lend support to fellow Nagas in inter-communal conflicts occurring in Manipur and Assam. Central forces and state police rarely pursue operations against these ceasefire violations.

From the center's perspective, the NSCN-IM and NSCN-K ceasefires have had real benefits. First, there has been a dramatic decline in security force fatalities. From 1992–2001, an average of 24 government troops were killed each year in Nagaland. In contrast, there has been a total of only nine such deaths from 2002 to 2008. Second, the NSCN factions have reduced their logistical and manpower support to other militants groups attacking security forces. Some of the insurgent groups that appeared in the 1990s had the capacity to attack state forces only in conjunction with NSCN fighters. Those groups have declined since the NSCN ceasefires. The Garo Hills in Meghalaya are, for example, more stable as a result. Third, although passivity toward factional and inter-communal violence in Nagaland has been called a product of indifference, the center may actually believe that allowing a local autocrat to emerge from the factional violence is the most efficient way to achieve temporary stability in the otherwise volatile region.[46]

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45. Sanjib Baruah, "Confronting Constructionism: Ending India's Naga War," *Journal of Peace Research* 40:3 (2003), pp. 321–38.

46. Economic and Political Weekly Editorial Board, "Drifting toward Containment," *Economic and Political Weekly* 42:37 (September 2007), p. 3679.

Manipur

The worst fighting in the Northeast is currently in the state of Manipur. In the 1960s, separatists in Manipur were ideological leftists. Over time, the conflict has taken on explicitly ethnic dimensions, with fighting between the Meiteis of the plains areas, who are autochthonous but not considered a tribe, and the upland population, most of which is designated as tribal (e.g., Kukis, Paites, Hmars, and Vaiphei). There is also violence among the tribes. The central issue of contention among all these communities is the elaborate system of reservations and land restrictions in place in Manipur and demands for redistribution of those privileges.[47] Further, Manipur's disorder is a product of Nagaland's and Mizoram's relative stability, spurred by militants there who have moved their operations out of their home areas.[48]

Manipur is host to an estimated 15 militant groups comprising about 10,000 fighters.[49] Armed groups dominate some areas of the state completely. Insurgents punish local crime, enforce their own social decrees, and also routinely threaten, abduct, or kill candidates during election season. Migrants are targeted for attacks,[50] and Meitei insurgents have pursued ethnic cleansing in tribal areas.[51] Because the targets of most of Manipur's insurgent activities are not the security forces, various ceasefires with New Delhi since 2005 have done little to change the overall level of violence.

As in Nagaland, the huge central security force deployed in Manipur does not move aggressively against ceasefire violations or to protect civilians.[52] The state and central governments have ignored Meitei insurgents' ethnic cleansing campaigns and have even withdrawn their administrative

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47. Many reservations, particularly autonomy arrangements and restrictions on the ownership of land, apply only in the geographic "home area" of the targeted group. These restrictions create an incentive for communities to ethnically cleanse integrated areas, thereby expanding the area in which they are privileged or contracting the territory in which another group's special privileges apply.

48. This includes Hmar militants expelled from Mizoram. Also, the ceasefires in Nagaland allow the NSCN-IM and NSCN-K to concentrate on operations in Naga-speaking areas in Manipur and Assam.

49. Bibhu Prasad Routray, "No End to Despair," *South Asia Intelligence Review: Weekly Assessments and Briefings* 6:21 (2007), <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/6_21.htm>.

50. Chakma, ed., *India Human Rights Report 2008,* p. 112.

51. H. K. K. Suan, "Hills-Valley Divide as a Site of Conflict: Emerging Dialogic Space in Manipur," in Baruah, ed., *Beyond Counter-Insurgency*, p. 263.

52. The rules of engagement for the security forces and their alleged assaults on the local population have become a major point of political contention in Manipur. See Chakma, ed., *India Human Rights Report 2008,* pp. 110–11.

presence from affected minority areas.[53] Again, the center's aim may be to allow the most powerful insurgents to consolidate control as local autocrats in the hopes of simplifying future negotiations. This is certainly one of the most likely results of the central government's policies in Manipur.

The Costs and Benefits of Localized Autocracy

Peacemaking is a messy business. Avoiding or ending violence often requires compromises that some consider appeasement, injustice, or undemocratic. Yet, a flawed peace may be preferable to continued violence. Ideally, compromises to end violence induce future participation in rule-based competition for political power. Therein lies the distinction between compromising with violent actors as a means of transforming the political system, versus creating a local autocracy. A compromise with local militant actors will only bring about lasting change if it is followed by enforcement of democracy and rule of law in the local partners' dealings with the public, rivals, and with minorities.[54]

In Northeast India, central assistance to beleaguered state governments or New Delhi's agreement to a ceasefire or peace treaties do not mark the beginning of normal political competition. Instead, the center tolerates ongoing repression and corruption so long as there is an end to attacks on strategic or government targets. This has several perverse effects.

First, initiatives aimed at diminishing mass grievances, such as land reform or poverty relief, are hampered by elite corruption. New Delhi pours large sums of money into the Northeast, ostensibly to address popular grievances. For example, per capita central government grants to the Northeast were about six times higher than the average funding received by other states in 2007–08.[55] Yet, corruption in the administration of these funds is massive. Thus, the region still performs poorly in terms of the outcomes most important to political stability, such as economic opportunities for the younger cohorts otherwise most likely to perpetrate

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53. Suan, "Hills-Valley Divide," pp. 284–85.

54. See also Sanjay Barbora, "Rethinking India's Counter-insurgency Campaign in the North-east," *Economic and Political Weekly* 41:35 (2006), p. 3805; Bethany Lacina, "Rethinking Delhi's Northeast India Policy: Why Neither Counterinsurgency nor Winning Hearts and Minds Is the Way Forward," in *Beyond Counterinsurgency: Breaking the Impasse in Northeast India,* ed. Sanjib Baruah (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008).

55. Estimated central government grants to the Northeastern states for 2007–08 totaled 10,673 rupees per capita (approximately $270) compared to an average for the other states of 1,872 rupees per capita (approximately $47). Based on Reserve Bank of India data retrieved from IndiaStat, "State-wise Grants from Center in India (2006–07 and 2007–08)," 2009, <http://www.indiastat.com>.

violence.[56] In 2004–05, state-level unemployment rates among urban males aged 15–29 averaged 16% in the Northeast, compared to 11% elsewhere in India. The average state unemployment rate for high school graduates was about 10.4% in the Northeast in the same period but around 8.4% elsewhere.[57] Nationwide, the government estimates that a little over 60% of children drop out of primary education before their tenth year of study. The Northeastern states have an average dropout rate of over 70%.[58]

Second, localized autocracies limit peaceful political competition. In the absence of institutionalized and rule-based means of politics, changes to the local distribution of power lead to violence by challengers looking to seize control of resources or leaders seeking to reconsolidate dominance. The case of Darjeeling especially demonstrates these dynamics, as do other cases in the Northeast.

Third, the establishment of local autocracy ironically creates incentives to use violence against the center if the local leader's power is challenged by rivals. High levels of popular grievance mean that a campaign against government targets might win over a frustrated public. Just as important, if the center is willing to support localized autocracy, violence is useful to induce the center to shift its support between local leaders, even if substantial policy concessions are unlikely. The primary accomplishment of the BLT insurgency, for example, was not gaining major concessions on autonomy but rather forcing the center to accept that group's hegemony over local rivals.

Opportunities and incentives for violence due to localized autocracy are dangerous, given that the Northeast is an area of India particularly conducive to insurgency. The region has difficult terrain, poor infrastructure, porous borders, and a high level of local grievance. At present, opportunities for violence against the center are at low ebb because India has had success in cross-border military offensives against militants in Bhutan and Myanmar. Ceasefires with a few powerful militant groups have curtailed the flow of assistance to smaller rebellions. However, a negative shock to India's

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56. Henrik Urdal, "Population, Resources, and Political Violence: A Subnational Study of India, 1956–2002," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52:4 (2008), p. 590.

57. Unemployment data are from Government of India's response to Rajya Sabha, unstarred question, no. 2375, dated December 13, 2005; and idem, Lok Sabha, unstarred question, no. 775, dated November 27, 2006, accessed, respectively, from IndiaStat, "State-wise Estimate of Unemployment Rate for Youth (15 to 29 Years) in Rural/Urban Areas of India (1999–2000 and 2004–05)" and "State-wise Unemployment Rates for Educated Persons (15 Years and Above) in India (2004–05)," 2009, <http://www.indiastat.com>, accessed October 31, 2009.

58. Ministry of Human Resource Development data, accessed from IndiaStat, "State-wise Dropout Rates in Classes I–V, I–VIII, and I–X in India (2005–06)," 2009, ibid.

coercive capacity or to the stability of its neighbors—for example state collapse in Myanmar or Bangladesh—would severely destabilize India's Northeast.

Why does the Indian central state continue to use the strategy of supporting local autocrats in the Northeast? Ideally, New Delhi would use periods like the present, when opportunities for major violence in Northeast India are diminished, to insist on democracy and rule of law. However, perhaps such insistence is infeasible given India's low level of state capacity. After all, the rule of law is not very good in much of India anyhow. In the Northeast, distance and terrain strain power projection; the cultural competencies of the bureaucracy and military are poor; and a substantial portion of the local population is deeply ambivalent toward the center.

Yet, analysts examining the rest of India have argued that poor rule of law there has less to do with insufficient resources and incompetent civil servants than with the politicization of the police and bureaucracy.[59] This is particularly true of failures of the rule of law at the elite level, which are often a reflection of impunity rather than the civil service's lack of money, personnel, or training. A lack of political will, rather than state incapacity, also helps explain localized autocracy in the Northeast. There is little political pressure on the center to find lasting solutions to violence in the Northeast because events there do not seem to perturb politicians and voters from other, more populous, regions of India. Other commentators have pointed out, for example, that the central government responds decisively to attacks on migrants to the Northeast only if they are from politically important groups.[60]

At the same time, the short-term incentives emanating from India's very competitive national political scene compel political parties to vigorously court leaders who control local election outcomes. Central party apparatchiks have never been very discriminating about how politicians deliver seats—even if this involved corruption, repression of rivals, or harassment of minority communities. Localized autocracy is thus protected by competing bids for leaders' political support. For example, the Bodo ex-militant BPPF party has played a role in forming governments in Assam, and both national parties also recognize that the BPPF controls the outcome of elections in Bodo areas of Assam. In spring 2009, the GJM in Darjeeling was courted by both the Congress and the BJP in the lead-up to national

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59. Atul Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1991); and Steven I. Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

60. Economic and Political Weekly Editorial Board, "Drifting toward Containment" and Hiren Gohain, "Governance as Theater," *Economic and Political Weekly* 41:29 (2006), p. 4109.

elections. Furthermore, Subash Ghising's GNLF previously had the role of kingmaker in the contest for the Darjeeling parliamentary seat. Short-term goals, such as gaining a few additional parliamentary seats from the Northeast, tend to trump long-term developmental goals, both political and economic.

Conclusion

Northeast India is at present an area of diminished concern for national security, although inter- and intra-communal ethnic violence remain. In the foreseeable future, the Indian central government seems likely to continue using localized autocracy to manage the Northeast. This involves massive economic transfers, a security presence to counter the greatest threats and secure the borders, and reliance on local leaders who use violence and corruption to remain in power, curbing electoral and party competition and, by extension, ethnic mass mobilization. Much of Northeast India today is, in fact, governed by these localized autocracies, which serve the purposes of the central government by curbing violence directed at strategic installations and government security forces.

As argued in this article, relegating ethnic relations to local autocrats in the Northeast is a particularly attractive strategy for the center. The relative electoral insignificance of the region overall shifts the concern of ruling parties in the center away from addressing broad popular concerns and toward the minimalist, short-term goals of preventing violence against government targets and winning a few parliamentary seats efficiently. In contrast, long-term initiatives for fixing the Northeast's problematic ethnic politics—such as development aid, infrastructure investment, and new autonomy structures—are all hampered by the lack of rule of law at the local level and corrupt local leaders who manage these programs.

The Indian central state's reliance on local autocracy to maintain a modicum of political stability (e.g., a lack of violence against the state) is fraught with long-term, potentially negative consequences. As stated earlier, a negative shock to India's coercive capacity in the region could be easily exploited by militants tapping into the area's complex economic grievances and identity-based rivalries. At minimum, both intra- and inter-communal violence there promise to persist in the absence of institutionalized solutions to these rivalries and conflicts. Thus, the potential for the reemergence of severe insurgency continues. As in the past, such violence will probably not pose an existential threat to India, but the potential costs are certainly not negligible, especially in terms of the quality of India's democracy and the well-being of citizens in the Northeast.