

## **Nepali Citizens' Expression of Concern over Manipur Violence and Government Accountability**

**August 2, 2023, Kathmandu**

We undersigned citizens of Nepal wish to express our pain and concern regarding the loss of life and property in Manipur, a constituent state of the Indian Republic which is seeing rage between members of the majority Meitei and minority Kuki communities. The violence has continued unabated for three months, with more than 180 dead, many more wounded, and enormous loss of property and infrastructure.

We have concluded that the state and central governments of India have not lived up to their responsibility to protect human rights in Manipur, ensure law and order, and promote mediation efforts among the warring sides. There is an urgent need for democratic intervention.

The countries of South Asia are populated by multiple and cross-cutting identities. The provinces and sub-units are predominantly multi-lingual and multi-ethnic, the result of the historical movement of peoples and more recent demarcations and migrations. Under such circumstances, the first obligation of an elected government is to ensure human security and inclusion, mindful that the protection of minority rights is key to democracy. Above all, members of the executive and legislature are required to overcome political party interests and be protectors against loss of life and limb, against rape and plunder.

When those in authority abandon responsibilities resulting in the escalation of violence in any part of South Asia, the duty of citizens everywhere is to speak up, including from neighbouring countries. As citizens of Nepal, we recognise the historical marginalisation of communities living in mountains, hills, and plains within our own society, and this impels us to recognise and express concern over what is happening in Manipur.

While ostensibly federal, all over South Asia the strong arm of central authority prevents provinces from achieving societal equilibrium, where communities are able to negotiate their place and future. We see national administrators using the 'divide-and-rule' tactic inherited from colonial times, cynically deploying the 'communal card' for political gain, and relying on the armed forces – all of which keep frustrations bottled up. The situation becomes more complex when a frontier area sees influx of refugees, as has happened in Manipur following the February 2021 coup in Myanmar.

Though there will be initial challenges and insecurities, we believe that authentic federalism across the countries of South Asia will allow both representation and accountability. Sham federalism must be tackled by visionary leaders, and notes exchanged across the Subcontinent to study failures and successes in inter-community relations and state responsibility.

India was till recently the exemplary country in South Asia with its robust electoral democracy, exemplary judiciary and questioning media. From neighbouring Nepal, we have watched in distress the weakening of the Indian polity over the last decade: populist governance feeding off vote-gathering ethno-religious sentiments, if taken further, will weaken the social fabric of a country that has the largest population on Earth.

We believe that multi-cultural peace in India as well as South Asia as a whole is endangered when governing mechanisms and elected officials fail in due diligence, as clearly happening in Manipur. No corner of South Asia is free from mendacious activities of populist leaders that pander to majoritarian moods, and the scale of distress will be that much more in the larger countries, provinces and states. When a majoritarian mindset defines the agenda, sparks can turn into wildfires and suffering get out of hand.

The media's role in polarising society and endangering peace is evident all over South Asia.

The use of social media apps to spread false news and enflame deadly passions is gravely concerning; in India, the widespread use of WhatsApp for the instantaneous spread of malicious information points to calamitous times. It is from India that in the past we have all sought solutions and examples in terms of reconciliation, justice and protection of the weakest. This is why we call upon state mechanisms and civil society in India to work to halt further deterioration of the situation in Manipur and to hold accountable those responsible for the carnage.

### **Signatories:**

*Meena Acharya, Renu Adhikari, Kundan Aryal, Raju Chapagain, Purnashova Chitrakar, Kanak Mani Dixit, Chandrakishore Jha, Sushil Pyakurel, Dinesh Tripathi.*

*Contact: kanakd@himalmag.com*