

Political Turmoil in the North Eastern States of India from 2016 to 2026

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Abstract: Political turmoil in North East India between 2016 and 2026 developed through several distinct processes: constitutional instability, citizenship disputes, ethnic violence, unresolved autonomy claims and conflict over territorial boundaries. This article examines these processes across the region's eight states through qualitative analysis of academic literature, judicial decisions and official documentation. It argues that electoral continuity and reductions in particular forms of insurgent violence are insufficient measures of political stability. Stability also requires public confidence that institutions will protect people across community boundaries, resolve disputes fairly and deliver negotiated commitments. Assam's citizenship controversies, Arunachal Pradesh's constitutional crisis, Manipur's prolonged violence and disputes involving neighbouring states reveal different weaknesses in those arrangements. At the same time, peace agreements and negotiated boundary initiatives demonstrate opportunities for political accommodation. International perspectives highlight the importance of minority safeguards, humanitarian protection and accountable implementation without suggesting that external models can be copied directly. The article concludes that the region requires differentiated responses grounded in constitutional federalism and everyday civilian security. Its 2026 assessment is confined to developments verified by 21 October, rather than presenting an unfinished year as a completed historical period.

Keywords: North East India, Political Turmoil, Federalism, Manipur, Citizenship, Ethnic Conflict, Autonomy, Peace Agreement

INTRODUCTION

Political stability is often described through election results, the survival of governments or declining insurgency figures. These indicators matter, but they cannot answer a displaced person's question about returning home or a border village's concern about which administration will protect it. North East India during 2016–2026 illustrates the gap between institutional continuity and confidence in public authority. Some conflicts became less violent while other tensions acquired new forms.

The region comprises Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Its societies have different histories, constitutional arrangements and relationships with neighbouring countries. Political turmoil therefore needs definition: this article uses the term for serious disruption involving government legitimacy, intercommunity security, territorial administration or access to political rights. Peaceful protest, electoral defeat and vigorous opposition are not automatically evidence of disorder.

The central argument is that recurring turmoil reflects weaknesses in the institutions that negotiate belonging, distribute authority and protect minorities. The analysis considers January 2016 to 21 October 2026, concentrating on verified turning points rather than claiming an exhaustive daily chronology. It also asks what recent settlements can achieve and why improved regional security statistics may coexist with severe suffering in a particular state.

RESEARCH METHOD AND CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

This is a qualitative regional review, not an original field survey. It draws upon constitutional materials, court decisions, agreements and historical scholarship. Official documents identify recorded actions and the government's account; academic work supplies context for interpreting them. Conflicting perspectives are assessed without assuming that state authorities, political parties or community organisations represent every resident equally.

Three distinctions guide the article. Government stability differs from social peace. Negotiation differs from implementation. Community protection differs from collective blame. These distinctions allow comparison across states without treating their conflicts as interchangeable. The analysis also avoids estimating undocumented casualty or displacement totals, since definitions and reporting periods vary. Its conclusions concern institutional relationships and policy priorities rather than statistically demonstrated causal effects.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The North East's contemporary political tensions have roots in the different ways its territories entered colonial and postcolonial administration. Before becoming a single policy region, these areas contained kingdoms, village communities, trading routes and overlapping political relationships. British expansion connected them to imperial priorities while preserving different forms of administration in hills and plains. Borders and administrative categories gradually acquired consequences for mobility, land and representation. Understanding this

history prevents the misleading assumption that a naturally unified region later fragmented because its communities refused national integration. The region itself was shaped through successive political decisions and contested institutional arrangements.

Colonial practices associated particular communities with particular territories, while labour recruitment and commercial agriculture encouraged movement across those boundaries. Such arrangements could protect local practices in some circumstances and reproduce exclusion in others. Plantation labour, urban employment and cultivation connected diverse populations to the region without giving them identical political standing. Claims about original settlement and later arrival consequently became linked to competition over resources. These claims should be examined historically rather than accepted as self-evident evidence of rights. A family's present legal position cannot be inferred simply from the language it speaks or the occupation of its ancestors.

Partition transformed a connected borderland into a space crossed by international boundaries. Assam's relationships with Bengal changed, while people escaping violence and insecurity required refuge. Later developments involving East Pakistan and Bangladesh added to the pressures surrounding citizenship, land and public representation. Political discourse often compressed different periods and forms of migration into one threatening category. Yet refugees, documented migrants, long-settled citizens and people with disputed paperwork occupied different legal positions. This distinction remains central to the present decade because administrative uncertainty can become social suspicion when politicians speak of entire populations as though their histories were interchangeable.

Postcolonial integration followed different trajectories across the region. Manipur and Tripura became part of India through arrangements that continue to attract historical and political debate. Naga political aspirations generated another conflict over sovereignty and representation. Sikkim became an Indian state in 1975 through a separate constitutional history. These experiences should not be folded into one narrative of rebellion. Their significance lies in the relationship between integration and consent: constitutional membership establishes a framework of government, but institutions must continue earning public confidence through fair treatment, meaningful representation and the protection of community identities (Baruah, 2020).

The Constitution attempted accommodation through several mechanisms rather than one uniform model. The Sixth Schedule provided autonomous district arrangements in specified tribal areas, while state-specific provisions recognised other historical circumstances. These institutions reflected an important insight: equal citizenship need not require identical administration everywhere. However, constitutional protection can generate new disputes about boundaries, membership and the distribution of power within protected areas. Autonomous institutions also require accountability to residents, including women and smaller communities. Their existence alone does not guarantee that local elites will govern inclusively or that neighbouring populations will accept every territorial claim.

State reorganisation altered the balance between regional autonomy and shared administration. Nagaland became a state in 1963; Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura attained statehood in 1972; Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh followed in 1987. These developments expanded political recognition but did not erase older connections between communities living across the new boundaries. Disagreement could then arise over whether a border represented an administrative line or an ethnic homeland's limit. The creation of additional states thus addressed some aspirations while leaving others unresolved. It also made cooperation between neighbouring governments increasingly important for residents whose everyday lives crossed jurisdictional boundaries.

Insurgency and counterinsurgency became powerful influences on public institutions. Armed groups advanced claims ranging from independence to autonomy, while the state deployed exceptional security measures. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958 became especially controversial because the relationship between operational authority and accountability affected everyday trust. The problem cannot be understood through security legislation alone, however. Insurgent extortion, coercion and attacks also restricted civic life. Public protection required institutions capable of investigating wrongdoing regardless of the perpetrator. Historical grievances became more difficult to resolve when communities came to regard public authority as partial or inaccessible.

Negotiated settlements offered a different political path. The 1986 Mizo Accord remains an important example of movement from armed confrontation to electoral participation. Assam's 1985 Accord addressed a mass agitation over foreigners through provisions concerning citizenship, safeguards and development. Subsequent autonomy arrangements and ceasefires

created further opportunities, although they produced different results. An agreement could reduce fighting without resolving disputes over representation or delivering promised services. The record therefore encourages a careful distinction between negotiation as an event and peacebuilding as a continuing relationship between institutions and affected populations (Baruah, 2005; Bhaumik, 2009).

Economic policy introduced another set of expectations. Roads, trade corridors, educational expansion and connections with Southeast Asia promised to reduce isolation and support employment. Yet development could become contentious when people feared land loss, environmental harm or unequal access to benefits. The question was never simply whether communities supported progress. It concerned who decided what progress meant, whose resources were used and how compensation or employment would be distributed. Dependence on public expenditure also strengthened the political importance of government access. Electoral competition could consequently revolve around both collective identity and the practical ability to secure services.

By 2016, the region therefore entered the decade with overlapping institutional inheritances rather than a single unfinished conflict. Some societies had developed comparatively durable electoral routines, while others continued living with armed organisations, contested borders or unresolved constitutional aspirations. The 2015 Naga Framework Agreement had already opened another negotiating stage, but its existence did not settle every competing demand. Digital communication, national party expansion and renewed citizenship debates would interact with these older conditions. The subsequent decade should be understood as the reshaping of longstanding questions through new events, not as the sudden appearance of turmoil in otherwise settled political landscapes.

These histories also explain why political repair requires patience. A decision accepted by national leaders may still need public explanation and local negotiation before residents regard its consequences as legitimate.

MAJOR POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS DURING THE DECADE

Constitutional Instability in Arunachal Pradesh

The 2016 Arunachal Pradesh crisis demonstrated how disputes within a ruling party could become a constitutional confrontation. The controversy involved the Governor, legislative

proceedings and the authority of an elected government. In *Nabam Rebia and Bamang Felix v. Deputy Speaker (2016)*, the Supreme Court invalidated the impugned gubernatorial intervention and restored the constitutional position preceding it. The broader lesson concerns the limits of discretionary office rather than the electoral merits of any party.

A government's later numerical strength does not remove the importance of those limits. Citizens need predictable rules governing legislative confidence and changes of administration. When procedures appear adjustable to partisan convenience, formal legality may lose public credibility. Arunachal Pradesh therefore belongs in a discussion of turmoil even though its crisis differed fundamentally from ethnic violence elsewhere. Constitutional restraint is itself a form of conflict prevention because it keeps competition within accepted institutions.

Assam and the Politics of Citizenship

Assam's public life during the decade was strongly affected by the National Register of Citizens process and opposition to the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019. These developments overlapped but were not the same exercise. The NRC concerned citizenship determination in Assam, whereas the amendment created a specified route for eligible persons from designated communities and countries. The 2024 rules supplied an implementation procedure; they did not automatically settle Assam's wider disagreements about belonging.

Many Assamese objections centred on the fear that the amendment departed from the historical understanding associated with the Assam Accord. Other critics emphasised equality and religion-based differentiation. These arguments should be distinguished rather than collapsed into one opposition position. Equally, documentary exclusion should not be described as a final judicial finding of foreign nationality. Fair notice, access to legal assistance and reasoned decision-making are essential where administrative processes affect identity, security and family life (Government of India, 2019; Ministry of Home Affairs, 2024a).

Manipur and the Breakdown of Everyday Security

Violence beginning in May 2023 made Manipur the decade's gravest illustration of the difference between having a government and experiencing protection. The conflict involved *Meitei and Kuki-Zo* populations within a wider landscape that also includes Naga and other communities. Land, representation, administrative authority and mutual fears formed part of

the background. No community should be treated as a single political actor, and civilians cannot be assigned responsibility for armed conduct through ethnic identification.

Displacement and separation of neighbourhoods changed the meaning of ordinary access to education, healthcare and employment. Restoring a road or reopening an institution does not necessarily restore confidence if residents fear crossing into another area. The Supreme Court's August 2023 intervention, including a committee chaired by Justice Gita Mittal, reflected concerns extending beyond immediate policing to relief and rehabilitation (*Dinganglung Gangmei v. Mutum Churamani Meetei*, 2023).

President's Rule began in February 2025. A new elected-government phase opened when Yumnam Khemchand Singh took oath as Chief Minister on 4 February 2026, a development confirmed by official reporting (Prime Minister's Office, 2026). That institutional transition should not be equated with completed reconciliation. The continuing analytical questions are whether protection is impartial, victims can obtain justice and displaced residents can make informed, voluntary decisions about their future. Administrative restoration is an opportunity whose results require separate assessment.

Nagaland and the Duration of Negotiation

Nagaland illustrates the tensions produced by a long negotiating process. The 2015 Framework Agreement with NSCN IM preceded this article's period, but the search for a settlement continued to shape the following decade. Questions of political recognition and the implications of competing demands extend beyond Nagaland's administrative borders. Agreements involving one organisation also require attention to other negotiating actors and affected populations (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2025).

Prolonged talks may reduce immediate confrontation while leaving residents uncertain about the eventual distribution of authority. Consultation is therefore necessary, including with women's organisations, local institutions and communities in neighbouring states. Public discussion should distinguish legitimate aspirations from coercive practices. The right to debate constitutional arrangements cannot justify extortion, while opposition to extortion should not be used to silence lawful political demands. These are related but separate questions of democratic responsibility.

Meghalaya and Mizoram

Meghalaya's politics brought together coalition bargaining, local identity claims and disagreement over boundaries with Assam. The March 2022 agreement addressed six areas of difference, showing that negotiation could produce incremental progress rather than a single comprehensive settlement. Such progress still requires clarity for residents about land, services and administrative jurisdiction. A boundary agreement gains credibility through implementation on the ground, not only through cooperation between chief ministers (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2022).

Mizoram presents a different combination of relatively established electoral competition and pressures associated with borders and kinship. The 2021 Assam-Mizoram confrontation showed how an interstate dispute could become an immediate security crisis. Displacement from neighbouring Myanmar also raised humanitarian questions in a society with strong connections across the international boundary. These experiences underline that internal stability depends partly on developments outside a state's control. Collective suspicion of displaced people offers little help in distinguishing humanitarian needs from specific security concerns.

Tripura and Sikkim

Tripura's changing electoral landscape did not eliminate disagreements over indigenous representation, land and language. The March 2024 agreement involving TIPRA addressed a political process concerning indigenous concerns, while the September 2024 settlement with NLFT and ATTF concerned armed organisations. They should not be described as one agreement or treated as equivalent political relationships. Both created opportunities, but public confidence depends on whether promised processes yield fair and accessible outcomes (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2024b, 2024c).

Sikkim provides a necessary comparison because regional analysis should not presume equal levels of violence everywhere. Its competitive politics and debates about protected identity differ from the insurgent and communal conflicts examined above. Questions concerning constitutional safeguards, local belonging and development nevertheless connect it to wider regional concerns. Including Sikkim helps establish the limits of the category of turmoil:

political disagreement may be managed through elections and public institutions without becoming an armed or humanitarian crisis.

STRUCTURAL CAUSES AND EMERGING CHALLENGES

The strongest connecting thread is uncertainty about who can make binding decisions for a community and territory. Elections confer authority, but they do not extinguish minority rights or resolve every historical claim. When majoritarian decision-making threatens access to land or identity protection, communities may regard ordinary policy as an existential dispute. Institutions need ways to hear those concerns before disagreement hardens into a contest over collective survival.

Interstate boundaries expose another weakness. Police forces answer to separate governments, while residents may use common forests, roads or markets. Without coordinated procedures, a local dispute can become a confrontation between administrations. The Assam-Arunachal Pradesh agreement of April 2023 indicates the value of negotiated resolution, although its long-term effect depends on surveys, consultation and consistent administration. A signed boundary initiative should be evaluated through residents' experiences as well as official milestones (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2023).

Digital communication introduces speed into longstanding mistrust. Images or allegations can circulate before verification, encouraging people to interpret a local event as an attack on an entire community. This is a plausible escalation mechanism, not a claim that social media alone caused a particular conflict. Authorities need rapid, multilingual public information and credible correction procedures. Restrictions on communication also require careful justification because they can interfere with education, livelihoods and access to help.

Development remains politically important, but infrastructure cannot substitute for trusted institutions. A new road may improve mobility while leaving fears about land ownership unresolved. Similarly, employment programmes may generate resentment if beneficiaries are selected through opaque networks. Public policy should therefore evaluate distribution and participation alongside expenditure. Regional aggregate security assessments must also be disaggregated: improvement in some states does not cancel serious deterioration elsewhere.

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

The region's international setting makes domestic politics inseparable from border governance. Myanmar's conflict raises questions about displacement and family connections, while relations with Bangladesh and Bhutan affect security cooperation and mobility. These circumstances call for differentiated responses. A refugee seeking safety, a trader crossing lawfully and an individual suspected of a specific offence require different institutional treatment. Border policy becomes less credible when humanitarian and criminal categories are merged without evidence.

International human rights principles provide a useful minimum standard for protection, participation and remedy (United Nations General Assembly, 1966). The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement also offer a framework for considering safety, assistance and durable solutions for displaced residents (United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 1998). They do not settle India's constitutional disputes. Their value is practical: return should involve conditions of safety and informed choice rather than treating movement out of a camp as proof that recovery is complete.

Comparative peacebuilding emphasises that exclusion can persist after armed violence declines. Lederach (1997) directs attention to relationships beyond political elites, while the sustaining-peace approach stresses prevention across the life of institutions (United Nations General Assembly, 2016). For the North East, the implication is that mediation, accessible justice and accountable local administration should operate continuously. Dialogue becomes less effective when it begins only after communities have suffered losses and lost confidence in one another's intentions.

POLICY DIRECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY

The first requirement is impartial civilian protection. Police deployment, investigation and relief must be assessed for accessibility across communities. Victims should receive clear information about complaints, compensation and legal assistance. Public authorities also need to explain the status of displaced people's housing, documents and education. Administrative coordination should make assistance easier to obtain, instead of requiring a person already affected by violence to navigate multiple disconnected institutions.

The second requirement is implementation that citizens can inspect. Peace agreements and boundary arrangements need timelines, accessible explanations and procedures for addressing disputes. Monitoring should include people beyond the signatories, especially smaller communities and residents affected by territorial decisions. Third, constitutional offices must operate within their lawful limits. Responsible conduct by governors, speakers and political parties helps ensure that competition over government does not become a dispute about whether procedures themselves can be trusted.

A fourth requirement is meaningful participation by women and younger people. They should help shape priorities, rather than appear only as beneficiaries of policies designed elsewhere. Universities, professional associations and local organisations can support carefully moderated dialogue and document public concerns. Such participation does not replace elected authority. It improves the information available to it and creates opportunities to address disagreement before public fear is monopolised by the most confrontational actors.

FUTURE SCOPE

Future research should compare how different institutions respond to similar pressures. Why does an identity dispute remain manageable in one setting while escalating in another? Answering this requires district-level evidence, interviews and attention to how police, courts, local bodies and political parties interact. Comparative work should not rank communities as naturally peaceful or violent; it should examine the conditions under which institutions gain or lose credibility.

Longitudinal studies should also track displacement, school continuity, livelihood recovery and participation in public life. Researchers need consistent definitions and transparent time periods when comparing security data. Follow-up work on the 2024 Tripura agreements, Assam's settlements and Manipur's 2026 political transition would help distinguish early institutional change from durable recovery. Ethical research must protect participants whose views could expose them to retaliation and avoid presenting a small interview sample as the voice of an entire community.

CONCLUSION

The decade reveals several North Eastern political trajectories rather than one uniform story of crisis or progress. Constitutional confrontation in Arunachal Pradesh, citizenship disputes

in Assam, prolonged insecurity in Manipur and negotiations elsewhere arose from different settings. Their shared lesson is that stability depends on credible arrangements for belonging, authority and protection. Elections and agreements are necessary institutions, but their value is realised through how people experience public power.

A constructive response therefore combines differentiated policy with consistent principles. Civilians require equal protection, contested claims require lawful procedures and negotiated promises require visible delivery. The region's political future will depend on whether communities can pursue their aspirations without fearing that another group's recognition necessarily threatens their own existence. That task extends beyond the end of 2026 and deserves sustained democratic attention.

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