

## An Analysis of the Movement of the Mizo Union for Mizo Autonomy

L.H. Chhuanawma\*

### Abstract

*Autonomy is usually meant to refer to self-government or self-rule. Mizo Union, the first political party in Mizoram (then Lushai district in Assam state) stood for integration of Mizoram in the Indian Union. And within India, the party fought for autonomy of the Mizos. It secured a District Council under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution for the Mizos. The District Council ushered an era of democratization in the land. It also abolished chieftainship and stripped the Mizo chiefs of all their undue privileges. This brought about equality and social justice among the Mizos. More significantly, it ended years of tyranny of the chiefs. The party also popularized and championed the term 'Mizo', an inclusive ethnic term that eventually replaced the exclusive term 'Lushai'. Since 1940s the party also stood for 'Greater Mizoram' thereby setting the issue as a public agenda among the Mizos till today.*

**Key words:** Autonomy, Mizo Union, District Council, Greater Mizoram.

### Introduction

In Political Science, the term 'autonomy' is mostly used to mean self-government or self-rule. The degree of self-government or autonomy, however, is a matter of degree. Autonomy may mean a small degree of self-governance even a full-fledged independence. A definition of autonomy given by the Cambridge Dictionaries Online (CDO) is used here as a working definition of the term. The CDO defines autonomy as "the right of an organization, country, or region to be independent and govern itself" (Cambridge Dictionaries Online, 2016). A

movement may be defined as united actions and efforts of a group of people for a common objective or objectives.

Mizo Union (MU) was the first political party to have started a movement for autonomy in Mizoram (formerly Lushai Hills district). The MU was the first political party in Mizoram that was founded at Aizawl on April 9, 1946. Though the MU ceased to exist since its merger with the Congress party in 1974, the MU's efforts towards securing autonomy for the Mizos was quite noteworthy and therefore this paper attempts to present a brief analysis of the

\*Dr. L.H. Chhuanawma is Associate Professor in Department of Political Science, Pachhunga University College, Aizawl. E-mail: chhuanawma@yahoo.com

Mizo Union's movement for Mizo autonomy. The MU's movement for autonomy is analyzed under the following heads: Movement for District Council, Movement for abolition of chieftainship, Movement for popularization of 'Mizo', Movement for Mizoram.

### **1. Movement for District Council**

From 1890 to Indian Independence in 1947, Mizoram (then Lushai Hills district) was a part of British India. The Government of India (Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas) Order, 1936, declared the Lushai Hills District an 'Excluded Area'. Under this Order, the administration of the Lushai Hills was carried out by the Governor of Assam from 1937 to 1947, acting independently of the Government of Assam. The Governor had a separate secretariat and he was assisted by a Secretary designated as Secretary to the Governor. This meant that the Governor of Assam, as an administrative head of the District, exercised his authority over the land 'at his discretion' (Rao, et al, 1987). Interestingly, the British administration ruled the land through the Mizo chiefs. The chiefs were allowed to enjoy a large degree of autonomy under the British. But the common people suffered, on the whole, under the rule of the chiefs. (Rao, et al, 1987)

At the time of the birth of the first political party in Mizoram, the Mizo Union, in April 1946, it became certain that India would gain independence from

the British. But there was uncertainty in the minds of the Mizo people about the future political status of the Lushai Hills district. Some of the Mizo leaders wanted complete independence from India while others wanted to join Burma (Myanmar). The chiefs were mainly interested to retain chieftainship, whether in India or in Burma (Vanlawma, 1989; Vanthuama, 2001). The role played by the MU at this critical juncture was therefore absolutely crucial.

An Advisory Committee of the Constituent Assembly of India formed a sub-committee called the North-Eastern Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub-Committee. The Committee was also known as Bordoloi Committee after the name of its Chairman Gopinath Bordoloi who was the Premier of Assam Province as well as a member of the Constituent Assembly of India. The Sub-Committee was to work out ways and means of integrating the Hill tribes of the then Assam Province into the Union of India. (Chhuanawma, 1993).

The Bordoloi Committee visited Aizawl on April 17, 1947. The Committee co-opted two representatives from the Lushai Hills, Ch.Saprawnga and Khawtinkhuma, both of whom were leaders of the MU. By the time the Committee visited Aizawl, the MU was ready with a memorandum containing demands and other points of concern to be submitted to the Committee. The memorandum contains fourteen main clauses and several other sub-clauses. In the memorandum, the MU said that

Mizoram would be a part of independent India (the memorandum at clause no. 2 actually said that “Mizoram would be a part of Assam”). The last clause at no. 14 said that all the clauses of the memorandum, including the clause on merger with India, would be reviewed after ten years (Vanthuama, 2001). On April 18, 1947, the MU submitted its memorandum to the Committee. After interaction with members of the Committee, the MU agreed specifically for creation of a ‘popularly elected District Council’ for the Lushai Hills district. The party also demanded representation in Assam Legislative Assembly. Further, it demanded that the proposed District Council should be given a fairly large degree of autonomy in order to safeguard the interests of the people of Mizoram on matters of land rights, tribal customs and traditions, regulation of influx of ‘outsiders’ etc. (Vanthuama, 2001).

It had been quite a difficult struggle for the MU leadership and the rank and file to make a firm decision to join India and to specifically ask for establishment of a District Council. There was another body, contending to be the sole representative of the people, the District Conference, headed by the District Superintendent Macdonald. The District Conference was dominated by the chiefs. The District Conference and its Chairman Macdonald stood at times for complete Mizo independence and at other times for joining Burma (Vanlawma, 1989; Vanthuama, 2001). But because the MU

managed to have an overwhelming popular support, the District Conference had to ultimately come round to the idea of joining India. In other words, the MU’s unwavering pro-India stand forced the District Conference to change its anti-India objective. The District Conference thus told the Sub-Committee at Aizawl that the Lushai Hills District should be given a District Council. The District Conference further pursued their desire for establishment of a District Council in a letter to the Governor of Assam, sent in May, 1947 (Vanthuama, 2001).

It is interesting to note that a small section of the MU called the Right Wing stood for Mizo independence. But the demand for independence was opposed by a larger section of the MU called the Left Wing. Opposition to the idea of Mizo independence was based on the fear of perpetuation of chieftainship (Chaube, 1973). People found that the simple slogan of ‘abolition of chieftainship’ (promised to be achieved under independent India) advanced by the Left Wing was more appealing and was concerned more directly with their immediate interest than the Right Wing’s slogan of ‘Independence’ that sounded rather vague and looked distant (Goswami, 1979).<sup>1</sup>

Besides the Mizo leaders, the Bordoloi Committee also interacted with various leaders of the hill tribes of Assam. Based on their interactions with the hills tribes of Assam including those of the Lushai Hills, the Committee prepared a

report. The Bordoloi Committee submitted its report to the Chairman, Advisory Committee on Fundamental Rights, Shri Ballabhbhai Patel. The most significant aspect of the Bordoloi Committee Report was its recommendation for creation of District Councils and Regional Councils, under the Sixth Schedule to the Indian Constitution, for the hill tribes of Assam including those in the Lushai district. After a series of debates and discussions, the Constituent Assembly accepted the broad recommendations of the Bordoloi Committee Report, including those relating to recommendation for creation of District Councils and Regional Councils. Provisions for establishment of a District Council and a Regional Council were then incorporated into the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. (Rao, et al,1987). Though the MU was by no means the only body that demanded creation of a District Council for the hill tribes of Assam (including the people of the Lushai district), there is no denying that the MU played quite a significant role in the eventual incorporation of constitutional provisions for the establishment of District Councils and Regional Councils in the Lushai Hills and elsewhere in the undivided Assam.

#### **Advisory Council (1948-1951)**

Since an immediate constitution of a District Council was not possible, an interim Council known as Lushai Hills District Advisory Council was set up in the Lushai Hills in 1948. Though the

Advisory Council had no statutory basis, it served as a Provisional District Council. The Advisory Council had 37 members. Out of this, 10 were reserved for the chief, 25 were allotted to the common people; and two other members— the Chairman and the Secretary were nominated by the government. The 25 seats were to be filled by an election. The first election to the Advisory Council was held on 15 April 1948, and the MU formed the Council (Rao, et al 1987).

Though the Council only advised the District Superintendent on various administrative problems and development schemes, the Superintendent having the final power and authority, lots of positive changes were affected during its short span. The Council drastically curtailed the powers and privileges of the chiefs. Privileges like selecting plots of field (*jhum*) before commoners, forced and free labour to build the chiefs' houses, *Sachhiah* (a shoulder of a killed animal given to a chief) and compulsory acquisition of properties left by those who left their villages- previously enjoyed by the chiefs- were all abolished (Vanlawma, 1989).

All these greatly reduced the burden of the people. These further brought about equality by demolishing the hierarchical social order and a process of democratization slowly began in the Mizo society. More importantly, the Advisory Council served as a good training ground for the Mizos in the art and practice of self-governing institution.

The Advisory Council was abolished on 12 November 1951.

### **Mizo District Council (1952-1971)**

On 25 April 1952, Lushai Hills District Council under the Sixth Schedule to the Indian Constitution was eventually constituted. The Council composed of 24 members, 18 elected and 6 nominated. The Council was headed by a Chief Executive Member. The Governor of Assam was just a nominal head of the Council and the Chief Executive Member and his Executive Members exercised real powers. A District Council was like a mini-state within a state. The Sixth Schedule contains various provisions that grant a large measure of autonomy to the people of Mizoram. The District Council eventually and effectively clipped the wings of autocratic chiefs (Rao, 1976).

The MU dominated the electoral scene right from the beginning, forming District Council executives from 1952 to 1967 without any break. The party lost only the fourth and the last District Council election in 1970 to the Congress by just one seat. The party merged with the Congress in 1974, after being in power for 20 years from 1948 to 1974 (Chhuanawma, et al, 2015).

### **2. Abolition of Chieftainship**

Another very important step taken by the MU towards self-rule was abolition of chieftainship.

The Mizos had been under the rule of the chiefs for a very long time. Though

some of the chiefs were popular among their subjects, the rule of the chiefs was, on the whole, becoming unbearable for the public. The chiefs enjoyed lots of privileges and the common people were expected to serve the former. There was no such thing as the right to resistance. The chiefs had absolute and final authority to inflict capital punishment on the subjects, to confiscate properties of the subjects, expel their subjects from villages, and to employ their subjects to unpaid and forced labour. This was worsened by the British administration which sided with and supported the chiefs. The British used the latter “to influence and mould the political thinking of the people”, and as “their tool to remain in power by administering through them” (Goswami, 1979:). The British policy of ‘least interference’ adopted in the Hills was, in fact, designed primarily to keep the chiefs on the former’s side wherein a large degree of autonomy was granted to the chiefs, leaving the helpless commoners at the mercy of the chiefs, whose self-indulgence and arrogance grew by the day now that their position was secure with the British patronage. All these acted as hurdles on the path of socio-economic progress of the people at large. Secondly, individual freedom and liberty was much curtailed to the extent that proper development of an individual personality was not possible under the existing system.

“The common Mizo people could not tolerate”, wrote Goswami, “the idle chiefs sitting at the top of the village

hierarchy and using power and authority because of British safeguard” (Goswami, 1979). The all-powerful Church fully backed the commoners in the latter’s undeclared war against the chiefs. “The struggle between the chiefs and the Mizos, who have embraced Christianity and were backed by the Church”, held Bhat, “was unequal. The strength of the church grew with each conversion and it had education and modernity on its side” (Bhat, 1975). Christianity and education created an ‘oligarchy’ of powerful middle class “imbued with the thrill of seeking independence from the chiefs and freedom from customary communal discipline who were dead set against chieftainship” (McCall, 1949). The leadership of the MU came from this ‘oligarchy’ of the educated middle class. The founder of the party, R. Vanlawma, for instance, was the first matriculate from the Lushai Hills district.

Over a period of time, a line was drawn between the chiefs and the commoners. This rift was, in fact, the immediate cause for the formation of the MU. On 16 January 1946, Macdonald (Superintendent of the Lushai Hills) convened a District Conference in which 22 people were elected as representatives of the then existing 11 Circles (*bial*): each circle had one representative from the commoners and another one from among the chiefs. The commoners protested to the Superintendent that this was unfair; the latter however ignored the plea that due weightage be given to the numerically larger group – the commoners. Nevertheless, the Superintendent allowed

the commoners to have a meeting with the permission to form a political party. On a resolution of the meeting held on 9 April 1946, at Aizawl, the Mizo Union was formed (Chhuanawma, 1993).

Notwithstanding a strong anti-chief feeling within the party, the MU wanted to work together with the chiefs. In order to accommodate the chiefs in the party, the word ‘commoners’ (incorporated in the original name) was dropped from the name of the party: Mizo Commoners’ Union became simply Mizo Union. This led Venkata Rao to remark that the MU was not an anti-chief organization at the outset. However, even after affecting a change in the name, the chiefs did not join the MU (Rao, 1976).

On the eve of India’s independence, difference arose between those who wanted complete independence (called Right Wing) and those who wanted to join India (called Left Wing). Interestingly, the left wing was more popular among the people due to its promise of abolition of chieftainship which was more appealing than the promise of independence (the latter looked distant and sounded vague to the people) by the Right Wing (Goswami, 1979). Further, independence, if at all, could only mean perpetuation of the rule of the chiefs which the emerging middle class desperately wanted to do away with (Chaube, 1973). As a result, the pro-independent Right Wing section gradually lost its ground and ultimately ceased to exist.

Even after being under independent India for a year, people discovered that

the chiefs were still at large. So, in order to fulfill its pledge to the people, the MU decided to press for the abolition of chieftainship in a big way. On 28 December 1948, the party launched a Civil Disobedience Movement against the chiefs and the administration. People were urged to defy the authority of the Government as well as of the chiefs. Violence broke out in many parts of the District leading to a state of political unrest. Upholding authority of the chiefs, L.L. Peter (District Superintendent) arrested many of the MU leaders. It was only when an assurance was given to the MU leaders by an advisor to the Governor of Assam of an early implementation of the Sixth Schedule (which was expected to take care of the concerns of the agitators) that pacified the party leadership. This ceased tension and the arrested leaders were later released (Chhuanawma, 1993).

With the full backing of the powerful church, the MU continued its relentless struggle against the chiefs. Finally, the MU was able to fulfill its long cherished dream when it abolished chieftainship in 1954 (i.e. within the Mizo District), eight years after launching the anti-chief movement in 1946<sup>2</sup>. The same was done away with in 1956 within the Pawi-Lakher Regional Council. The rule of the chief as a unit of village administration was replaced by the Village Council, on the pattern of Village Pachayat, a democratically elected body of the people.

From the perspective of autonomy, abolition of chieftainship had three very important results:

- A big hurdle on the path to socio-economic progress of the people was removed.
- Freed from the bondage of a kind of slavery, an individual could now enjoy a much larger amount of freedom and liberty which could enable proper development of his personality. In other words, autonomy of an individual in its true sense could be obtained under the new democratic set up.
- A real experiment with democratic political institutions began only after the abolition of chieftainship and its replacement by an elected Village Council. It was here that the seeds of grassroots democracy were sown.

In other words, abolition of chieftainship paved the way for the establishment of democracy in Mizoram: the rule of the people, by the people, and for the people.

### **3. Popularization of the term “Mizo”**

Another very significant step taken by the MU was popularization of the term “Mizo” which later became a symbol of unity and solidarity. The move was to become a very successful attempt to unite various tribes (having their own names/nomenclatures, dialects, cultures, etc.), such as Lusei, Ralte, Hmar, Paihte, Lai (Pawi) and Mara (Lakher).

The new nomenclature ‘Mizo’ (literally it means ‘highlanders’) was to eventually replace ‘Lushai’, a term hitherto in vogue and used by the British to designate the people living in the Lushai Hills. “The word Mizo”, to Goswami, “is a blanket term, having a political undertone” (Goswami, 1979.). To him, the word Mizo has many useful connotations over the use of the word Lushai. For instance, he says, “the ethnic group Lushei used to assume that the blanket word Lushai referred only to them and hence used to take pride for the popularity of the word over other ethnic groups...The word Mizo, however, is a neutral word and is, therefore, acceptable to the people of the territory in its general application” (Goswami, 1979). Chaube aptly remarked thus: “... The Mizo Union reflected the typical integrationist aspiration of the middle class when they choose the name ‘Mizo’ in preference to ‘Lushai’ (Chaube, 1973).

Championing a new ‘Mizo identity’ that was both an integrationist and a solidarity tribal movement must surely be one major reason for the overwhelming popularity of the MU within a short time. From the late 1940s through the early 1970s, the party became the most dominant political party in Mizoram. It completely dominated the electoral and political scene of the state since its foundation in 1946 till late 1960s. The party continued to play a significant role in the Mizo politics right upto its merger with the Congress in 1974 (Chhuanawma, et al, 2015).

It is true that the concept of ‘Mizo’ was there as early as 1901 or even earlier, when we come across the first magazine “Mizo leh Vai Chanchin” (‘Mizo and *Vai* Story’) published in Mizo language (Goswami, 1979). But the credit for popularizing and legitimizing ‘Mizo’ as an encompassing ethnic term goes to the MU. The party was instrumental in changing the names of the Lushai Hills District into the Mizo Hills District in 1954 and that of the Mizo Hills District into the Union Territory of Mizoram in 1972 (and not ‘Lushailand’). ‘Mizoram’ means ‘land of the Mizos’.

The popularization of the term Mizo had four very important results:

- Mizo as the ‘lingua franca’ was firmly established.
- Mizo language eventually becomes the one and only local vernacular medium of instruction used in schools, colleges and universities throughout Mizoram.<sup>3</sup>
- A common culture called ‘Mizo Culture’ eventually emerged.
- Popularization and legitimization of the term ‘Mizo’ by the MU paved the way for establishment of political institutions such as ‘Mizo’ District Council, and the Union Territory and the state of ‘Mizoram’.

The net result was that the hitherto heterogeneous Mizo society attained a very high degree of homogeneity after having a common language (the original



*Lusei* dialect was accepted as Mizo language) and a common culture (common customs, common religion, i.e. Christianity, etc.). The Mizo Identity was thus born<sup>4</sup>. This was no mean achievement in a multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic North-East. In fact, no other North-East state compares with Mizoram in this regard. It should be noted, however, that the efforts of the MU in the popularization and legitimization of the term Mizo were helped, in a big way, by other organizations such as the Young Mizo Association, the Mizo National Front Movement, the powerful Church and such other factors as remoteness of the area.

The newly established Mizo Identity had two aspects: Firstly, it is inward-looking in nature. It brought about a sense of belonging to the group that was much bigger than those tribal groups existing separately or individually, of togetherness, and of unity within the (Mizo) community. Paradoxically, a sense of being one, that is, of being Mizo, gave rise to a sense of being separate or different from ‘others’ (i.e. non-Mizos). The logical outcome of such an integrationist identity at the regional level was dis-integrationism and separatism at the national level and demands for autonomy as was demonstrated by the Mizo National Front’s demand for Mizo independence in 1960s. The second is outward-looking in nature. This Mizo identity further gave to birth to a pan-Mizo identity that transcends international boundaries. The seed of what has come to be known as “Greater Mizoram” was thus sown.

#### 4. Movement for “Greater Mizoram”

The MU also started a movement for “Greater Mizoram”. “Greater Mizoram” is a term that denotes areas inhabited by kindred Mizo tribes (otherwise popularly known as Lushai-Kuki-Chin tribes) that are geographically contiguous to the state of Mizoram, such as parts of Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Neither the exact origin of the idea nor the person who has coined the term ‘Greater Mizoram’ is known. What is known is that the idea was as old as the formation of the oldest political party- the MU. The concept is rather a complex one, for ‘Greater Mizoram’ can either be within or without India, with independence or complete autonomy as the ultimate objective, or within India with or without a special status. It is largely a political move on the part of the Mizos (MU) of Mizoram who had realized the importance and significance of the size of population and political units and hence had taken upon themselves the mantle of the ‘Godfather’ of the ‘Mizos’ (i.e. all those belonging to the Lushai-Kuki-Chin tribes).

Right from its foundation, the MU made a commitment for establishment of a single administrative unit for all the Mizos living in geographically contiguous areas in India, Burma and Bangladesh. Clause no. 3 of the MU’s memorandum submitted to the Bordoloi Committee in April 1947 clearly stated the party’s position on the issue. The said clause reads: When the then Lushai Hills district

would eventually join India, 'Mizoram' would comprise of:

- The present Lushai Hills,
- Cachar area in Assam, an area of 300 sq. miles with a "Mizo population of 9,000",
- Chittagong Hills Tract, an area of 3,000 sq. miles with a "Mizo population of 5,000",
- Parts of Manipur, an area of 3,500 sq. miles with a "Mizo population of 7,000",
- Parts of Tripura, an area of 250 sq. miles with a "Mizo population of 7,000" (Vanthuama, 2001).

Though the party could not realize its goal of creating a 'Greater Mizoram', it never gave up on it, at least in principle. Thanks to the MU, the idea of 'Greater Mizoram' has till today become a public and political agenda both in Mizoram and its surrounding areas, both inside and outside India. Perhaps the party could not properly pursue this objective since the Mizo National Front launched a movement for Mizo independence since 1966. It may be noted that the MNF fought for independence of 'Greater Mizoram' as well. It did not allow any other organization such as the MU that sought to pursue the same objective of forming 'Greater Mizoram'.

## **Conclusions**

To conclude, the creation of a District Council empowered the people of Mizoram and thus positively gave to the people a great deal of autonomy by way of establishing a constitutional body to look after their interests and general wellbeing. The very powers of the District Council also abolished chieftainship altogether along with the latter's special privileges. This also gave autonomy to the people by way of removing an institution of injustice and inequality in the Mizo society. Movements for popularization of 'Mizo' and for creation of 'Greater Mizoram' are more of ideals that the MU had successfully employed to capture popular support and imagination than they are of political institutions that could directly ensure, in themselves, autonomy in the immediate future. However, attempts to realize 'Greater Mizoram' and the supporting ethnic term 'Mizo' championed by the MU, has become an autonomy issue in that the very idea has got the potential to grant autonomy to the Mizos, at any time in the future. As already pointed out, the dream of all the Mizos (Lushai-Kuki-Chin people) to live under one roof, whether within India or independent of India, has indeed been a lively dream for many Mizos till this day.

**Notes**

1. The pro-independent Right Wing group within the M.U gradually and ultimately ceased to exist in the long run. Most of them either left the party or were eventually reconciled to the Left Wing ideology of abolition of chieftainship, of joining India, etc.
2. The Assam (Lushai Hills Acquisition of Chief Rights) Bill 1954 was passed on 28 June 1954. Chieftainship was abolished in the Mizo District on 16 August 1954. Accordingly monetary compensations were given to the chiefs.
3. Mizo language is not used in most of Chakma area and some parts of Mara area. In the Chakma District Council area, Chakma and English are generally used as a medium of instruction in educational institutions. Likewise, some Primary and Middle Schools in Mara District Council area do not use Mizo as a medium of instruction. Mara is used instead. The Mizo language is used by most of the people and is understood by one and all within Mizoram. The Chakmas are not regarded as Mizos nor do they regard themselves as one. The Maras and the Lais living in the southern parts of Mizoram are regarded as Mizos with some reservation.
4. Loosely defined, the Mizo identity means the sense of belonging to a social group called "Mizo". Though there are several different tribes, a common language, originally a Lusei dialect and a common culture i.e. an amalgam of cultures of different tribes- largely prevail in the state. A person's loyalty has, henceforth, shifted from his tribe or clan to the new entity the Mizo community. Of course, for the people of state, the new identity is nothing less than 'Mizo Nationality'.

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“A successful man is one who can lay a firm  
foundation with the bricks others have thrown at him.”  
~ *David Brinkley*

“Let him who would enjoy a good future waste none of  
his present.”  
~ *Roger Babson*