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Policy Brief

Karbi Insurgency in Assam: The Way Forward

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S*ummary*

Over the years, endless corruption, mismanagement of funds, and failure to devolve power to the people has completely jeopardised the unique Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, leading to the rise of Karbi insurgency. Growing insecurity has also led to the rise of Naga and Kuki militant groups in Karbi Anglong. While most of the militant groups have laid down their arms and have agreed to the ceasefire agreement with the government, the Karbi People's Liberation Tigers (KPLT) remains active in the region. This brief attempts to understand the genesis of Karbi insurgency and recommends the way forward to establishing peace in Karbi Anglong

Earlier this year, the Karbi People's Liberation Tigers (KPLT) issued a threat to the local media after journalists at a meeting in Diphu Press Club unanimously decided not to publish the outfit's calls for *bandh* against the assembly election scheduled in the district on April 04, 2016.¹ In fact, just two days before the election, two KPLT militants were killed in an encounter with security forces in Karbi Anglong. Over the years, insurgency has adversely affected the socio-economic development of the district compared to the rest of the state. Development projects in the district have long been hampered by abductions and demands for extortion money by the insurgents.² While most of the local insurgent groups have come under the ceasefire agreement, the KPLT continues to pose threat to security and development in the Karbi Anglong region. Apart from KPLT, the Naga Rengma Hills Protection Force (NRHPF) and the Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA) are also active in the area.

Karbi Anglong is considered among the most backward regions. Over the years, endless corruption, mismanagement of funds and the failure to devolve power to common people have completely jeopardised the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC). A unique autonomous council, it was conceived to empower the Karbi tribe and safeguard their political, cultural and linguistic identity. The present system of allocation of funds through the state government has also deprived the council of resources and impeded the development process. KAAC has also not been able to address the concerns of the non-Karbi people residing in the Karbi Anglong District.

About Karbi-Anglong

Karbi Anglong is the largest district in Assam, comprising various tribal and ethnic groups such as Karbis, Bodos, Kukis, Dimasas, Hmars, Garos, Rengma Nagas, Tiwas, and Man (Tai Speaking). Several clashes have taken place among these tribes over the years. Karbis at 46.38 per cent form the majority of the population. They linguistically belong to the Tibeto-Burman group. Karbi Anglong is an autonomous district under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. On April 01, 1995, Karbi Anglong District Council (KADC) was upgraded to Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC).

Located in the central part of Assam, Karbi Anglong spreads over an area of 10,434 sq kms. As per the official census of 2011, Karbi Anglong has a population of 956,313 (951 females/1000 males) with average literacy rate of 69.25 per cent.³ It is geographically divided into two parts i.e. East Karbi Anglong (EKA) and West Karbi Anglong (WKA) with its administrative headquarters located at Diphu town in EKA. The terrain in the district is hilly with thick vegetation and dense tropical forest cover.

¹ "Two KPLT militants killed in Assam", *The Arunachal Times*, April 03, 2016, at <http://www.arunachaltimes.in/two-kplt-militants-killed-in-assam/> (Accessed April 20, 2016)

² "Karbi rebel groups on massive extortion drive in Bokajan", *The Sentinel*, April 22, 2016, at <http://www.sentinelassam.com/state1/story.php?sec=2&subsec=2&id=264573&dtP=2016-04-23&ppr=1> (Accessed April 20, 2016)

³ "Karbi Anglong District: Census 2011 Data", at <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/district/157-karbi-anglong.html> (Accessed April 25, 2016).

It is said that “The Karbis were popularly and frequently referred to as *Mikir* in the official colonial documents of the British as well as in the pre-colonial Ahom Chronicles. But they like to call themselves as Karbi or *Arleng*.....The coming of the Christian Missionaries in the hills of Karbi Anglong during later decades of the 19th century brought the *illiterate* and *tribal* people of the hills under the purview of colonial modernity.....However, unlike the state of Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya of North-East India, where majority or sometimes the entire population was converted to Christianity, the absolute religious cleansing did not take place among the Karbis or among other tribal communities of the present-day Assam.”⁴

Rise of KPLT

Unlike earlier times, the Karbi demand for statehood has been backed by armed militancy since 1990s. In 1996 two groups - Karbi National Volunteers (KNV) and Karbi People’s Force (KPF) - were formed. These militant outfits however never got the prominence they sought and formation of splinter groups continued. In 1999, both the organisations came under one banner and named itself as the United Peoples’ Democratic Solidarity (UPDS). In 2002, the UPDS entered into a ceasefire agreement with the Indian Government. However, in 2004, the anti-talk faction of the UPDS formed Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF).

On February 11, 2010, KLNLF too entered into a ceasefire agreement with the government in a ceremony held at Diphu. In this ceremony, 403 cadres of the KLNLF laid down their arms. However, few days prior to the ceremony, a total of 17 cadres led by Amitabh Hanse defected with weapons to later form KPLT. The breakaway group declared they will continue to wage armed struggle until the grievances and aspirations of the Karbi people are addressed.

The faction divided itself into three sub groups spread across different areas of the Karbi Anglong District under different leaders to project themselves as the sole group fighting for Karbi statehood. The group openly challenged the civil administration and political leaders by frequently calling for *bandh*. KPLT has also been carrying out extensive recruitment drives in the remote areas of Karbi Anglong and is believed to have tacit support from the UPDS.

KPLT is reported to have linkages with ULFA (I), NDFB (S) and NSCN (IM). Being the only armed fighting force for Karbi statehood, it enjoys the illicit support of all the political groups fighting for Karbi cause. The links with Karbi Student Association (KSA), an influential student body representing Karbi youth, has been ascertained many a times. During 2010-11, UPDS, while being in ceasefire agreement with government, provided adequate political support to KPLT in establishing itself as an organisation. There are also reports that political parties of Karbi Anglong have maintained tacit relations with KPLT to keep the issue of Karbi statehood alive.

⁴ “Growth and Development of the Karbi Ethnic Movement”, pp. 129-130, at http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/48744/10/10_chapter%204.pdf (Accessed April 20, 2016)

Genesis of Karbi Insurgency

Semson Singh Ingti, regarded as the father and architect of 'Karbi nation' and 'Karbi nationalism', along with few other educated elite, started a movement aimed at raising the political consciousness among the Karbi people. The first Karbi socio-political organisation namely *Karbi A Dorbar* was formed in the year 1946. During the time of Indian independence, the Bordoloi sub-committee found 'considerable' but unequal progress in the hill areas. The Mikir Hills and the Garo Hills – both parts of the partially excluded areas - were found to be the most backward areas of the region.

On May 18, 1947, the *Dorbar* submitted a memorandum to the Bordoloi Committee where it demanded a separate district for the Karbis. On November 17, 1951, the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills District was formed carving out an area of 4421.12 square kilometres from the then Nagaon District and 4382.28 square kilometres from Sivsagar District. The Autonomous District Council was formed under the provision of the Sixth Schedule on June 23, 1952. In the year 1970, bifurcation of the United Mikir Hills District took place which gave birth to separate Mikir Hills and North Cachar districts. The formation of Meghalaya and Nagaland was one of the catalytic factors. On October 14, 1976, the Mikir Hills District was renamed as Karbi Anglong and the district council as Karbi Anglong District Council (KADC). On April 01, 1995, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed followed by necessary constitutional amendments upgrading the Karbi Anglong District Council (KADC) to Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC).

On November 25, 2011, the Karbi armed outfit United People's Democratic Solidarity(UPDS) signed a tripartite Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) with the representatives of the Central and State Governments in New Delhi. With a view to expedite the process of development in the district, the MoS envisaged further decentralisation of powers by upgrading the existing Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) to Karbi Anglong Autonomous Territorial Council (KAATC). The MoS was aimed to fulfil the legitimate aspirations of the people of Karbi Anglong regarding all round development including preservation and promotion of their cultural identity and language, while economically facilitating devolution of the development process to bring the fruits of education and economic development to the people.⁵

Language Bill and Script Movement

The Assam Assembly in 1960 passed the Language Bill by which Assamese language was adopted as the State language. It received negative reactions especially in the hill areas of then Assam as well as among other tribal groups in the plains and also in the Bengali-dominated Barak Valley. It led to the formation of the All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHLC) that opposed the language bill. Another significant movement was the script movement. Since the Karbi language did not have its own script, it had adopted the Assamese script. The script movement that arose demanded that Roman Script be adopted for the Karbi language. On May 31, 1973, a meeting was convened in

⁵ K.C. Das and Lutfur Rahman Choudhury, "Karbi Anglong: A Journey from District Council to Territorial Council", *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*, Vol. III, Issue I, March 2015, pp. 530-537, at <http://ijellh.com/karbi-anglong-journey-from-district-council-territorial-council/> (Accessed May 10, 2016)

Diphu Club, under the chairmanship of the then chief executive member (CEM) of the Autonomous District Council (ADC), which unanimously resolved that Roman Script should be used for Karbi literature as well all the Karbi text books used in schools.⁶

Ethnic Clashes

Karbi Anglong, the largest district of Assam, shares the distinction of being the melting pot of different cultural, religious, ethnic and linguistic groups. The population of the district is predominantly tribal. As stated earlier, the major tribal ethnic groups in the district are Karbis, Bodos, Kukis, Dimasas, Hmars, Garos, Rengma Nagas, Tiwas, and Man (Tai Speaking). Besides, a large number of non-tribals also live in this hill region. There have been several ethnic clashes among these tribes. Between October 2003 and March 2004, several rounds of clashes occurred between Karbi and Kuki militants in the district. It is estimated that militants of the KRA and the anti-talks faction of the UPDS together killed 85 people. KRA was formed in December 1999 with a declared objective of creating the 'Kuki National Council' — an autonomous administrative council for the Kukis in Karbi Anglong. Karbis are the largest tribe in Karbi Anglong but the Kukis are in majority in the Singhason hill area.⁷

Similarly, there were clashes between Karbis and Dimasas in 2005, which were planned to create rift between these two tribes which were involved in a political struggle for a joint state. Otherwise the Karbi tribe has lived in peace with the Dimasa tribe of the NC Hills. In fact these two were a single district till the 1950s.⁸ Over 3,000 people from the Karbi and Rengma Naga tribes were forced to leave their homes due to violent clashes between the ethnic Karbi insurgent KPLT and the Rengma Naga Hills Protection Force (RNHPF) on December 27, 2014. The RNHPF was formed in 2012 for protection of the Rengma Nagas from KPLT attacks. It has also been demanding the creation of a regional council for the Rengma Nagas of Karbi Anglong. In June 2013, the Rengma Naga-inhabited areas of Karbi Anglong witnessed an exodus when the KPLT issued quit notices to the Rengma Nagas.⁹

Demand for Statehood

The rising demand for a separate state including all the hill areas of Assam started with the APHLC movement during the 1970s. In 1979, the Separate State Demand Committee was formed. In the same year, the Karbi Anglong People's Conference (KAPC) also declared the need for a separate state for the hilly population of Assam. But KAPC sometimes supported the issue of separate state and sometimes opposed and thus the demand for a separate state became diluted. However, a political consensus again began to prevail among most of the Karbis in favour of an autonomous state 1990 onwards.

⁶ Shodhganga, no.4. pp. 137,140.

⁷ Praveen Kumar, "Karbi-Kuki Clashes in Assam", *Strategic Analysis*, 28 (2), April 2004, at http://www.idsa.in/strategicanalysis/KarbiKukiClashesinAssam_pkumar_0404 (Accessed April 25, 2016)

⁸ "Conflict Induced Displacement in Assam", p. 124, at http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/29219/12/12_chapter%204.pdf (Accessed April 20, 2016)

⁹ Sushanta Talukdar, "3,000 people rendered homeless in Karbi Anglong clashes", *The Hindu*, January 07, 2014, at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/3000-people-rendered-homeless-in-karbi-anglong-clashes/article5546137.ece> (Accessed May 10, 2016)

The Karbi people are deeply committed to their demand for a separate state of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. This demand has become more vocal after the centre's decision to carve out a separate state of Telengana. There have been ethnic clashes amongst Karbi-Dimasa, Karbi-Kuki and Karbi and non-tribes. Approximately 60 per cent of the population in Karbi Anglong as well as Dima Hasao District is an ethnic mix of various communities who are not in favour of a separate hill state. This is evident from several instances of protest by the people of these non-Karbi dominated areas. This 60 and 40 per cent dynamics may also lead to violent clashes between Karbis and non-Karbis.

The Way Forward

Transparency and Accountability of the KAAC

The autonomous councils may, to some extent, have been successful in connecting tribal population to the political mainstream and in establishing some sort of administrative setup, but have miserably failed in promoting development. In the first place, their developmental agenda is very limited and whatever is there are stifled by lack of resources. Also, even the small budgets prepared by them and approved by the state governments are seldom fully met. The money comes late and their disbursement has been irregular. There is a need to have transparency and accountability in the functioning of the KAAC. On the part of government, it is necessary that funds required by these councils are allocated timely to empower these councils to have credibility among the populace. Creation of KAATC with enhanced executive, legislate powers and development functions is long awaited and need to be expedited.

Addressing the Aspirations of All Communities

Fear of insecurity among Kukis and Rangma Naga has given rise to the militant groups like NRPF and KRA. The Rengma Nagas in Karbi Anglong have been demanding a separate autonomous council through bifurcation of Rengma Hills from Karbi Hills. The Kukis in Karbi Anglong have also been demanding an autonomous regional council for Kuki-inhabited areas, citing neglect of the community by KAAC. There is a need to assuage the grievances and apprehensions of Kuki, Naga and other communities inhabiting Karbi Anglong. Hence, it is important that aspirations of these communities are addressed by giving them adequate representation in the KAAC/KAATC. An inclusive approach to development would lead to peace and harmony in this region.

Closure of Camps and Rehabilitation of Cadres

There are more than 1,000 cadres in five camps established by the government in East Karbi Anglong. While awaiting rehabilitation, they often indulge in illegal activities such as extortion. There have also been instances of surrendered cadres again joining active militant groups either due to frustration, coercion or compulsion. An attempt towards early finalisation of the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) followed by comprehensive rehabilitation of cadres and closure of these camps is necessary for bringing peace in Karbi Anglong. In the interim, it is important to manage ceasefire camps and strictly

implement ceasefire ground rules while ensuring smooth integration of cadres into the mainstream.

Inclusive Development

Inclusive development is a pro-poor approach that equally values and incorporates the contributions of all stakeholders including the marginalised groups in addressing development issues. Many people are excluded from development because of their gender, ethnicity and other tribe related issues. This is the biggest challenge in the Karbi Anglong region because of the existing diversity and varied interests of each tribe. There have been indications of increased differences between the Karbis and non-Karbis. Thus, the civil administration should ensure inclusiveness and create bonhomie amongst the locals.

The remote areas of Karbi Anglong lack the basic amenities of health, education, connectivity and have seen extremely slow rate of development. The roads are still in poor state. It is extremely important to develop and implement an action plan for overall development of these areas. Infrastructure development will open up new avenues for the locals, which in turn will lead to peace and prosperity.

Sustained Security Forces' Operations

Security forces have been operating effectively in the East Karbi Anglong which has restricted the movement of the cadres. The pressure generated by the security forces has led to surrender by the cadres. There have also been numerous incidents wherein the locals have apprehended the cadres and handed them over to the Army. These are positive indicators and show waning support for militancy in the area. Several bold and innovative operations launched by the security forces have helped extend the reach of civil administration and the police to remote areas. Such synergised operations need to continue to maintain pressure on the militant outfits and extend development activities to the remote areas of the district.

Conclusion

Karbis have been seeking better opportunities, all round development, basic facilities and greater security through better governance. Most of the rural areas in the interiors are yet to be connected with a metalled road. Therefore, improvement of roads and transport as well as building of RCC bridges along with other development projects should be the focus area. The infrastructure for education is also appalling in the district and urgently needs to be improved. Therefore, an inclusive approach to development in both Karbi and non-Karbi inhabited areas is necessary for stability and peace in Karbi Anglong.

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