

Students' Movements in Mizoram: A Study of the Movements and Activities of MZP in Pre and Post Statehood Era

Joseph C. Lalremruata

Assistant Professor

Dept. of Political Science

Government Mamit College

Mamit: Mizoram

Abstract

This paper analyses various students' movements and activities particularly the MZP, which is the oldest and biggest students' association in Mizoram. Several students' movements and activities for peace process, technical education, unification and brotherhood of Zo-ethnic tribes etc. are analyzed and discussed in this paper. Moreover, the origin and formation of MZP and other students' associations which were formed to play constructive role in peace process during insurgency period in Mizoram has also been analyzed. The paper attempts to provide the readers to acquire basic knowledge with regard to the contribution and role of students in various important issues in pre and post statehood era of Mizoram.

Key Words: MZP, Peace Talk, Demonstration, Technical Education, Zofest.

The students' movement is not a new thing in modern world and various students' movements are seen in the history of various countries. The students' organisations often play very important role to initiate reform and change in the society as well as to counter the corrupt practices of the Government. Besides, they are often important player to bring peace in the society. Mizoram also witnessed students' movements in various important issues. The insurgency movement remained in the State around 20-years as the MNF led by Laldenga declared full independence from the Indian Union. On the 1st March, 1966, a number of persons attacked the telephone exchanged and district treasury at Aizawl and looted Rs.64,000 and ammunitions. The district was declared as disturbed area on 2nd March, 1966 by Government of Assam. Even the MNF was declared as an unlawful association under the Defence of India Rules (Prasad 1987:241-244). The student community got deeply involved in the process of peace talk and they contributed a lot for bringing peace accord between the two parties.

Establishment of MZP (Mizo Zirlai Pawl _Mizo Students' Association)

Certainly, the advent of Christian Missionaries and their introduction of education to the Mizo Society changed the outlook, tradition and morality of the Mizo people on a large scale. Later on, some Mizo educated youths realized that the importance of the establishment of social organization for the development and upliftment of the Mizo Society. The first student association named as Lushai Students' Association (LSA) was established in 1924 and which was formed by Mizo students who studied in Calcutta (Kolkata), Gauhati (Guwahati) and Shillong (Lalzawnga 2015:49). However, it has been opined that the life span of the first Mizo student association was very short. With the passage of time, Mizo students of Shillong revived students' movements and formed a "Lushai Zirlai Pawl" (Lushai Students' Association or Union) on 27th October, 1935 and the name of the organization was, latter, changed into "Mizo Zirlai Pawl" (Mizo Students' Association) commonly known as MZP (Lalsawmliana 1992:1992). It is said that the Second World War badly affected MZP's activities and made it inactive for five years. The association was renewed only with effect from 1947 and it was reconstituted in 1959 (Lalzawnga 2015:49). After several years, other student associations also established in Mizoram such as Mizo Students' Union (MSU), Mara Students' Organisation (MSO), Hmar Students' Association (HAS), Lai Students' Association, Siamsin

Pawl Pi (SSPP) and so on and so forth. As a matter of fact, MZP and MSU are the main apex student bodies in Mizoram who involve in most of the State's problems. Both of them established their General Headquarters at Aizawl and headquarters at various places of Mizoram and outside the State. Various Students' Unions in different Colleges of Mizoram and different Clan based student associations are also affiliated to them and these student bodies are very cooperative in various movements organized by these two.

Objectives of MZP

The following points are some of the important objectives of MZP (Hmanmawia 2015:104).

- 1) To safeguard the rights and unity of all Mizo students.
- 2) To prepare Mizo people to become helpful citizens of Zoram.
- 3) To do its best to unite all Mizo tribes and create an independent Mizo State out of all the territories historically occupied by Mizo people.
- 4) To prevent and attack corruption in Mizoram.
- 5) To conserve traditional Mizo values.

Due to Mautam Famine, the involvement of Mizo students in the political process could be traced back to 1959. Though the then Mizo District Council had informed the Assam Government about the problem which could be faced by the Mizo people due to mautam famine, the Chaliha government did not pay much attention in this regard. At that time, the present Mizoram was one part of Assam and the region was economically backward. If the famine broke out it would have a large impact on the State and the People was certain. But, if the government took some certain measures to tackle the mautam famine, which would surely lessen the burden and troubles that could be confronted by the people. The Mizo students felt agitated due to the slow economic rehabilitation of the famine stricken people. Hence, in order to show their disgruntled feeling against the Assam Government, they launched a fasting in Shillong and criticized the poor and slow performance of the Assam Government (Chawngsailoa 1995:161).

For Restoration of Peace and Normalcy in Mizoram

The status of Mizo District Council was upgraded into Union Territory in 1971. The Mizo students also launched an agitation against the decision of the Central Government in this regard. The government decision in this regard was viewed as an insult by Mizo students because the proposal of the Central Government to upgrade the Mizo District into Union Territory was to break the backbone of the MNF movement. They pointed out that the Mizo who fought for the independence were only offered the status of Union Territory while the neighbouring districts who did not demand secession as the Mizo did were given statehood. Therefore, the Mizo students regarded it as an insult. Due to this, they submitted memorandum to the Prime Minister of India and organized a procession in Shillong on 31st July 1971. In the memorandum, the students clearly stated that the peaceful settlement of the Mizo problems could only be attained through peaceful negotiation of the MNF and the Government of India and the offering of the Union Territory would not solve the problem rather it would multiply. Since then, the involvement of Mizo students in political field is an important phenomenon. In the beginning, the Mizo students wanted to preserve and protect the legitimate interest of the Mizo people. However, some of the students leaders had latter become the main instrument of the politicians. As stated earlier, the insurgency movement remained around 20 years in Mizoram since the MNF began to declare full sovereignty from India (Chawngsailoa 1995:161).

For the restoration of normalcy as well as to bridge the gap between the MNF and Indian Government to have a peace talk, the Mizo students played a very valuable role. The peace talk normally began in 1976 and the Mizo students looked the talk with enthusiasm in the hope of getting a permanent peaceful negotiation between the two. The direct involvement of the Mizo students in the peace efforts can be traced back to 1979, when the MZP leaders namely, Lalthangliana Sailo, K. Hrangthankima, Vanupa Zathang and C. Thuamluaia went to New Delhi to meet the then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi and Laldenga who was the MNF leader and they submitted Memorandum to the Prime Minister (Memorandum 1971). In their meeting, Laldenga tried to impress upon the student leaders that Brig. T. Sailo ministry in Mizoram was the main obstacle in the peace process. The Prime Minister also reportedly told the student leaders that T. Sailo ministry in Mizoram was not their party government and cannot simply ask them to step down or dissolve because it would be unconstitutional and as students they may know what to do. Chaltuahkhuma also said that Laldenga requested the student leader to launch agitation in Mizoram to demonstrate their wish in favour of an agreement as well as to hasten the peace talk. Since then, the Mizo students got deeply involved to bring peace till the memorandum of settlement was signed between the MNF and Govt. of India.

When a peace talk between the MNF and the Government of India was called off on January 12, 1982, students' unrest and agitation came to standstill. Several students' leaders were imprisoned due to their anti-governmental activities. Moreover, the State Government did not permit the establishment of the MZP branch in all the educational institutions. As a result, several pro MNF students joined the underground, some others joined Mizoram Congress (I) and few of them joined the ruling PC and some others also formed a body called Students' Conference for Action Programme (SCAP) supporting the ruling party. At the same time, a students' forum known as Mizo Peace Forum (MPF) was jointly formed on December 30, 1982 by Mizo Students' Union (MSU) and All Mizo Post Graduate Students' Union (AMPGSU) leaders in Shillong. No doubt, the MPF was formed primarily to influence the existing political attitudes of the various groups of people and also to mobilize the people along the MNF lines. But, shortly afterwards the MPF converted itself into a political party. Its main aim, among other things, was maintaining permanent peace and tranquility. Thus, from its initial stage, the MPF was a pro-MNF forum.

After the Central Government and the MNF resumed peace talk in 1984, the Mizo students once again woke up from their slumber in the form of a Students Joint Action Committee (SJAC), which was formed at Aizawl on May 7, 1985, in the hope of playing more effective role. After various rounds of discussions, a preliminary draft of the peace settlement was completed in December, 1985. However, the final peace agreement could not be reached and it was an open secret that in Aizawl, the Mizoram Congress (I) Government led by Lal Thanhawla was seen as the main obstacle because he could not vacate his Chief Ministership in favour of the peace process, which led to a dead lock following which Laldenga (MNF underground President) went to London to spend Christmas in late 1985. Before his departure, Laldenga was informed by the Prime Minister that he would be summoned around January, 10, 1986. However, till the month of February 1986, Laldenga was not asked to come back to New Delhi from the Indian Government. Hence, the SJAC sent two delegates namely, R.F. Muana and Lalhmingliana went to New Delhi to urge the Prime Minister to call Laldenga back to New Delhi to finalize the peace talk. However, the SJAC delegates could not get appointment to meet the Prime Minister. After the SJAC delegates threatened to start fasting in front of the Parliament building, they were given an appointment and met the Prime Minister on March 10, 1986 and urged him to bring back Laldenga from London to conclude peace talk (Hluna 2015:22).

The SJAC sent letters to all Mizoram MLAs requesting them to resign for hastening the peace settlement, however, which was not heeded by the MLAs. Besides, in order to reach peace settlement, the SJAC requested the State Congress (I) Government led by Lal Thanhawla to step down. At the same time,

the SJAC organised a public procession in Aizawl on March 12, 1986 to speed up peace negotiation between the Government of India and the MNF underground. They launched a State-wide agitation and called for a total bandh for two days on June 3 and 4, 1986 (Hluna 2015:23). In short, the role played by Mizo students during insurgency was quite noteworthy. It is interesting to mention that there were various obstacles, drawbacks and deadlocks during the process of peace talk between the MNF and India's government. During those critical days, the students pressed the authorities for the restoration of peace talk and they contributed a lot for the success of Peace Talk. There is no-exaggeration to state that due to the critical role played by the students, finally, a Peace Settlement was signed in New Delhi by the MNF and Government of India on June 30, 1986.

MZP and Technical Education in Mizoram

After India became a free nation, the framers of the Constitution of India had given special protection for the upliftment of weaker sections of the society like SC, ST etc. There are several reservations in government jobs and seats in various institutions of India for SC, ST and OBC. Hence, various medical and engineering colleges have reserved seats for ST and SC students and filling up of the reserved seats and the selection of students are put in the hands of the concerned States. In Mizoram, there was no problem in the selection of reservation before 1980s because of less number of qualified students. However, the number of qualified students had been increased year by year and the technical education also attracts more students due to availability of more jobs in this sector. In the beginning, the method of selection of students to avail Mizoram quotas was done only through personal interview. Later on, written test are conducted by the Education Department due to the activism of the students' union.

The MZP General Conference held in 1980 passed a resolution for exclusion of non-Mizo students from the Mizoram quota/seat reservation. However, in the next year, the People's Conference (PC) party ministry led by Brig (ret'd). T.Sailo, selected three non-Mizo students for B.Sc. (Agriculture) course to avail Mizoram quota. One of the candidates was son of the Director of Agriculture department, Govt. of Mizoram, who was working on deputation basis. As the selection of non Mizo students for technical course was in violation of the previous year's resolution of MZP, the MZP leaders met Agriculture Director on the 21st January, 1981 and requested him to select from among the Mizo. Instead of reselection of students, the government arrested the three leaders of MZP and charged with them forcefully collecting money from the non-Mizo traders, on the night itself and kept them in police custody. The next day, many students came together in the premises of Aizawl Police Station and demanded the unconditional release of their leaders, where the student leaders were kept.

After the failure of constant requests of the magistrates and the security officers to vacate the police station, the students sitting in front of the police station were dispersed with lathi charge and emission of tear gases. As a result, 14 students were injured and admitted to the Civil Hospital. On June 23, 1981, the desperate students who were continuing agitation (around 150 in number) were arrested and sent to camp Jail, Tuiriail, while some of them were kept at an improvised Jail at Government High School. On June 24, 1981, MZP continued the agitation by organizing picketing in the Civil Secretariat complex, Aizawl. For the clearance of the blockage against government servants, public and private vehicles the police dispersed picketers with stick and tear gas. The panic students came together in the afternoon at Dawrpui Middle School. All of them alleged that the then ruling People's Conference party led by Brig. T. Sailo as the good supporter of non-Mizo. Conceding to the demand of MZP, the detained students were released on July 25, 1981 and the remaining three MZP leaders were also released unconditionally on July 26, 1981.

As soon as the MZP organised agitation at Aizawl town, Government of Mizoram pointed out that the seat reservation list which had been prepared for ST and SC might also include any child of Central Services who were posted and deputed in different parts of backward areas. The State Govt. also warned

students that such kind of agitation against the sons and daughters of Central Government official may lead to the cut in the quota in the next academic year. After the recess of students activities around one and a half month, Pachhunga University College Library and five other High Schools of Aizawl town were burnt down on November 4, 1981, around 1:00 am. The shocking news renewed the hatred between the government and the students. The MZP General Secretary and Magazine Editor were arrested in connection with the incident. After the failure of unconditional release of their leaders, MZP restarted their agitation of picketing with effect from November 7, 1981. On November 24, 1981, the police entered MZP office by breaking the lock and took away some articles from the office (Lalzawnga 2015:57-60).

Since the Government could not tolerate all kinds of student agitations, some student leaders were dispersed to different places including neighbouring States. As the branchless headquarters leaders were scattered here and there, F. Chalngenga, acting Vice Chairman in 1981, said that most of them joined political parties, of which 60 percent joined Congress (I) (Lalsawmliana 1992:61).

One of the important objectives of MZP is to safeguard the rights and privileges of Mizo students. The MZP seriously used to watch and monitor the technical entrance exam and its result every year conducted by Government of Mizoram, Higher and Technical Education Department. In fact, Mizoram Higher and Technical Education (H&TE) Department had never conducted examination till 1997 from the beginning. Selection of technical students to avail Mizoram quota was done only on the basis of their marks which they got in the board examination. However, the MZP felt that this system was not fair and safety to select the most deserving students because students who applied for Mizoram technical quota had passed out from different States and the grading or marking system was not same in different boards and Universities in India. Hence, the MZP pressed the State Government to conduct technical and non technical entrance examination instead of selection on the basis of their marks getting in the board examination for fair assessment of the students' capacity.

Despite pressuring the State Government, Higher and Technical Education department still used the existing rule called "The Mizoram (Selection of the candidates for Higher and Technical Course) Rule 1993" for the selection of MBBS students for different medical and engineering colleges of the country in the next year 1998. The MZP vehemently criticized the State Government with regard to the selection of MBBS students which was done between the 1st to the 3rd June, 1998. The MZP said that there was acceptance of late application form and the use of fake mark sheet in the interview board. The very simple question of asking only the telephone contact number in the very important interview board annoyed the student association. Further, leakage of the result, taking home of the selection file, modification of results after publication and the denial of preferential choice to the students shocked the MZP (Lalzawnga 2015:62).

As the selection method of technical students did not satisfy the MZP, they wanted to shift the job and responsibility of selection of technical students from Higher and Technical Education department to Mizoram Public Service Commission (MPSC). In order to fulfil their demand, the MZP organised total bandh on August 13, 1998, and requested all of its branches to detail students for duty. However, the total bandh was not effective enough and they organised indefinite hunger strike with effect from the 28th September, 1998, 3:00 pm at Treasury Square Aizawl. The MZP strongly demanded the State Government to make new rules and reconstitute selection committee for the selection of MBBS students to avail Mizoram quota. Because of the endless demand for reselection of MBBS students, Mizoram State Government set up a one-Man Inquiry Commission to look into the matters. Lalnggheta Sailo who was Commissioner and Secretary of Health and Family Welfare Department, Govt. of Mizoram was appointed in this commission. He was authorized to find out the responsible person(s) engaged in irregularities as well as to make remedial measures and recommendation to avoid such problems in the future. The Inquiry

Commission submitted its report in time and consequent upon the report, the State Government suspended the process of allotment of seats for MBBS with immediate effect.

With regard to reselection of nominating candidates for MBBS admission, the State Government had issued notification for the reselection of nominating candidates on August 4, 1998. The order clearly mentioned that it was made only for those who had faced interview and also informed them to bring original certificates and mark sheets. As already mentioned above, the reselection of candidates for MBBS course was held on August 17, 1998, at Women's Polytechnic, Zarkawt, Aizawl. This process of change in the official position in response to the demand of the young students calmed down their tension. As demanded by the MZP, the State Government also amended the existing rules called "The Mizoram (Selection of Candidates for Higher and Technical Course) Rules 1993 on February 19, 1999 at the office chamber of Minister, Higher and Technical Education department, Mizoram (Lalzawnga 2015:63). If we analyze many of their programmes, the students' associations especially MZP & MSU are trying to cultivate the spirit of patriotism among the Mizo youths and unification of all the Zo-ethnic tribes. Even they stand and fight to safeguard the interest of Mizo students as well as Mizo society. As the State Higher & Technical Education department placed the Chakma students living in the State under State Technical Entrance Examination (STEE) rules category-I. In 2014, the MZP strongly pressed the State government to modify this rule so as to include only the students of Mizo inhabitants in the Category-I. Due to this demand, the MZP organized strike, processions and so on for the success of their demand, thousands of college students joined the movement. At last, the State authorities modified the rules and decided to place the Chakma students under STEE rules Category-2. However, due to the ruling of Guwahati High Court Mizoram Bench in persuasion of the complaint submitted by the Chakma students, the State Government had to place again the Chakma students under STEE rules Category-I.

MZP and Chakma Issue

With the implementation of North Eastern Areas Re-organisation Act, 1971, Lushai Hills was elevated to the status of Union Territory on 21st, January, 1972 and the existing Mizo District Council was then dissolved in the same year. As the Pawis and the Lakhers were not in favour of the abolition of the Regional Council, the Pawi-Lakher Regional Council (PLRC) was trifurcated into three Regional Councils, namely, the Pawi Regional Council (PRC), the Lakher Regional Council (LRC) and the Chakma Regional Council (CRC) on 2nd April, 1972 and the three Regional Councils were subsequently upgraded to the status of full-fledged Autonomous District Council on 29th April, 1972. It should be recollected that Chakma Regional Council later on Chakma Autonomous District Council (CADC) emerged in the trifurcation of the PLRC and it remains a hot political issue in Mizoram since then (Doungel 2013:3). Many people believed that the Chakma Autonomous District Council (CADC), which is located in the extreme southern part of Mizoram, is a safe Home for Chakma foreigners who are illegally emigrating from the neighbouring country Bangladesh.

The MZP General Headquarters, Aizawl passed a resolution and ordered a "Quit Mizoram" notice to check and maintain a balance towards the Chakma foreigners who are residing in Mizoram particularly at the CADC area, illegally immigrating from Bangladesh on January 28, 1995. In order to revise the existing Electoral Roll, the MZP pressurized the State Government but it was not effective and this had compelled them to organize a "Long March" from Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram, to Chawngte which was the headquarters of Chakma Autonomous District Council (CADC) located in the extreme southern part of the State within Lawngtlai District bordering Bangladesh on April 22, 1996. No doubt, this 'Long March' had created tension between the MZP and the State Government and many leaders of MZP were arrested by the police and put into jail. As the Chakmas in Mizoram submitted a petition to the Centre to upgrade CADC to Union Territory status, total bandh was organised by the MZP to show its denial of this on June 3, 1997.

In 2013, the Federal Assembly of MZP passed a resolution to have “Chakma Foreigner Census”. Besides, it was also resolved to construct “Zofate Chawlhbuk” (the Zo-tribes rest shed/house) at Borapansury which is the Sub-headquarters of Chakma Autonomous District Council (CADC). The then President of MZP General Headquarters, Lalmachhuana said that the responsibility of the Mizo community was to preserve and protect the land and community for the future and the next generation. After the inclusion of 38 Chakma students in the result of State Technical Entrance Examination (STEE) in 2014, the MZP strongly argued that the Chakmas have never been indigenous in the soil of Mizoram and they cannot claim the rights of the Mizos. In this issue, the MZP decided to organise a State-wide rally and it was successfully organised on September 25, 2014, at the State capital Aizawl and other district headquarters. The rally was joined by thousands of College students and their main slogan was; “Chakmas are not indigenous of Mizoram, the rights of the Mizo should not be given to others”. The students’ movement led to the amendment of the existing State Technical Entrance Examination (STEE) rules by substituting the words “indigenous people” with “Mizo” (Kima 2015:97).

MZP and ZOFEST

One of the main objectives of MZP is to promote and to work for the unification of Zo-ethnic tribes. Hence, in order to bring unification and brotherhood of Zo-ethnic tribes residing in various parts of India and the world, the MZP General Headquarters, Aizawl started to organise Zo-Festival called as Zofest. The first Zofest was organised at Churachanpur, Manipur in 2002 and it is possible to state that Zofest in simple term means the Assembly of Zo-ethnic tribes for better unification and brotherhood as well as for uniting various Zo-ethnic tribes around the world. As already stated, the MZP has used this important event ‘Zofest’ to inculcate the spirit of unification and fraternity among various Zo-ethnic tribes in various parts of the world. Some of the main themes of Zofest are; “We Are Brothers”, “Let Us Unite” etc. Since 2002, ‘Zofest’ had already been organised eight times by the MZP General Headquarters, Aizawl and the year and place are mentioned below:

- 2002 – Churachanpur, Manipur.
- 2004, 2006 & 2009 – Aizawl, Mizoram.
- 2012 – Darchawi, Tripura.
- 2014 – Halflong, Assam.
- 2016 – Zokhawthar, Mizoram (near Myanmar border).
- 2018 – Reiek, Aizawl.

From the above discussion, it is apparent that the MZP has continued to play an important role even in the post statehood era. Sometimes the MZP is an initiator in finding out the objectionable practices which are going on inside the government administration. Even its valuable role to monitor the performance of the government in various issues is commendable. Now, many key players in various political parties in Mizoram are the former student leaders. During the last several years, we have been witnessing ex-student leaders who turned into successful politicians and key players in various ministries. Even in the current Congress ministry in Mizoram (2013 – 2018), some legislators and party leaders have been the ex-student leaders. In other political parties also, we have seen many ex-student leaders who are playing valuable roles for their respective political parties. The following persons are some student leaders who turned into successful politicians in Mizoram;

- C.L. Ruala – MP (INC - Lok Sabha).
- Zoramsangliana – MLA (INC) and Ex-Minister.
- Lalrinliana Sailo – MLA (INC) and Ex-Minister.
- R. Vanlalvena – MLA (INC).
- Lalruatkima – MLA (INC).
- Prof J.V Hluna – Ex-Minister (PC), now Mizoram State BJP President.
- H. Lalhmingliana – Ex-MP (MNF - Rajya Sabha).

- Lalchhandama Ralte – Ex-MLA (MNF).

Besides these persons, there are several ex-MZP leaders who have been now key players in various political parties of Mizoram namely, Lalmuanpuia Punte, ZNP General Secretary, who is ex-President of MZP Gen. Hqrs., K.Vanlalvena, MNF General Secretary and ex-President of MZP Gen. Hqrs., P.C Laltlansanga, Chairman Communication department of Mizoram Pradesh Congress Committee (MPCC) and ex-President of MZP Gen. Hqrs., James Thanghmingmawia, Chairman Media Cell of MPCC and ex-President of MZP Gen. Hqrs., Anggu Lalmachhuana, President NSUI Mizoram and ex-President of MZP Gen. Hqrs. etc.

Conclusively, from an analysis of student movements in pre and post statehood era, the MZP has played very useful role in peace process as well as for socio-economic development of Mizoram. Besides, its role and efforts to protect the share and rights of the indigenous people in Mizoram and to promote the unity and brotherhood of various Zo-ethnic tribes are commendable. There is no exaggeration to state that the movement and activities of students' organizations in Mizoram seem to be useful and not motivated by the dirty party politics compared to other States in India. Meanwhile, there is a room for the improvement of the organization to play more useful role as well as to convince the society. The direct link of the students' organization and party politics are not safety and it would spoil the utility and usefulness of the organisation as well as lead the innocent students in the wrong way. Hence, the active members and its leaders should always try to be clean and free from mal practices, unfair means and corruption. They should never attempt to politicize any issue for any reason. They should try to keep the body free from political motivation and interference so as to keep the organization out of the political dirty game, else their movements would never be appreciated as expected.

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