



ON THE PATH TO FORCED SOBRIETY: THE CHURCH SPEARHEADING THE TEMPERANCE MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The relationship held with liquor varies from person to person; a dear friend to those habituated to drinking however, a foe to those that lost a husband, a mother, a daughter and a son to liquor addiction, be it through consumption or harm induced by another consumer(s). The case of the Mizo Christians presents a unique construct on the making of a good Christian thoroughly rooted by the British Missionaries. One necessary pre-condition to the making of a good Christian was abstention from their beloved zu implying the renunciation to the 'thing' that held a tread that connected them to their cultural past. Thus, making abstention the symbol of the indigenized Christian and the culture left behind. The passing of years had only increased the Church's aversion to the drink. Government policy enforced in 1973 had caused for such varieties to be introduced in the state. Prior to the introduction of the Mizoram Excise Act, 1973, civil society had done much to curb the proliferation of country liquor. The Mizoram Presbyterian Church in particular had lobbied for 'total prohibition' since 1991 which resulted in the enforcement of their objective, leading the reluctant Government to implement 'forced sobriety' in the state.

Keywords: *Liquor, consumption, prohibition, civil society, Church.*

Introduction

Liquor exists in societies across the globe and has either been a source of merriment or of sadness. The relationship held with liquor varies from person to person; for one a friend and the other a foe. A dear friend to those habituated to drinking however, a foe to those the drink had caused

to lose a husband, a mother, a daughter and a son, be it through consumption or harm induced by other consumer(s). The ravages of inebriety have caused aversion of many, leading to the assumption that the best solution would come in the form of 'unavailability' and 'punishment' in association to the drink. Societies have time

and again resorted to enforcing such solutions and have time and again failed. Attitude towards the drink vary from society to societies as well as the system of controls. To some cultures, drunkenness is not strongly condemned, the drunkard is simply prevented from harming himself and others. While some may exhibit high level of tolerance towards, others the opposite thereby leading to the enforcement of national prohibition in most Muslim countries. The control system may focus to some on the seller while others on the drinker (Britannica, 2014).

The case of the Mizo Christians presents a situation where the construct on the making of a good Christian had been thoroughly rooted by the British Missionaries. One such necessary pre-condition required to the making of a good Christian was the abstention from their beloved 'zu', the liquorish rice beer brewed by each household; implying the renunciation to the 'thing' that held a thread that connected them to their cultural past. Thus, making abstention the symbol of the indigenized Christian and the culture left behind. The passing of years had only increased the Church's aversion to the drink which had come to acquire different labels and contents. Government policy enforced in 1973 had caused for such varieties to be introduced in the state. Prior to the introduction of the Mizoram Excise Act, 1973, civil society had done much to curb the proliferation of country liquor. The Mizoram Presbyterian Church in particular had lobbied for 'total prohibition' since 1991 which finally resulted in the enforcement of their objective of letting the

reluctant Government to implement 'forced sobriety' in the state through the Mizoram Liquor Total Prohibition Act, 1995. The case of liquor proves a conflicting subject to legislate; it attempts to somehow legislate over the morality of the behavior of man which is believed to be fundamentally conflicting and different from one individual to the other. Cigarettes and 'sin taxes' (Kimberly, 2021) are laws that impose tax on the behavior to both discourage and discredit it (Blitz & Nadler, 2014). This paper seeks to understand how the Church viz., the Mizoram Presbyterian Church (MPC) brought about legislation on the total prohibition of liquor law in Mizoram, 1995 and bring light to the perception of the Church on the issue as it mobilizes social organizations for the fulfillment of its interest.

The Church: An Establishment

Churches became central to the functioning of the society in the pre-political set up of the Mizo society with the gradual dissolution of the *Zawlbuk*¹. It filled the vacuum as it became the centre of knowledge and action until the establishment of the Young Mizo Association (YMA), an organization that formally took up the role of mobilizing the community in preserving its 'Mizo-ness'². Despite the existence of various denominational Churches in the state, reference to the Church in this paper is made to the Mizoram Presbyterian Church (MPC) as they have vehemently taken the pain to object and lobby against the free flow of liquor at the policy level. The largest denomination in Mizoram is the

Presbyterian Church (Synod Bu Vawi 95-na, 2019) (6,04,514 members, 2017-2018 Statistics Report) which consist of nearly half the population of Mizoram.

The Presbyterian Church has 51 presbyteries, 304 pastorates, 1113 churches, 102 branch churches. The administrative set up of the Presbyterian Church known as the Mizoram Synod is via the local church, Pastorate and Presbyteries, each having their local authority, however, the Synod being the apex authority. The financial operation, the personnel matters, the administration, management and the execution of works of the Church are all directly or indirectly supervised and controlled by the Synod. Mizoram Synod has 18 Boards/Committees/Departments to handle and manage different works of the Synod. Among them, the Synod Executive Committee (SEC) is the highest decision making body under the Synod and there are 15 Sub-Committees under SEC. The SEC exercises the functions of the Synod in respect of routine matters and to dispose of matters which cannot be postponed until the next regular meeting of the Synod. Financially, the Mizoram Synod is self-supporting without any foreign funds. Its annual income is around 243 crores and the main source being the tithe from its members (Mizoram Synod, 2019)

Social organizations in Mizoram are community based and memberships to these organizations represents a sense of belonging. These social organizations find their genesis to the Church, like the Young Mizo Association (YMA) that was established on the 15th June, 1935 (Ralte, 2017) found its genesis from the Church,

established in the likeness of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) by missionaries like Rev. David Edwards back then in 1935. Since then, other organizations like the women wing, the Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl (MHIP), the old age association like the Mizo Upa Pawl (MUP) etc. came to be established later on to fulfil specific interests. They all operate aligned to the wishes of the Church particularly on the issue of liquor. The Church's demand for prohibition is supported by these community based organization thus, making them a force to be reckoned with.

Temperance: An enforcement

The issue of zu has been a topic of debate in the Christian dominated state of Mizoram. The British missionaries had taught the newly converts the implication of being a good Christian required (among other things) abstinence from making and consuming their liquorish rice beer. The earliest known prohibition of liquor consumption in Mizoram was its introduction in December 1897 at Mission Veng, Aizawl by DE Jones (Zosaphluia). It forbade the Mizo Christians to drink zu and those who defy the dry law were to be expelled from the village (Lalrinmawia, 2002). The Church did not allow habitual drinkers to take part in its affairs. Drunkards were excommunicated and expelled from the village for a certain period of time. In spite of this, many Mizos continued to drink and addiction to it has been identified as the cause of various evil in the society. Consequently, liquor had come to acquire a negative connotation to the early Christian converts. Its consumption was considered a

sin synonymous to reverting back to one's tribal tradition, the undoing of one's conversion and symbolism of reversion to one's old tradition. This perception where liquor had come to symbolize a 'sin' continues to be held by the majority in the contemporary Mizo society.

The first General Assembly (where agenda for the assembly are submitted from various Presbytery³ of the Presbyterian Church held on April 1910, decision of agenda No. 7 reaffirmed "Do not drink liquor, let us teach others not to drink as well, to abstain from the drink as it was so done before (Synod Social Front, 1995)" prohibited church members from brewing, selling and consuming liquor. Strict actions against those in the habit of brewing, consuming and selling liquor may be taken by the areas Church Committee. Their decision can even extend to expulsion from the area (Synod Social Front, 1995). Commenting to this, F. Lalsangliana presented a different perspective that "It is often believed that the missionaries were the ones who prohibited the consumption of liquor but the reality was that the Mizo people firmly believed such an act of consuming liquor was against the Christian principle and it was this belief which ultimately led the Church leaders to firmly advocate for prohibition (F. Lalsangliana, personal communication, 6th February 2021)". So, he presents a different narrative where the Mizo Christians were the ones who initiated prohibition and not the British missionaries. However, it can be seen that the missionaries were the ones who taught the sinful implication of liquor as the drink was so heavily intertwined with the past

culture, preached for abstinence and even expelled members from the Church and community. This consequently rubbed heavily on the psyche of the indigenized Mizo Christians and when the missionaries left the hills, their belief and work was carried on by the Church they helped establish. With modernization setting in and a more liberal approach to certain values being adopted by the younger generation, the old belief was held onto more dearly that it resulted to a more polarized view on the issue. However, those who stand on the opposite side continue to be the minority.

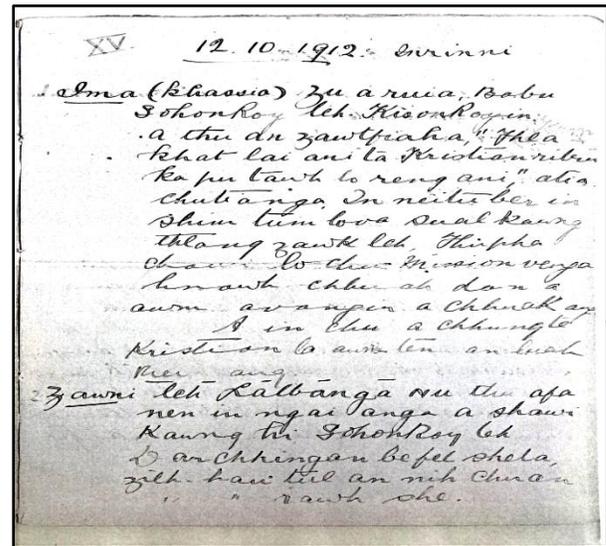


Figure 1: Aijal Kohhran Thu Remna or The Ruling of Aijal Church, January 10, 1910-December 1916.

Source: Book No. 1, Aijal Kohhran Thu Remna or The Ruling of Aijal Church.

The ruling of any issue by the Church was to be effective for one year. The content of the first section of the picture as shown in **Figure 1** is as explained: On the 12/10/1912, the Aijal Church decided to ex-communicate and expel Ima (khasia) on the ground that

he had been drunk, on closer inspection of his case by Soho Roy and Kison Roy, the Ima had confessed that his sojourn with the drink *'has been almost a month and I no longer have the Christian mind set'*. Since the owner of the house had decided to side with *sual* or evil without signs of repentance, as according to the expulsion law that existed, he was to be expelled from Mission Veng. His house will continue to be inhabited by his Christian family members.

The Church acting as a vanguard of the morality of the people had found consensus with the Civil Society organizations to do all it can to stop the flow of liquor. The Church stands firmly against the free flow of liquor and continue to do so. Rev. Rokhuma, the then Moderator of the Mizoram Synod had commented *"the Church was of the opinion that sale of liquor promoted drinking and addiction and as such is the most destructive force in Mizoram"* (The Assam Tribune, 1988) use of various social evils, the Church lobbied for the total prohibition of liquor. The Church had prohibited Christians from indulging not only in liquor but also from the consumption of bhang and smoking ganja (Dan Bu Bung II, 1995). This law was ordered to be circulated in 1933 in all presbyteries by the Synod Committee (SC). An issue arose in Vanlaiphai, a village situated in the current Serchhip District in 1936 where an influenza patient was prescribed by Dr. Hrangbuanga a concoction of *rakzu*⁴ and egg. Having wanted to have the same prescription, seven people drank the same concoction on their own accord. The local Church wanted the council of the Synod Committee (SC) on how to deal with

the situation. The SC had decided on the 3rd March, 1936, No. 6 that those who drank the concoction on their own accord without the prescription of the doctor should be regarded as having drunk *zu* and on the 5th April, 1936 No. 5 a ruling was further made again that if a person is not prescribed and does not have the prescription to consume *zu* should be excommunicated from the Church (Synod Social Front, 1995).

The Excise Act of 1973 passed by the Mizo Union with the hope that it might reduce the number of people who were in the habit of drinking also had a negative impact. Twenty-six (26) permits were granted for the sale of liquor in 1976 under the Mizoram Excise Law 1973 (Hluna, 1995). It also increased the number of people habituated to drinking. The 1976 Synod General Assembly (Gen. 32, 1976) urged the Government to prohibit the sale of liquor and the 1978 Synod Executive Committee also made a circular in support of prohibition the same as it did before. The Synod Executive Committee 45:7 on the 16th February, 1977 also ruled to excommunicate members of the Church who were in the habit of brewing, selling and consuming liquor. With the formulation of supporting Rules to the Act on the 10th October 1984, liquor was liberalized which left the Church in a dismal state. The enforcement of the Rules from the 3rd December, 1984 consequently resulted in the hand out of ten thousand and ten (1010) retailer licenses, ten (10) wine shops and four (4) bars were established (Zozam Times, 2011). Four (4) wine shops were opened in Lunglei, with two (2) whole sellers located in Aizawl (Lalzirliana, 2014)

namely the RTP Bonded Warehouse and the Eastern Syndicate (Excise & Narcotics Department).

The turn of 1985 riled up the Church with the sale of liquor however, this renewed the vigor of the Church to excommunicate members who held licensing permits and sold liquor following the footsteps of what the other Churches did (Synod Gen. 19, 1985). The 1985 Synod Assembly decided to continue to push the State for the ban of selling liquor, the Church also had a meeting with the Chief Minister where the stated agenda was to push for prohibition. Their opinion was also written and sent to the Government but generated no response (Synod Bu, 1986). The 1987 Synod Assembly deliberated on the issue and stated reasons for its disapproval of the sale of liquor (Synod Social Front, 1995) as follows:

- a. The legalized selling of liquor liberalises and increases the number of consumers. It also increases a lot of sufferings.
- b. The Church regards liquor as one of the most destructive force to our society. It also believes that it is inherently linked to drug abuse.
- c. Though the Government may make profit from liquor tax; if a more thorough thought is put into it, we may actually lose a lot of capital from buying the product than the tax profit made by the Government. This loss cannot be corrected from the liquor tax profit made by the Government.

In 1987, acting on the decision of the Assembly, the Synod Executive Committee (SEC) started giving out notices to its Church members not to apply for liquor licenses and that it will take strict actions against church members who continue to renew their licenses and sell liquor. Campaign posters against liquor was made and put up by the Church. The Church decided to put full pressure on the Government as discontentment rose from their meeting with the then Chief Minister Laldenga on the 5th April 1988. The inaction on the Governments part to make prohibition law prompted the Synod Executive Committee (SEC) to establish a *Common Front* which would include all denominations, organize: a walking demonstration, hunger strike, statewide prayer. The Common Front had also been handed the task of organizing a mass meeting at the Vanapa Hall. It mobilized its entire fleet where dissemination both in writing and speaking of the Church's stance on a) *the dissatisfaction felt on the inaction of the Chief Minister Laldenga in not keeping his end of the bargain* and b) *the total expenditure related to liquor to far outweigh the income generated from liquor by Excise Department* were considered vital to highlight. Posters were made and 10,000 copies were distributed, writings of the actions of the Church in its fight against liquor, liquor narratives were published in the church circulars such as Kristian Thalai and Synod Newsletter. Also, writings on the negative effects of liquor were widely circulated by the Church and a request was made to all Church members not to apply for liquor permits (Synod Social Front, 1995).

Zoramthanga the then Education and Finance minister had invited the leaders of the Church where he happened to discussed with them *the benefits of Excise Act over the prohibition Act and the difficulty of enforcing prohibition* (Synod Social Front, 1995). Licenses the Government planned to renew by March all came to a halt as a result of strong pressure from the Church (Menon, 1988). It was difficult for Laldenga, the Chief Minister to go against the Church. Soon after Laldenga was voted out of power by eight of his ministers and the state was put under Presidents Rule from September, 1988 to January 1989. The fall of Laldenga had been interpreted by some as a consequence of his pro-liquor policy and by others as a consequence to not having the blessings of the Church. January 1989 saw the dawn of a new Government established by the Congress party under the leadership of Lal Thanhawla. The new Government once again ruffled the feathers of the Church as it also came to exhibit its liberal perception to liquor. Thus, continued the fight of the Church for total prohibition.

On the road to prohibition

Since 1991, the Mizoram Presbyterian Church had frequently corresponded with the Government through official letters and meetings where requests was continuously made for not just control of liquor but also suggested for the enforcement of ‘total prohibition law’ (MPC, communication, July 29, 1991). However, their request was not granted in 1991 and they continued to put in requests the next year and the years that followed. The requests put in was not met with the trajectory the Church had

envisioned. Publication of the news on the grant of liquor permits to the Armed Forces (1st Bn. MAP) by the Government in 1992 (MPC, communication, June 25, 1992) jolted a frenzied response from the Church. Consequently, the Church made two requests to the Chief Minister viz.,

- i) to revoke the permits granted and
- ii) the Government to make thorough consideration of the Excise Act and make efforts to curb the increasing flow of liquor and the submission and passing of the Total Prohibition Bill in the next legislative session (MPC, communication, June 25, 1992).

It continued to advocate for prohibition but its efforts did not come to fruition and had to be put on hold with the impending General Election of 1993 looming right around the corner. The Government in its defense of not having sooner replied to the Church claimed to be doing necessary research on states that had enforced prohibition law (Chief Minister, communication, December 3, 1993). The third state election held in 1993 led to the formation of a coalition Government between the Congress and the Mizoram Janata Dal (MJD) with Lal Thanhawla as the Chief Minister for the third time⁵. Thus, the Church resumed its correspondence with the Chief Minister in 1994, who had prior to the election spoken of continuance of discussion on prohibition after the election (MPC, communication, May 18, 1994). The Church once again felt disillusioned from the lack of action initiated by the Government.

Once again, publication of information surfaced in the newspapers on the grant of wine shop permit by the Government which once again left the Church quite unsettled (MPC, communication, July 28, 1994). The Government responded to the Church, clarifying that the published information regarding was ‘untrue’ and that ‘the total prohibition bill is now under active consideration’ (Chief Minister, communication, August 8, 1994). The Church then quickly responded to the Chief Minister that the resurfaced information was published by newspapers such as Vanglaini, Aizawl Times and Zoeng which wrote about the intention of the Government to grant liquor permits and the consideration of the details by the Law Department. On this correspondence, mention was also made on how the Church had requested not just for regulation but for prohibition since 1991. A recap to their previous correspondences was also made to jolt the Chief Ministers’ memory which reassured them of ‘active consideration regarding the matter’. The letter also stipulates that the surfacing of such information from various news sources puts the Church at a state of distress and that it finds it quite perplexing. Further mention was made of ‘prohibition being not just wish of the Presbyterian Church but also the wish of the Mizoram Kohhran Hruaitute Committee (MKHC)’. To this, J. Lalsangzuala the acting CM reassured the Church in their meeting that the Government ‘does not intend to grant liquor permits’.

The wish of the Church for prohibition is clearly stipulated in the Synod 1994 Gen. No. 48 which firmly stands by the belief that ‘liquor is the source of decay for the Mizo

ethnicity and the society’ (MPC, communication, August, 21, 1995). The stance of the Presbyterian Church on ‘why it is against’ liquor was made clear in 1995, it stated:

- a. There is no positive mention of liquor in the Bible. It states drunkenness to be a great sin.
- b. Liquor is highly intoxicating which can distort the senses of the user and lure him towards committing greater sins. It can change an ordinary man into a ‘baser’ person and is also a gateway to other intoxicants.
- c. Responsible use of liquor is almost impossible since it is a very strong intoxicant. It has become more of a problem in our modern era rather than in our pre-civilized society and is therefore a dangerous substance.
- d. It is detrimental to the personality and spiritual well-being of the user. Moreover, it has caused the ruination of family, society and even official matters and also lead to sins such as sexual promiscuity and deviations, violence and murder and other great offences. It is one of the most destructive forces against society and culture (Synod Social Front, 1995).

Towards the end of their second term, the Congress became unpopular and began to lose the trust of the people. Not missing the opportunity, the opposition party lead by the Mizo National Front (MNF) introduced the Mizoram Prohibition of Liquor Bill, 1995 as a private bill of the opposition MLA, Lalrinchhana, on the 29th September,

1995. The MNF played their politics well by introducing of the need of the hour viz., the prohibition bill. This introduction once again earned them the favour of the people and thus began their journey to being recognized as the prohibitionist party despite the rejection of the bill by the majority of the house. Two months later, the Mizoram Liquor Total Prohibition Bill, 1995 was introduced by the Government thus resulting in the enforcement of the Mizoram Liquor Total Prohibition Act, 1995.

On every assembly debates, references on the wishes of social organizations like the Young Mizo Association (YMA), Village Defence Party (VDP), Village Council (VC), Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl (MHIP) particularly the Church regarding the issue of liquor; on total prohibition had always been made by both opposition and treasury bench alike. This shows acknowledgement of temperance stance of social organizations. Lal Thanhawla, President of the Congress party and Ex-Chief Minister of Mizoram identified the Church (Lal, Thanhawla, personal communication, December 22, 2020) as the most active social organizations that pressured most for prohibition during his ministry. He presumed their pressure as 'what they are supposed to do'. The Church had been identified as the agent in-charge of the morality of the people and 'the people' also consists of members of the legislative assembly of Mizoram (as all members belong to one congregation or the other). It also continues to occupy a very influential position in the Mizo society as the state and its indigenous population has been identified a 'Christian state' with cent percent

Christians. Thus, Christianity becomes a very important identity to all Mizos. The fear had been to anger the Church, to avoid being in opposition to it, as expressed by Dr. K. Beichhua, 'the voice of the Church is the voice of God' (Beichhua, 2014).

The MLPT Act did not extend to the Autonomous District Councils. The reality had been that the Act though named 'total prohibition' contained various provision of exemptions under which permits and licenses could be applied for under the Act. Chapter IV of the MLTP Act contains provisions of grant of licenses and permits under section 29 which is subjected to any person who is: a) sovereign or head of a foreign country, b) ambassadors, diplomatic envoy or Consul, Trade, Commerce or other representatives of a foreign country, c) member of staff appointed by or serving under any person specified under a) & b) provided that such a member is a national of a foreign country, e) consort of persons specified in a) & b) or c) or any relation dependent upon him, f) any foreign national employed by or engaged in any firm or any other concern in Mizoram. Section 30 grants permission of import of liquor by armed forces for purchase of liquor from canteen stores depot (India), for sale and consumption in their messes and canteens. Section 31 grants permits to any person above twenty-one (21) years the use or consumption of liquor for the improvement of his health or if it provides ailment, and section 32 (1) grants permit on prescription from Registered Medical Practitioner. Consequently, licenses had been handed out to security forces namely, 457 Field Ambulance, 39 AR, Head Quarter CE

Project Pushpak, Headquarter 24th BRTF Seling, Tlangnuam, DIG Headquarters, BSF Durtlang, 173 BSF Headquarters Mizoram Range, AR Khatla, 40 AR, 96 BSF, 142 Battalion BSF, 4th AR Serchhip, CIJW School Kolasib, Vairengte. By 2014, there were a total of 12 permit holders, 214 civilians were granted permits on the ground of medical prescription and a total of 2162 Ex-Servicemen were granted permits as well (Lalzirliana, July 10, 2014) as mentioned by R. Lalzirliana at the Legislative Assembly debates in 2014.

The Church that once excommunicated members for drinking with the passage of time had become more lenient in its approach. It did not further charge the state for the making of such provisions. Excommunication of members in the contemporary Mizo world takes place for other reasons such as elopement of couples which is often interpreted as the misuse of sexual conduct out of wedlock. However, these excommunication period applies for six (6) months and are granted entry to the roll of the Church on application of re-entry by those excommunicated, also grant of re-entry is assured in all cases. The Church had persevered in its fight to end the flow of liquor which was finally met in 1995 with the formulation of the total prohibition bill and the eventual passing and enforcement. Thus, M. Lalmanzuala rightly comments, *“The very reason that liquor total prohibition existed in our society is because of the request of the Church. The request of the Church was respected by the Government; thus, the law came into being”* (Lal Thanhawla, personal communication, December 22, 2020).

Notes:

¹**Zawlbuk** was a large traditional house where all the young unmarried men of the community slept together. It was here they were taught how to wrestle, the art of hunting and disciplined when need be.

²**Mizo-ness** is a deep affinity and respect for Mizo traditional cultures, beliefs and practices, manifested in actions and way of life. It makes up the essence of the Mizo, provides a sense of belonging and identity. Here it is written in reference to the virtues and practices taught and upheld by the YMA to preserve and conserve the Mizo culture. It mobilizes the youths with the aim to uphold such values as the practice of altruism called ‘tlawmngaihna’, the call of community work called ‘YMA hnatlang’, the YMA’s practices of mobilizing the youths on happy and sad occasions called ‘chhiatni that ni’ etc.

³**Presbytery** are branches of the Presbyterian Church which spreads across the entire Mizoram. There are 49 Presbyteries at the moment.

⁴**Rakzu**, a popular spirited drink of the Mizos that was occasionally consumed by the Chiefs and his Elders. A distilled drink comparable to whisky, brandy and rum.

⁵**Mizoram Janata Dal (MJD)** was formally known as the Peoples’ Conference Party led by Brig. T. Sailo.

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