

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SIALSIR CONVENTION IN THE MIZO INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT

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Abstract

Sialsir village is greatly significant in the political history of Mizoram. Apart from being one of the oldest villages in the state, the village hosted the Parliament Session of the underground MNF Government during 11th – 15th December, 1966. This session of the MNF Parliament at Sialsir, commonly known as the ‘Sialsir Convention’ or the ‘Sialsir’ Parliament was very crucial in the course of the Mizo Independence Movement. The paper discusses and analyzes the resolutions passed in the Sialsir Parliament Session and attempts to examine the significance and importance of the decisions and resolutions of the Sialsir Parliament in the Mizo independence movement. Besides, the paper also traces the various developments that took place during the Parliament session at Sialsir and thereby identifies their impacts in the future of the independence movement on the one hand, and on the internal administration of the MNF on the other.

Keywords: independence, Convention, MNF, Constitution, Sialsir

The Mizo Independence Movement, also known as the Mizo Insurgency Movement began on the midnight of 28th February, 1966, when the Mizo National Front (MNF) declared the

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independence of the Mizo Hill District from the Indian Union. The MNF volunteers attacked various defence establishments of the Indian Government across the Hill District under the codename 'Operation Jericho.' 'Jericho' is the name of a town in Israel. Jericho has a great significance for Christians.

Fig 1: Sialsir Primary School where the *Sialsir* Convention was held



Picture taken by the scholar at Sialsir Village on 15.1.2016

In Biblical history, Jericho was a fort with strong fortifications which was overtaken by the Israelites with the help of God, with no loss of life on their side. Apart from the 1st Battalion Assam Rifles Camp at Aizawl, the MNF managed to capture and put under their control, most of the defence and government establishments in the Mizo Hills. Thus, the period of insurgency, which would last for over two decades started in the Mizo Hills.

After the launching of "Operation Jericho," the MNF President Laldenga and Foreign Secretary Lalhmingthanga went to East Pakistan (presently Bangladesh). Their purpose was to seek co-operation and assistance from Pakistan and other nations in their movement for independence. They wanted to negotiate with the Pakistan Government for the provision of 'Elbow room-place for hosting the insurgents'(Zamawia, 2007, p.365). Moreover, with the intensification of counter-insurgency measures by the Indian security forces, the bulk of the MNF volunteers had also moved to East Pakistan by the end of 1969. Henceforth, the MNF carried on with their movement in the Mizo Hills from within the territory of East Pakistan.

After about nine months from the launching of Operation Jericho, the MNF convened an important meeting at *Sialsir* village (presently in Lunglei District) during 11th-15th December, 1966, commonly known as *Sialsir Inkhawmpui* or the *Sialsir* Convention (Biakchhunga, 1996, p.8). *Sialsir* is a village which is located about 60kms from Serchhip town. At present, there are 58 families (200 inhabitants) living in the village. *Sialsir* is one of the oldest existing villages in Mizoram. The village had celebrated its Centenary in 2013. The meeting was held at *Sialsir* Primary School. The meeting was crucial for the MNF movement mainly for the following reasons. Firstly, from the beginning of the movement, Laldenga, the President of the MNF spent most of the time outside the country. Hence, the activities of the movement were carried on under the supervision of the MNF Vice President Lalnunmawia. In the meantime, rumors had spread even prior to the *Rulpuihlim* Cabinet meeting, which was held during 30th June-2nd July, 1966 before the *Sialsir* Parliament, that the Vice President was planning a coup to overthrow the President and the Home Minister was trying to monopolize the Defence Ministry etc (Zamawia, 2007, p.457). It shows that right from the beginning of the insurgency, there was dissatisfaction within the MNF regarding Laldenga's continued absence in important meetings and his living in foreign countries. It created hostilities among the leaders of the Front which greatly affected the internal unity of the organization in the latter years (Biakchhunga, 1996, p.3). In other words, there were internal factions and groupings within the MNF from the beginning of its movement. R. Zamawia, the Defence Minister of the underground MNF government during the time stated about the *Sialsir* Convention that:

“He Inhmuhkhawmna boruak hi sawi thiam hleih theih mang si lovin a buarchuar ru tel tlat a ni,” (Zamawia, 2007, p.464).

(Free English Translation): “*There persists an unseen and tense atmosphere during this whole convention, but it is difficult to exactly put to words.*”

Secondly, the Mizoram Provisional Government, which was constituted prior to the launching of the independence movement had drafted an *ad hoc* Constitution of Mizoram which would come into operation in case of an armed movement. Hence, the Constitution needs to be revised, amended and passed by the Parliament to adopt it as a permanent constitution for Mizoram (Zamawia, 2007, p.457).

Thirdly, with the establishment of the Provisional Mizoram Government, the status and position of the MNF party leaders needs to be revised and re-organized, because they were assuming the dual responsibilities of being political and party leaders on the one hand, while at the same time, many of them were incorporated as government employees in various departments under the Provisional Mizoram Government (Zamawia, 2007, p.457).

Lastly, the operation and administrative policy of the Mizoram Government need to be revised and plans and working policies drafted for the future course of the movement. But most importantly, Laldenga, who had spent most of the time in a foreign country was requested time and again to come over and preside the Cabinet meetings, which he failed to comply. However, since the Parliament session at *Sialsir* would discuss and adopt a permanent constitution for Mizoram, which would also involve the status of his Presidency, Laldenga agreed to attend the *Sialsir* Parliament session (Zamawia, 2007, p.458). In a nutshell, the *Sialsir* Parliament was important because it was the first time that a session of the Parliament and Cabinet meeting of the Underground MNF Government was held in the presence of the Preseident, Laldenga after the launching of the Independence Movement.

It is to be noted that apart from the joint sitting of the two Houses of MNF Parliament i.e. *Upa In* (Senate) and *Aiawh In* (House of Representatives), important meetings of various departments under the underground MNF Government were held during the week long Convention at *Sialsir* Village.

The first joint session of the MNF Parliament was held during 12th – 13th December, 1966 (Zamawia, 2007, p.461). During this session, several Acts and Regulations were passed, among which the amendment of the Constitution of the Provisional Mizoram Government, which had been in force since the Declaration of Independence on 1st March, 1966 was the most crucial. The issue of whether to carry on with the Presidential form of government or to adopt a Parliamentary system of governmental administration was discussed (Zamawia, 2007, p.461). In fact, the MNF had all along adopted the Presidential form of government for about nine months since the launching of the movement. The Parliament agreed to permanently carry on with the Presidential system of government for the future. However, this decision of the MNF Parliament to adopt a Presidential type of government seemed to have far reaching impacts on the future course of the movement and especially between the top most leaders of the party, namely, Laldenga, the President of the MNF and Lalnunmawia, the Vice President.

In the meantime, while the Parliament Session was being convened at *Sialsir* village, a section of the Indian army were ambushed by the MNF volunteers led by Lt. Lianzara near *Chekkawn* village, a village located about 6kms from *Sialsir* in the early hours of 14th December, 1966. As a result, the MNF leaders left *Sialsir* on the same day and the Parliament session was continued on the banks of *Tuichang* river near *Sialsir* village. At this point, the Laldenga-Lalnunmawia rivalry, which had been

brewing up since the launching of the Independence Movement, and particularly after the *Rulpuihlim* Cabinet meeting came to the notice of their colleagues. It is noteworthy that after the launching of the Independence Movement and the corresponding launch of counter-insurgency military operations by the Indian Government, the MNF party's High Command resolved that Laldenga, President and Lalhmingthanga, Foreign Secretary would be sent to East Pakistan to seek asylum for MNF personnel (Zamawia, 2007, p.365). In the meantime, it was also resolved that the operations of the MNF within the Mizo Hills would be carried on under the leadership of Lalnunmawia, the Vice President. With Laldenga, the President spending most of the time in a foreign country while the movement was carried on amidst the intensifying counter-insurgency operations of the Indian security forces, it was difficult and sometimes, impossible to carry on the administration of the MNF underground government (Zamawia, 2007, p.365). Besides, since the MNF followed a Presidential system of government, the continuous absence of the President greatly obstructed the administrative affairs of the organization.

Henceforth, when Laldenga was about to leave for East Pakistan on 17th December, 1966 after the conclusion of the Parliament session, Lalnunmawia demanded that Laldenga handed the charge of President before leaving for East Pakistan. He said to Laldenga:

“President thuneihna min hlan lo va I liam leh a nih chuan, lehkha leh file pawimawhin a rawn um zui tho tho ang che,” (Zamawia, 2007, p.365).

(Free English Translation): *“Even if you leave without handing over the charge of the President to me, I will definitely send all important files and documents to you.”*

Laldenga hesitantly handed over the President charge to Lalnunmawia (Zamawia, 2007, p.365). This incident further widened the rift between the two outstanding leaders of the MNF. Moreover, in the Constitution of the MNF which was amended and passed at the *Sialsir* session, it was laid down in Article V (4) that, ‘*No person shall hold office of the President for more than two consecutive terms,*’(Zamawia, 2007, p.365). This particular provision was never enforced during the course of the movement, which was marked by frequent coups, expulsions, arrests and leadership crisis. Moreover, in Article V 2(5) of the Constitution of the Constitution, it was stated that ‘*In case of the removal of the President from Office or his death, resignation or inability to discharge the power and duties of the President, the same shall devolve on the Vice President and a new Vice President shall be elected within six months.*’ This particular provision was interpreted by *Pu Lalnunmawia* and some of the leaders of the MNF as a proof of Laldenga’s inability and ineligibility to perform the functions of President as a result of his continuous absence (Malsawma Colney, personal communication, January 27, 2016). Mr. Malsawma was one of the Senators in the MNF Underground Government during the insurgency movement. In short, the rivalry between Laldenga and Lalnunmawia further worsened after the *Sialsir* Convention which led to various crises and splits within the MNF in the latter years (Malsawma Colney, personal communication, January 27, 2016). It could, therefore, be concluded that the incidents and resolutions of the *Sialsir* Parliament session had far reaching consequences on the unity and resolve of the MNF during the course of the independence movement.

Another notable significance of the *Sialsir* Parliament session was that the reorganization of the MNF into Mizo National Volunteers (MNV) and Mizo National Army (MNA) was finalized in the session. The Mizo National Volunteers, also

referred to as MNF Volunteers formed the backbone of the MNF in all its activities since its establishment in late 1963. However, with the intensification of counter-insurgency measures by the Indian Government, it became difficult to maintain and administer battalions of volunteers, which comprised of women volunteers as well. Hence, according to Mr. R. Zamawia, who served as Defence Minister under the MNF Underground Government, and who also occupied the position of President of the MNF for a brief period, it was felt by the MNF leaders that it would be inappropriate to involve all volunteers, especially women in military combats, and given the fact that there was shortage of food supplies and arms and ammunitions as well (R. Zamawia, personal communication, January 26, 2016). For such reasons, the bill for the re-organization of Mizo National Volunteers (MNV) into Mizo National Volunteers (MNV) and Mizo National Army (MNA) was passed during the Cabinet meeting held at *Phullen* village during 30th September-3rd October, 1966 . Mr. Lalchamlia, former Mizoram Legislative Assembly Speaker and a member of the Mizo National Army (MNA) during the time of the *Sialsir* Convention argued that in the Parliament session at *Sialsir*, it was resolved that the MNV would comprise of volunteers who would participate in the movement and assist their comrades in any way as necessary without going underground, while the MNA would be constituted by an army, that would go underground and fight against the security forces during the course of the movement (as cited in Lalawia, 1999, pp.32-33). This re-organization of the Mizo National Volunteers into MNV and MNA formed the core of the MNF organization till the signing of the Memorandum of Settlement in 1986. In total, apart from passing the amended Constitution of Mizoram, the *Sialsir* Convention passed 12 Acts and Regulations (Zamawia, 2007, p.462).

To conclude, the *Sialsir* Convention was crucial for the future course of the MNF movement on the one hand, and in the future administration of the organization on the other. In fact, the rivalry between Laldenga and Lalnunmawia, the two top ranking leaders of the party, which surfaced during the *Sialsir* Parliament session could be considered as the precursor of the frequent splits and coups within the MNF organization in the latter years. Moreover, although the re-organization of Mizo National Volunteers into MNV and MNA was intended to relieve the administrative and economic burden of the underground MNF government, it stalled the momentum of the Independence Movement to a great extent. One of the greatest mistake that the MNF committed during the course of the independence movement, according to *Pu R. Zamawia*, was their attempt to maintain a parallel civil and military administration simultaneously (R. Zamawia, personal communication, January, 26, 2016). In short, the *Sialsir* Convention occupies an important place in the history of the independence movement. It was the first Convention in which a majority of the MNF leaders, including Laldenga were present after the launch of the independence movement. Besides, the Convention provided the impetus and directive principles for the future course of the Independence Movement through its various landmark decisions, including the amendment of the Constitution of the Provisional Mizoram Government.

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