



# THE RISE OF ARAMBAI TENGGOL

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Arambai Tenggol is a militant group that emerged in the state of Manipur in northeastern India in the early 2020s. The group claims to represent the interests of the Meitei, which is the majority ethnic group in Manipur.

The group is thought to have been created by cadres of Meitei insurgent groups with the support of Chief Minister N. Biren Singh and Manipur's titular king Leishemba Sanajaoba, who is also the state's lone representative to the Rajya Sabha, India's upper house of parliament.

The group adopted a religious and nationalist rhetoric, invoking the ancient Meitei religion of Sanamahism and the historical Meitei kingdom of Kangleipak.



### IN THE LIMELIGHT

Arambai Tenggol was relatively unknown till a couple of years ago, and gained prominence when the ethnic violence broke out in the state on May 3, 2023. The group, along with another recently formed organisation called Meitei Leepun, led the mass killing of innocent Kuki-Zo civilians in the Imphal Valley, and played a lead role in attacking tribal settlements in other parts of the state.



Cadres of the group typically wear black shirts with a picture of Meitei cavalry inscribed on the back in red colour.

These black-clad cadres armed with weapons typically lead raiding parties on tribal villages. During the violence in the capital Imphal in May, Arambai Tenggol led the mobs in burning down tribal properties and lynching civilians on the street and in their homes.

In other parts of the state, many witness accounts describe gunmen wearing Arambai Tenggol shirts leading mobs of hundreds during attacks on villages. Reports from the national media corroborate the events.

“This Arambai Tenggol group had made the first assault on May 3 and continued attacking the Kuki community. This group had been raised with the blessings of the chief minister. The group was allowed to loot arms from the state armouries,” a paramilitary force officer was quoted as saying by the Telegraph newspaper.

According to him, Meitei-linked terrorist organisations like the KYKL, PLA and the UNLF, banned under provisions of the UAPA, are supporting the Arambai Tenggol as it enjoys the patronage of the ruling party.



A report by India Today, quoting security sources, said out of 500 militants who surrendered to the government last year, a significant number of them joined Arambai Tenggol.

Arambai Tenggol cadres were alleged to have been part of mobs which looted over 4,000 weapons from state armouries in May.



Apart from surrendered militants, Arambai Tenggol conducts recruitment drives among the young and disaffected youths. Pictures and videos on social media show young boys among those attending the group's activities.

Before violence erupted in the state this year, the group used social media and other online platforms to spread propaganda in an effort to radicalise the Meitei population and recruit young people.



## TIES TO THE GOVERNMENT

But the main reason why the group gained prominence and clout is because of the support of the state government.

Multiple reports and conversations with political watchers in Imphal suggest Arambai Tenggol enjoys the patronage of the chief minister and the Rajya Sabha MP.

Arambai Tenggol's Facebook page shows members of the group taking pictures with the chief minister on at least two occasions.



Volunteers of Arambai Tenggol are also known to take oath at Sanajaoba's residence, which indicates his close links with the group. A video dated 25th Sept, 2022 on the Rajya Sabha MP's Facebook page shows the group holding their oath-taking ceremony at his residence, led by their leader Korounganba Khuman.

Mr. Khuman, a burly man who often poses with guns on social media, is present in all of the group's photo sessions with the chief minister and the Rajya Sabha MP.



This shows that the group is being used as a tool by the state government to execute its majoritarian agenda.

Even before the outbreak of the violence, Arambai Tenggol organised various expeditions in the hills in the past couple of years in an apparent effort to assert themselves in tribal lands.

Scores of bikers wearing Arambai's conspicuous black shirts were often seen riding in the hill districts, reaching as far as Behiang near the Indo-Myanmar border and Pherzawl, which borders the state of Mizoram.



“The BJP-led government mobilised the Meitei youths, running a campaign against the Kukis and convincing the mothers about the Meitei cause...” an academic based in Imphal was quoted as saying by the Telegraph.



## TRUE COLOURS

A couple of months before the outbreak of the clashes, residents in several Imphal colonies received a knock on their doors from persons who said they were conducting a survey, asking about the names and ethnicities of the residents.

A few days later, all Kuki-Zo tribals had their houses marked by red paint. There are several pictures of these on social media.



From the night of May 3, houses bearing these marks began to be systematically targeted by mobs with torches. Pictures and videos shared on social media show Arambai Tenggol cadres in black shirts leading mobs in Imphal – on foot or on motorbikes.

Despite a plethora of evidence of Arambai Tenggol's leading role in the violence – witness testimonies, social media posts and quotes from security officers deployed in the state – the government and the chief minister has not said a word condemning the group. No action has been taken to arrest their members or curb their activities.

A widely-shared video on Twitter and Whatsapp shows a rioter in Imphal saying “Arambai is here” as they headed to Langol locality, just 2 km from the Regional Institute of Medical Sciences, which houses the top medical college in Northeast India.

The rest, as they say, is all death and destruction.

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