

Determinants and Outcomes of Insurgency in North East India: A Case Study of ULFA

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Abstract: The insurgency associated with the United Liberation Front of Asom offers a revealing account of how political grievances become organised violence and how armed movements eventually confront the limits of their strategy. This article examines ULFA through historical interpretation, conflict theory and a qualitative review of academic and official sources. It argues that insurgency in Assam developed through the interaction of contested belonging, perceived economic dispossession, weak institutional credibility and opportunities for armed mobilisation. None of these conditions independently explains why particular individuals joined the organisation. Equally, the movement's outcomes cannot be assessed only through military losses or negotiated surrender. Civilian insecurity, damaged public trust, restricted economic choices and the changing terms of regional political debate also require attention. The December 2023 settlement created a significant opening for the negotiating faction, but ULFA Independent remained outside it. The article therefore distinguishes an agreement with participating leaders from a comprehensive settlement of the underlying conflict. International experience suggests that credible implementation, civilian protection and inclusive participation matter as much as the terms signed at the negotiating table. Sustainable peace requires constitutional accommodation, accountable security institutions and economic opportunities that people can access without armed patronage.

Keywords: ULFA, Assam, Insurgency, Regional Identity, Peacebuilding, Federalism, Civilian Security, North East India

INTRODUCTION

For a family living with the possibility of extortion, recruitment or a security operation, insurgency is experienced through ordinary decisions: whether to send a child away to study, keep a shop open or speak publicly about an injustice. These experiences help explain why the history of ULFA cannot be reduced to a contest between an armed organisation and the state. Its consequences entered neighbourhood relationships, public institutions and the prospects available to successive generations.

ULFA emerged in 1979 with the objective of establishing a sovereign Assam. Its political vocabulary drew upon a wider sense that the region's resources and identity were inadequately protected within India. Yet the legitimacy of a grievance and the legitimacy of violence are separate questions. Understanding the former does not excuse attacks on civilians. Similarly, recognising the state's responsibility to protect the public does not remove its obligation to investigate unlawful conduct by its personnel.

This article asks why ULFA arose, what sustained and weakened it, and how its outcomes should be assessed after the 2023 settlement. Assam is treated as a specific case within a diverse region, rather than a model that explains every North Eastern conflict. Developments are considered up to 21st October 2026 where verified; no assumption is made that the entire calendar year has concluded.

RESEARCH APPROACH AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopts qualitative historical analysis and documentary review. Academic histories are read alongside the Assam Accord, peace-process documentation and comparative conflict scholarship. Official statements establish the government's position and recorded agreements; they do not independently establish every allegation or prove that implementation has succeeded. The article presents interpretation rather than original interview findings or a statistical test of causation.

Relative deprivation helps explain why perceived exclusion can become politically powerful (Gurr, 1970). Ethnic competition draws attention to how group recognition and access to public authority interact (Horowitz, 1985). Organisational explanations ask how insurgents recruit, finance themselves and survive despite opposition (Fearon & Laitin, 2003). These approaches are complementary, although grievance alone cannot explain participation, and organisational survival cannot demonstrate popular consent.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Assam's insurgency grew within a landscape repeatedly reorganised by empire, migration and state formation. British expansion after the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826 connected the Brahmaputra Valley more closely to an imperial economy while changing existing political arrangements. Tea plantations, extractive industries and new administrative institutions generated wealth, but the distribution of authority and opportunity remained unequal. Colonial

labour recruitment also brought workers whose descendants became integral to Assam's society. These histories complicate any account that treats the region as an unchanged cultural space subsequently disturbed by outsiders. The political question concerned both belonging and control over change.

Colonial administration classified populations, distinguished hills from plains and governed neighbouring communities through different institutional arrangements. Such practices did not create every identity, but they affected how identities acquired political significance. Language, employment and representation became connected to the question of who could speak for Assam. The emergence of an educated Assamese public encouraged cultural renewal while also exposing anxieties about influence within wider provincial structures. These debates were not confined to a simple Assamese and Bengali opposition. Tribal communities, plantation populations and religious minorities occupied different positions within the same evolving political order (Misra, 2000).

Partition in 1947 transformed older routes of trade and mobility into international border questions. Assam remained part of India, but the region's relationship with surrounding territories changed sharply. Displacement and later migration produced humanitarian needs as well as political anxieties. The creation of East Pakistan, followed by Bangladesh in 1971, added new layers to discussions of land, citizenship and electoral representation. It is essential to distinguish documented migration, disputed claims about migration and the political use of demographic fear. Language or religion alone cannot establish whether a person crossed a border or lacks citizenship.

Independence also brought competing expectations about development. Assam contributed tea, oil and other resources to the national economy, yet many people felt that local opportunities did not reflect that contribution. Regional arguments about extraction connected material concerns to questions of dignity and political voice. However, Assam contained substantial internal inequalities: a plantation worker, an urban professional and a small farmer did not experience development in the same way. The later insurgent claim to represent the whole population therefore simplified a more complicated social reality. Regional disadvantage could coexist with privilege exercised by influential groups within Assam.

The reorganisation of the North East further changed Assam's political imagination. Nagaland attained statehood in 1963, while Meghalaya emerged as a state in 1972; other territorial

changes continued reshaping the region. Communities seeking protection from domination frequently viewed their own autonomous institutions as necessary. Assamese regional nationalism consequently developed alongside nationalisms and autonomy movements that questioned its territorial assumptions. This history matters because an inclusive Assamese political identity could not simply be declared from above. It required negotiation over language, land and representation with communities whose experiences and aspirations were not identical (Baruah, 1999).

The Assam Movement began in 1979 around demands concerning the identification and removal of foreigners from electoral rolls. Student organisations became central public actors, and citizenship emerged as an intensely emotional political issue. ULFA was founded in the same year, but the two should not be treated as a single organisation or a unified programme. The mass movement sought changes within India's political framework, whereas ULFA advanced a sovereignist claim. Their overlapping historical setting helps explain recruitment opportunities, but it does not justify attributing the actions of an armed group to every participant in a public agitation.

The Assam Accord of 15th August 1985 provided a negotiated response to the agitation through provisions addressing foreigners, safeguards and development. Its citizenship arrangements distinguished different periods of entry rather than applying a single undifferentiated rule. The agreement became a continuing reference point in Assamese politics, partly because implementation and interpretation remained contested. The political transition following the agitation showed that regional aspirations could enter electoral government. For ULFA, however, constitutional accommodation did not resolve the underlying sovereignty claim. Disappointment with governance subsequently offered armed mobilisation another vocabulary of betrayal, even where citizens opposed insurgent methods (Government of India et al., 1985).

During the late 1980s, ULFA expanded its influence through recruitment and coercive resource collection. Its image as a defender of Assam competed with experiences of intimidation, kidnapping and killing. The government banned the organisation in 1990, and major military operations followed. These interventions disrupted insurgent structures but also generated allegations of serious abuses. Public confidence could therefore be damaged by more than one source of violence. The distinction between supporting regional rights and supporting armed coercion became increasingly important. Communities could reject both

insurgent threats and unlawful counterinsurgency without inconsistency or divided loyalty (Baruah, 2005).

Crossborder movement helped sustain armed networks beyond the immediate reach of Indian authorities. Changes in neighbouring states' policies nevertheless made external shelter uncertain. Bhutan's action against insurgent camps in 2003 and subsequent developments involving ULFA leaders in Bangladesh narrowed organisational options. These episodes demonstrated that an insurgency rooted in local grievances could depend heavily on international circumstances. They also exposed a strategic contradiction: an organisation claiming political independence remained vulnerable to decisions made outside Assam. Diplomatic cooperation and regional security shifts could alter its capacity even when the original public grievances had not disappeared (Bhaumik, 2009).

A negotiating stream entered formal talks in 2011, while a faction associated with Paresh Baruah continued outside that process. The distinction became decisive when the participating ULFA leadership signed a settlement with the Union and Assam governments on 29 December 2023. The agreement offered a route away from armed activity through democratic participation and rehabilitation. It did not include ULFA Independent. The historical trajectory consequently ends with an opening rather than a complete resolution: organised violence had lost much of its earlier political space, while implementation, civilian confidence and the position of nonparticipating actors remained important questions.

Historical memory also remained contested within families and public institutions. Remembering the conflict required space for grief, disagreement and testimony, especially where official accounts and personal experiences offered different understandings of responsibility and political belonging.

DETERMINANTS OF INSURGENCY

Political Recognition and Contested Belonging

ULFA's appeal rested partly on the proposition that Assam lacked meaningful control over its collective future. Cultural recognition, access to employment and influence over resources became connected within this argument. Its strength lay in translating dispersed frustrations into a coherent political story. Its weakness lay in presenting sovereignty as though it would

automatically resolve differences within Assam. A credible explanation must examine who gained a voice through that story and whose claims it left unsettled.

Migration politics strengthened this mobilisation, but demographic anxiety should not be accepted as a neutral description of an entire population. Citizens who share a language or faith with people across a border remain individuals with legal rights. Political leaders can intensify uncertainty when they allow unresolved documentation disputes to become accusations against whole communities. Institutions capable of determining status fairly are therefore part of conflict prevention, rather than an administrative issue separate from it.

Economic Dispossession and Unequal Opportunity

Resource wealth can become a grievance when residents see extraction but little influence over its benefits. The relevant issue is not simply whether infrastructure exists or public expenditure increases. It is whether local people obtain secure work, fair compensation and a meaningful role in decisions affecting land and livelihoods. Perceived exclusion can give insurgent claims emotional force even when particular development indicators improve.

Nevertheless, poverty does not mechanically produce rebellion. Many economically disadvantaged people reject violence, and armed movements require leadership, networks and financing. The literature on economic motives is useful when it asks how coercive revenue sustains organisations, but it becomes misleading when it treats everyone's participation as a search for profit (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). In Assam, material interests and political convictions could coexist, change over time or conflict within the same organisation.

Institutional Credibility and Recruitment

People are less likely to trust constitutional remedies when complaints appear unanswered or public authority seems available only through influence. Such conditions can make radical alternatives appear credible. Yet recruitment is rarely a straightforward expression of collective frustration. Friendship networks, family experiences, coercion and personal ambition may affect decisions differently. The absence of original interviews limits any claim about which motive predominated among ULFA recruits.

A further mechanism is escalation through abusive encounters. Where a civilian experiences arbitrary treatment, an insurgent explanation of the state may become more persuasive. Where

insurgents intimidate a family, their promise of liberation may lose credibility. Violence therefore changes the social environment in which recruitment takes place. Kalyvas's (2006) work encourages attention to these local relationships rather than assuming that ideological declarations fully explain conduct.

Organisational Capacity and External Space

Insurgency requires more than dissatisfaction. Leaders need communication, resources and ways to survive pressure. Difficult terrain and external operating spaces can help an organisation persist, although they do not prove popular support. Fearon and Laitin's (2003) emphasis on conditions favouring insurgency is valuable here because it separates the ability to fight from the intensity of a grievance.

International support should nevertheless be described carefully. Crossborder presence, cooperation with another armed group and sponsorship by a foreign government are different claims requiring different evidence. Broad accusations can obscure local political responsibility. For policy, the practical implication is that border cooperation can reduce organisational opportunity, while credible domestic institutions must address the grievances that external restrictions alone cannot settle.

OUTCOMES OF THE ULFA INSURGENCY

Human Security and Social Relationships

The most consequential outcomes concern people whose lives were interrupted by violence. Death and injury are only part of this burden. Fear can restrict travel, silence witnesses and change where families educate their children. Businesses may avoid expansion, and households may devote scarce resources to coping with insecurity. These mechanisms are plausible consequences of prolonged conflict; their precise magnitude in Assam would require household and district-level evidence rather than assumption.

Women's experiences deserve particular attention without reducing women to passive victims. They may carry additional care responsibilities, seek information about missing relatives and sustain community initiatives. Former recruits also face varied problems involving stigma, employment and family relationships. A peace process that records surrendered weapons but

ignores these experiences gives an incomplete account of recovery. Civilian needs should remain visible even when they do not fit the administrative categories used for rehabilitation.

Political Change and Democratic Space

ULFA helped keep questions of regional dignity and resource control prominent, but prominence should not be confused with exclusive ownership. Cultural organisations, students, elected representatives and ordinary citizens developed related arguments through nonviolent means. Crediting an armed group with every subsequent concession would erase those contributions and reward a misleading causal narrative. Historical sequence alone does not establish that violence produced a particular reform.

Insurgency could also narrow democratic space by making disagreement dangerous. When an organisation claims to embody the nation, critics may be labelled disloyal rather than treated as fellow citizens. State institutions can reproduce a similar problem if they equate peaceful dissent with militancy. The practical outcome is a weaker public sphere. Peace requires citizens to debate autonomy, migration and development without having to demonstrate loyalty to either an armed organisation or a governing party.

Negotiation and Its Limits

The December 2023 settlement is a substantial institutional development, recorded in official peace-process documentation (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2025). Its significance lies in the participating faction's movement towards lawful politics, alongside commitments concerning rehabilitation and regional concerns. However, the existence of a signed text does not demonstrate that every promise has been delivered or that all affected communities regard the process as representative.

Implementation should consequently be evaluated separately from signature. Relevant questions include whether eligible former cadres obtain assistance, whether public commitments receive timely funding and whether affected communities can raise objections. The nonparticipation of ULFA Independent remains a major limitation on claims of comprehensive settlement. Government security assessments also require attribution and critical reading: allegations concerning continuing armed networks are evidence of the official assessment, not substitutes for independently established findings (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2026).

International Perspectives

International experience offers questions for Assam rather than a ready-made settlement. The Belfast Agreement illustrates how political inclusion, institutional guarantees and recognition of competing identities can be negotiated together (Government of the United Kingdom & Government of Ireland, 1998). Its circumstances differ substantially from Assam's. The useful lesson is that a community should not need to abandon its identity before gaining protection within shared institutions.

The Aceh agreement demonstrates another possible relationship between ending armed confrontation and creating arrangements for political participation (Government of Indonesia & Free Aceh Movement, 2005). Again, transfer must be cautious: the constitutional setting, conflict trajectory and international involvement were different. Assam's institutions must be assessed within Indian federalism. Comparative experience is most valuable when it tests whether commitments are implementable and whether political competition can continue without intimidation.

Lederach (1997) places relationships at the centre of peacebuilding, while the United Nations' sustaining-peace framework emphasises prevention and participation across society (United Nations General Assembly, 2016). Applied here, these perspectives suggest that agreements need support from teachers, local associations, employers and affected households. The analysis is an inference, not proof that one institutional design will work everywhere. Durable peace depends on whether people experience public authority as predictable and fair after the negotiating teams leave.

Policy Priorities in the Present Scenario

A first priority is transparent implementation. A publicly accessible record should distinguish commitments completed, delayed and disputed, with responsible institutions identified. This would allow citizens to evaluate delivery without depending entirely on celebratory statements or opposition accusations. Participation should include communities affected by the settlement and people harmed during the conflict, while avoiding the assumption that former combatants are the only stakeholders entitled to recognition.

A second priority is rehabilitation connected to actual livelihoods. Training has limited value if it does not lead to viable employment or enterprise. Assistance should be monitored for

accessibility, sustained outcomes and fairness towards other disadvantaged residents. Otherwise, communities may conclude that armed affiliation creates advantages unavailable through peaceful citizenship. Victim support, legal assistance and psychosocial care should develop alongside reintegration rather than compete with it.

A third priority is accountable security. Protection against recruitment, extortion and attack remains necessary, but allegations of unlawful force require credible investigation. Legal responsibility should remain individual and evidence-based. Neither collective suspicion nor selective impunity can build confidence. A fourth priority is responsive regional development: local consultation, fair land processes and transparent benefit distribution should accompany infrastructure. These recommendations treat dignity, opportunity and security as connected public responsibilities.

The practical meaning of success should also be agreed in advance. An administration might prioritise the absence of attacks, while a household may prioritise freedom from intimidation and reliable access to work. Both are legitimate concerns, but they measure different outcomes. A useful monitoring framework would combine recorded security incidents with confidential surveys about mobility, trust and access to public services. Findings should be published in a form that does not expose respondents to retaliation or identify vulnerable families.

Education offers another route towards sustaining peace. Schools and universities can discuss the region's history through multiple perspectives without romanticising armed struggle or dismissing regional grievances. Students need opportunities to distinguish evidence from accusation and disagreement from disloyalty. This is particularly important when younger generations encounter the conflict mainly through inherited stories or online material. A democratic public culture gives them language for questioning authority while respecting the rights of people whose experiences differ from their own.

Finally, political inclusion requires attention to internal diversity. Baruah's (2020) account of nation-making encourages scrutiny of how borders and citizenship shape participation. Applied to Assam, this means asking whether communities with different languages, livelihoods and historical experiences can influence decisions made in the name of regional protection. Recognition becomes more durable when its beneficiaries can disagree openly about its meaning.

FUTURE SCOPE

Future research should follow implementation over several years and distinguish the experiences of former cadres, victims and communities outside the negotiating process. Interviews across different districts could examine how people define peace and whether rehabilitation changes everyday prospects. Researchers should include women, minority communities and residents who rejected armed mobilisation, rather than treating organisational leaders as the sole interpreters of the conflict.

A second direction is careful comparison between districts and generations. Researchers could examine employment, school continuity, perceptions of policing and experiences of intimidation while protecting participants' identities. Such work should avoid implying that a before-and-after improvement proves the settlement caused it. Changes in national policy, economic conditions and neighbouring countries may also matter. Longitudinal evidence would make it possible to assess those competing explanations more responsibly.

Public reporting should therefore describe both achievements and unresolved difficulties, allowing residents to assess progress through their own experiences rather than official reassurance alone.

CONCLUSION

ULFA's history shows how disputes over recognition and resources can become an armed challenge when organisational opportunities and institutional distrust reinforce one another. It also reveals the limits of coercion as a political language. Insurgent violence harmed the society it claimed to represent, while unlawful state conduct, where established, weakened the credibility of public protection. A serious account must hold both forms of responsibility within the same framework of civilian rights.

The 2023 settlement offers an important route forward, but peace cannot be inferred from signature alone. Its quality will depend on implementation, fair participation and the ability of citizens to pursue contested aspirations without intimidation. Assam's future is best served when regional dignity becomes compatible with plural belonging and accountable constitutional government. The strongest outcome would be a public life in which neither frustration nor disagreement makes violence appear necessary.

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