

Tribal Autonomy at a Crossroads: ADC Elections and the Crisis of Self-Governance in Manipur

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Abstract: *This article examines the protracted crisis of tribal self-governance in Manipur, focusing on the suspension of Autonomous District Council (ADC) elections and its implications for the hill tribes. Unlike other states in Northeast India governed under the Sixth Schedule, Manipur's ADCs operate under the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act of 1971, a framework that provides significantly less legislative and judicial authority. The enduring inadequacies of the ADCs in meeting tribal aspirations have, since the 1970s, generated sustained demands for the extension of the Sixth Schedule to Manipur's hill districts; this, combined with the recent and ongoing suspensions of ADC elections, has resulted in a condition of a state of suspended autonomy. This paper argues that the state government's consistent bypassing of the Hill Areas Committee and the failure to hold timely elections have eroded the constitutional safeguards provided under Article 371C, resulting in a governance vacuum that deepens the hills-valley divide.*

Key Words: *Article, Autonomous, Asymmetric Federalism, Democratic, Self-Governance etc.*

Date of Submission: 22.07.2026

Date of Acceptance: 27.07.2026

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Introduction

The framework of decentralized governance in India has historically been guided by the twin objectives of deepening democratic participation and accommodating the country's vast socio-cultural diversity¹. This balance is particularly complex in the hill regions of Manipur, where the Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) were established to enable tribal self-governance and institutionalize local autonomy. In principle, these councils were meant to serve as representative bodies responsive to the aspirations of tribal communities. In practice, however, they have struggled to function as effective democratic institutions and increasingly reflect a condition that may be described as "suspended autonomy," wherein formal

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structures remain in place but lack substantive authority, continuity, and legitimacy. This situation is closely tied to the broader design of decentralization in India, which emphasizes the devolution of power, resources, and accountability to subnational levels.² Although constitutional provisions such as the Fifth and Sixth Schedules were crafted to safeguard tribal autonomy through asymmetrical federal arrangements, Manipur's ADCs operate outside the Sixth Schedule framework under state legislation. As a result, they lack constitutional protection, making them particularly susceptible to state control and political interference.³

A key manifestation of this institutional fragility is the irregular conduct of ADC elections, which undermines the core principles of democratic decentralization. Regular elections are central to ensuring accountability and representation, yet in Manipur they have frequently been delayed, suspended, or held under contested circumstances. This pattern reflects not only administrative shortcomings but also a deeper political dynamic in which the state retains discretionary authority over local governance institutions, thereby weakening their autonomy.⁴ The consequences are particularly pronounced in Manipur's ethnically divided political landscape, where hill communities such as the Kukis and Nagas have long demanded autonomy, recognition, and the protection of customary practices.⁵ The weakening or non-functioning of ADCs has produced a governance deficit in the hill areas, constraining institutional avenues for tribal participation and self-governance and thereby deepening perceptions of political marginalization while reinforcing the hill-valley divide.⁶ The resulting imbalance in institutional representation has accentuated divergent political experiences between the two regions, contributing to growing distrust and competing perceptions of state authority. Furthermore, the suspension of these institutions has adverse implications for development and administration, as decision-making shifts back to centralized bureaucratic structures that often lack local accountability.⁷ Against this backdrop, this paper examines the crisis of ADC elections in Manipur, arguing that repeated disruptions have reduced these bodies to instruments of controlled decentralization. By situating this case within broader debates on asymmetrical federalism and indigenous autonomy, the study highlights the structural and political factors sustaining this condition and proposes pathways for restoring meaningful democratic governance in the hill areas.

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Decentralization, Asymmetrical Federalism, and Indigenous Autonomy

Decentralization is commonly understood as the transfer of authority, responsibility, and resources from central to lower levels of government. Early formulations by Rondinelli⁸ conceptualized decentralization in administrative terms, emphasizing efficiency and development outcomes. Subsequent scholarship, however, has highlighted its political dimensions, particularly the role of elections and representation in ensuring accountability.⁹ In democratic settings, decentralization is expected to deepen participation by bringing governance closer to the people. Yet, decentralization is not inherently emancipatory. Scholars have pointed out that it can be shaped by existing power structures, leading to what is often termed elite capture or controlled decentralization.¹⁰ In such contexts, local institutions may exist but remain subordinated to higher-level political actors. This insight is particularly relevant for Manipur, where ADCs operate under significant state control.

The concept of asymmetrical federalism further illuminates the institutional context. India's constitutional design incorporates asymmetry to accommodate regional diversity, especially in tribal areas. The Sixth Schedule provides a high degree of autonomy to tribal regions in Northeastern States such as Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram, granting legislative, judicial, and financial powers to district councils. Such arrangements represent a negotiated form of federalism aimed at managing ethnic diversity.¹¹ Manipur, however, occupies a peculiar position within this framework. Its ADCs are not governed by the Sixth Schedule but by a state law, which significantly limits their autonomy. This institutional design reflects partial asymmetry, a condition where autonomy is granted in form but restricted in substance. As a result, ADCs lack the constitutional protection that would shield them from state interference. The notion of indigenous autonomy adds another layer to this analysis as Indigenous governance systems are often rooted in customary laws and community-based decision-making processes.¹² In Northeast India, these systems have historically coexisted with formal state structures and indigenous autonomy is not merely about administrative decentralization but also about cultural recognition and political self-determination.¹³ In this context, ADCs were expected to serve as hybrid institutions, bridging customary governance and modern state structures. However, their limited powers and irregular functioning undermine this role. Instead of empowering indigenous communities, they often function as

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extensions of state authority. Furthermore, democratic institutions can be undermined not only through outright abolition but also through gradual weakening.¹⁴ In Manipur, the irregular conduct of ADC elections (Suspended from 1988-2010 and no election held since 2020) represents a form of such erosion, where the institutional shell remains intact but its democratic content is hollowed out. Without regular elections, local institutions like ADCs lose its legitimacy and accountability and with the absence of electoral mandates, governance becomes bureaucratic rather than participatory, further alienating Indigenous Tribal populations. This crisis of ADCs in Manipur therefore cannot be understood merely as an administrative failure, it reflects a deeper structural problem rooted in incomplete decentralization, weak asymmetrical federal arrangements, and the marginalization of indigenous tribal autonomy.

Historical Evolution of ADCs in Manipur

The Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) in Manipur constitute a significant institutional arrangement designed to address the distinctive governance requirements of the state's hill tribal communities. Their historical evolution reflects a long and complex trajectory, beginning with pre-colonial forms of tribal autonomy under independent chieftainships in the hills, followed by a phase of colonial intervention, during which the British administered the hill areas separately through political agents, primarily to insulate them from valley domination and to maintain indirect control.¹⁵ The eventual incorporation of these hill regions into the postcolonial state of Manipur marked a critical shift, embedding earlier patterns of separation within new institutional frameworks of governance.

Emerging from this historically entrenched hill-valley divide, ADCs can be understood as a response to enduring political tensions between the Meitei-dominated valley and the tribal populations, particularly the Nagas and Kukis, who have consistently articulated demands for self-governance to safeguard customary practices, land tenure systems, and cultural identity.¹⁶ During the colonial period, the administrative segregation of the hills from the valley reflected a policy of limited interference, which effectively preserved the autonomy of tribal chiefdoms while preventing their full integration into the princely state. This arrangement was not merely administrative but also pragmatic, as colonial authorities frequently recorded the inability of the valley-based administration to govern the hills equitably.¹⁷ The resulting pattern of intermittent raids and punitive expeditions further

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underscored the persistence of tribal autonomy under chieftainship, reinforcing the structural and political separation that would later shape the institutional logic of ADCs in Manipur.

Post-independence, the Constituent Assembly grappled with integrating Manipur's diverse ethnic groups, initially omitting special provisions for its hills under the Sixth Schedule, which applied to Assam's tribal areas.¹⁸ Manipur's merger into India in 1949 and attainment of statehood in 1972 prompted the enactment of the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Councils Act, 1971, creating six ADCs (Chandel, Churachandpur, Sadar Hills, Senapati, Tamenglong, and Ukhrul). This legislation devolved limited executive and financial powers over 16 subjects, including land use, customs, and primary education, but excluded judicial and legislative authority, relying on state grants as the sole revenue source.¹⁹ Unlike the Sixth Schedule's constitutionally entrenched model in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram which empowered councils with broader autonomy under Articles 244(2) and 275(1), Manipur's ADCs operated under state legislation, rendering them subservient and fostering perceptions of inadequate decentralization.²⁰

The first ADC elections in 1973 marked an initial step toward democratic participation, but fail to satisfy the aspiration of the tribal people and dissatisfaction quickly arose, leading to demands in 1974 for upgrading to Sixth Schedule status in the Hills of Manipur.²¹ Elected District Councils were subsequently dissolved, and their administration was placed under the control of district officials. Although elections were constitutionally mandated every five years, the last such elections were conducted in 1988 in Senapati and in 1989 in the remaining districts. On 18 July 1990, the Hill Areas Committee (HAC), constituted under Article 371C of the Constitution, reaffirmed its earlier unanimous resolution of 08 June 1983 alongside the formation of the Sixth Schedule Demand Committee, Manipur (SSDCM), declaring that no further ADC elections would be held unless the provisions of the Sixth Schedule were extended to the existing District Councils. Thus, ADC elections were boycotted for 21 years from 1988 to 2010, symbolizing protests against limited powers and state dominance. These demands reflected broader Northeast autonomy typologies wherein Manipur's model as "devolutionary autonomy," negotiated bilaterally between the state and tribes, contrasted with "decentralized autonomy" under the Sixth Schedule, which involved multilevel federal negotiations.²² On 28 March 2001, the state cabinet decided that the state government has no objection to the extension of the provision of the Sixth Schedule to the tribal areas in the Hill District of Manipur with certain "local adjustment and amendments".

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However, despite continued advocacy, the issue remained unresolved due to persistent institutional inertia and conflicting political interests. The Government of India repeatedly sought clarification from the Manipur government regarding the proposed “local adjustments,” but no substantive response was provided, effectively halting further action. Even high-level interventions, including correspondence from central leaders and memoranda submitted by hill legislators, failed to produce concrete outcomes. Various national committees and expert bodies, including those reviewing constitutional reforms and decentralized planning, recommended extending the Sixth Schedule to Manipur’s hill areas, reinforcing the legitimacy of the demand. Simultaneously, attempts by the state government to reform the ADC framework, through amendments in 2000, 2006, and 2008 did little to enhance their autonomy, often serving instead as measures to manage ongoing protests. The issue resurfaced again in parliamentary discussions in 2015, where it was revealed that the absence of detailed proposals from the state government continued to impede progress as repeated reminders from the Ministry of Home Affairs went unanswered, highlighting a pattern of administrative non-responsiveness.²³ This prolonged delay has been interpreted as evidence of systemic marginalization and institutional exclusion of hill tribes within the state structure. The continued failure to address the demand underscores a deeper political problem: the reluctance to engage meaningfully with the historical and structural basis of hill–valley tensions.²⁴ Consequently, the movement for Sixth Schedule status reflects not merely a demand for administrative reform but a broader struggle for recognition, autonomy, and equitable governance rooted in the historical distinctiveness of Manipur’s hill communities.

In 2021, eighteen legislators from Manipur’s hill areas, including the chairperson of the Hill Areas Committee (HAC), drafted the Manipur (Hill Areas) Autonomous District Councils Bill, 2021 for introduction in the state assembly on 20 August 2021. The bill according to the HAC was to undo the persistent “deficiencies” in the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Councils Act, 1971, which have contributed to “disproportionate development between the areas of the hills and valley of Manipur over the years.”²⁵ The proposed legislation seeks to “repeal and replace” the 1971 Act and provide “more autonomy to the Hill Areas Committee and the Autonomous District Councils” in administering the hill regions. Key provisions include increasing ADC membership from 24 to 31 (with three nominated members), reserving one-fourth of seats for socio-economically backward areas, and establishing a Hill Areas

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Secretariat to coordinate administration, monitor development programs, and manage budget allocations. The Manipur government accused the HAC of attempting to create two power Centers and bypassing “proper channels” prompting the HAC to respond that such matters relating to the affairs of the Hills are well within its constitutional mandate. Despite aiming to establish internal autonomy, the bill faced resistance from the Meitei-dominated government, underscoring its reluctance to share power. The state government has also failed to conduct elections to the District Councils since 2020, despite sustained demands and pressure from various tribal organizations, thereby effectively rendering even the minimal framework of tribal self-governance inoperative.²⁶ The episode reflects broader political anxieties, as demands for autonomy are often viewed in the valley as threats to territorial integrity.

Structural Limitations of ADCs: Institutional Design and the Limits of Devolution

The persistent crisis of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) in Manipur is not merely a function of electoral irregularities but is deeply rooted in their institutional design. The structural limitations embedded in the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Councils Act, 1971 have systematically constrained the ability of ADCs to function as meaningful instruments of self-governance. These limitations can be analytically understood through three interrelated dimensions: the absence of substantive powers, fiscal dependency, and administrative subordination.

First, the lack of legislative and judicial authority fundamentally distinguishes Manipur’s ADCs from those constituted under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Sixth Schedule councils possess the authority to enact laws on subjects such as land, forest management, and customary practices, as well as to establish courts for adjudicating disputes. In contrast, ADCs in Manipur are largely confined to advisory and developmental functions. This limited mandate undermines their capacity to respond to local needs and reduces them to implementing agencies rather than decision-making bodies. Scholars such as Louise Tillin²⁷ and Sanjib Baruah²⁸ have emphasized that the effectiveness of decentralized institutions depends on the extent of real power devolved to them; without such devolution, decentralization remains largely symbolic.

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Second, fiscal dependency severely constrains the autonomy of ADCs. Financial resources are central to governance, and the ability to generate and allocate funds is a key indicator of institutional autonomy. ADCs in Manipur rely almost entirely on grants from the state government, with minimal capacity for independent revenue generation. This dependency creates a hierarchical relationship in which councils are accountable upward to the state rather than downward to their constituents. The broader literature on fiscal decentralization highlights that without financial autonomy, local governments cannot effectively plan or implement development programs.²⁹ In Manipur, this constraint is particularly acute in the hill areas, where infrastructural deficits and developmental needs are significant.

Third, administrative control remains concentrated in the hands of state-appointed officials. Key executive functions are often exercised by bureaucrats rather than elected representatives, limiting the operational autonomy of ADCs. This reflects a broader pattern identified in studies of decentralization in India, where bureaucratic dominance persists despite formal devolution. Studies of development schemes in hill districts show that access to programs like MGNREGA and PMAY is mediated through a complex interplay of Village Authorities, ADCs, and the district bureaucracy, with state-controlled agencies retaining decisive influence over approvals and implementation.³⁰ As a result, ADCs function more as one actor in a state-dominated network than as the primary administrative authority in the hills and the elected bodies are marginalized, and decision-making remains centralized.

These structural limitations are further compounded by legal provisions that allow for the dissolution or supersession of councils without stringent safeguards. The absence of constitutionally mandated protections, such as those available under the Sixth Schedule, means that ADCs can be suspended or rendered inactive at the discretion of the state government. This situation produces a condition of institutional precarity, wherein the councils are marked by a lack of stability and continuity. Although ADCs formally exist, their constrained powers and structural dependence on the state undermine their effectiveness as mechanisms of self-governance, with decentralized institutions functioning more as extensions of state authority than as genuine sites of local empowerment.³¹ Moreover, the structural weaknesses of ADCs have significant implications for democratic accountability. In the absence of meaningful authority, elections alone cannot ensure responsiveness to local needs. Decentralization must involve not only the transfer of functions but also the empowerment of local actors to make decisions. In Manipur, the gap between formal

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representation and substantive power undermines the very rationale of decentralized governance. The persistence of these structural limitations suggests that the crisis of ADCs is not accidental but systemic. It reflects a broader reluctance on the part of the state to devolve meaningful authority to tribal regions.³² This reluctance is shaped by political, territorial, and security considerations, which will be explored in subsequent sections.

Ethnicity, Territoriality, and the Politics of Autonomy

The crisis of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) in Manipur cannot be understood in isolation from the broader dynamics of ethnicity and territorial politics that define the state. Manipur's socio-political landscape is characterized by a sharp hill–valley divide, which has profound implications for governance, representation, and autonomy.³³ The valley region, dominated by the Meitei community, constitutes the political and administrative center of the state and constitute ten percent of the state geographical area. In contrast, the hill areas constitute ninety percent of the state's geographical area and are inhabited primarily by tribal communities, the Nagas and Kukis, who have historically maintained distinct socio-cultural and political identities. This spatial and ethnic segmentation has shaped competing visions of governance and autonomy. Scholars such as Sanjib Baruah³⁴ and Bengt Karlsson³⁵ have argued that ethnic politics in Northeast India is closely linked to questions of territory and resource control. In Manipur, the demand for greater autonomy in the hill areas is often framed in terms of protecting ethnic territory, customary practices, and political representation. ADCs were intended to address these concerns by providing a degree of self-governance within the state framework. However, the limited powers and irregular functioning of ADCs have led to dissatisfaction among tribal communities. The demand for inclusion under the Sixth Schedule has been a persistent feature of hill politics, reflecting the perception that existing arrangements are inadequate. The Sixth Schedule is seen as providing stronger safeguards for autonomy, including legislative and financial powers. At the same time, these demands have been met with resistance from valley-based groups, who view them as a threat to the territorial integrity of the state. This tension reflects what scholars describe as the politics of recognition, where competing groups seek to assert their identities and claims within a shared political space.³⁶ The politics of ADC elections is deeply embedded in this context. Electoral processes in the hill areas are not merely administrative exercises but are intertwined with broader struggles over representation and power. Delays or disruptions

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in elections can be interpreted as attempts to control or limit tribal political agency, further intensifying ethnic grievances. Moreover, the absence of effective local governance structures can exacerbate inter-ethnic tensions. In the absence of institutional mechanisms for resolving conflicts and addressing grievances, disputes may be expressed through mobilization and protest. This dynamic has been observed in various parts of Northeast India, where weak governance structures contribute to instability.³⁷ The concept of territoriality is also central to understanding the crisis. For many tribal communities, land is not merely an economic resource but a basis of identity and autonomy. The inability of ADCs to exercise meaningful control over land and resources undermines their legitimacy and relevance. Furthermore, the intersection of ethnicity and governance raises questions about the inclusivity of state institutions. The perception that state policies are biased toward the valley can reinforce feelings of exclusion among hill communities. This perception is amplified when local institutions such as ADCs are weakened or rendered inactive. The Manipur case illustrates the challenges of managing diversity within a unitary state framework. As scholars of federalism argue, accommodating ethnic diversity requires not only institutional arrangements but also political will and trust.³⁸ In the absence of these conditions, decentralization efforts may fail to achieve their intended goals.

Policy Implications and Pathways for Reform

Addressing the crisis of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) in Manipur requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond incremental administrative adjustments. The issues identified in this paper; structural limitations, electoral irregularities, and political tensions necessitate systemic reforms aimed at restoring both the functionality and legitimacy of decentralized governance in the hill areas.

A central policy question concerns the constitutional status of ADCs. One of the most frequently articulated demands from tribal communities is the extension of Sixth Schedule provisions to Manipur's hill areas. Such a move would provide constitutional safeguards, including legislative, judicial, and financial powers, thereby enhancing the autonomy of local institutions. Such constitutional backing is critical for ensuring the durability and effectiveness of asymmetrical federal arrangements.³⁹ While the extension of the Sixth Schedule may entail significant political challenges, the continued denial of tribal demands and the disregard of their sustained democratic struggle for autonomy have undermined the

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state's normative claim to territorial integrity. Durable and peaceful coexistence can only be achieved through the meaningful recognition of rights and the redress of historical injustices. The state requires a consociational settlement, grounded in meaningful political decentralization, to address the enduring conflicts between the hill and valley regions. This framework facilitates the accommodation of diversity, safeguards minority interests, prevents territorial fragmentation, and sustains political stability. Ultimately, the future of the state will depend on how effectively decentralization is negotiated among its constituent groups and how equitably the benefits of governance and development are distributed between the different group of people in the state.⁴⁰ In the absence of immediate constitutional reform, significant improvements can still be made within the existing framework. One key area is electoral reform. Establishing mandatory timelines for ADC elections, overseen by an independent authority such as the Central Election Commission, would reduce the scope for political manipulation. Regular elections are essential for maintaining accountability and public trust. Fiscal decentralization is another critical area. Providing ADCs with greater control over financial resources, either through enhanced grants or the authority to generate revenue would improve their capacity to plan and implement development programs. For decentralization to operate in a substantively effective manner, it is imperative to ensure a sustained and systematic alignment between fiscal resources and the functional responsibilities assigned to governing institutions. Administrative reforms are also necessary to strengthen the operational autonomy of ADCs. This includes transferring greater authority over local administration to elected representatives and reducing bureaucratic interference. Capacity-building initiatives, such as training programs for council members and staff, can further enhance institutional effectiveness.

In addition to these institutional reforms, there is a need for broader political dialogue. The crisis of ADCs is deeply intertwined with ethnic and territorial tensions, which cannot be resolved through administrative measures alone. Building trust between hill and valley communities is essential for creating a conducive environment for reform. Participatory governance mechanisms can play a role in this process. Engaging local communities in decision-making through consultations and public forums can enhance the legitimacy of ADCs and ensure that policies reflect local priorities. This aligns with the broader democratic principle of inclusive governance. Finally, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be

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strengthened to assess the performance of ADCs. Regular assessments can identify gaps and inform policy adjustments, ensuring that reforms are responsive to changing needs.

Conclusion

The prolonged non-conduct of Autonomous District Council (ADC) elections in Manipur since 2020 represents a critical rupture in the functioning of decentralized governance in the state's hill areas. This article has argued that the delay cannot be adequately explained through administrative or logistical factors alone but must be situated within the broader political and institutional context of asymmetric federalism, ethnic power relations, and majoritarian state formation. At the institutional level, the structural weaknesses of ADCs in Manipur is because it operate under a state statute rather than the constitutional framework of the Sixth Schedule. The absence of such safeguards in Manipur has rendered ADCs particularly vulnerable, enabling the prolonged suspension of elections without significant legal consequences. Electoral vacuum that resulted from the failure of the state government has far-reaching consequences for democratic governance, development, and ethnic relations as absence of elected councils has created a democratic deficit, centralized administrative authority, and disrupted development processes in the hill areas. More importantly, it has reinforced perceptions of marginalisation among tribal communities, contributing to the deepening of ethnic divides within the state. These dynamics align with broader patterns identified in the literature on Northeast India, where the failure to accommodate ethnic aspirations within formal political institutions often leads to instability and conflict.

At the political level, the hesitancy of the successive state government for implementing the Sixth Schedule in the hill districts and the delay in ADC elections reflects the influence of majoritarian state logic, in which the interests of dominant groups shape governance practices and institutional arrangements. In Manipur, the concentration of political power in the valley has historically limited the autonomy of hill areas, creating a system in which decentralized institutions are subject to centralized control. The suspension of ADC elections can thus be understood as part of a broader strategy to manage and contain tribal political agency, particularly in the context of ongoing demands for greater autonomy. From a policy perspective, the restoration of ADC elections is a necessary but insufficient condition for addressing the crisis of tribal self-governance in Manipur. There is a need for more

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fundamental reforms aimed at strengthening the institutional framework of ADCs, including the possibility of extending Sixth Schedule provisions to the state. Such reforms would enhance the autonomy and effectiveness of these institutions, providing a more robust platform for democratic participation and conflict resolution. Ultimately, the crisis of ADCs in Manipur raises fundamental questions about the nature of democracy and federalism in India. Can decentralized institutions effectively accommodate ethnic diversity in the absence of constitutional protection? To what extent can statutory autonomy serve as a substitute for more robust forms of self-governance? And how can the state reconcile competing demands for autonomy and territorial integrity within a democratic framework? Addressing these questions requires not only institutional reforms but also a broader political commitment to inclusivity and dialogue. The restoration and strengthening of ADCs must therefore be seen as part of a larger project of reimagining governance in Manipur, one that recognizes the rights and aspirations of all communities and seeks to build a more equitable and stable political order.

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