

Role of United Mizo Freedom Organization (UMFO) in the Political Development of Mizoram

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Abstract: *(The present-day Mizoram, which was known as Lushai Hills, is located in the northeast corner of India. The term Lushai Hills was named by the British as an administrative unit, merged with the Indian Union as the outcome of an accomplished political entity. The process, however, took a rough road because of British policy towards the Mizo. The British, therefore, adopted a policy of non-intervention towards the people by allowing them to settle their own affairs among themselves after they fully annexed the Lushai Hills in 1890. The British policy enforced through the Chiefs was repressive and became a burden for the common people because they had to serve two masters—the British and the Chiefs. This dual administration system caused untold suffering, dividing the people into two political factions demanding different political status for Mizoram after the British. This paper elucidates the origin of the second political party in Mizoram and its inclination towards secessionist ideologies. The study attempts to examine the chaotic scene at the dawn of India's independence in Mizoram. The present study also focuses on evaluating the performance of UMFO in the District Council election.)*

Keywords: Mizoram, Mizo, Election, Mizo Union

Introduction

Following the formation of the Mizo Union (MU) in 1946, which marked the inception of the first political party in Lushai Hills. The growth of political consciousness among the Mizo people can be likened to a wildfire in the hills. It also instills hatred in the people toward the chief, dividing Mizo society into two factions: MU supporters and chief supporters. Being subject to the autocratic rules of the chief was a burden for the people. The masses cannot raise objections to the chief's leadership if his decisions are harsh or biased. The MU policy towards the abolition of chieftainship led the people to support the party in a short span of time after its formation. The MU also expressed a desire to be integrated into the Indian Union. This is evidenced by the fact that two of its prominent leaders, Ch. Saprawnga and Khawtinkuma, were appointed as co-opted members of the North East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Area Sub-committee, commonly referred to as the Bordoloi Sub-committee under the chairmanship of Gopinath Bordoloi in order to provide the required provisions in the Constitution of India for the hilly people of Assam. In contrast, the United Mizo Freedom Organization (UMFO) was formed to support the chief and advocate for the exclusion of Lushai Hill (Mizoram) from the Indian Union.

Genesis of UMFO

It has been noted that all the different public opinions were initially present within the Mizo Union, but those who advocated for an ideology of political future outside of the Indian Union quickly lost support within the MU party. Meanwhile, the antagonism between commoners and chiefs had evolved into an extreme kind of hostility. Since April 1947, a fraction of the Mizo Union has been calling for Mizo independence under the name Mizo Union Right Wing.¹ Then, some prominent citizens believed that the creation of a new party was required in order to create a platform where commoners and chiefs would unify. As a result, the United Mizo Freedom Organization (UMFO) was formed. It attracted chiefs, unsatisfied Mizo Unionists, and individuals who opposed the Mizo Union's pro-India, anti-chief, and anti-British stance. So, the party was fundamentally in opposition to the Mizo Union, and it was founded to serve as an alternative to the first political party in the Lushai Hills.

Even though its official name is UMFO, it is commonly referred to as “Zalen Pawl” in Mizo discourse. On the 5th of July, 1947, Lalbiakthanga and his companions founded the party, and he was elected as party President. Lalmawia Khiangete, a former King's Commissioned Emergency Officer (KCEO) under the British government during the Second World War, held the position of General Secretary. He was also a former employee of Burma civil affairs following the war. After settling in Lushai Hills, he desired to join the MU party. As it turns out, his local Dawrpui MU unit had rejected him for membership, and this was one of the reasons he came up with the idea of forming the UMFO party.²

The main aims and objectives of the UMFO party were classified into eight points:

- 1) To be identified as separate nationality, a strict principle should be adopted.
- 2) To keep fascism at bay by promoting a true democracy in which people choose their own leaders.
- 3) The land and nation should be powerful as possible to be self-reliant.
- 4) Culture and customs should be preserved in creative ways.
- 5) Cordial relationship and communication should be established between the ruler and the people.
- 6) Effective and efficient model of administration should be adopted.
- 7) Expression shall be emphasized.
- 8) There shall be religious liberty.

Policy to join Burma

Since the party's President, Lalbiakthanga, joined government job, Lalmawia took over as President; L.H. Liana was appointed as Secretary; and Lalrinliana as Treasurer. Lalmawia served as President until 1955, when the UMFO merged

with the EITU. After leaving the MU party, the first MU President and one of the wealthiest men in Aizawl, Pachhunga, along with his associates, joined UMFO. This helped the party gained popularity. The UMFO party had several aims, but the most significant and most openly advocated aim was to join the Burmese government once the British left India. They thought this was the best opportunity for Mizo people rather than to join the Indian government or get independence on their own. In response to the party's assessment of joining the Burmese government, the people posed numerous questions. The primary response to their inquiries was, "If the Mizo people sincerely desire it, we can do it through the law of democracy."³ These bold views and opinions caused them to lose people's trust and attention. However, their goal was in contrast to the objective of the MU party, which was to join India; hence, the chiefs supported and joined the UMFO party.

In December 1946, Lalmawia conducted a goodwill mission to Burma with the aim of securing the support of the Burmese government. During this mission, he held discussions with the Prime Minister of Burma, U Nu, and his cabinet colleague, U. Ba Sawe, regarding the possibility of uniting the Lushai Hills with Burma. U Nu, a seasoned politician, was well-versed in handling delicate situations. The implementation of the UMFO policy to join Burma has a chance to negatively impact the diplomatic ties between India and Burma. U Nu, a close friend of Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, received crucial assistance from Nehru when he was in a bind shortly after Burma's independence. India was the primary source of arms and ammunition utilized to suppress the internal rebellion, specifically from the tribes of the Shan States, in significant quantities. U Nu expressed his contentment regarding the probable inclusion of the Lushai Hills into Burma but stipulated that a significant proportion of Mizos must endorse the proposition.⁴

It appears that U Nu may have been aware of the MU decision to align with India and that the MU held a larger support base in the Lushai Hills compared to the UMFO. It is believed that U Nu exhibited a lack of enthusiasm towards the inclusion of the Lushai Hills within Burma, ostensibly due to discernible factors. Initially, the Burmese government was facing significant challenges from the tribal communities residing in Burma. He expressed his aversion towards receiving any further assistance from the Mizos, who were commonly known for their ferocious nature. Furthermore, it should be noted that most of the people residing in Lushai Hills had already undergone religious conversion to Christianity through the efforts of the Welsh Mission. The majority of individuals identified as Protestants. Buddhism was the official religion in Burma. The potential for religious conflict may arise in the event of the Lushai Hills eventual integration with Burma. Furthermore, the amalgamation of the Lushai Hills and the Shan States could potentially bolster the secessionist movement. Despite the expectations of the goodwill mission led by Lalmawia, the government of Burma did not provide the anticipated level of support and encouragement.⁵

Although the future status of Mizos in the Constitution of India has not been decided yet, the policy of the UMFO to join Burma aroused many questions and worries among the Mizos. In response to these, Superintendent L.L. Peters convened a conference in Aizawl on 14th August, 1947, the day before India's Independence. This meeting had 50 participants, including political leaders, chiefs' representatives, and accredited leaders of Lushai Hills. The meeting suggested that the Governor of Assam be contacted for clarification on the matter after numerous discussions. The inquiry included the following topics: i) Regarding the future administration in the Lushai Hills, which was not explicitly stated in Section 7 sub-section (2) of the Indian Independence Bill. ii) Could the Lushai Hills become a part of Burma or Pakistan? iii) Will Lushai Hills be able to sever ties with the Indian government after ten years?⁶

The response to these inquiries by the Governor of Assam was given in Lushai Hills Superintendent Notice No.7626-30 G of 2.9.1947 and mentioned the following points:⁷

1. There can be no question of the Lushai leaving the Indian Union as in law, the Lushai Hills being an excluded areas was already part of Assam.
2. That the Lushai must remain with the Indian Union and cannot join either Pakistan or Burma.
3. That in view of the constitutional position stated above, the question of opting out after 10 (ten) year does not arise.

Somehow, the UMFO party's primary objective of joining the Burmese government became pointless and meaningless after India attained independence and the Lushai Hills was under the Indian Union. The party, on the other hand, continued its activities with the chiefs' support.

Election performance of UMFO

In the Lushai Hills Advisory Council⁸ election for commoners, the UMFO and MU parties were the main competitors. This election had a total of 26 seats, of which UMFO won four and the MU party captured the remaining seats. Furthermore, in the first Lushai Hills District Council election, held on 4th January, 1952, UMFO won only one seat, that of the Aijal (present Aizawl) Town circle representative seat. Instead of the public's preference for the UMFO party, this victory was mostly a result of the affluent Pachhunga's popularity. Besides, the first election for the Village Council in the Lushai Hills District Council took place on 24th July, 1954. Similar to previous elections in the Hills, UMFO and the MU were the leading competitors. After failing to win enough seats in the election, the UMFO alleged that the election had been rigged and requested an investigation. As a result, C. L. Rema, Pastor Zairema, and Lalchungnunga were appointed by the District Council government to conduct an investigation. The investigation's report concluded with a recommendation for re-election in more than ten villages. However, the District Council government rejected the proposal. This provoked a civil-disobedience movement led by UMFO.⁹ However, unlike the MU party's civil-disobedience movement in December 1948,¹⁰ the UMFO party did not obtain adequate support from the public, nor did they have enough members, hence this movement had little impact.

The reason for the failure of the UMFO Party in various elections in the Lushai Hills can be attributed to the following points: i) During the early stages of the UMFO, the main objective of the MU party was to abolish chieftainship, which gained widespread support and resulted in a loss of interest in the newly formed UMFO. ii) The abolishment of chieftainship was the primary issue among the Mizo people at that time; hence there was no place for debate over any other policy. iii) The chiefs, who were despised by the people, generously backed the UMFO party. As Lushai Hills became part of India, UMFO's major

policy of joining the Burma government was no longer feasible, and the party's popularity among the people declined. v) The UMFO party was founded shortly prior to the British departure from India, and Lushai Hills was nearly included in the Indian Union. Therefore, their policy of joining the Burmese government was unable to garner public approval or support. vi) The president, Lalmawia, wielded excessive power over the formation and operation of the party, which was not favoured by the public.

As indicated by his performance, Lalmawia, the President of the UMFO, possessed a great deal of control over the functioning of the party. R. Dengthuma, elected from the Lunglei constituency in the Assam MLA election on 5th January, 1952, was afterwards appointed as a District Council Court Judicial Officer. An MLA by-election for the Lunglei constituency was held in June 1954, and UMFO President Lalmawia was elected.¹¹ Also, when State Reorganization Commission (SRC) visited Silchar on 4th May 1955, they met only UMFO President Lalmawia from Lushai Hills. UMFO also submitted their memorandum to the SRC which stated the need to establish a Hill State for the hilly people in Assam.¹²

In the second term general election to Mizo District Council, held on 25th January, 1957, the UMFO party's swift advancement was clearly apparent. Eight of the 20 elected seats were won by the UMFO. In addition, they won two of the three MLA seats for the Mizo District in the Assam MLA election such as, Lalmawia from Aizawl East, C. Thuamluaia from Lunglei while the remaining Aizawl West constituency was secured by the MU party. Even for the first time in Mizo District Council, Lalthankima, MDC from UMFO party was elected as opposition leader.¹³ There were two variables that account for the UMFO's remarkable progress. First, due to their excessive self-assurance, MU leaders did not put much effort into the campaign, and this was benefitted by the UMFO. Second, internal strife within the MU resulted in the creation of the MU Right Wing, which weakened the status of the party. In this election, the MU Right Wing fielded multiple candidates, scattering the MU party's vote bank. This was incredibly beneficial for their opponent. Also, J. Malsawma's Labour Party merged with the UMFO,¹⁴ which led them to increase the number of supporters.

Meanwhile, the leaders of the hill peoples in the state of Assam held a conference in Aizawl on 26th-29th October, 1955. A proposal to merge all hill political parties into a single party so as to demand a hill state was passed at this conference. The new party was given the name Eastern India Tribal Union (EITU). The intention of the Assam government to implement the Assam Official Language Act was one of the main motives behind the establishment of EITU by the hill political leaders. EITU began to function under the leadership of President B.M. Pugh and General Secretary Capt. Williamson A. Sangma.¹⁵

As a result of this conference, the leaders of the MU Right Wing and the UMFO dissolved their parties and merged to EITU on 2nd October 1957. The office bearer posts were allocated as- President- Lalmawia, Vice President- Lalsawia, General Secretary- Lalhuliana, Asst. Secretary- Chhumbura, Treasurer- Lalrinlana, and Financial Secretary- Vankeuva.¹⁶ However, the MU party opted not to dissolve their party but to continue to support and cooperate with EITU. The UMFO party, which was founded on 5th July 1947, was dissolved after ten years of its formation. Even within the District Council government, the EITU continued to pose as an opposition party.

Conclusion

The UMFO party is widely believed to be the first political party that espoused the ethnic identity of the Mizos and endeavored to maintain the democratic framework of Mizoram by emerging as the first opposition party. They expressed a desire to be excluded from the Indian Union on account of cultural and traditional differences. Initially, they desired to join the Burmese government, but their efforts were thwarted by a lack of support from the Burmese government. Secondly, it endeavors to safeguard and segregate the tribal ethnic identity of the Northeast region by establishing a separate Hill State. This was the primary reason the party was dissolved and merged with EITU. It can be elucidated that the UMFO has been at the forefront of promoting secessionist inclinations since its inception. The notion of secessionism propagated by the UMFO party continues to persist in the collective consciousness of the Mizos. It can be clarified that the secessionist idea instilled by the UMFO party strongly impress the Mizo people, and when the Mizo National Front (MNF) was formed and retaliated for the independence movement through armed revolt against the Indian government in 1966, many Mizos rapidly supported it. Retaliation led to the 1986 Peace Accord with the Government of India. On the other hand, there is still a feeling of discontent in the minds of the Mizos, which led to the formation of several groups based on zo-ethnic identity till today. It can be concluded that the United Mizo Freedom Organization (UMFO) played a substantial role in the political advancement of Mizoram to an immense degree.

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8. 8.As the immediate formation of Autonomous District Council (ADC) was not possible following the implementation of the Constitution of India, measures were taken to form an Interim Advisory Council that would serve as a provisional ADC. In the months of March and April 1948, an Advisory Council election was held in Lushai Hills for the representatives of chiefs and commoners. It serves as a provisional ADC until the conduct of first general election (1951-1952) in India.
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10. In the midst of the ongoing tension between the Superintendent and MU, MU members began their agitation against the despotic rules of L.L. Peters, Superintendent of Lushai Hills at that time, on 28th December, 1948. Many people protested and took to the streets in Aizawl, chanting "Peters, go back." Many were apprehended by the Hills authority and imprisoned in Aizawl. At the end, the leaders of MU and L.L. Peters made a treaty to cease the agitations resulting in the release of all prisoners and the refund of all fines.
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