

## Original Research Article

# The Role of Ethnic Ties in Refugee Reception: A Comparative Study of Zomi Refugees in Manipur and Mizoram

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how ethnic ties and political dynamics shaped the reception of Zomi refugees in the Indian states of Manipur and Mizoram following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar. Although both states share geographical proximity and cultural links with the Zomi people, their responses diverse significantly. Manipur adopted a restrictive stance, influenced by political pragmatism and longstanding ethnic tensions between the dominant Meitei community and the Kuki-Zomi groups. In contrast, Mizoram responded with compassion, driven by ethnic solidarity and a sense of shared ancestry. Using a comparative qualitative approach based on secondary data- including media reports, and social media narratives-the study explores how local governance, identity politics, and community mobilisation affected refugee reception. The security-focused response of Manipur reveals the limitations of refugee protection in politically fragmented settings. Conversely, the inclusive response of Mizoram illustrates how cultural kinship can supersede logistical constraints to enable grassroots humanitarianism. The findings highlight that ethnic and cultural relationships can play a pivotal role in shaping humanitarian action, while political fragmentation and exclusionary narratives may hinder effective refugee management. The study contributes to the broader discourse on refugee management by highlighting the importance of local dynamics, ethnic identity, and political will in shaping responses to forced migration in ethnically diverse states.

**Keywords:** Political Pragmatism, Ethnic Solidarity, Zomi Refugees, Refugee Reception, Northeast India.

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## INTRODUCTION

Following the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, widespread violence and repression forced millions of civilians into displacement (UNHCR, 2022). Ethnic minorities, particularly the Zomi from northern Chin state, were disproportionately targeted due to long-standing discrimination and religious persecution. Facing military attacks, economic blockades, and humanitarian crises, many Zomi families fled across the porous Indo-Myanmar border into the northeastern states of Manipur and Mizoram, India, seeking refuge among communities with whom they shared cultural and linguistic ties. However, their reception varied sharply, shaped by local ethnic and political considerations.

In their desperate search for safety, many Zomi families crossed into the northeastern region of India, primarily Manipur and Mizoram due to proximity and shared cultural ties. However, the reception of Zomi refugees varied significantly between these two neighbouring states, revealing how ethnic and political dynamics shape local responses to forced migration.

Although both Manipur and Mizoram are geographically adjacent to Chin state and share borders with Myanmar, their responses to the refugee influx were starkly different. The response of Manipur was shaped by ethnic tensions and political fragmentation-especially between the Meitei majority and Kuki-Zomi minority-resulting in more restrictive and securitised strategies. In contrast, Mizoram bound to the Zomi by a sense of shared ancestry and ethnic solidarity, adopted a

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welcoming stance, offering humanitarian support through government action and grassroots mobilisation.

This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of the responses of Manipur and Mizoram to the Zomi refugee crisis. It explores how ethnic identity and political pragmatism influenced the framing and implementation of refugee policies, and how community-based solidarity or political exclusion shaped humanitarian outcomes. The study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on refugee reception, ethnic politics, and regional governance in northeast India.

### Research Questions

1. How did the ethnic ties influence the response to the Zomi refugees in Mizoram?
2. What factors contributed to a more restrictive stance of Manipur?
3. How do local ethnic and political dynamics affect refugee reception in these states?

### Review of Literature

Studies on refugee reception globally have highlighted responses of host communities that are often shaped not only by national policies and international humanitarian frameworks but also by local ethnic, political and social dynamics. Ethnic solidarity and political pragmatism emerge repeatedly as critical factors influencing these responses.

### Ethnic Solidarity in Refugee Reception

Research shows that shared ethnic and cultural ties foster strong community-based humanitarian responses during refugee crises. For example, Bakewell (2000) observed that Angolan refugees in Zambia received greater support from host communities who perceived them as ethnically similar, facilitating easier integration. Similarly, in Bangladesh, the Rohingya refugees faced mixed reactions; while humanitarian compassion was evident, long-term solidarity weakened due to perceived ethnic and religious differences (Ashraf, 2021). These examples underline that while ethnic ties can enhance refugee reception, they are often selective and conditioned by perceptions of kinship and belonging.

### Political Pragmatism and Exclusionary Responses

Conversely, political calculations often prioritise security, stability or resource management over humanitarian obligations. In Kenya, Braithwaite *et al.*, (2019) document how Somali refugees were viewed as security threats post-terror attacks, leading to restrictive policies like camp closures and deportations despite humanitarian concerns. Similarly, Betts (2013) discusses how “survival migration” is often criminalised or securitised by host states when displaced populations are perceived as political or economic liabilities. Such patterns echo the restrictive measures seen in Manipur.

### Regional Context in Northeast India

Scholars like Baruah (2003) have noted that the history of ethnic conflicts and autonomy movements in Northeast India has created complex identities, often leading to differentiated treatment of displaced populations. Previous studies on refugee influxes into Manipur and Mizoram, such as those concerning the Chin refugees in the early 2000s, already demonstrated how ethnic affinity influences state and community responses (Brahmachari, 2019).

Thus, the reception of Zomi refugees fits within broader global patterns where political pragmatism and ethnic fragmentation can restrict them while ethnic solidarity can enable humanitarian responses. This study builds on and extends existing literature by providing a comparative study from Northeast India, illustrating how local identity politics and governance priorities intersect to shape refugee outcomes.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two theoretical concepts: Political Pragmatism and Ethnic Solidarity. These frameworks help explain the contrasting responses of Manipur and Mizoram to the Zomi refugee crises and offer broader insights into how local identity politics and governance priorities shape humanitarian outcomes.

### Political Pragmatism

Political pragmatism focuses on how states make strategic decisions that prioritise stability, resource management, and security over purely humanitarian crises (Betts, 2013). The restrictive approach of Manipur toward Zomi refugees reflects a pragmatic calculation: protecting the fragile ethnic balance and preventing perceived threats to political and social stability.

Nevertheless, political pragmatism has been criticised for its instrumental view of refugees, often reducing displaced populations to security threats or administrative burdens. Similar tendencies have been observed elsewhere: for instance, the decision of Kenya to close the Dadaab refugee camp (hosting Somali refugees) was justified on security grounds following terror attacks, illustrating how pragmatic policies can marginalise vulnerable groups while masking broader human rights considerations (Braithwaite *et al.*, 2019).

Moreover, pragmatism can sometimes backfire, generating secondary displacement, worsening humanitarian crises, and undermining social cohesion, as displaced populations are left without protection or viable alternatives.

### Ethnic Solidarity

Ethnic solidarity posits that shared cultural, linguistic, and historical ties create strong bonds of kinship, encouraging mutual aid, particularly during crisis (Anderson, 1991). In contexts where ethnic identity forms a key part of social cohesion, solidarity is

often mobilised to extend support across borders to those perceived as kin. In Mizoram, the cultural and ancestral relations between the Mizo and Zomi populations translated into immediate community-driven humanitarian assistance.

However, scholars have critiqued the ethnic solidarity framework for its selectivity: solidarity is often limited to those who share close ethnic or cultural bonds, excluding “others” who may also be in dire need. For example, in the case of Syrian refugees in Europe, some Balkan states extended preferential treatment to co-ethnic groups (e.g., Orthodox Christians) over Muslim refugees, demonstrating that solidarity may be ethnically conditional (Hathaway, 2018). Thus, while ethnic solidarity can enable humanitarian responses, it can also reinforce boundaries and exclusion in multi-ethnic settings.

### **Interplay Between Political Pragmatism and Ethnic Solidarity**

Although often seen as opposing forces, political pragmatism and ethnic solidarity can coexist and interact in complex ways. Where ethnic divisions prevail, political pragmatism may dominate, curtailing humanitarian action as seen in Manipur. Conversely, a humanitarian response rooted in ethnic solidarity, like in Mizoram, can moderate the restrictive tendencies of political pragmatism.

Recognising this interplay is crucial. It highlights the contingent nature of refugee reception: shaped not only by strategic political calculations conditioned by historical grievances, governance structures, and media narratives but also by the presence or absence of ethnic bonds.

Thus, this study situates the Zomi refugee experience within a broader framework, acknowledging both the risks and realities of political pragmatism as well as the possibilities and limitations of ethnic solidarity.

## **DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

This study did not involve direct fieldwork or interviews. Instead, qualitative insights were drawn from secondary sources such as newspaper articles, social media posts, YouTube Podcasts and recorded speeches by community leaders, government officials and refugee advocates. These public sources provided rich narratives and firsthand perspectives that helped capture the lived experiences of Zomi refugees, as well as local attitudes in both Manipur and Mizoram. The inclusion of these digital and media-based narratives allowed for a contextual and contemporary understanding of public sentiment and policy responses, especially in the absence of access to formal refugee camps or government data.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Response of Manipur: Political Pragmatism and Exclusion**

Manipur adopted a securitised and restrictive stance. With approximately 4,000 Myanmar refugees present, the state government referred to them as “undocumented and illegal immigrants” (IFP Bureau, 2023). The arrival of Zomi refugees in Manipur was not viewed through a humanitarian lens, but rather as a challenge to the fragile ethnic balance of the state.

The ethnic politics of Manipur- dominated by the Meitei community- have long been tense, particularly with Kuki-Zomi groups. The influx of Zomi refugees was perceived as exacerbating this tension, leading to heightened fears of resource competition and political stability. Media outlets, largely controlled by the Meitei majority, often portrayed the Zomi as threats, illegal settlers, or poppy cultivators (Deka, 2023) reinforcing public hostility.

Policy responses were stringent: biometric registration of refugees, restriction on aid distribution, detentions, and even deportations. In 2023, the Manipur government reported an “unnatural growth” of villages and attributed ethnic violence in part to refugee influxes (Khair, 2023). As of late 2023, over 100 Myanmar nationals were in prisons in Manipur (Radio Free Asia, 2023), with the first phase of deportations underway in May 2024 (Peter, 2024).

The absence of ethnic solidarity and the dominance of exclusionary policies severely limited local humanitarian action. While some Zomi groups in southern Manipur attempted to support refugees, they were constrained by a lack of influence and state resistance. The refugees, largely unsupported, were forced into secondary displacement, with many seeking refuge in Mizoram instead.

### **Response of Mizoram: Ethnic Solidarity in Action**

Mizoram emerged as a compassionate refuge for Zomi refugees following the 2021 Myanmar military coup. Despite the directives from the Central government to close the border, the Mizoram state government refused to turn away refugees, instead prioritising humanitarian needs. Approximately, 40,000 refugees found shelter in the state. Former Chief Minister Pu Zoramthanga publicly criticised the indifference of the central government, emphasising the moral responsibility of Mizoram rooted in ethnic kinship (PTI, 2021).

The welcoming stance of Mizoram was grounded in a shared ethnic and cultural identity. The Mizo and Zomi people both belong to the Kuki-Chin ethnic groups and are connected through language, religion, and historical ancestry. This deep sense of kinship fostered a strong community-based response,

where Zomi refugees were seen not as outsiders but as families in need.

Integration was facilitated by cultural similarities- shared language, religious worship, and social norms allowed for smoother assimilation into local communities. Civil society, particularly churches and NGOs, played a pivotal role in relief efforts, providing food, shelter, medical aid, education and emotional support (Hazarika, 2023).

Despite limited economic resources in Mizoram, the state prioritised dignity and solidarity. Grassroots support often exceeded government provisions, showcasing the power of community mobilisation in humanitarian crises. Churches, in particular, functioned as both logistical hubs and spiritual anchors, helping refugees cope with trauma and rebuild their lives.

The approach of Mizoram demonstrates how cultural kinship and local leadership can enable inclusive responses even in resource-constrained settings.

### Comparative Summary

The stark contrast between the responses of Manipur and Mizoram illustrates how ethnic affinity and

political orientation shape refugee reception. While Manipur treated them as security threats and imposed exclusionary policies Mizoram embraced the Zomi as kin and mobilised widespread support.

A comparative table below captures these differences across key dimensions such as ethnic composition, state response, media narratives and refugee outcomes. Ultimately, the findings highlight that effective refugee reception depends not only on state capacity but also on local identity politics, civil society engagement, and community attitudes.

The comparative findings suggested that effective refugee reception policies in multi-ethnic states must account for both structural governance issues and grassroots cultural attitudes. Political divisions and negative media framing can severely restrict refugee protection while local solidarity can significantly amplify humanitarian outcomes. Policymakers, therefore, need to foster inter-ethnic trust, promote inclusive media narratives, and balance security concerns with humanitarian obligations to ensure dignified reception for displaced populations.

### Comparative Analysis of Manipur and Mizoram's Response to Zomi Refugees

Dimension	Manipur	Mizoram
Ethnic Composition	Majority Meitei; historical tensions with Kuki-Zomi	Majority Mizo; close cultural ties with Zomi
State Response	Restrictive; securitised policies emphasised	Welcoming; humanitarian assistance prioritised
Government Stance	Supported biometric data collection, deportations	Resisted central pressure; prioritised kinship ties
Civil Society Role	Limited; support largely from marginalised groups	Strong involvement: churches, NGOs, communities
Media Portrayal	Hostile Narratives labelling refugees as threats	Sympathetic narratives highlighting kinship
Integration Approach	Minimal support; refugees faced hostility and isolation	Community-based integration, cultural acceptance
Outcomes for Refugees	Secondary migration, marginalisation, detentions	Stability, dignity, community inclusion

## DISCUSSION

The Zomi refugee crisis highlights the decisive role of political pragmatism and ethnic solidarity in shaping state responses to force migration. Although Manipur and Mizoram are geographically adjacent and share historical links with the Zomi people, their reactions to the refugee influx diverged sharply, reflecting different socio-political realities.

The approach of Manipur was shaped by political pragmatism amidst deep-seated ethnic tensions. The dominant Meitei community viewed the arrival of Zomi refugees linked with the Kuki-Zomi ethnic groups as a potential threat to the fragile ethnic balance. Media narratives portraying refugees as illegal immigrants or criminals further entrenched public hostility,

legitimising restrictive state policies. As a result, refugees were marginalised, often compelled to leave Manipur in search of safer and more welcoming environments.

Conversely, in Mizoram, ethnic solidarity rooted in shared ancestry and cultural ties with the Zomi community fostered a compassionate response. Despite limited resources, the Mizo people, civil society organisations, and the state government mobilised to provide shelter, food and emotional support. A strong sense of kinship inspired humanitarian action, demonstrating how cultural affinity can override logistical challenges and political pressures.

The contrast between Manipur and Mizoram underscores that refugee reception is not merely a

function of humanitarian need but is intricately tied to local ethnic relations, political interests and public narratives. While ethnic solidarity can foster inclusive and community-driven responses, political fragmentation and ethnic competition can lead to exclusion and marginalisation.

## CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that ethnic solidarity and political pragmatism critically shaped the reception of Zomi refugees in northeast India following the 2021 Myanmar military coup. While the reaction of Manipur was defined by ethnic tensions, security concerns, and exclusionary policies, the response of Mizoram was rooted in cultural kinship and humanitarian action despite limited resources.

The contrasting experiences of the Zomi refugees in these two neighbouring states reveal that refugee reception is deeply influenced by local sociopolitical dynamics, not just by international norms or humanitarian principles. Political fragmentation can exacerbate exclusion and secondary displacement, as evident in Manipur. Ethnic solidarity can foster inclusive and community-driven humanitarian responses, as seen in Mizoram.

These findings highlight the need for refugee policies that balance security considerations with humanitarian imperatives, particularly in ethnically diverse and politically sensitive states. They also highlight the powerful role of civil society, responsible media narratives, and cultural empathy in shaping more inclusive responses to forced migration.

As refugee movements continue to challenge governance structures worldwide, understanding the interplay between ethnic identity and political pragmatism becomes crucial. Strengthening local solidarity networks and promoting inclusive political frameworks will be essential for building resilient and humane refugee protection systems in the future.

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