

Why are many civil society organisations demanding that the State's National Register of Citizens be prepared first? What are the differences between some communities and the Kukis on this issue? How is the NRC demand related to the Manipur ethnic conflict?

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The story so far:

On August 31, the Centre deferred the Census operations in Manipur amid demands from several community-based and civil society organisations (CSOs) to first conduct the State's National Register of Citizens (NRC) exercise with 1951 as the base year. The decision followed Union Home Minister Amit Shah's meeting with Manipur Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla and Chief Minister N. Biren Singh in New Delhi. The message conveyed was that Manipur can ill-afford fresh tension amid the ongoing Kuki-Meitei and Kuki-Naga conflicts, with elections to the State's 60-member Assembly less than a year away.

What led to the Census deferment?

The decennial Census operation in poll-bound Manipur was scheduled to start on September 1. Data collection for the exercise began in January.

A few months later, several community-based and CSOs began opposing the scheduled headcount, demanding that the State's NRC be prepared first. The Meiteis, who are in the majority in Imphal Valley, opposed the Census 2027 exercise. The Meitei Pangals (Muslims), largely inhabiting the valley, joined the NRC-before-Census bandwagon, as did the Nagas, who dominate at least five of the State's 10 hill districts.

The Kuki community, led by the Kuki-Zo Council, supported the Census operation. Their leaders said an impartial headcount would dispel false claims about Kuki population growth and the perception that they were "illegal migrants", and ensure a fair delimitation process based on verified population numbers. The Kukis also said updating the NRC before the Census was premature and biased, fearing that the community members might face unfair exclusion if 1951 was used as the base year. This is because there remains a perception among some communities that the Kukis are not the

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However, the other communities intensified their pro-NRC protests. Shutdowns and boycotts of all the Central and State government offices followed. A citizens' group, Campaign for Just and Fair Delimitation, threatened to intensify its protest. Leaders of 14 CSOs met with the Governor before travelling to New Delhi to meet with the Union Home Secretary, Registrar General of India, and the High-Level Committee on Demographic Change to explain why Manipur needed the NRC to find a permanent solution to the ethnic conflict that has scarred the State since May 3, 2023.

Has the Census been deferred or withheld earlier?

Yes, at least thrice. The exercise was withheld or not conducted in 1981 for Assam, which was in the midst of a mass movement (1979-1985) against undocumented immigration. The agitators feared that conducting a Census amidst unresolved citizenship disputes would legitimise illegal settlers on the voters' list. Normal Census operations were resumed after the Assam Accord was signed in August 1985.

The 1991 Census for Jammu and Kashmir was also not conducted due to the rise of extremist activities and the mass exodus of Kashmiri Hindus (Pandits) from the Kashmir Valley following widespread violence.

The 2021 Census cycle was postponed nationally due to the COVID-19 pandemic and rescheduled to 2026-27.

What is the argument of the pro-NRC groups?

In a memorandum submitted to the Governor on July 1, the 14 CSOs said an NRC was necessary to identify "illegal migrants" who migrated to Manipur from Bangladesh, Burma (Myanmar), and Mizoram to "pose a threat" to the State's "original inhabitants". They claimed that the Inpuls, Kabuis, Liangmais, Maos, Marams, Meiteis, Poumais, Rongmeis, Tangkhuls, and Zemes were the original inhabitants. They said the population of Meitei Pangals, descendants of Muslims from present-day Bangladesh who migrated to the State since 1606 and settled by marrying Manipuri women, increased to 2,39,886 (Census 2011) from 4,881 in 1881 with an "unexpected" growth rate of 4,814% over 130 years. The population of the Meiteis and the original tribes increased by 880% and 897%, respectively, during this period, they said.

Claiming large-scale migration into Manipur's hills from Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Mizoram since the 15th century, the CSOs said the total population in the hills jumped to 5,49,599 in 2011 from 25,384 in 1881, recording a growth rate of about 2,165%. They said protecting their ancestral land from "infiltrators" and keeping their socio-cultural environment intact became a "headache" for most original inhabitants, given the demographic scenario.

The CSOs said those who fail to establish a

link between people in the 1951 Census and those in the (demanded) NRC should be declared "non-citizens of Manipur" and duly detected and deported.

How is the NRC demand linked to Manipur's ethnic conflict?

The Manipur government has consistently backed the NRC. Its formal demand gained traction after the Manipur Legislative Assembly adopted a unanimous resolution on August 5, 2022, seeking the establishment of a State Population Commission and the implementation of the NRC. One of the triggers was the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, following which several hundred people crossed over to Manipur through porous borders. Most of those who took refuge were Kuki-Chin, ethnically related to the Kukis of Manipur and the Mizos of Mizoram. Many in Manipur blame the illegal influx for the ongoing ethnic conflict, first between the Kukis and Mizos and then between the Kukis and Nagas, which has claimed almost 300 lives since May 2023 and displaced more than 62,000 people. Although the State government or any other agency has not conducted any survey of "illegal immigrants", Meiteis and Nagas believe that the Kuki population has jumped exponentially in the hill districts. While non-tribal Meiteis feel the Census could reduce their representation in the Assembly from the current 40 seats, the Nagas believe the scale could tip in favour of the Kukis in the hills. The 20 Assembly seats in the hills are divided equally between the Kukis and the Nagas. The latter, however, say the hill areas should have had at least three more Assembly seats based on the 2011 population.

Is an error-free NRC guaranteed?

The NRC, entailing the transfer of data from Census slips, was born out of independent India's first Census in 1951. Assam compiled the NRC in 1951, although all States were mandated to do so. The intention behind that exercise in Assam was to prepare a village-based inventory of residents in view of the resistance from the State – then undivided – to house post-Partition refugees. The fear of the indigenous people of being outnumbered by "illegal immigrants" during and after the 1971 Bangladesh War led to the Assam Agitation from 1979 to 1985. A demand during the agitation was to eject undocumented foreigners by updating the 1951 NRC. The exercise, supervised by the Supreme Court, began in 2014, and the complete draft was published on August 31, 2019. This draft excluded 19.06 lakh out of the 3.3 crore people who had applied for inclusion. The Assam NRC process, however, remains incomplete because the Registrar General of India has not issued any notification declaring it as final. Organisations such as the All Assam Students' Union claim the NRC 2019 was manipulated to pass a majority of an estimated 41 lakh illegal immigrants as citizens. The BJP-led Assam government remains adamant that the NRC was erroneous, with at least 20% of the enlisted names in districts bordering Bangladesh requiring re-verification. Assam's updated NRC has been in limbo, with cases against it pending in the Supreme Court.



Women hold placards during a sit-in protest demanding the conduct and update of the National Register of Citizens before the Census, in Imphal. ANI