Electoral Politics in Manipur: Ethnic Mobilisation and Democratic Practice

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
	Electoral politics in Manipur, a multi-ethnic borderland state in Northeast India, unfolds within a context of social cleavages, historical grievances, and recurrent inter-ethnic tensions. This article examines the interaction between ethnic mobilisation, voting behaviour, and democratic practice, assessing whether electoral democracy has functioned as a mechanism of integration or as a site of fragmentation. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of consociationalism, instrumental and constructivist perspectives on ethnicity, the study analyses how ethnicity structures political competition, influences voter behaviour, and shapes perceptions of legitimacy. The findings suggest that while ethnic mobilisation has facilitated representation and sustained political participation, it simultaneously reinforces identity-based competition and structural fragmentation. The article further explores prospects for democratic consolidation through constructive identity politics, cross-ethnic deliberation, and institutional innovations that foster inclusion and collective governance. Ultimately, the case of Manipur illustrates the paradoxical role of ethnicity in democratic consolidation: enabling participatory engagement while simultaneously challenging integrative institutional capacity.

Introduction

Elections constitute the foundational mechanism of modern representative democracy. At a procedural level, they enable the peaceful transfer of political authority, institutionalise political competition, and

provide citizens with the opportunity to choose and replace their rulers. Beyond this procedural dimension, elections perform deeper normative and functional roles: they confer legitimacy on governments, structure political accountability, and translate social diversity into institutional representation. In democratic theory, elections serve at least four core functions. First, they ensure **popular sovereignty**, affirming that political power ultimately derives from the will of the people. Second, they provide a mechanism of **accountability**, allowing voters to reward or punish incumbents based on performance. Third, elections facilitate **political inclusion**, incorporating diverse social groups into the formal political arena. Fourth, they promote **conflict management**, offering institutional channels through which competing interests and identities can be negotiated without resorting to violence (Schedler, 2001).

Electoral Politics in a Multi-Ethnic Society

Electoral politics rests on the normative principle that political authority derives from the consent of the governed and is periodically renewed through competitive. In representative systems, elections institutionalise political competition, facilitate peaceful transfers of power, and create mechanisms of vertical accountability between citizens and rulers. Beyond their procedural function, elections perform integrative and conflict-regulating roles: they aggregate diverse social interests, transform social cleavages into organised political competition, and provide legitimate channels for contestation within a constitutional framework. However, in deeply plural or multi-ethnic societies, electoral democracy operates within a structurally complex environment. Social cleavages based on ethnicity, language, religion, or territory often pre-exist democratic institutions and may become politically salient during electoral competition (Horowitz, 1985). Theoretical debates on democracy in divided societies suggest two contrasting possibilities. On one hand, elections can moderate ethnic conflict by incorporating marginalised groups into formal political structures, encouraging bargaining, coalition-building, and power-sharing (Lijphart, 1977). On the other hand, electoral incentives may encourage elites to mobilise voters along identity lines, reinforcing communal boundaries and transforming elections into arenas of ethnic outbidding (Chandra, 2004).

Thus, electoral democracy in multi-ethnic settings presents a paradox: it simultaneously enables inclusion and risks polarisation. The extent to which elections deepen democratic practice depends on whether political competition transcends ethnic exclusivity or becomes structurally anchored in identity-based mobilisation. Democratic consolidation, therefore, cannot be assessed solely through procedural

continuity—such as regular elections or high voter turnout—but must also consider substantive dimensions including representation, inclusiveness, legitimacy, and conflict management.

This broader theoretical tension finds a compelling empirical illustration in Manipur, a borderland state in Northeast India. Characterised by pronounced ethnic cleavages between the Meitei-dominated valley and the Naga and Kuki-Zomi inhabited hill districts, Manipur represents a deeply plural society where electoral politics unfolds alongside competing territorial claims, insurgency, counter-insurgency, and periodic inter-ethnic violence. Yet, despite these structural constraints, electoral processes have continued uninterrupted, voter participation has often remained high, and party competition has evolved within constitutional parameters. The case of Manipur therefore provides an important site to examine whether electoral democracy in a conflict-affected, multi-ethnic context functions as an instrument of democratic consolidation or as a mechanism that intensifies identity-based political mobilisation.

Objectives

This article aims to assess whether electoral politics in Manipur has meaningfully contributed to democratic consolidation or whether ethnic mobilisation has limited the deepening of democratic practice. It seeks to evaluate the institutionalisation and resilience of electoral processes within the constitutional framework of India, while examining how ethnic identities shape political competition, representation, and governance. Ultimately, the study explores whether elections in Manipur function as instruments of democratic integration and legitimacy, or whether they reinforce ethnic polarisation and structural inequalities within the state's multi-ethnic context.

Historical Evolution of Electoral Politics in Manipur

The trajectory of electoral politics in Manipur must be situated within its distinctive historical experience of monarchical governance, colonial intervention, postcolonial integration, and prolonged insurgency. The evolution of representative institutions in the state reflects both the broader constitutional framework of India and the region's specific socio-political cleavages.

Manipur briefly experienced an early experiment with constitutional governance through the Manipur State Constitution Act of 1947, which introduced an elected legislative assembly prior to its formal merger with India in 1949. This episode marked an important, albeit short-lived, moment of proto-democratic institutionalisation. Following its merger and subsequent reorganisation as a Union Territory, electoral politics became gradually embedded within the parliamentary system of India. The attainment of full statehood in 1972 represented a critical juncture, consolidating representative institutions and

enabling the formation of a state-level party system (Kabui, 1991). From the 1970s onward, electoral competition in Manipur evolved within a context shaped by insurgency, counter-insurgency operations, and the imposition of extraordinary security laws. Despite these constraints, regular legislative assembly and parliamentary elections were conducted, often recording high voter turnout. This continuity underscores the procedural resilience of electoral democracy even amid conflict. At the same time, the party system underwent significant transformation. Initially dominated by the Indian National Congress, the political arena gradually witnessed the entry and consolidation of regional parties, shifting alliances, and, more recently, the growing influence of national parties seeking to expand their footprint in the Northeast.

A defining feature of this evolution has been the interaction between electoral competition and ethnic politics. The hill–valley divide—structurally embedded in the state's administrative and demographic configuration—has shaped patterns of representation and political mobilisation. Electoral constituencies in the valley and hill districts have often reflected distinct political preferences, reinforcing identity-based alignments. Over time, coalition governments, party defections, and shifting political loyalties have become recurrent features, reflecting both the fragmentation of the party system and the strategic negotiation of ethnic and regional interests. Thus, the historical evolution of electoral politics in Manipur reveals a dual dynamic: on the one hand, the consolidation of procedural democratic norms—regular elections, competitive party politics, and institutional continuity; on the other hand, the persistent salience of ethnicity as a structuring principle of political contestation. Understanding this historical trajectory is essential for assessing whether electoral politics in the state has advanced democratic consolidation or merely accommodated existing social divisions within a constitutional framework.

Ethnic Mobilisation, Voting Behaviour and Democratic Practice

Ethnic mobilisation constitutes a structurally embedded dimension of democratic politics in deeply plural societies. Classical democratic theory presumes the primacy of individual citizenship and programmatic competition; yet in contexts marked by historically consolidated social identities, political participation frequently unfolds through collective affiliations. Ethnicity becomes politically consequential when shared cultural markers—language, territory, customary institutions, and collective memory—are translated into organised political claims. In such settings, democratic practice is rarely insulated from identity; rather, it emerges as the principal arena through which identity is articulated, negotiated, and institutionalised.

In Manipur, ethnic mobilisation has evolved as a foundational axis of political organisation. The demographic configuration of a Meitei-majority valley juxtaposed against Naga- and Kuki-Zomi-dominated hill districts has produced territorially anchored identities that intersect directly with the electoral map. Electoral constituencies, therefore, are not merely administrative demarcations but socio-political spaces embedded within distinct historical experiences and political aspirations. Democratic competition unfolds within a framework in which ethnicity shapes both the supply side—party strategies, candidate selection, and campaign rhetoric—and the demand side—voter expectations, representational claims, and perceptions of legitimacy.

At the level of participation, ethnic mobilisation has contributed to the institutionalisation of electoral engagement. Communities perceive elections as constitutionally sanctioned mechanisms through which collective interests—relating to land, autonomy, development, and recognition—can be advanced. This perception has fostered sustained voter turnout and competitive participation, even during periods marked by instability or inter-community tension. Electoral democracy, in this sense, functions as a structured channel for articulating identity-based demands within the constitutional framework of India, thereby integrating potentially contentious claims into formal political processes.

Yet the same dynamics complicate the substantive deepening of democracy. Ethnic mobilisation frequently conditions patterns of coalition formation, ministerial allocation, and distributive politics. Governance arrangements often reflect attempts to maintain inter-community equilibrium, privileging representational balance over ideological coherence. While such balancing may mitigate immediate conflict and enhance perceived fairness among communities, it can simultaneously constrain policy innovation and weaken programmatic party development. Electoral campaigns may foreground identity narratives, narrowing deliberative space for issue-based discourse and reinforcing segmented political publics. In this context, democratic legitimacy becomes relational and contingent: trust in institutions is frequently filtered through communal perceptions of inclusion, fairness, and access to state resources. During episodes of heightened inter-ethnic strain, electoral outcomes may be interpreted not merely as political results but as indicators of relative advantage or marginalisation. These dynamics underscore the inextricable linkage between ethnic identity and democratic authority (Singh, 2024).

Importantly, ethnic mobilisation in Manipur does not operate solely as an exclusionary force. It has simultaneously enabled representation and structured political competition, integrating diverse communities into a shared—though contested—democratic framework. Elections function as institutionalised arenas of negotiation, where identity-based claims are mediated through constitutional

procedures rather than exclusively through extra-institutional confrontation. In analytical terms, democratic practice in Manipur may thus be characterised as **procedurally resilient yet substantively mediated** by entrenched socio-ethnic cleavages. Ethnicity does not negate democracy; rather, it shapes its modalities, incentives, and limits. The interaction between ethnic mobilisation and electoral institutions produces a distinctive form of democratic politics—one in which participation is robust, competition is structured by identity, and consolidation remains contingent upon the management of pluralism within a deeply divided social order.

Ethnicity remains a central, though not singular, determinant of electoral behaviour in Manipur. The territorial embedding of ethnic identities—most visibly reflected in the valley–hill divide—has translated demographic realities into patterned political alignments. Electoral constituencies function as socio-territorial spaces where identity, land, history, and political aspiration converge. Consequently, voting behaviour reflects a layered interaction between ethnic affiliation, party competition, leadership networks, and strategic calculations.

In the valley constituencies, where the Meitei population forms a demographic majority, electoral competition tends to be mediated through mainstream political parties operating within India's parliamentary system. Campaigns frequently foreground development narratives, governance performance, employment, infrastructure, and leadership credibility. While ethnic identity remains salient—particularly during periods of inter-community tension—it does not always translate into explicit bloc voting. Party switching, candidate reputation, factional alignments, and patronage networks often exert considerable influence. The relative density of political parties and higher levels of media penetration in the valley further contribute to more competitive and issue-oriented electoral dynamics, even if ideological consolidation remains relatively shallow (Singh, 2024).

In contrast, many hill constituencies exhibit stronger patterns of ethnic consolidation, shaped by demographic concentration and historically rooted collective political aspirations. In several Naga- and Kuki-dominated areas, electoral behaviour demonstrates a high degree of community cohesion, where identity-based considerations heavily influence voter preferences. Local leadership networks, customary institutions, and influential community actors shape political orientations, reinforcing the principle that representation should align with collective ethnic interests. Political parties organised around ethnic identities—or those that explicitly foreground ethnic concerns—exercise considerable influence, articulating demands related to land, autonomy, recognition, and security, thereby positioning themselves as custodians of community aspirations. Even when candidates contest under national party banners,

ethnic affiliation and community endorsement remain central to electoral legitimacy. Elections in these constituencies thus function not only as mechanisms of individual political choice but also as platforms for collective assertion, embedding voting behaviour within shared identity narratives and communal expectations (Haokip, 2010).

In Kuki-dominated constituencies, ethnic identity also constitutes a powerful mobilising resource, particularly regarding land rights, security concerns, and political representation. However, electoral competition in these areas has exhibited relatively greater partisan pluralism. Candidates frequently contest under the banners of multiple national and regional parties, and shifting alliances are common. This pattern suggests that while ethnicity frames political discourse, it does not always produce uniform electoral consolidation. Leadership rivalries, kinship networks, denominational affiliations, and localized patronage systems mediate voter choice, producing outcomes that are more fragmented compared to certain Naga-dominated areas (Haokip).

This variation between Naga and Kuki electoral patterns underscores an important analytical point: ethnicity in Manipur does not operate as a monolithic or deterministic variable. Rather, it interacts with local leadership structures, civil society organisations, insurgent histories, and the strategic behaviour of political elites. Ethnic identity provides the overarching grammar of political mobilisation, but the specific expression of voting behaviour depends on context-specific alignments and opportunity structures. Electoral behaviour cannot be reduced to "pure ethnic voting." Even in constituencies marked by strong identity consolidation, voters consider candidate credibility, access to resources, developmental promises, and the capacity to negotiate with state and central authorities. Ethnicity often defines the boundaries of political competition—determining who is considered a legitimate representative—but within those boundaries, party strategies, individual ambitions, and governance considerations remain influential.

Thus, ethnicity functions less as an exclusive determinant and more as a structuring framework within which democratic choice is exercised. It shapes the contours of political competition, influences coalition-building, and conditions perceptions of representation, yet coexists with pragmatic calculations and institutional incentives. Electoral politics in Manipur therefore reflects a **complex synthesis**: identity-driven mobilisation operating alongside strategic party competition, revealing both the integrative and fragmentary potentials of democracy in a multi-ethnic society.

Achievements and Structural Constraints

Has electoral politics strengthened democratic legitimacy? Or Does ethnic mobilisation deepen democracy or fragment it? The trajectory of electoral politics in Manipur reflects both the achievements and the limitations of democracy in a multi-ethnic context. On the one hand, the expansion of electoral participation and the emergence of ethnically representative political parties have contributed to the formal consolidation of democratic legitimacy. Elections have provided communities with institutional avenues to articulate their interests, demand accountability, and participate in governance. In this sense, ethnic mobilisation has, at least procedurally, deepened democracy by ensuring that diverse groups are included within the political process and that their voices are acknowledged within formal decision-making structures.

However, these achievements coexist with structural constraints that temper the democratic gains. Ethnic mobilisation in Manipur frequently reinforces political fragmentation, as parties and voting patterns often coalesce along ethnic lines. While this enhances representation, it also intensifies competition for access to state resources and political power, creating zero-sum dynamics that undermine broader societal cohesion. Electoral processes may become arenas for ethnic contestation rather than deliberation over policy, development, or governance. Additionally, historical grievances, unequal development between the valley and hill regions, and centralised policy interventions contribute to persistent perceptions of exclusion, further complicating the consolidation of democratic legitimacy.

Thus, ethnic mobilisation in Manipur embodies a paradox. It simultaneously strengthens democracy by expanding participation and representation, yet it can fragment the political landscape and challenge the integrative capacity of democratic institutions. The state's democratic trajectory depends on the ability of political actors and institutions to transform mobilisation into constructive engagement—through inclusive policies, negotiated settlements, and cross-community collaboration—rather than allowing ethnic cleavages to harden into enduring barriers to governance and social cohesion.

Prospects for Democratic Consolidation

Constructive Identity Politics

Addressing the challenges posed by ethnic mobilisation in Manipur requires promoting forms of identity politics that are aligned with the principles of democratic pluralism. This entails recognising and protecting group-specific rights within constitutional and legal frameworks, thereby ensuring that communities can assert their identity without undermining the broader democratic order. At the same

time, fostering inclusive political platforms that bring diverse communities into meaningful dialogue is essential. Mechanisms for negotiation and consultation—ranging from institutionalised forums to participatory decision-making processes—can further facilitate engagement across groups. When identity politics is channelled in a constructive manner, oriented toward mutual accommodation rather than exclusivity, it not only enhances political representation but also strengthens social cohesion and collective trust in democratic institutions.

Cross-Ethnic Deliberation and Institutional Innovation

Equally critical to consolidating democracy in Manipur is the cultivation of cross-ethnic deliberation and institutional innovation. Collaborative political spaces—such as inter-community alliances and deliberative forums—can help mitigate polarising tendencies by focusing attention on shared developmental and governance agendas rather than on divisive identity claims. Institutional reforms, including inclusive electoral arrangements, strengthened local governance structures, and mechanisms for participatory budgeting and planning, can further facilitate cross-community cooperation. By creating avenues for diverse groups to negotiate, deliberate, and jointly shape public policy, these innovations promote an integrative democratic culture that accommodates diversity while fostering collective decision-making and accountability.

Conclusion

The analysis of electoral politics in Manipur highlights a complex interplay between ethnic mobilisation, voting behaviour, and democratic practice. Ethnic identities, structurally embedded in the state's demographic and territorial configuration, serve as both frameworks and drivers of political mobilisation, shaping candidate selection, party strategies, and voter expectations. While this mobilisation has strengthened procedural democracy by institutionalising political participation and enabling representation of historically marginalised groups, it also reinforces communal boundaries, conditions coalition formation, and creates structural constraints on substantive governance and programmatic development. Democratic legitimacy in Manipur, therefore, is relational and contingent: it depends not solely on procedural regularity but on perceptions of inclusion, equity, and access to state resources. Electoral politics in the state reflects a dual dynamic—ethnicity both integrates communities into formal democratic processes and fragments the political landscape along identity lines. Prospects for democratic consolidation lie in transforming ethnic mobilisation from a source of zero-sum competition into a basis for constructive engagement. Promoting identity politics that recognises group rights while fostering dialogue, cross-ethnic deliberation, and participatory institutional mechanisms can enhance social

cohesion and collective decision-making. Strengthened local governance, inclusive electoral reforms, and mechanisms for negotiated cooperation offer pathways to mitigate polarisation while preserving robust representation. Ultimately, Manipur exemplifies the paradoxical nature of democracy in deeply plural societies: robust participation and institutional resilience coexist with structural fragmentation, and the consolidation of democracy depends on the capacity of political actors and institutions to manage diversity constructively, balancing representation with the integrative imperatives of governance.

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