



Civic Space as Democratic Arena: Conflict, Dissent, and Accountability in Manipur

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ABSTRACT

Manipur has seen persistent conflict and violence leading to instability and fragile peace. In this paper, I argue that persistence of conflict reflects not only state incapacity or ethnic polarization but a deep democratic deficit rooted in erosion of civic space. The paper presents a conceptual and analytical argument that when civic space shrinks particularly through suppression of dissent and alternative voices, instability continues. The paper draws on civic space literature and democratic theory of participation and deliberation as civic goods. The paper conceptualises civic space as a crucial element of democratic space that deepens citizen's agency to seek state accountability. It argues that the constraints on substantive freedom of expression undermine democratic accountability and narrow possibilities for sustaining peace and stability.

1. Introduction

The ethnic diversity in Northeast India is a complex mosaic. The varied interests often create tensions. This diversity translates to divergence in socio-cultural and political interests, often resulting in conflict and violence. Often interests collide into outright violence when channels of legitimate interest claims fail to deliver. Manipur itself represents a state with such a complex mosaic of ethnic diversity.

Manipur has seen such episodes before but the inter-community friction that emerged in May 2023 has not seen equivalence in the past. In this conflict, hundreds have lost their lives and thousands have been displaced. A deep ethnic political fault line has since emerged between the two communities. To this date, more than two years have passed since this day yet durable peace has been elusive. Political



reconciliation seemed to be on the horizon yet concrete results are still unseen when this paper is written. With the fragile peace failing to sustain without a concrete political measure, a stable and peaceful Manipur seems a distant dream at present.

The May 3, 2023 outbreak should be read not merely as an episodic flare-up but as a structural shift in ethnic politics in Manipur. It exposed persistent institutional fragmentation and a collapse of reciprocal trust between communities and state actors. This shift transformed everyday interactions in access to schools, hospitals, markets, and inter-state connectivity into zones of contestation, creating deep cleavages that ordinary institutional remedies cannot easily reverse. The magnitude and duration of the displacement demonstrate that the crisis is not only a security problem but a problem of civic institutions and the mechanisms through which citizens deliberate, claim rights, and hold power-holders accountable. I argue that these civic pillars have been weakened that reinforce the cleavages.

The government faces accusations of incapacity and blame-diversion while the outcome of conflict and violence continues to make everyday life difficult. Generally, when such conflict happens, people's faith in the state's willingness and capacity in bringing lasting solutions to the conflict. The elusiveness of a lasting solution has made disillusionment creep into the psyche of the people of Manipur leading to the fall of state government. Ironically, the increasing involvement of the Union government after the imposition of president's rule hasn't brought substantive change.

State incapacity and ethnic competition are necessary parts of explanation. State incapacity makes episodic flare up turn to outright conflict and ethnic competition elevates the social legitimacy of conflict through entrenchment of us vs them complex. But these explanations are not sufficient. A state-centric narrative emphasises administrative failure or the use of coercion, while ethnic explanations reduce the crisis to identity clash. Both angles underplay the role of degraded civic infrastructure. When civic space contracts, citizens lack safe and plural arenas to express grievances, negotiate interests, and articulate reconciliatory agendas. In other words, state failure interacts with civic-space shrinkage to produce a self-reinforcing cycle of dwindled civic space and incapacitated state. State incapacity reduces citizens' trust. This leads to turning towards non-state mobilization that bypass legal boundaries to settle disputes. Non state mobilization often underprioritize democratic and inclusive agendas shrinking civic space. A constricted civic space prevents the emergence of mediating institutions (both state and non-state) that could restore trust, accountability and confidence among the diverse populace.

It is in this context, I see significance in exploring the concepts such as "civic engagement" in conjunction with "civic space". Existing scholarship and policy conversations often invoke the role of



Civil Society and CSOs. However, this is done without exploring the mechanisms by which civic space actually functions or fails to function, including in a crisis context within and outside the Civil Society's sphere. The gap is both empirical and conceptual. We lack a focused analysis of how speech and associative freedoms, elite dominance in narrative, and everyday self-censorship shape democratic accountability and the prospects for negotiated peace. This paper attempts to fill the gap by treating civic space as the crucial mediating channel between citizens' agency and state responsiveness.

The main argument I present here is that the emergence and persistence of conflict is linked to shrinkage and distortion of civic space. I particularly emphasise suppression of speech and dissent through elite driven conformity and argue that this undermines democratic accountability hindering productive engagement and peaceful negotiation. The paper mainly relies on the conceptual analysis of civic space literatures that excavate its legal and normative value. I attempt to establish their relevance in Manipur. Although the paper's focus is temporally elastic, yet emphasis is given to the Post May 2023 landscape. The paper aims to show how civic space conditions influence long-term possibilities of civic-driven peace.

2. Civic Space and Civic Engagement: Conceptual Foundations

The concept of civic space originated in the legal circles of the USA. It has slowly gained prominence among scholarly circles and global institutions both in the west and developing countries (Biekart and Fowler, 2023). However, a clear definition of the concept and its academic study in relation to civil society or development has been inadequate (Biekart and Fowler, 2023, citing Fowler, 2009). Nevertheless, the concept provides a robust and workable paradigm for understanding what makes people exercise power and undertake civic action to shape the trajectory of polity and society. Civic Space as a paradigm offers some advantages. First, civil society's institutional characteristics overlooks the social and democratic conditions that enable citizens' exercise of collective power outside and beyond the institutional landscape. Civic space emphasises the realm where citizens associate, assemble and speak both formally and informally making it more dynamic than civil society in the scholarly discourse. Conceptually, civic space shifts emphasis from organizations to the enabling environment that allows organizations and individuals to exercise their voice freely and pursue accountability.

Civic space is defined as "the public arena used by citizens and civil society organizations, and provided by the state, to exercise fundamental rights of association, assembly, and expression" (Biekart and Fowler, 2020 citing CIVICUS). In practical terms, it is a safe space, often within the organisation of civil society, where citizens can participate in expressing ideas, opinions and concerns. Civic space is



both a physical realm of collective individuals and the normative ideas of enabling conditions. It is both the domain and the quality of the political landscape “in which civil society can express, and where they can voice their opinion and concerns” (Beikart and Fowler, 2023). Bossuyt and Ronceray (2020) equates civic space to the public arena in which people organize and intervene to safeguard their rights, interests, values and identities . Civic space, thus, is the “environment that enables civil society to play a role in political, economic and social life of our societies”(OHCHR, EU Civic Forum).

For this paper, civic space can be understood in four dimensions- (a) legal protections for association, assembly, and expression; (b) social norms of pluralism and tolerance that permit dissent (c) institutional channels (media, local organisations) that translate voices into accountability (d) safety for citizens to gather and protest. These four dimensions are mutually interactional and reinforcing. For instance, legal rights without social norms make exercise of rights contingent on the majority's mercy despite legal and constitutional guarantees . People can express claims and interests but without institutional channels they fail to convert to policies.

Civic Engagement and Civic Agency

Civic engagement simply is the utilization of civic space by actors with democratic temperament. However, the term carries a sense much deeper than mere political participation. According to Bhavna Sharma (2008), civic engagement constitutes a multitude of actors with varied relationships between them. She underscores roles such as providing a platform for voices of people, influencing public policy, achieving accountable and responsible state and achieving “civic objectives and goals”. Civic engagement thus is “a process, not an event that closely involves people in the economic, social, cultural, and political processes that affect their lives”(Sharma, 2008 quoting UNDP,1993). The key aspect of civic engagement is the emphasis on accountability of the state and providing a platform to various voices (Sharma, 2008, citing Malik and Wagle, 2002).

Civic engagement implies goal-oriented action and deliberate agency of actors . The actors include individuals, CSOs, and the media using civic space to create common public goods. Public goods can be information, issue-based mobilization, actionable agendas and redressal demand. Actors with agency bring accountability to power holders. When the civic agency of these actors are strong, the grievances are channeled into institutional demands. For instance, it could be a demand for change of government, leadership, legislative amendments or governance norms. When civic agency is weak grievances often are channeled to identity-based mobilization or manipulated by elite infiltration, and politically vested interests.



Why Civic Space Matters for Democracy

CIVICUS, an organization monitoring civic space globally, puts civic space as the pillar of an open and democratic society. Civic space deepens democracy in that when quality of civic space declines, there is broader impact of democratic erosion which degrades state's accountability on policies, fundamental and human rights. An open civic space is crucial for all stakeholders from CSOs to advocacy groups, to media, journalists, human right defenders, youth movements. A weak civic space causes political fragmentation; hate speech proliferation, hostility, decline of democratic standards; deterioration of values, traditions and conventions.

Thus when civic space shrinks two effects follow. Firstly, It hollows out incentives to the elites to be accountable. Additionally, in the absence of civic agency seeking public scrutiny, accountability mechanisms weaken making political and institutional elites fail to correct policy mistakes. Secondly, norms of tolerance degrade while identity-based polarization intensifies. The end result is polarization transforming disagreement into identity conflict. When conflict protracts, compromise is framed as betrayal of a community's interest rather than a necessity for reconciliation.

3. Civic Space in Manipur: An Uneven Democratic Landscape

In Manipur freedom of association and assembly has been historically exercised better relative to freedom of expression, especially dissenting opinions which often face suppression formally and informally. This is because collective mobilization has been normalized historically. Today, multifarious organizations, civil society organizations with tall achievements flourish in Manipur. To give a few examples – Meira Paibis, the women collective is known for its champion of human rights and local guardianship. All Manipur Students Union (AMSU) have historically advocated for educational reforms and protection of local rights. In recent times, Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity (COCOMI), Coordination Committee (CorCom), All Manipur United Clubs' Organisation (AMUCO), etc has been taking leadership roles in channelizing the voices of people during both normal times and tense periods. The vibrancy of associational life in Manipur is a social resource. But the organization's count does not equate to robustness of the civic space. An open civic space needs democratic internal deliberation, independence from elite dominance and the healthy contestation of narratives. Without these characteristics, associations and organizations fail to achieve democratic agency.

With regard to restriction in association and assembly, Section 144 of Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) is often imposed affecting exercise of legitimate rights in Manipur. However, its imposition is not



routine but occasional one used to curb potential violence. Yet, critics allege arbitrary imposition even when such draconian measures are not necessary. That said, section 144 is sporadic and episodic, therefore it barely acts as limitation in functioning of civic space in the context of Manipur. The primary constraints to civic space functioning, however, exist in subtle social limitations of speech and monopolization of narrative by powerful groups. These subtle constraints exert rather a deeper chilling effect on the deliberative role of civic space as arenas of public contestation. Thus, exclusive focus on operation of formal laws without social dynamics yields partial understanding of how civic practice is restricted in Manipur.

In Manipur, it is in matters of speech we can discern a hidden crisis. Freedom of speech remains protected only at superficial level. It is formally protected yet suppressed substantively in practice. Encroachment to free speech comes not only from the state and the government but also from the society, oftentimes social encroachment manifests stronger causing self-censorship, self-imposed reticence, and self-exclusion from civic discursion. Social enforcement manifests stronger because political speech intertwines with identity and community loyalty. This factor shapes a culture where, in public discourse, divergence of opinions is suppressed and conformity to certain narrative is considered a community duty. In practice, citizens exercise unwilling concessions to dominant narratives for individual defiance that attracts unfavourable consequences. The civic outcome is the loss of plural viewpoints. Thus, consensus so created looks like a common consensus masking the dominance of an elite's perspective achieved at the exclusion of many others.

This is the premise based on which I argue that the transformative power of civic space in Manipur is hindered by cultural absence of inclusive viewpoints and social legitimation of elite's narratives. The concept of elite is full of confusion. For this paper, I operate my analysis on elites meaning as "those who have vastly disproportionate access to or control over a social resource," with such resources often having transferable value that provides advantages across different arenas of social life (Khan, Walker, & Diaz, 2011)." In the context of Manipur, these social resource can mean moral authority social leaders, activists, organization bear; political power, community leadership, media that shapes narrative. The immediate result of elite dominance is internalization of self-censorship among citizens since speaking against the dominant voice can cause reputational, economic and physical costs. The long term consequence is the narrowing of the critical voices thereby social and political accountability of public policy which eventually reduces the range of policy options.



4. Dissent, Knowledge, and Democratic Accountability

Dissent means reason-based challenge against opinion or narrative. The normative value of dissent rests on its ability to offer alternative viewpoints. J.S Mill argued that truth can emerge from anyone and anywhere. He emphasises the importance of different viewpoints in consolidating truth as a social resource. Opinions can either be true or false. Mills argues both add credence to truth. True knowledge can strengthen the understanding of truth by correcting mistakes while erroneous views can reinforce the truth since it lets the people educate themselves from the mistake. Mill said that even truth must be allowed to be challenged ; without challenge it risks becoming a dogma halting knowledge growth. Drawing on Mill, dissent, thus , is a public good. It prevents dogmatism, supplies new information and perspective. In fragile societies, dissent can create grievance signaling channels and tools for compromise before differences become potential sources of hostility and violence. Dissent also acts as corrective incentives to leaders and policy makers. Therefore, when dissent loses protection, civic learnings stop and leaders lose incentives to innovate or revise policies.

Mill extends the importance to even radical and wildly unpopular views. Radical views are essential for the intellectual progress of society. Karl Popper remarked, “the increase of knowledge depends entirely on the existence of disagreement.” A society is naturally constitutive of people with diverse views and sometimes perspectives are so diametrically opposite in content. This diversity can cause disagreements. Disagreement, however if properly channeled, can be a source of corrective politics. Therefore, in civic arenas, the goal is not to level disagreement but its management such that disagreement translates contestations into reform.

Defenders of conformity argue that a united voice or collective narrative transcending individual differences is an inconvenient necessity not a choice claiming collective challenges demand collective voice particularly during turbulent times. Such views are short-sighted and ignore how conformism undermines adoption of innovation, intellectual growth and foregrounds emergence of authoritarian tendencies thereby insulating powerholders from accountability. Short term appeal of unity may look attractive but in the long horizon, they can be costly socially and politically. It can normalize exclusion, power concentration and foreclose deliberations and debates. Politics of disagreement insists on mutual respect and civic reciprocity that allow every one to be interlocutors and auditors of social and political functioning.

The role of deliberative civic society applies to fostering a social bond. Arthur Brooks asserts in his book *Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from Our Culture of Contempt* that loving



one's enemies (ideological) is not only morally good but also effective in bridging divides and fostering a more connected society. This bond is fostered in collective spaces through civic engagement. In polarized settings like Manipur, fostering civic respect is both an ethical and strategic necessity. It reduces polarization, creates mutual trust and converts adversarial relations into institutionalized bargaining. In the book *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life* Ashutosh Varsney links social bonding in daily interactions and quotidian interdependency with the diffusion of disagreement before turning hostile. He highlights how inter-community associational life strengthens inter-community trust and peaceful co-existence.

5. Shrinking Civic Space: State and Non-State Constraints

The issue of shrinking civic space has been a point of concern in scholarly discourse in recent times. Bhavna Sharma (2008) warns of elite capture, where non-state actors, like powerful groups, undermine civic space. She emphasised demanding the same legitimacy and accountability as state institutions to the non-state institutions. Bossuyt and Ronceray (2020) argue that both state and non-state actors restrict freedoms—states through repressive laws (e.g., internet curbs, National Security Act), and non-state actors through power assertion, monopolizing narratives, and suppressing opposition, often promoting illiberal, populist ideologies. In polarized environments, non-state actors who often sideline democratic ideals increasingly dominate civic space. Local dynamics in India and Manipur share the global trends of democratic recession and political polarization.

Roggeband and Krizsán (2021) maps how civic space can be influenced by government. He argues that the state and the government use strategic techniques to organize civic space to achieve vested political agendas. This happens by offering state support in forms of resource, state patronage to pro-government organisations and depriving the same to others that are critical of government positions. The civil societies which stand against the government face intimidation, harassment leading to erosion of autonomy, civic capacity and engagement. This carrot and stick policy influences the temperament of individual actors thereby fragmenting civic space through selective patronage, intentional hurdles and legal restriction. The cumulative consequence remains civic organizing becoming risky and costly.

Bhavna Sharma (2008) warns of elite capture of civic space. As defined before, community leaders, influential CSOs, and religious authorities monopolize moral authority and dominate over alternative voices. When such actors align with partisan state interests, civic engagement fails to achieve their transformative capacity. Public demonstrations, statements and organizations serve to legitimize a



dominant narrative rather than to contest power. The combined outcome is the systematic exclusion of minority and dissenting voices.

Reclaiming Civic Space

An effective civic culture is underpinned by political, social and cultural norms that respect equality, human rights, freedom of speech and expression, culture of dissent, etc. Without these principles civic space becomes space for elite manipulation of public discourse, civic agency is compromised and civic engagement becomes a performative exercise not genuine democratic space making civic driven change impossible.

Reclamation requires both cultural work and legal reform. Cultural norms must inculcate civic education, inclusive participative culture. It is crucial that any interventions foreground with the premise of disagreement as legitimate within all level of community-village, religious or ethnic community, state and the nation

The vibrancy of civic space is unachievable without the state's commitment. In its absence, genuine civic space and civil society cannot flourish, they become targets of influence not tools of social empowerment. In this regard, ICNL has outlined the roles and responsibilities of the state in promotion and protection of civic space. In its 2021 document it has highlighted that states must commit to upholding human rights and protecting civic space with both positive and negative obligations. Positive obligation involves legal enforcement, law and order maintenance to give level playing field to various voices, opinions. Negative obligation involves avoiding unnecessary interference, upholding of organizational rights and ensuring legal enforcement meets necessity and proportionality tests. It recommends institutionalisation of legal and governance mechanisms to advance human rights and civic freedom.

Reclaiming civic space requires a multi-layered ecosystem. It needs legal institutions, independent media and fact-checking networks, academia, and popular civic education. Coalition-building across these layers reduces vulnerability to elite capture and increases the durability of civic gains.

Civic Space and the Future of Manipur

The battle to protect and reclaim civic space cannot be won easily. It needs patience and demands popular mobilization underpinned by heightened civic awareness and skills. It needs efforts from different layers. This includes academic, popular movement, legal instruments and governance channels.



Bossuyt and Ronceray (2020) note the emergence of different forms of practices that can strengthen the horizon of civic space. He highlights alliance formation between CSOs and social movements and activists, utilizing the legal and political recourse such as legislative institutions and courts; partnership with local institutions and governments; joint agendas with media; leveraging digital platform and crowdfunding, etc.

Manipur's enduring instability cannot be resolved solely by top-down security measures or by narrow ethnic bargaining. Durable peace requires resilient civic deliberation. It needs open civic space in which dissent is tolerated, accountability is practiced. It needs a system where diverse voices can broker compromises. The loss of such space produces narrative dominance, accountability collapse and prolongs conflict. Civic space is democratic necessity as much as it is a human-rights concern. Restoring it is a prerequisite for lasting peace. Future research should empirically map the micro-mechanisms of self-censorship, measure associational independence, and evaluate interventions (legal, cultural, institutional) that most efficiently reopen civic space in post-conflict settings.

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