

Democracy, Media, and Civil Society in Mizoram: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

Scholarship on democratic resilience in the Global South has overwhelmingly privileged national-level analyses, leaving subnational polities—particularly those situated at the geographic and political margins of large federal states—significantly underexamined. This paper addresses that gap by investigating the interplay between media institutions, civil society organizations, and democratic practice in Mizoram, a small state in northeast India that transitioned from armed insurgency to stable electoral democracy following the 1986 Mizo Peace Accord and the attainment of statehood in 1987. Drawing on a qualitative-analytical framework that synthesizes Habermas's (1989) public sphere theory, Putnam's (1993, 2000) social capital approach, Diamond's (1994) functional typology of civil society, and Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) institutional guardrails thesis, the paper examines how vernacular print media, emergent digital platforms, and deeply embedded civic associations—most notably the Young Mizo Association, the Mizoram Presbyterian Church Synod, and the Mizoram People's Forum—have collectively shaped democratic consolidation, electoral accountability, and citizen participation in the post-statehood period. Rather than presenting Mizoram as an uncomplicated success story, the paper offers a balanced assessment that identifies three concurrent dynamics: resilience, sustained through dense associational networks, high voter turnout, and peaceful transfers of power; tension, arising from ethnic exclusion of minorities such as the Bru-Reang, social conformism that constrains dissent, and gendered limitations in public participation; and transformation, driven by the rapid shift from print-based to digitally mediated public discourse, which has expanded participatory spaces while simultaneously introducing risks of misinformation and informal surveillance. Situated within the conference track on Information, Media, and Technology, the paper contributes a theoretically grounded, empirically specific case study that illuminates how media ecosystems and civil society infrastructures interact to both sustain and strain democratic governance in ethnically cohesive, post-conflict subnational settings.

Keywords: democratic resilience, civil society, media, public sphere, Mizoram, subnational democracy, social capital, post-conflict governance

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1. Introduction

In the expanding literature on democratic resilience and erosion, the study of subnational polities remains a conspicuous lacuna. Comparative democratization scholarship has long tended to treat nation-states as the primary unit of analysis, thereby obscuring the considerable variation in democratic quality that exists within large, diverse federal systems (Snyder, 2001; Giraudy et al., 2019). India—the world's largest democracy by population—exemplifies this problem acutely. While national-level democratic performance attracts sustained scholarly and journalistic attention, the democratic trajectories of India's smaller states, particularly those in the geographically and culturally distinct northeast, remain poorly understood in comparative political science. Mizoram, a landlocked state of approximately 1.2 million people sharing international borders with Myanmar and Bangladesh, represents one such understudied case. Yet its democratic trajectory is analytically remarkable: within a span of roughly two decades, it moved from a prolonged armed insurgency against the Indian state to one of the most peaceful, participatory, and orderly electoral democracies in the Indian federation.

The foundations of this transition lie in the Mizo Peace Accord of 1986, brokered between the Indian government and the Mizo National Front, which ended two decades of insurgency and paved the way for Mizoram's elevation to full statehood in 1987 (Nunthara, 1996). Since statehood, Mizoram has witnessed regular, competitive elections with high voter turnout—the 2023 state assembly election recorded an overall turnout exceeding 80 percent—and multiple peaceful alternations of power between rival political parties, including the Congress, the Mizo National Front, and more recently, the Zoram People's Movement (ZPM), which won a decisive mandate of 27 out of 40 seats in 2023. These patterns of electoral regularity and peaceful power transfer stand in sharp contrast to the democratic distress observed in several other states of India's northeast and, indeed, in many post-conflict polities globally.

What makes Mizoram's democratic experience particularly worthy of analytical attention, however, is not merely the fact of electoral stability but the distinctive institutional and cultural infrastructure that undergirds it. Two pillars merit particular scrutiny. The first is the state's extraordinarily dense civil society, anchored by organizations such as the Young Mizo Association (YMA)—a secular, near-universal civic body with over five lakh members and branches in every village and urban locality—the Mizoram Presbyterian Church Synod, and student organizations like the Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP). These organizations perform functions that extend well beyond conventional civic engagement: the YMA conducts informal community governance and election monitoring; the Presbyterian Church Synod, through the Mizoram People's Forum (MPF), operates an independently organized election watchdog that signs binding agreements with political parties on campaign conduct; and student unions serve as vehicles for accountability demands and youth political mobilization. The second pillar is a vibrant, predominantly vernacular media ecosystem—led by newspapers such as Vanglaini, the state's largest-circulation daily—that has historically served as a primary channel for public information, political debate, and community deliberation, and that is now undergoing a rapid transformation driven by the migration of public discourse to social media platforms, particularly Facebook.

This paper undertakes a systematic, qualitative-analytical study of the nexus between democracy, media, and civil society in post-statehood Mizoram. Its central research question is: How have media institutions and civil society organizations shaped democratic consolidation, participation, and accountability in Mizoram since 1987, and what resilience factors, tensions, and transformative pressures characterize this relationship? The paper pursues this question through a theoretical framework that integrates three strands of political and communication theory. First, it draws on Habermas's (1989) concept of the public sphere—

adapted for a linguistically specific, non-Western media environment—to analyze the role of vernacular print media and emergent digital platforms in structuring democratic discourse. Second, it employs the civil society scholarship of Diamond (1994) and the social capital framework of Putnam (1993, 2000) to examine how associational density and community norms—especially the Mizo cultural ethic of *tlawmngaihna*, which emphasizes collective duty and selfless service—contribute to democratic deepening while also raising questions about social conformism and exclusion. Third, it engages the democratic resilience and erosion literature, particularly the institutional guardrails thesis of Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) and the autocratization framework of Lührmann and Lindberg (2019), to assess the conditions under which Mizoram's democratic fabric proves durable and those under which it shows signs of strain.

Empirically, the paper relies on secondary sources, including scholarly literature, government reports, media analyses, and journalistic accounts, to construct a detailed, contextually grounded account of Mizoram's post-statehood democratic experience. It does not claim the depth of primary fieldwork but aims instead to synthesize and analytically organize a body of dispersed evidence that has not previously been brought together within a unified theoretical framework. The paper's contribution is threefold: it fills a gap in subnational democratic studies by bringing an underexamined case into the comparative literature; it demonstrates the analytical utility of integrating media theory, civil society theory, and democratic resilience scholarship for studying post-conflict subnational democracies; and it offers a balanced assessment that avoids both uncritical celebration and unwarranted pessimism about Mizoram's democratic present.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical framework in detail. Section 3 provides the historical and political context necessary for understanding Mizoram's post-statehood trajectory. Section 4 analyzes the role of civil society organizations in democratic practice. Section 5 examines the media landscape—both traditional and digital—and its relationship to democratic discourse. Section 6 offers an integrated analysis of democratic resilience, erosion risks, and transformation dynamics. Section 7 concludes with a summary of findings, theoretical implications, and directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper employs a composite theoretical framework organized around three interlocking pillars: media and the public sphere, civil society and democratic deepening, and democratic resilience and erosion. Each pillar draws on established theoretical traditions but adapts them to the specific analytical demands of a small, ethnically cohesive, post-conflict subnational polity within a federal democratic system. The integration of these three strands is deliberate: in a setting like Mizoram, where media institutions, civic associations, and democratic norms are tightly interwoven, no single theoretical lens adequately captures the complexity of democratic experience.

The first pillar centres on Habermas's (1989) concept of the public sphere, understood as a domain of social life in which citizens come together to deliberate on matters of common concern, forming public opinion that can hold state power accountable. In Habermas's original formulation, the public sphere was associated with the rise of a literate bourgeois reading public in eighteenth-century Europe, mediated through newspapers, coffeehouses, and literary salons. Subsequent scholarship has extensively critiqued and extended this framework, noting its exclusions along lines of class, gender, and race (Fraser, 1990), and questioning its applicability beyond Western liberal democracies (Calhoun, 1992). For the purposes

of this study, the public sphere concept is employed not as a normative ideal to be measured against, but as an analytical tool for examining the communicative spaces through which political information circulates, democratic debate occurs, and accountability claims are articulated in Mizoram. McNair's (2011) typology of media-democracy relationships—which distinguishes between media as watchdog, as agenda-setter, as forum for public debate, and as conduit for government communication—provides additional analytical precision. In Mizoram, the vernacular press, particularly newspapers like Vanglaini, has historically functioned as a community-oriented forum rather than a commercially driven adversarial watchdog, and the emerging digital media ecology—dominated by Facebook groups and pages—has introduced new dynamics of participation, speed, and informational disorder that complicate traditional public sphere assumptions.

The second pillar draws on the theoretical literature on civil society and social capital. Diamond (1994) offers a functional typology of civil society's contributions to democracy that identifies several core roles: interest articulation and aggregation, civic education and political socialization, monitoring of state power and promotion of accountability, channelling of citizen participation beyond electoral cycles, and the cultivation of democratic norms of tolerance and compromise. This typology is particularly useful for analysing Mizoram's civil society landscape, where organizations such as the YMA, the Presbyterian Church Synod, and student bodies like the MZP perform many of these functions simultaneously—and sometimes in tension with one another. Putnam's (1993, 2000) social capital framework complements Diamond's institutional focus by directing attention to the relational fabric of civic life: the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit. Putnam's distinction between bonding social capital, which reinforces ties within homogeneous groups, and bridging social capital, which connects individuals across social cleavages, is especially pertinent in Mizoram's context. The Mizo cultural ethic of *tlawmngaihna*—a complex moral code encompassing selflessness, communal duty, courage, and readiness to assist others even at personal cost (Ralte, 2023)—functions as a deep reservoir of bonding social capital that fuels civic participation and community solidarity. However, the very density and homogeneity of this social fabric raises questions about whether it also constrains individual dissent, reinforces ethnocentric exclusion of non-Mizo minorities, and produces conformist pressures that may undermine the pluralistic dimension of democratic life.

The third pillar engages the growing literature on democratic resilience and erosion. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) argue that democracies die not primarily through dramatic coups or revolutions but through the gradual erosion of institutional norms, particularly the norms of mutual toleration—accepting the legitimacy of political opponents—and institutional forbearance—exercising restraint in the use of institutional prerogatives. Their framework, though developed primarily with reference to established national democracies, offers a productive lens for examining how subnational democratic cultures maintain or undermine the informal rules of the democratic game. Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) extend this conversation by conceptualizing autocratization as a process that occurs on a continuum, encompassing subtle and incremental shifts that may not register as outright democratic breakdown but cumulatively erode democratic quality. At the subnational level, such erosion may take distinctive forms: the dominance of a single ethnic or religious community over public institutions, the informal coercion exercised by powerful civil society bodies, or the emergence of digital spaces that enable rapid mobilization but also facilitate surveillance and social policing. Taken together, these three theoretical pillars provide a framework capable of capturing the multidimensional character of Mizoram's democratic

experience—its institutional strengths, its cultural underpinnings, its communicative infrastructure, and its latent vulnerabilities.

3. Historical and Political Context

Understanding Mizoram's post-statehood democratic trajectory requires a brief account of the historical conditions from which it emerged. The Mizo hills, inhabited primarily by Tibeto-Burman peoples collectively identified as Mizo, came under British colonial administration in the late nineteenth century. Colonial rule introduced Christianity—primarily through Welsh Presbyterian missionaries beginning in the 1890s—and formal education, both of which profoundly transformed Mizo social organization. The dissolution of the Zawlbuk, the traditional communal bachelor dormitory that had served as a centre for male socialization, military training, and community decision-making, created a vacuum that was partly filled by new Christian institutions and, from 1935 onward, by the Young Lushai Association, later renamed the Young Mizo Association (Sangkima, 1995). These institutional shifts laid the groundwork for the distinctively organized civic landscape that would later support democratic governance.

Following Indian independence in 1947, the Mizo hills were initially incorporated as an autonomous district within Assam, an arrangement that generated widespread dissatisfaction among Mizo elites who sought greater autonomy. The devastating 1959 Mautam famine—caused by a cyclical bamboo flowering that triggered a rat infestation and destroyed food supplies—and the perceived inadequacy of the Indian government's relief response catalyzed a wave of Mizo nationalism (Nunthara, 1996). In 1966, the Mizo National Front, led by Laldenga, launched an armed insurgency demanding independence, which was met with a severe counterinsurgency response by the Indian military, including the regrouping of villages, aerial bombardment, and prolonged imposition of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act. The insurgency lasted two decades and left deep scars on Mizo society, but it also, paradoxically, strengthened communal solidarity and the institutional capacity of civil society organizations that provided social services during the conflict years.

The Mizo Peace Accord of 1986, signed between the Indian government led by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the MNF led by Laldenga, brought the insurgency to a close and provided for Mizoram's elevation to full statehood in 1987. The accord permitted the MNF to function as a legitimate political party, and Laldenga became Mizoram's first chief minister under statehood. Since then, Mizoram has conducted regular state assembly elections—in 1989, 1993, 1998, 2003, 2008, 2013, 2018, and 2023—with power alternating primarily between the Congress and the MNF. The 2023 election introduced a significant new actor, the Zoram People's Movement, which won 27 of 40 seats, ending the MNF's five-year incumbency and demonstrating the continued dynamism of Mizoram's competitive electoral landscape. Throughout this period, voter turnout has consistently ranked among the highest in India, regularly exceeding 75 percent and sometimes approaching or surpassing 80 percent, reflecting a deeply participatory political culture.

Several features of Mizoram's social and cultural landscape distinguish it from most other Indian states and shape the terrain on which democratic politics unfolds. First, the state is overwhelmingly Christian—approximately 87 percent of the population identifies as Christian, with the Presbyterian denomination predominating—making it one of the most religiously homogeneous states in India. The institutional influence of the church permeates public life in ways that have no parallel elsewhere in the Indian federation. Second, Mizo society is characterized by a strong egalitarian ethos, rooted in the pre-colonial clan-based social structure and reinforced by the cultural code of *tlawmngaihna*. This ethic of communal

obligation and selfless service has been described as the moral backbone of Mizo civic life, animating the voluntarism that sustains organizations like the YMA (Ralte, 2023). Third, despite this egalitarianism within the Mizo community, the state's relationship with its non-Mizo minorities—particularly the Bru-Reang and Chakma populations—has been marked by tension, displacement, and contested citizenship claims, raising fundamental questions about the inclusivity of Mizoram's democratic order. Together, these features constitute the structural context within which the interplay of media, civil society, and democracy must be understood.

4. Civil Society and Democratic Practice in Mizoram

Civil society in Mizoram operates with an institutional density and public authority that is rare among Indian states and uncommon even by global standards. Three organizations merit sustained analytical attention: the Young Mizo Association, the Mizoram Presbyterian Church Synod and its election-monitoring affiliate, and the Mizo Zirlai Pawl. Each performs multiple democratic functions as identified in Diamond's (1994) typology, but each also generates tensions that complicate the relationship between civic associationalism and democratic pluralism.

The Young Mizo Association, founded in 1935 by Welsh missionaries and Mizo church leaders as a successor to the traditional Zawlbuk, has evolved into what is arguably the most powerful non-state institution in Mizoram. With over five lakh members organized across more than 800 branches covering virtually every village and urban locality in the state, YMA membership functions less as a voluntary choice and more as a social expectation—a rite of passage for Mizo youth and a lifelong marker of community belonging. The organization's constitutional objectives encompass the promotion of education, cultural preservation, community development, and the advancement of a virtuous Christian life, but its practical reach extends far further. The YMA runs anti-drug and anti-alcohol campaigns, organizes community sanitation drives, assists in disaster relief, arbitrates local disputes, and—crucially for democratic governance—monitors elections and mobilizes citizens around accountability demands. A journalistic account in Scroll.in described the YMA as "a government that never needs to be elected," capturing the organization's quasi-governmental authority in Mizo public life. During the 2018 state election, the YMA's leadership played a central role in organizing a massive demonstration in Aizawl involving nearly 50,000 participants over the issue of Bru refugee voting rights, effectively compelling the Election Commission of India to transfer an official perceived as undermining Mizo interests.

Analysed through Diamond's (1994) framework, the YMA performs at least four of the core civil society functions he identifies: it articulates community interests and aggregates them into collective demands; it provides civic education and socializes citizens into norms of public responsibility; it monitors state performance and holds elected officials accountable through public pressure; and it channels citizen participation through organized platforms that extend democratic engagement beyond the ballot box. In Putnam's (1993, 2000) terms, the YMA generates substantial social capital—the networks of reciprocity, the norms of mutual obligation rooted in *tlawmngaihna*, and the generalized trust that facilitate cooperative action. However, the social capital the YMA generates is overwhelmingly of the bonding variety. Its dense, ethnically homogeneous networks reinforce intra-community solidarity but do little to bridge the gap between the Mizo majority and the state's minority populations. Indeed, the YMA has historically taken positions that actively exclude non-Mizo groups: it opposed the inclusion of Bru-Reang refugees on Mizoram's electoral rolls and has, at various points, supported demands to restrict the rights of Chakma settlers. Furthermore, the organization's informal authority carries coercive potential. During periods of

liquor prohibition, YMA volunteers were reported to have detained and physically punished individuals found with alcohol, with at least one reported death attributed to such vigilante enforcement. These instances illustrate the fine and sometimes porous boundary between civil society guardianship and social coercion—a boundary that democratic theory, following Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), identifies as critical to the maintenance of democratic norms.

The Mizoram Presbyterian Church Synod exercises a different but equally significant form of democratic influence. As the governing body of the largest Christian denomination in a state where approximately 87 percent of the population is Christian, the Synod commands moral authority that no political party can afford to ignore. The Synod's political engagement is mediated primarily through the Mizoram People's Forum (MPF), established in 2006 in the wake of the violence-marred 2003 state elections. The MPF represents a distinctive institutional innovation: a church-backed, independently organized election watchdog that signs formal Memoranda of Understanding with all major political parties before each election, establishing binding codes of conduct that restrict campaign expenditure, prohibit community feasts by candidates, ban the distribution of cash or gifts to voters, regulate the size of campaign materials, and establish shared public platforms where candidates from all parties address voters under MPF supervision. During the 2023 elections, MPF volunteers were present at virtually every polling station across the state, and the organization was credited by the Chief Electoral Officer with contributing to peaceful and ethical campaigning. The MPF's model of civil society-led electoral oversight has drawn recognition from the Election Commission of India and represents an instance of what might be termed bottom-up democratic institutionalization—the creation of informal but effective accountability mechanisms by societal actors rather than by the state.

The Mizo Zirlai Pawl, the apex student body established in 1935, constitutes a third significant pillar of Mizoram's civil society. The MZP functions as a vehicle for youth political mobilization, channelling student energy into demands for governmental accountability, cultural preservation, and policy reform. Since 2018, the MZP has taken the lead in organizing annual Remna Ni (Peace Day) celebrations on June 30, commemorating the signing of the 1986 Peace Accord and providing a platform for cross-party dialogue. However, the MZP's activism also exhibits the exclusionary tendencies that characterize much of Mizo civil society. In the lead-up to the 2023 state assembly elections, the MZP publicly demanded that political parties refrain from nominating Mizo women married to non-Mizo or non-tribal men, framing this as a matter of cultural preservation and customary law. This campaign—which effectively sought to restrict the political candidacy of women on the basis of their marital choices—illustrates how civil society activism in ethnically cohesive settings can slide from cultural guardianship into the enforcement of exclusionary norms that restrict individual rights, particularly the rights of women, in the democratic process.

Taken together, these three civil society actors—the YMA, the church-affiliated MPF, and the MZP—constitute an institutional ecosystem that powerfully shapes democratic life in Mizoram. Their collective contribution to democratic consolidation is substantial: they sustain high levels of civic participation, enforce norms of electoral integrity, provide alternative channels for citizen voice, and cultivate a political culture in which public accountability is valued. Yet the very features that make this ecosystem effective—its density, its moral authority, its ethnic homogeneity, and its capacity for collective enforcement—also generate democratic tensions. The dominance of bonding social capital over bridging social capital, the blurring of civic voluntarism and social coercion, the restriction of minority rights, and the gendered

policing of political participation all represent areas where Mizoram's vibrant civil society may inadvertently constrain the pluralism and individual liberty that democratic theory regards as essential.

5. Media, Information Ecosystems, and Democratic Discourse

The media landscape of Mizoram has served as a critical infrastructure for democratic discourse since statehood, evolving from a modest vernacular print culture in the late 1970s into a complex ecosystem encompassing newspapers, television, community radio, and—increasingly dominantly—social media platforms. Analysing this landscape through the lens of Habermas's (1989) public sphere theory and McNair's (2011) media-democracy models reveals both the democratic contributions of Mizo media and the emerging challenges posed by the ongoing digital transformation.

The foundations of Mizoram's print media were laid during the colonial period, when missionaries introduced literacy and publishing to the Mizo hills. The first Mizo-language newspaper, *Mizo leh Vai Chanchin*, was initiated by colonial bureaucracy, establishing an early link between media and state authority that persists in modified forms today (Thirumal et al., 2018). The contemporary print landscape is dominated by *Vanglaini*, which began publication as a Mizo-language weekly in 1978 and became a daily in 1986. *Vanglaini* commands the largest circulation in the state—estimated at approximately 45,000 copies—and surveys have indicated that it captures roughly 85 percent of the newspaper readership in Mizoram. Other significant publications include the *Zozam Times*, *Aizawl Post*, and English-language dailies such as *Newslink* and the *Mizoram Post*. In Habermasian terms, *Vanglaini* and its peers have functioned as a vernacular public sphere—a communicative space where Mizo-speaking citizens encounter information about governance, debate public issues, and articulate demands on political authority. The newspaper's self-described editorial mission of independent and impartial journalism, and its practice of publishing community-contributed articles alongside professional reporting, gives it a participatory character that approximates what Fraser (1990) called a "subaltern counterpublic"—a discursive arena where members of subordinated social groups formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.

However, the democratic potential of Mizoram's print media is constrained by several structural features. First, the press in Mizoram is heavily dependent on government press releases and official sources for news content. Research on Mizo media has found that more than two-thirds of local news content derives from government sources, primarily covering activities of the Chief Minister, cabinet ministers, and bureaucratic departments (Thirumal et al., 2018). This dependency creates an informational environment in which the press functions more as a conduit for government communication—one of McNair's (2011) less democratically productive media roles—than as an adversarial watchdog. Second, the newspaper industry in Mizoram is characterized by limited investigative reporting capacity; the joint editor of *Vanglaini* has acknowledged the newspaper's moderate editorial orientation and the relative absence of deep investigative journalism. Third, the overwhelmingly Mizo-language character of the press, while vital for community-centred discourse, simultaneously limits media pluralism by marginalizing the perspectives of non-Mizo linguistic minorities. Fourth, women remain significantly underrepresented in Mizoram's print journalism, both as reporters and as editorial decision-makers, reflecting broader gender asymmetries in Mizo public life (Vanamamalai, 2018).

The most consequential transformation in Mizoram's media landscape in recent years has been the rapid migration of public discourse to digital platforms, and specifically to Facebook. In a pattern observed across many developing regions with expanding internet penetration, Facebook has become what scholars

studying Myanmar and other Southeast Asian contexts have described as a de facto internet—the primary platform through which citizens access news, share information, debate politics, and organize collective action (Walton, 2018). In Mizoram, Facebook groups and pages have emerged as vibrant spaces of political discussion that supplement and, in significant respects, surpass the capacities of the traditional press. A Scroll.in investigation documented how Mizoram's Facebook groups "take readers where newspapers fail to tread," providing a platform for the kind of irreverent political commentary, citizen-generated investigative reporting, and rapid information sharing that the cautious print media is structurally unable to deliver. Where newspapers offer restrained, government-source-dependent coverage, Facebook groups enable citizens to post first-person accounts, circulate photographs and videos of governance failures, and engage in real-time debate about policy decisions and political conduct.

This digital shift carries genuine democratic potential. In terms of Habermas's (1989) framework, social media platforms have expanded the boundaries of the Mizo public sphere by lowering barriers to participation, enabling a wider range of voices—including those of younger citizens, rural residents with smartphone access, and Mizo diaspora communities—to enter public discourse. The communicative affordances of digital platforms also enable forms of horizontal citizen-to-citizen communication that the hierarchical structure of print media cannot facilitate, potentially fostering what Dahlberg (2001) described as "online deliberative forums extending the public sphere." The use of Facebook for political mobilization was visible during the 2018 election controversy over Bru refugee voting rights, when digital platforms facilitated the rapid coordination of the massive Aizawl demonstration, and during the 2023 election campaign, where candidates, parties, and citizens used social media extensively to disseminate messages, debate policies, and share information about electoral processes.

Yet the digital transformation of Mizoram's public sphere also introduces significant risks for democratic discourse. First, the migration to social media has been accompanied by the proliferation of misinformation and unverified content. In the absence of the editorial gatekeeping that print media, for all its limitations, provides, false information can circulate rapidly through Facebook groups, shaping public opinion before corrections can reach the same audience. Second, digital platforms have enabled new forms of social surveillance and community policing that extend the coercive potential of organizations like the YMA into online spaces. The dense, close-knit character of Mizo society means that social media activity is highly visible to one's community; individuals who express dissenting views, critique powerful institutions, or deviate from community norms may face social sanctions that effectively suppress the freedom of expression that digital platforms nominally enable. Third, the digital divide between urban Aizawl—where internet penetration and digital literacy are relatively high—and rural districts, where connectivity remains uneven and digital skills are limited, raises concerns about informational inequality and the potential for urban-centred digital discourse to further marginalise already peripheral populations. Fourth, Facebook's near-monopoly status means Mizoram's digital public discourse is ultimately shaped by a private, foreign corporation's algorithmic decisions and content-moderation policies, which may not align with the communicative needs of a small, linguistically distinct community. These challenges suggest that while the digital transformation has expanded the horizons of Mizoram's democratic discourse, it has also introduced new vulnerabilities that require analytical attention and, potentially, institutional responses.

6. Democratic Resilience, Erosion, and Transformation: An Integrated Analysis

The preceding sections have examined civil society and media as distinct—though interrelated—pillars of

Mizoram's democratic order. This section draws the two analyses together, assessing Mizoram's overall democratic health through the tripartite lens of resilience, tension, and transformation that structures this paper's argument.

Mizoram's democratic resilience is grounded in a set of mutually reinforcing institutional, cultural, and communicative factors. At the institutional level, the state has maintained an unbroken record of free, competitive elections with peaceful transfers of power across nearly four decades of statehood. The 2023 election, in which the recently formed Zoram People's Movement displaced the incumbent Mizo National Front in a decisive verdict, demonstrated that Mizoram's electorate is willing to punish underperformance and reward new political alternatives—a hallmark of democratic health. Voter turnout has consistently remained among the highest in India, with female voters in 2023 actually exceeding male turnout, reflecting a genuinely participatory political culture rather than a mere formality of electoral competition. At the cultural level, the ethic of *tlawmngaihna* provides a normative foundation for civic engagement that is deeply embedded in everyday social practice, sustained through church involvement, community organizations, and family socialization, and translated into political participation through the mediating institutions of the YMA, the MPF, and the MZP. At the communicative level, the combination of a vibrant vernacular press and an expanding digital public sphere ensures that political information circulates widely, that citizens have access to platforms for expressing demands and grievances, and that elected officials face at least some degree of public scrutiny—even if, as noted, the press falls short of robust investigative journalism. These three dimensions—institutional regularity, cultural normativity, and communicative infrastructure—constitute what Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) would recognize as democratic guardrails: informal but powerful constraints that sustain democratic norms even in the absence of formal enforcement mechanisms.

Against this account of resilience, however, a set of persistent tensions must be acknowledged. The most consequential concerns the treatment of ethnic minorities. The displacement of over 30,000 Bru-Reang people from Mizoram following ethnic violence in 1997, and the subsequent two-decade-long refugee crisis that was only partially resolved by the 2020 quadripartite settlement agreement, represents a fundamental failure of democratic inclusion. Mizo civil society organizations, including the YMA and MZP, were not neutral bystanders in this crisis; they actively opposed the inclusion of Bru refugees on Mizoram's electoral rolls and asserted that the Bru were not indigenous to the state. The Chakma population has faced similar exclusionary pressures. These dynamics reveal a structural limitation of the bonding social capital model: the very solidarity and communal cohesion that sustain democratic participation within the Mizo majority can simultaneously underwrite the exclusion, displacement, and disenfranchisement of those who fall outside the community's ethnic boundaries. In Diamond's (1994) terms, Mizoram's civil society excels at interest articulation and civic education within the dominant community but falls short on the cultivation of democratic norms of tolerance toward outgroups—a function Diamond identifies as essential for civil society's contribution to democratic consolidation.

A second tension concerns the boundaries of civic authority. The informal power exercised by the YMA, the church, and student organizations, while often directed toward democratically beneficial ends such as electoral integrity and anti-corruption campaigns, can shade into forms of social coercion that restrict individual autonomy and suppress dissent. When the YMA enforces prohibition through physical punishment, when the church-backed MPF effectively dictates campaign rules to political parties, or when the MZP campaigns to exclude women married to non-Mizo men from political candidacy, the line between civic guardianship and authoritarian paternalism becomes dangerously thin. This pattern

complicates the celebratory tone that often characterises accounts of Mizoram's civil society strength and suggests that the relationship between associational density and democratic quality is not linear but curvilinear: beyond a certain threshold, civic authority may begin to crowd out the space for individual freedom and political pluralism that democracy requires.

The third dynamic—transformation—is driven primarily by the digital shift in Mizoram's information ecosystem. The transition from a print-dominated to a digitally mediated public sphere is not merely a technological change; it constitutes a structural reconfiguration of how political information is produced, circulated, and consumed, and of who participates in democratic discourse. On the participatory side, digital platforms have widened the circle of democratic engagement, enabling younger citizens, diaspora communities, and individuals in previously information-poor rural areas to access political content and contribute to public debate. On the risk side, the same platforms have introduced misinformation, algorithmic fragmentation, and new modalities of social surveillance into a communicative environment that was previously characterised by the slower, more editorially controlled rhythms of print journalism. Mizoram's democratic order must harness the participatory gains of the digital transition while building the institutional capacity—through media literacy initiatives, community-based content verification practices, or regulatory innovation—to mitigate its democratic risks. This is a challenge that Mizoram shares with democratic polities worldwide, but the state's distinctive social structure—its dense civil society networks, its near-universal organisational participation, and its cultural ethic of communal responsibility—may provide resources for addressing digital-age democratic challenges that are unavailable in more atomised societies.

7. Conclusion

This paper has examined the interplay between democracy, media, and civil society in post-statehood Mizoram through a theoretical framework combining public sphere theory, civil society and social capital scholarship, and democratic resilience literature. The analysis yields three principal findings.

First, Mizoram's democratic resilience is sustained by an unusually dense and interlocking infrastructure of civic associations—the YMA, the church-affiliated MPF, and the MZP—and a vernacular media ecosystem that, taken together, perform critical democratic functions: maintaining high levels of political participation, enforcing norms of electoral integrity, providing channels for citizen voice, and cultivating a political culture in which public accountability is expected and pursued. The cultural ethic of *tlawmngaihna*, which emphasizes communal duty and selfless service, provides a deep normative foundation for this civic engagement, functioning as a form of embedded social capital that translates cultural values into democratic practice.

Second, Mizoram's democratic order is marked by significant tensions that qualify its resilience. The exclusion of ethnic minorities—most notably the Bru-Reang—from full democratic citizenship, the coercive potential of powerful civil society organizations, the gendered restrictions on political participation enforced by student and community groups, and the limited media pluralism in an ethnically homogeneous information environment all represent areas where the state's democratic fabric shows strain. These tensions reveal that democratic resilience and democratic erosion are not mutually exclusive conditions but can coexist within a single polity, with the same institutions that sustain democratic norms in some respects undermining them in others.

Third, the ongoing transformation of Mizoram's information ecosystem—driven by the rapid migration of public discourse from print media to social media platforms—is reshaping the conditions of democratic

participation and accountability in ways that are still unfolding. The digital shift has expanded participatory possibilities and introduced new voices into democratic debate, but it has also created vulnerabilities to misinformation, social surveillance, and informational inequality that the state's institutional landscape has not yet fully addressed.

The paper makes several contributions to the broader literature. For subnational democratic studies, it demonstrates the analytical value of examining democratic resilience and erosion at the state level within large federal democracies, where national-level indices may obscure significant subnational variation. For media and democracy scholarship, it illustrates how vernacular media ecosystems and digital platforms interact to structure democratic discourse in linguistically distinct, non-Western settings, and it suggests that the Habermasian public sphere concept, when suitably adapted, retains analytical utility for such contexts. For civil society theory, it offers an empirically grounded demonstration of the curvilinear relationship between associational density and democratic quality—showing that civil society can simultaneously sustain and constrain democratic pluralism, depending on the character of the social capital it generates and the boundaries of the community it represents.

The study has limitations that future research should address. As a qualitative-analytical paper drawing on secondary sources, it lacks the empirical depth that primary fieldwork—including interviews, surveys, and systematic content analysis of Mizo media—would provide. Comparative analysis with other northeast Indian states, such as Nagaland or Meghalaya, which share some of Mizoram's features while differing in others, would sharpen the causal claims advanced here. Longitudinal research tracking the impact of the digital transition on political participation, media trust, and democratic norms over time is particularly needed as Mizoram's information ecosystem continues to evolve. Despite these limitations, the paper demonstrates that Mizoram's democratic experience is analytically rich, theoretically instructive, and deserving of far greater attention than it has hitherto received in the comparative study of democracy.

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