
UNIT 9 ETHNICITY AND POLITICS OF RECOGNITION*

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9.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the meaning of ethnicity and politics of recognition;
- Establish relationships between them; and
- Discuss politics of recognition in the context of Northeast India.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

In Northeast India, several communities have been complaining of unequal treatment meted out to them either by the central or state governments or by other communities. They say that generally, their opinions are neglected in the formulation of policies; vested interests exploit their natural resources, and they have limited economic opportunities for development. In their perceptions, their neglect, exploitation, and limited economic opportunities lead to erosion in their social and cultural identities, economic disadvantage and political exclusion. Often such feelings get manifested in political aspects and ethnic relations. Attempts on the part of communities to seek equality and autonomy in

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relationship with other communities and treatment from the state can be understood in terms of politics of recognition. In this unit, you will read about the politics of recognition with reference to ethnicity in Northeast India.

9.2 THE CONCEPTS: ETHNICITY AND POLITICS OF RECOGNITIONS

9.2.1 What is Ethnicity?

Ethnicity is related to a kind of group identity. Such identity is formed when a group of people think that they share common characteristics – language, culture, customs, history, economic needs, race, kinship, etc. These are called markers. But every group identity is not an ethnic identity. A group identity becomes an ethnic identity only when it compares itself with another group identity. Thus, different group identities in relationships are ethnic identities. The relationship between different ethnic groups is known as ethnicity. These relationships can be different kinds of relationships – conflictual, competitive or cooperative. Their relationships depend on political context, e.g. elections, government formations, competition among and within the parties, among leaders. The number of markers that form ethnic identities varies. An ethnic can be formed on the basis of a single marker such as language, culture, customs, traditions, race, clan, religion or any other. It can also be formed on the basis of multiple factors cumulatively. The choice of their number depends on the perspective of a scholar defining ethnicity. Some scholars, especially stationed in western academic institutions, consider identity formed on the basis of a single marker as ethnic. However, those settled in Indian academic institutions designate single-marker identity in the name of that marker – caste, linguistic, regional, communal or religious identity. For them, an identity based on multiple markers is an ethnic identity. With reference to Northeast India, ethnic identity generally alludes to as the group formed on the basis of multiple factors such as tribe, race, kinship, culture (food, dress, and songs), region, customs, history, religion, economy, etc. Every state in Northeast India has multiple ethnic identities. In a situation of ethnic conflict between different ethnic groups, even if the conflict originally results from a single marker, the ethnic identities involved in the conflict get formed on the basis of multiple markers.

There are two perspectives that explain the nature of ethnic identities: primordial and instrumentalist or constructionist. The primordial perspective suggests that ethnic identities are naturally given. This perspective gives priority to the “ethnic core” or ascriptive factors as the principal cause for the formation of ethnic identity. On the contrary, according to the instrumentalist or constructivist perspective, ethnic identities are not natural. They are constructed or imagined. Ethnic identities are formed by the elite who manipulate the “imagined”, “constructed” or “invented” markers to form an identity. Ethnic identities are not permanent, and their shape is malleable. Both these perspectives have limitations. The primordial perspective does not explain how the ascriptive or primordial factors get political manifestation. The instrumentalist approach does not explain

why the elite are able to manipulate the markers of identity formation. Alternatively, why do members of ethnic groups respond to the call of the leaders from their ethnic group? Some suggest that a combination of primordial and instrumentalist perspectives can better explain the formation of ethnic identities (Singh 2011).

9.2.2 What is politics of Recognition?

The politics of recognition is about relationships between two or more groups or individuals. Charles Taylor (1992) explains the notion of recognition. It denotes that every individual is an embodiment of self-respect. It is also based on the premise that a reciprocal and equal relationship exists between two or more groups or individuals. That means the groups or individuals should have mutual and equal respect for each other. Lack of equality in a mutual relationship shows a lack of recognition or presence of misrecognition/non-recognition on the part of one of the groups or individuals. An attempt to seek equal treatment in mutual relationships by the misrecognised groups or individuals and response to them by other groups or individuals is an indication of the politics of recognition. Charles Taylor (1992) has conceived the politics of recognition within the framework of multiculturalism. This framework is about mutual and equal relationships among different groups about their democratic rights. A framework of multiculturalism focuses on respect, recognition, and autonomy of discrete identity groups. This framework was originally applied to the western context. Gurpreet Mahajan (2002) points out that the western discourse on multiculturalism locates the source of discrimination within the nation-state. It overlooks the sources of discrimination that exist outside the nation-state, such as discrimination against the minority groups in connivance with the government functionaries. In its application to India, a multicultural framework has been applied with reference to religious groups (Mahajan 1998, Ali 2000) or caste groups (Singh 2021). In the context of Northeast India, Haokip (2021: pp. 371-72) discusses the question of accommodating ethnic minorities in regional councils in terms of politics of recognition as defined by Charles Taylor.

9.2.3 Relationship between ethnicity and Politics of Recognition

What is the relationship between ethnicity and politics of recognition? When we apply the notion of recognition to ethnicity, we need to consider relationships of different ethnic groups among themselves and with the state/nation-state, government, officers, etc. In political recognition relating to ethnicity, there are different stakeholders: rival ethnic groups, state agencies. The issues in this politics involve rights of ethnic groups about political representation, political autonomy, recognition of national symbols; protection and preservation of their cultural identity (language, race, language, customs, status of women), natural resources, etc. In politics of recognition, ethnic groups feel that the rival groups do not treat them fairly/equally. The aggrieved ethnic groups attempt to recognise their rights, cultural and symbols, ethnic identity, protection and preservation of their social and cultural identity, and economic resources and opportunities. In such an attempt, they appeal to the state agencies or other ethnic communities. If

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they feel that the state or other communities do not respond to their concerns in a fair/equal manner, they make their efforts to get recognition. They either invent or discover their cultural symbols and project them not inferior to the symbols of other communities. They also resort to collective political mobilisation. Grounds for grievances of ethnic groups are not always based on reality. On various occasions, they are constructed by the political elite such as middle classes, politicians, student leaders or other civil society organisations. Politics of recognition is manifested in different forms such as ethnic conflict, insurgency, attempts by the communities to address their grievances, demand for political autonomy in terms of autonomous councils, demands for new states/union territories. As ethnicity is based on both realistic and imagined markers, politics of recognition is also based on realistic and imagined factors. Whether such politics is shaped by realistic or imagined/constructed factors depends on the elite, which play a decisive role in politics of recognition. Moreover, this again depends on political context: rise middle classes/elite, elections, competition between leaders within ethnic groups. In ethnic politics of recognition, the state institutions generally get identified with one or the other ethnic groups. In such a situation, they also become part of the politics of recognition. They support or oppose the stance of one or the other ethnic group. The state responds by formulating policies or taking executive actions. Therefore, in politics of recognition, along with the ethnic groups, the role of the state or public institutions is included.

Check Your Progress 1

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.
ii) Check your answers with the model answers given at the end of the unit.

1) What is meant by ethnicity and politics of recognition?

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2) Discuss the relationship between ethnicity and the politics of recognition.

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9.3 POLITICS OF RECOGNITION IN NORTHEAST INDIA

In view of their meanings explained above, we can understand the relationships between ethnicity and politics of recognition in Northeast India around the following points. These are the context, generation of a perception that ethnic communities do not get required recognition, and dimensions of politics of recognition. We can identify two broad dimensions of politics of recognition in Northeast India: social, cultural, and political. The social and cultural dimension is related to protecting and retaining symbols of social and cultural identities. The political dimension includes political autonomy, sovereignty, representation, creation of new states or Union Territories out of existing states or states or institutions such as autonomous district, regional or territorial councils to ensure political autonomy, and recognition of flag or constitutions ethnic communities claiming to be nations. The politics of recognition pertaining to ethnic groups in Northeast India has broadly three forms; One, with reference to relationships between the principal ethnic groups in a state such as between Bengalis and Assamese in Assam or tribals and non-tribals in Meghalaya, etc.; two, about relationships within an area between the communities each claiming to be indigenous and considering the other as non-indigenous/migrant, e.g., the conflict between Nagas and Kukis; and three, with reference to the relationship between ethnic groups and the state institutions (which are seen to be siding with one or the other ethnic groups). The politics of recognition in Northeast India is caused by the birth of consciousness within an ethnic community to seek social and cultural, and political recognition. It may arise due to realisation within an ethnic community that in comparison to or due to the other ethnic communities or neglect by the governments (centre or the state), it is not getting proper recognition by the state agencies or the other communities. With the help of some examples, this section of the unit deals with the context and dimensions of politics of recognition in Northeast India. This section of the unit is largely based on some literature on Northeast India: Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder* (2005, *Beyond Counter-Insurgency* (2009); *India Against Itself* (1999); S.K. Chaube, *Hill Politics in North East India* (1973); Udayon Misra, *Burden of History* (2017); Sajal Nag, *Contesting Marginality* (2002), *Roots of Ethnic Conflict* (1990); and Joy L.K. Pachuau, *Being Mizo* (2014).

9.3.1 The context

The politics of recognition in Northeast India plays out in a specific political context. The latter is represented by the rise of opinion-makers, especially the middle classes/elite among the ethnic groups, elections, some significant political development other than elections, competition among politicians within the same parties or different parties, bargaining for ministerial berths at the time of formation of governments, etc. A leading role in politics of recognition in Northeast India has been played by middle classes/elites, students, or other civil society organisations. The rise of the middle class among the communities in the

Northeast can be traced to the colonial era. Such class emerged across the communities – tribals and non-tribals (Assamese and Bengalis). Its emergence among the tribal communities is more spectacular. But even among the tribals, its growth had not been even over the period. During the first half of the twentieth century, a middle class emerged among the tribes like in other communities. During the pre-Independence period, having got educated in Calcutta (now Kolkata), Guwahati and Shillong, the middle class of indigenous ethnic communities played a decisive role in articulating grievances of their respective communities. This class continued to grow in the post-Independence period among different indigenous communities in Northeast India. It had close relations with their ethnic communities. Their close association with their respective communities enabled them to reflect on issues or grievances of their respective communities. The grievances covered a wide range of issues social and cultural identities, political autonomy, and preservation of economic resources and opportunities. The elites from the indigenous ethnic communities in the Northeast - middle classes, students, politicians or civil society organisations generally identified the reasons for their grievances in nature of their relationships with the nation-state agencies/central police/governors, migrants from other regions, etc. They underline that such relationships lack equality in reciprocity. They are not given due recognition; their opinions are neglected, the central government often uses central government institutions to impose its decisions on them. Such opinion can be based both on reality and imagined factors. The efforts on the part of opinion makers to seek autonomy, equality in the relationship, self-respect, etc., indicate the existence of politics of recognition on the part of the communities in the region.

9.3.2 Social and Cultural Dimension

Some of the important aspects of the social and cultural dimension of the politics of recognition in Northeast India are related to language, recognition of the discrete identity of a tribe, preserving and protecting the identity of a tribe from the erosion in its original features. Language and Patois have been a source of ethnic conflict in Northeast India. The roots of it can be traced to the colonial period. Sajal Nag in *Roots of Ethnic Conflict* (1990) explains that during the colonial period, middle classes belonging to ethnic groups – Assamese and Bengalis-competed for recognition of their respective language – Assamese or Bengalis as an official language. Arguing in favour of the Bengali language, the Bengali intellectuals and middle classes argued that Bengali should be the official language and that Assamese was a Patois of Bengali. The Assamese gave a counter argument that Assamese was developed and independent with a long history; it should be recognised as an official language. Both sides appealed to the colonial authorities for recognition of their respective language as an official language. The colonial authorities took different stances depending on their interests or the pressure of respective ethnic communities. In 1838, the colonial authorities recognised Bengali as an official language in Assam. Bengali began to be taught in schools in Assam. The initial introduction of Bengali as an official language, official work in Assam (Ahom regime) was done in Persian. In 1873,

Bengali was replaced by Assamese as an official language. In the conflict over language questions during the colonial period, the colonial authorities supported the Bengali middle class; the missionaries supported the Assamese middle class. In the post-Independence period, during the 1960s, Assam witnessed language conflicts. The Assam Sahitya Sabha passed a resolution suggesting Assamese become an official language in the entire Assam, which included areas where non-Assamese languages formed lingua franca: hill areas (Khasi, Garo and Jaintia hills), and plain areas (Bengali-dominated Barak valley). The move faced opposition in the areas inhabited mostly by the non-Assamese linguistic communities. The language was also one of several issues in the Bodos' politics of recognition. These issues were included in the 92- points charter of demands of the All India Bodo Students Movement prepared after the 1987 Assam Accord. The Bodos objected to clause 6 of the Accord, which included Assamese as a concept for people of Assam whose interest the Assam Accord was expected to protect. In their opinion, the term Assamese subsumed the identity of smaller tribes such as Bodos. Instead of being known as Assamese, they wanted to be recognised as Bodos. "We are Bodos, not Assamese", they asserted (Baruah, *India Against Itself*, 1999). They argued that Bodos were original inhabitants of Assam, and the high castes of Assam had migrated from other parts of India. The Bodo intellectuals argued that Bodos were known by different names as the original inhabitants of Assam common language: Bodo. They argue that the language of Bodos and Kacharis, "the original master ruler of Assam," is "the most original and widespread in Assam". They counter the suggestion to make Assamese a "link language" in Assam by suggesting that Bodo can be a "link language" of the Assamese. They assert that their language (Bodo) is different from that of the ethnic Assamese; they also follow different cultural practices. For instance, unlike the ethnic Assamese, who burnt their dead bodies, the Bodo buried them or left their corpse in the open to be fed by vultures (Baruah, 1999: pp. 184-85). They also underline that their food and dressing patterns are different from those of the dominant communities, the Assamese (Baruah 1999, p. 186).

Several tribal ethnic groups in the Northeast feel that their indigenous identity has been eroded over the years. As ethnic identities in Northeast India are formed on the basis of multiple markers – language, race, kinship, the specific character of a tribe (such as matriarchy among the Khasis), the status of women, natural resources, etc, erosion in any of these markers is viewed as erosion in an entire identity. The indigenous communities complain that erosion of their identity is reflected in every marker of their identity, which impacts their overall ethnic identity. The reasons for their perception are both real and constructed. They count several factors accountable for erosion in their identity - unequal treatment by the state (especially the central government and institutions/agencies associated with it), the role of immigrants or non-indigenous ethnic communities. According to H. Kham Khan, Suan Post-colonial state "seems unduly privileged" to have exclusive material and symbolic power to designate a tribe as it wished: the encounter between tribes and the state was unequal (Suan 2011: 158).

Although it is the post-colonial state that has been largely held responsible for unequal treatment of the indigenous communities in the Northeast, scholars and activists from the Northeast often trace it to the policies of the colonial state. The post-colonial state does not consult them while devising policies about the region; this neglect is their misrecognition. Over the years, cultural practices and features of several indigenous tribes in the Northeast have undergone changes. As mentioned earlier, these changes have often been viewed as erosion in the features of the indigenous tribes. Among the Khasis of Meghalaya, such changes have generated a debate within their community. Various sections of the Khasis – students, middle classes, civil society organisations argue that the identity of the Khasi society has been adversely impacted due to exploitation of their economic resources and opportunities by the immigrants and other vested interests, and inter-ethnic marriages. Especially, inter-ethnic marriages are considered to be the main reason for the erosion of their matrilineal system. The changes in the features of the matrilineal system and other issues relating to the social and cultural identities have generated a debate within the Khasi tribe about the reasons for the changes and measures to be taken to preserve and restore them.

Both colonial and post-colonial authorities have created generic categories consisting of several individual tribes. For examples, Nagas and Mizos are not the original names of the tribes. Some of the individual tribes which form these generic groups prefer to be recognised by the names of their individual tribe. Mizos in the state of Mizoram largely identify themselves as Mizos. But those with domicile outside Mizoram prefer to identify themselves with their distinct names, such as Hmars and Paites. Even within Mizoram, the tribes such as Maras (formerly Lakhers) and Lais (also known as Pawis) prefer to be called by these names rather than Mizos (Pachau, 2014: pp. 10-12). Some tribes complain that the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order 1950 committed “errors” in their names. This has caused them problems for the indigenous tribes in availing government policies (especially outside Northeast India) and recognising indigenous names. For instance, some tribal communities in Arunachal Pradesh – civil society organisations, especially students, have been demanding recognition of individual dignity (indigenous identities). They complain because of errors by the Constitutional (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950, and “colonial interpretation”, ambiguity has been created in their identity. They understand that because of ambiguity in nomenclature, their number in Arunachal Pradesh is projected less than their actual numbers. In response to their demand, the Parliament in (the first week of August 2021) passed the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Amendment) Bill, 2021 to amend the list of Scheduled Tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. The Bill was passed after one year of cabinet approval to it. The Bill seeks to modify Part-XVIII of the Scheduled to the Constitution (Scheduled Order), 1950. The 2021 Bill seeks to correct the names of the 16 tribes whose names were spelt incorrectly, adds names of a few tribes whose names were written ambiguously or had their parent group only. However, the replacement of “Any Naga tribe” in the bill with specific names of these four Naga tribes i.e. Nocte, Tangsa, Tulsu and Wancho is opposed by the NSCN (IM)

on the ground that it will conceal their Naga identity. It is argued that it will undermine the cause of the creation of Nagalim or Greater Nagaland (Agarwala, 2021).

9.3.3 Political Dimension

As stated earlier, the basis of an ethnic identity formation may start with a single marker. But in due course, it may expand to include multiple markers. The elite/middle classes from ethnic communities in the Northeast channelised the feeling of neglect or recognition of their respective communities into political demands. These demands span from seeking regional, district or territorial councils, formation of new states, formation of states within old states, the introduction of Inner Line Permit (IPL), creation of a sovereign state, etc. In some cases, political mobilisation on these demands gets manifested in insurgency or ethnic conflicts. The context to the political dimension of politics of recognition in Northeast India is indicated by the rise of middle classes or elite; major political developments in any state of the region; elections; bargaining among political leaders at the time of government formation. In most Northeast Indian states, indigenous communities discover or invent symbols such as flags, constitutions, territorial autonomy, institutions, etc. They argue that they have been nations since time immemorial. Their nations had culture, territory, political sovereignty, autonomy, etc. These nations suffered at the hands of the state – colonial and post-colonial. The colonial state subjugated them, and the post-colonial state did not give them due to recognition. The latter imposed central institutions, neglected them, etc.). Some of them (such as Nagas) argued that they were never part of India: the British had subjugated them. After the withdrawal of the British, they said, they remained nations: they demanded that they should be accorded sovereignty. Other communities did not claim that they were never part of India but demanded recognition as a sovereign state.

In the 1950s-1960s, the Nagas and Mizos were engaged in insurgencies. The end of colonial power became a political context for the Nagas to assert that they had always been an independent nation. They discovered symbols of their nation and claimed to have a sovereign nation. Non-adherence to the Hydari accord in 1956 led to the birth of the Naga insurgency. However, the formation of Nagaland state in 1963 resulted in a decline of the Naga insurgency until the signing of the Shillong Accord in 1975. Demand for the creation of Nagalim is the latest phase of politics of recognition. The Mizo insurgency began in the wake of the famine of 1956 in Mizoram. The Mizos felt neglected by both the central government and state government in Assam, of which the Lushai (Mizo) hill was then apart.

The feeling of neglect on the part of Mizos implied that they were not treated equally in their reciprocity with the central and state government. The formation of Meghalaya state in 1972 provided a new political context for competitive politics in the new state. The new context was different from the earlier period. At that time, competitive politics took place within the state of Assam, between the Assamese and Assamese. After the formation of Meghalaya, the competition shifted to politicians with the new state. In the new context, the politicians

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competed with each other. They alleged that the social and cultural identities of the indigenous were feared to be eroded (along with the exploitation of economic opportunities and resources). In the process, the indigenous tribes were neglected and discriminated. They underlined that their autonomy and identities needed to be protected. They adopted a two-pronged strategy to retrieve and protect their identity: efforts at the community level to invent and discover symbols of their identity, etc. and political mobilisation, formulating policies, etc. Elections often became the proper context for raising these issues.

Again in the 1960s, people in hills (Khasi, Jaintia, Garo and Mizo/Lushai) demanded the formation of a new hill state. There were two reasons for this: dissatisfaction against the functioning of the SDCs under the VI Schedule, and opposition to the introduction of Assamese as an official language, and medium instruction in areas where Assamese was not spoken. This finally resulted in reorganisation of Assam, leading to the formation of Meghalaya, Tripura, Manipur as states and of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh as Union Territories. In the 1980s, some Bengalis in the Barak valley of Assam demanded separate statehood or Union Territory of Cachar. In the post-Assam Accord, the Bodo demanded the creation of Bodoland. Bodoland is an indigenised nomenclature of the more Sanskritised version of Udayachal, a demand for a new state of Bodos made earlier.

The non-indigenous communities also often complain that they are not equally treated with the tribal communities by the state-level agencies and local institutions in the federal structure. They complain that their misrecognition becomes more acute during a conflictual situation such as ethnic conflict, insurgency or disputes at individual levels.

Check Your Progress 2

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.
ii) Check your answers with the model answers given at the end of the unit.

- 1) Discuss social and cultural dimensions of politics of recognition in Northeast India.

- 2) Explain political manifestation of politics of recognition in Northeast India.

9.4 LET US SUM UP

Ethnicity and politics of recognition have specific meanings. Ethnicity denotes relationships among groups that are formed on the basis of a consciousness that members of such groups share certain common features or markers. Such markers are culture, language, dressing pattern, dance, food, clan, race, customs, etc. An ethnic identity can be formed on the basis of single or multiple markers. Recognition denotes the existence of reciprocal and equal relationships among different ethnic groups. Recognition is based on the premise that every individual or group deserves self-respect and dignity. Recognition is provided by equality and reciprocity in the relationship. The absence of equality and reciprocity in the group relationship denotes a lack of recognition or misrecognition of the less resourceful/influential group. Politics of recognition means attempts to seek equality, self-respect or recognition in relationships among individuals or groups. In a multicultural society, ethnicity and the politics of recognition are interlinked. The relationship between ethnicity and politics of recognition suggests attempts on the part of an ethnic group to seek equality, self-respect, autonomy from the state or other ethnic group. In Northeast India, politics of recognition in relation to ethnic groups are of two types: One, relationship between different ethnic groups; two relationships between ethnic groups and state agencies. Politics of recognition in Northeast India has social and cultural, and political dimensions. Its social and cultural dimension includes attempts on the part of tribal groups to preserve and protect their cultural identities. They feel that these identities have been eroded because of the unequal treatment meted out to them by the state policies/central government and outsiders. Political ramifications of politics of recognition take the shape of insurgencies, demands for political autonomy by creating regional, districts or territorial councils or formation of separate states. Elite/middle classes play the principal role in this politics. Such politics also occurs in a specific political context.

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9.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Ethnicity is about the relationship between ethnic groups. Ethnic groups are the groups that are formed on the basis of consciousness among the members of a group that they share common markers such as language, culture, customs, kinship, etc. Ethnic groups exist in relationships with other such groups. Politics of recognition denotes a reciprocal and equal relationship between different ethnic groups.
- 2) The relationship between ethnicity and politics of recognition implies attempts on the parts of ethnic groups to seek recognition of their social and cultural identities and political autonomy, representation, etc, the response of other ethnic communities and the state agencies.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The social and cultural dimension of politics of recognition is about protecting and preserving symbols of a community’s social and cultural identity. When a community realises that its language, customs,

indigenous features, etc., have to be protected or preserved, and it makes attempts in that direction, it is about recognising social and cultural identity.

- 2) In Northeast India, political manifestation in recognition assumes the form of demands for new states or union territories or a sovereign state, for creating autonomous regional, district or territorial councils, etc. Sometimes, it assumes the form of insurgency or ethnic riots.

