

Peace Agreements and Ethnic Contestation: The Kuki Memorandum of Settlement in Assam (2026)

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Abstract–The Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) signed on 15 March 2026 between the Government of Assam and Kuki Suspension of Operations (SoO) groups represents a significant milestone in the state’s ongoing peace process. The agreement seeks to address long-standing insurgent mobilization through negotiated political accommodation and development-oriented institutional arrangements. However, the MoS has also generated contestation in the hill districts of Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao, revealing the complex interplay between ethnicity, autonomy, and constitutional governance in Assam. This paper examines the MoS as both a peacebuilding instrument and a site of political tension. Using a qualitative case study approach based on documentary analysis, the study explores the historical roots of Kuki political demands, the constitutional basis of their claims, the transition from insurgency to negotiation, and the competing interpretations of the settlement among key stakeholders. The paper argues that the MoS reflects both progress toward negotiated peace and the persistent fragility of ethnic accommodation in Northeast India.

Keywords–Kuki, Assam, Sixth Schedule, autonomy, peace process, ethnic conflict, Karbi Anglong, Dima Hasao

1. Introduction–The Memorandum of Settlement (MoS), signed on 15 March 2026 between the Government of Assam and Kuki Suspension of Operations (SoO) groups, marks a significant development in Assam’s ongoing peace process. The agreement, involving groups such as the Kuki Revolutionary

Army (KRA), United Kuki Gam Defence Army (UKDA), Kuki Liberation Army (KLA), and the Hmar group HPC (Democratic–Assam Region), seeks to bring decades of insurgency to a negotiated conclusion. The paper does not attempt to evaluate the long-term implementation of the MoS but instead examines its immediate political and constitutional implications. For the Government of Assam, the MoS reflects continuity in its broader strategy of resolving ethnic militancy through dialogue and institutional accommodation. For sections of the Kuki community, however, it carries deeper political and emotional significance, closely tied to long-standing questions of identity, representation, and constitutional recognition.

Even before implementation could begin, the agreement faced opposition from organisations in Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao, including student bodies and civil society groups. This reflects a broader pattern in the hill districts of Assam, where political settlements are often interpreted through competing concerns over

autonomy, land, representation, and demographic balance. The MoS thus functions simultaneously as a peace agreement and a political test, highlighting both progress toward accommodation and the continuing challenges of managing ethnic pluralism within India's constitutional framework.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) signed on 15 March 2026 between the Government of Assam and Kuki Suspension of Operations (SoO) groups. The research is based on documentary analysis of primary and secondary sources.

Primary sources include the text of the MoS, official notifications, press releases, and public statements issued by the Government of Assam, the Ministry of Home Affairs, and Kuki SoO organisations. Secondary sources include scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and credible newspaper accounts on ethnic politics, insurgency, and peace processes in Northeast India. The study also incorporates historical documentary references, including earlier memoranda submitted by the Kuki National Assembly (KNA) advocating for the creation of a Kuki Tribal Autonomous Regional Council (KTARC) in Karbi Anglong, alongside other archival materials related to Autonomous State demand in the region.

Data are analysed using qualitative content analysis and triangulation, comparing state narratives with perspectives from Kuki, Karbi, and Dimasas organisations. This allows for an assessment of how the MoS is interpreted across competing political and ethnic frameworks. As the study relies primarily on documentary sources, it does not include interviews with stakeholders. Future research may complement documentary analysis with field-based evidence.

3. Historical Roots of the Kuki Demand

The political aspirations of the Kuki communities in Assam have evolved through a combination of historical settlement patterns, ethnic mobilisation, and constitutional engagement. Early demands for administrative recognition and territorial autonomy were articulated through organisational platforms, including memoranda submitted by the Kuki National Assembly (KNA), which called for the creation of a Kuki Tribal Autonomous Regional Council (KTARC) within the Sixth Schedule framework. These demands were shaped by broader patterns of ethnic reorganisation in Northeast India and were influenced by precedents such as the creation of autonomous councils for other tribal groups.

Over time, Kuki political claims increasingly centred on constitutional recognition, political representation, and institutional safeguards within existing administrative structures.

4. Constitutional Basis of the Demand-The Kukis' demand for a Regional Council derives legitimacy from the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India, particularly provisions under Paragraphs 1(2) and 2(2), which empower the Governor to create autonomous regions within Scheduled Areas for distinct tribal communities.

Kuki leaders have argued that if larger tribal groups could be granted autonomous arrangements under Sixth Schedule and the provisions of Article 244A inserted for Autonomous State, then smaller tribal communities also merit comparable institutional recognition. Historical precedents, such as the Pawi-Lakher Regional Council established in 1953 in present-day Mizoram, are often cited to support this claim.

From this perspective, the demand for autonomy is framed not as secessionist but as constitutionally grounded and historically consistent with India's federal design for tribal areas.

5. From Insurgency to Negotiated Settlement-The MoS emerged after years of armed mobilisation, Suspension of Operations arrangements, and multi-level negotiations involving the Government of India, the Government of Assam, and Kuki SoO groups.

The SoO framework initiated in 2012 marked a turning point, enabling militant groups to enter structured dialogue. Over time, these groups consolidated their negotiating position and moved toward a collective settlement framework.

A key feature of the 2026 MoS was the transition from the demand for a Kuki Tribes Regional Council to the establishment of a Kuki Welfare and Development Council. While the latter was welcomed as a developmental institution, it was widely regarded within sections of the community as a scaled-down version of earlier constitutional aspirations.

6. Why the MoS Became Controversial-Following the signing of the MoS, opposition emerged from organisations in Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao, particularly concerning perceived implications for the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) and North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC). Concerns centred on fears of institutional dilution, demographic balance, and overlapping governance structures within Sixth Schedule

areas. Although the Government clarified that the proposed councils would function as socio-economic bodies without undermining existing autonomy structures, apprehensions persisted.

This reflects a structural tension in Assam's hill governance, where even developmental initiatives are often interpreted through the lens of ethnic competition and political security.

7. Between Anxiety and Accommodation- Despite tensions, inter-community engagement did not fully break down. Reports of continued interaction between civil society organisations suggest that the situation reflects political anxiety rather than totalised ethnic rupture.

The Kukis and Hmars remain integral stakeholders in the socio-political fabric of the region. Their aspirations have historically been expressed through constitutional and democratic frameworks, rather than extra-legal claims alone. In this context, the MoS may be understood as part of a broader attempt to institutionalise accommodation within a plural and contested political landscape.

8. Conclusion- The 2026 Kuki MoS represents both an achievement in conflict resolution and a test of political sustainability. It reflects progress toward negotiated settlement and institutional recognition, while simultaneously revealing the fragility of ethnic accommodation in Assam's hill districts.

A notable aspect of the post-agreement phase has been the restraint shown by Kuki organisations despite criticism of the settlement's limited scope. This reflects a strategic preference for dialogue over confrontation, even where expectations were only partially met.

Ultimately, the durability of the MoS will depend not only on its administrative implementation but also on its acceptance across communities. Sustainable peace in ethnically diverse regions such as Assam cannot be achieved solely through institutional design; it requires mutual recognition, trust, and continued political dialogue within the constitutional framework.

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