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Angami Zapu Phizo and the Making of Modern Naga Nationalism: A Historical Analysis

Krishanu Ghosh

Assistant Professor

Department of History, Bhairab Ganguly College
&

Ph. D Research Scholar

Department of History, Rabindra Bharati University
krishanurbu@gmail.com

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Abstract:

The movement of Nagaland has been one of the most long-lasting, complex, and emotionally charged ethno-nationalist movements of South Asia. At least in part, such an ethno-nationalist movement has been perpetuated by AngamiZapuPhizo, who has played the role of the Naga identity, resistance and aspirations by his charismatic and uncompromising leadership of the movement through forty years. Phizo's influence touched all the major stages of the movement and left a lasting impact on both the movement's successes and failures. This paper examines the development of Phizo's leadership through critical events in the history of the Naga struggle. The paper first examines the Naga National Council's (NNC) early years and the debates regarding the Naga people's right to autonomy or self-determination. The paper then focuses upon Phizo's role in leading the plebiscite held in 1951—a significant event for Phizo, as he believed the plebiscite would demonstrate the Nagas' desire for independence from India and lead to India recognizing their sovereignty. Following the plebiscite, the paper examines the transition from peaceful negotiations with the Indian government to an armed conflict and Phizo's complex relationship with the Indian government. The paper will also examine Phizo's decision to move to London and lead the Naga movement from there. While the decision to remain in exile in London, while continuing to lead the Naga movement, did create some disunity among the Naga people and further fragmented the Naga National Council in the 1960s and 1970s, Phizo's leadership continued to inspire many Naga people and provide the movement with a clear ideological focus. However, Phizo's commitment to achieving full sovereignty for Nagaland also led to divisions and fragmentation within the movement. By placing the Naga struggle within the context of post-colonial state building and the decolonization process, the paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of the leadership of Phizo and how he shaped the course of Naga nationalism from 1947 till 1990.

Keywords: Angami Zapu Phizo, Naga National Movement, Naga National Council (NNC), Naga plebiscite 1951

The Naga movement could be traced back to the creation of Naga Club in 1918 by twenty Naga members of the French Labour Corps who had fought in the First World War. The Club

was consisting mainly of Government officials and village headmen with the object of ameliorating the administrative and social problems of the Nagas.ⁱ These experiences they had in war aroused in them a sense of Naga identity, and gave them some kind of early Naga nationalism.ⁱⁱ The Club that consisted of the members of major tribes such as the Angami, Ao, Konyak, Lotha, Rengma, Sema and Yimchunger was left to run free by the British administration. In January, 1929, when the Simon Commission visited Kohima, the Club submitted a memorandum demanding the exclusion of Naga areas from the proposed reforms and their retention under direct administration, to save them from being overwhelmed by the people of the plains. This demand was, no doubt, motivated partly by a desire on the part of the Naga tribes to protect their lands, forests and way of life from interference by more sophisticated outsiders.ⁱⁱⁱ On the basis of the report of the Simon Commission which mentioned that the stage of development of these areas precluded their being brought under the general constitutional arrangements, in 1937 the Naga Hills District came to be known as one of the Excluded Areas of the Government of Assam under Section 91(1) of the same Order, and as an Excluded Area it remained under the direct charge of the Governor who administered it in his discretion under Section 92 of the Act through the Deputy Commissioner at Kohima.^{iv}

In 1944, the Second World War reached the borders of Nagaland, including Kohima, and this experience had a profound effect on the Naga people. In 1945, the Naga Hills District Tribal Council was established at the initiative of the Deputy Commissioner, Charles Pawsey. The Council was constituted with the aim of bringing together the Nagas and repairing some of the damage done to the Naga areas during the Second World War. It was renamed the Naga National Council (NNC) a year later to foster the welfare and social aspiration of Nagas. It also received official patronage. The original political objective of the Naga National Council was to achieve local autonomy within Assam and train the people for self-government.^v It soon became evident that the Nagas wanted all the areas inhabited by them to be grouped together as a single administrative unit under some sort of a scheme of regional autonomy, and demands to this effect were voiced in June 1947 before Sir Akbar Hydari, the then Governor of Assam. As a result of prolonged talks, a 9-point memorandum known as the Hydari Agreement was drawn up. According to Clause 9 of this Agreement, at the end of 10 years from the day it would come into effect, the Nagas were to be given the choice to ask for an extension of the Agreement or express themselves in favour of drawing up a new Agreement. The intention, of course, was that at the end of this period of 10 years, the Nagas would be free to suggest, if they so wished, an administrative pattern to suit their special genius and to ensure a measure of autonomy within India. Phizo, however, misinterpreted this Article to mean that the Nagas had the liberty to demand complete independence.^{vi}

Before the rise of Phizo, the NNC was internally divided into three distinct factions: one supporting the idea of a Crown Colony, another advocating for an autonomous district council, and a third group preferring direct administration by the Centre. The Hydari Agreement represented an effort to strike a compromise among these competing positions.^{vii} A. Z. Phizo appeared on the Naga political space in June, 1946. In June 1946, he was recruited into Naga National Council (NNC) after he returned to the Naga Hills. He did not however take the opinion of the Council that the Council should carry out its activities according to constitutional means. He hence formed another political party known as the Peoples Independence League that required full autonomy of the Nagas.^{viii}

The rise of Naga national consciousness had already begun to take shape across the region, and this broader awakening deeply influenced Phizo's political outlook. The devastation of the Second World War, the retreat of British power from Asia, and the contrasting approaches of Gandhi's non-violence and Netaji's armed struggle all contributed to shaping his understanding of nationalism. Drawing on these global and regional shifts, Phizo articulated a

clearer vision for the political future of the Nagas and refined their collective identity in response to the changing world. Central to his mission was the unification of all Naga tribes under a single political framework. He emerged as the leading figure advocating this idea, working tirelessly to build solidarity among disparate Naga communities. Travelling extensively—often on foot and across difficult terrain, including the Saramati–Patkoi ranges—he visited villages throughout the Naga Hills to mobilize support for a unified Naga political cause.^{ix}

Phizo's conception of an independent Nagaland took shape during his enforced exile in Burma, following his effective expulsion from the Naga Hills by the British authorities. During this period, Phizo—together with his brother KeviYalley and Savino—began to articulate a vision of sovereignty for the Nagas. His interactions with the northern Burmese tribes, especially the Kachins and the Karens, who were themselves engaged in struggles for self-determination, further strengthened his resolve to pursue a similar path for his own people.^x Phizo's decision to join the Indian National Army was influenced by Japanese assurances that Nagaland would be recognised as an independent sovereign state. Yet, the eventual setback suffered by Japan brought an abrupt end to these aspirations.^{xi}

The collapse of the Hydari Agreement directly encouraged the emergence of a more extremist faction within the NNC. Led by Zapu Phizo, this group viewed the 9th clause of the Pact as a complete “sell-out” by the established NNC leadership. This was not a clear promise of self-determination.^{xii}

At this stage, when the Naga leadership was considering multiple political possibilities—from full independence to a form of autonomy—both the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League chose to remain distant from these Naga initiatives. On 19th July 1947, Mr. A. Z. Phizo, Kezehol and T. Sakhue three of the Naga delegation of seven that flew to Delhi to present their viewpoints to the Indian leaders, declared there were 130000 Angami Nagas, who constitute two-thirds of the Naga tribes, who would “fight to the last drop of their blood” in defence of their independence^{xiii}. The delegation met Mr. Jinnah first, then Mr. Gandhi and later Mr. Jaipal Singh and representative in the Indian Constituent Assembly at the time of their visit to Delhi. According to the delegation, Mr. Jinnah said, it is a matter entirely for you to decide and expressed his fullest sympathy with their cause and supported their goal of an independent “Nagastan”^{xiv}.

When they meet Mahatma Gandhi, they are reported to have asked him whether, if they declared independence, the Congress would use force against them part of India. Mr. Gandhi, according to them replied that the Congress, whose creed was non-violence, would not use force against them. Thereupon, the Nagas are reported to have told Mr. Gandhi, “Then we want to be independent^{xv}.” According to A.Z. Phizo, “Mahatma Gandhi told the delegates: ‘Nagas have every right to be independent. We do not want to leave under the domination of the British and they are now leaving us. I want you to feel that India is yours. I feel that the Naga Hills are mine just as much as they are yours. But if you say that they are not mine, the matter must stop there. I believe in the brotherhood of man, but I do not believe in force or forced unions. If you do not wish to join the Union of India, nobody will force you to do that. When the Naga delegates pointed out that Sir Akbar Hydari was threatening to do exactly that, Gandhi exclaimed; ‘Sir Akbar Hydari is wrong! He cannot do that! ...I will come to the Naga Hills; I will ask them to shoot me first before one Naga is shot’^{xvi}. But according to The Collected works of Gandhi, Gandhi says, ‘personally, I believe you all belong to me, to India. But if you says you don’t, no one can force you. And again he says, if I come there I will teach you the art of spinning and weaving. You grow cotton and yet you import cloth. If you use rifles and guns and tanks, it is a foolish thing.’^{xvii}

But the Naga National Council moved quickly with its extreme line of action and declared independence on 14th August 1947, one day before India's independence. Phizo says,

we the Naga people declared ourselves independent on the 14th of August, and on the same day we informed India by telegram, and cabled to HMG and UNO for information and record.^{xviii} But, the unilateral declaration of the Naga National Independence was not recognized by British India.

When Phizo failed to assert his position within the organisation against moderate leaders such as AlibaImti and T. Sakhrie, he left the NNC and formed the People's Independence League, which aimed to fight for a sovereign Nagaland. Despite sustained attempts at mass mobilisation, Phizo was unable to secure significant public backing, and a disillusioned Phizo eventually returned to the NNC.^{xix}

With the transfer of power in 1947, the "Unadministered Areas" adjacent to the Naga Hills District were integrated into the North East Frontier Agency and known as "Naga Tribal Area" and later as "Tuensang Frontier Division". In its discretion the Governor of Assam was responsible to the Central Government for the administration of the North East Frontier Agency. The Naga Hill District remained within Assam, while special provisions were made for its administration in the sixth Schedule to the Indian Constitution^{xx}.

The Naga National Council issued an ultimatum to the Government of India on 4th November 1947 and threatened to declare independence if their demand was not acceded to.^{xxi} After nearly one year later, a delegation of Nagas called on the Governor, Sir Akbar Hydari at Shillong on 22th June 1948 to seek confirmation whether the 9-point agreement would be implemented.^{xxii} This was confirmed by Sir Akbar Hydari and Shri Gopinath Bardolai, the then chief minister of Assam.^{xxiii} But Phizo and his associates could not be persuaded to give up their interpretation of Clause 9 of the Agreement. The deadlock remained and the 9 point agreement therefore did not become effective in practice.^{xxiv}

In December 1948, the Naga National Council submitted a Memorandum to the Government of India. It proposed the creation of a separate (centrally administered) administrative unit to be called the North-East Frontier Agency and they also expressed dissatisfaction with the Sixth Schedules of the Draft Constitution relating to the administration of the tribal areas of Assam.^{xxv} Their main objections were that the Assam State Assembly exercise control over the administration of the Hill Districts.

On 30th May, 1949 another Memorandum was submitted to the Governor of Assam on his visit to Kohima, by the President of Naga National Council, intimating that the provisions of the Constitution of India cannot be accepted by the Nagas and that the case of the Nagas will at all appropriate times be renewed and pressed in proper quarters until the right of the Nagas for self-determination is recognized.^{xxvi} In September 1949, the president of Naga National Council sends a letter to the Government of India, complaining against mere local autonomy granted to them under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India and Copies of this letter were also forwarded to the editor of Newspapers.^{xxvii} On 9th November, 1949, Gopinath Bardoloi, Premier of Assam, told the Nagas that the Hydari Agreement was no longer considered to exist by the Indian Government.^{xxviii} A Naga National Council delegation met C.R. Rajagopalachari, the Governor-General of India on 28th November, 1949. They stated to the Governor-General, "Nagas shall not buy friendship with their territory"^{xxix}. The Governor General replied that, "India wants to be friendly with you. India does not want to deprive the Nagas of their land. Nagas are at full liberty to do as they like, either to become part of India or be separated if that would be best for their interest to be isolated"^{xxx}.

In reality, the Naga National Council was divided house on the Naga Independence issue. From the early 1950s to the 1960s, Naga nationalism became more consolidated, and the Phizo-led NNC emerged as the dominant force. The collapse of the Hydari Agreement and the sidelining of moderate leaders within the NNC opened the way for A.Z. Phizo's shift toward armed resistance against the Indian state.^{xxxi} From then onwards, the attitude of the Naga

National Council towards the demand for a separate sovereign state became stiffer, and in December 1950, A. ZaphuPhizo finally captured power in the NNC and became its President. With the capture of power by A. ZaphuPhizo, the older group of moderate leaders like VisarAngami and Satsuo were pushed into the background. A. ZaphuPhizo received much support from students and educated youths.^{xxxii} Although the NNC leadership came largely from the rising Naga middle class, it did not challenge the authority of traditional tribal councils. Instead, Phizo actively sought their support, which gave both him and the NNC immediate advantages. Although the NNC leadership came largely from the rising Naga middle class, it did not challenge the authority of traditional tribal councils.^{xxxiii}

Under Phizo's leadership the Naga National Council was transformed into militant political organization, wedded to the idea of a sovereign Nagaland^{xxxiv}. One concrete achievements of the Naga National Council, under the leadership of A.Z. Phizo, is the holding up of all political progress and development in the Naga hill district by organizing a boycott of the proposed Advisory Council for their district, which would have large measure of autonomy and self-government, including considerable judicial powers, for the present rule by the Deputy Commissioner^{xxxv}. The Naga tribes have expressed their fear that the new Indian Constitution does not give them the same autonomy as they have been enjoying and it is therefore not acceptable to them^{xxxvi}.

In the second week of January 1950, a delegation of Nagas came to New Delhi to have an interview with the Governor-General. They were not granted the interview and were advised to see the Governor of Assam for any representation they may have to make in the matter. After their return they addressed telegrams, declaring their independence, to the various Diplomatic Missions of the foreign countries in India and also to the president of the General Assembly and Secretary General of the United Nations. They also lodged a complaint against the Government of India in the United Nations. The complaint has not so far been included in the agenda either of the General Assembly or of the Security Council^{xxxvii}.

On the eve of India's becoming a republic, the Naga National Council in a telegram to the New Delhi bureau of The New York Times on 25th January, 1950, announced: "The Nagas will become a free nation. The Indian Constitution cannot bind the Nagas. An appeal is made to India to declare to the world on Republic Day that the Nagas will be given the freedom of choice to become independent^{xxxviii}." On 16th to 18th February, 1950, the Naga National council met at Kohima and passed a resolution. This resolution was also sent to the Governor of Assam:

1. No Naga should join the Assam Legislative Assembly or Indian Parliament representing the Nagas.
2. Resolved that anything that is autonomous in character will not be accepted by the Nagas.
3. The aspiration and inspiration of the Nagas to fight for freedom is through peace and goodwill not through bloodshed. The Nagas are strongly determined to fight constitutionally for the liberation of their mother-Nagaland^{xxxix}.

In addition to briefly taking about independence, at this point Nagas did not appear to put law into their hands or threaten the region's peace.

On 5th April, 1950, the president of the Naga National Council decided to establish a separate sovereign state. Naga National Council organized a conference at Kohima in May 14 and 15, 1950. The conference adopted a resolution stating that a plebiscite was held to decide whether the Naga Hill District was to ask for independence or would remain in the Indian Union. There is great unanimity among all tribals^{xl}.

In June 1950, R.V. Subramaniam, Secretary of the Government of Assam for the Excluded and Tribal Areas, was in Kohima and came to discuss the implementation of the machinery for the early set-up of the District and Regional Council in accordance with the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. But the Naga National Council denied this. The Governor invited a few leaders in Shillong for a meeting because the representative of the Naga National Council wanted to discuss the future of the Nagas with him. Nevertheless, prior to this meeting, Phizo on the behalf of the Nagas, declaring that they did not wish to be part of the Indian Constitution^{xli}.

The Chief Minister of Assam, who undertook a tour of the Naga Hills in the second week of December 1950, met Zapu Phizo. The latter was unwilling to discuss with the Chief Minister anything other than the establishment of the so-called sovereign Naga state. Towards the end of 1950, a meeting of the Naga National Council held at Kohima. A resolution was also passed suggesting that should the Government of India not grant the demands of the Nagas to form a separate Naga state, their case would be submitted to the U.N for considerations^{xlii}. On 16 May, 1951, Phizo conducted a plebiscite in an effort to disprove the slander that the desire for independence was held by only a few "educated" Nagas. The result, tabulated finally in March, 1952, was a 99 per cent vote for a sovereign, separate Naga state.^{xliii} In his plebiscite speech, Phizo asserted :

"The Nagas do not ask Independence from India; indeed, we do not want anything from India. India has nothing to give away to Nagaland. We are Independent and sovereign in our own national right. What we ask is not to interfere our administration but leave us alone and allow Nagaland, the national state of the Nagas, to continue to exist in peace and make progress without hindrance... As for the question of race, the less we talk the better. It is an undeniable fact that the Nagas are not Indian. We distinctly and unmistakably belong to the great Mongolian family. Strictly speaking, the world has come to know that the question of nationality is not a question of racial purity of a people. Also, the most important thing to consider is not merely one of politics but it is rather a problem of biology and psychology. To live together in peace different people must have the same attitude and the same feeling: there must be tolerance. Between the Indians and the Nagas, I am sad to say, these are lacking. Nagas found it impossible to tolerate the Indians. This is our experience in the last 70 years ever since our people came to know them. The Indians have no human feeling in them and their attitude is anti-social. There are, undoubtedly, many good Indians who understand us; but we do not live together with those good men... The Nagas have nothing to do with India. And the Indians have nothing to do with Nagaland. This is the exact position. Historically, Nagas and the Indians did not have a common tradition. Racially, Nagas belong to the Mongolian family while the Indians belong to entirely a different race of their own. Politically, neither the Nagas nor the Indians know each other, that is why trouble is just about to start. Legally, it is nonexistent. There is absolutely no like. Culturally, the Nagas and the Indians never had occasion to meet each other; and, there is nothing in common. Socially, the Indians abhor the Nagas and the Nagas despise the Indians. It is better to face fact now. Religiously, the Indians are Hindus; and the ancient Naga religion is "Animism" having nothing to do with Hindus. As it is, there is nothing in common between the Nagas and the Indians. The difference is too varied, the feeling is too deep, and the attitude is too wide and too malignant for the two nations ever to think to live together in peace much less to become "Indian citizens". The only way to live in peace is to live apart. Economically, Nagaland had never been dependent on India. All these have been so ever since and long before human history began. Nagas and Indians do not speak the language. Why, we do not eat even the same food. It was very good that the Indians never allow the Nagas to go near them because they hate our people."^{xliv}

The Nagas boycotted the elections held to constitute the district councils and subsequently also boycotted the 1952 general elections. Although required to return three MLAs to the Assam Assembly, not a single Naga stood for election.^{xlvi}

In July 1952, the Prime Minister met Phizo in Dibrugarh and made it clear to him that the Naga demand for independence could not be entertained by the Government. In December, 1952, Phizo went underground and attempted to reach the United Nations via Burma to taking his case to the U.N.^{xlvi} He was arrested in Burma while on his way to Pakistan.^{xlvi} After his release in June 1953, he again went underground and soon thereafter incited the Nagas to begin an armed and violent struggle against the Government of India. In 1953, the Prime Minister visited Kohima and told Naga leaders that the Government of India had consistently pursued a liberal policy and that any difficulties in implementing the Sixth Schedule could be remedied and its provisions modified to afford the maximum possible autonomy to the Nagas. After his release from the Burmese Jail in June 1953, he again went underground and soon thereafter incited the Nagas to begin an armed and violent struggle against the Government of India.^{xlvi} In 1953, Phizo formed an “Independent Naga Government” in the remote areas of the Tuensang Frontier Division, calling it the “Hongkin Government.” However, this attempt failed, and he was soon driven out of the Tuensang Frontier Division by the Administration.^{xlvi}

Phizo’s plan for violent agitation involved infiltrating his agents into the Tuensang Frontier Division, then a part of the North-East Frontier Agency. He organised several war-like tribes into units of Naga Home Guards and announced the formation of the “Naga Federal Government,” with a Cabinet of fifteen “Kilonsers” and a legislative body.¹ In 1954, the campaign of violence began in earnest, followed by several political murders of Naga Government servants and peace-loving villagers. Over time, these political killings—sometimes accompanied by the public display of the victims’ severed heads—became a regular feature of the hostile campaign of terror and revived tribal feuds that the Administration had long tried to control. Towards the end of 1954, Phizo himself toured the Tuensang Frontier Division and fomented unrest, which escalated on a large scale in the spring of 1955. In January 1956, Phizo again went underground and attempted to provoke the people of the Naga Hills District into a violent campaign, employing brutal methods—including murder and torture—against Nagas who opposed his extreme policies.^{li}

Meanwhile, several of his more responsible associates had resigned from the Naga National Council in September 1955 and formed a Liberal Party committed to seeking a satisfactory solution through peaceful negotiation. The leader of this party, Sakhrie, formerly an associate of Phizo, was kidnapped, tortured, and murdered under Phizo’s direction in January 1956.

From 1952 to 1956, Phizo remained engaged in organising an armed insurgency. The institutional foundations of Naga nationalism were consolidated during the mid-1950s. The Naga Supreme Court was established on 4 July 1954, marking the emergence of an organised judicial authority.^{lii} Phizo drafted the “Constitution” of “Independent Nagaland,” which was approved at an All-Naga Tribes meeting held at Sanis in March 1956, which provided a formal political framework for the emerging Naga polity. Under this constitution, he appointed a “Head of State,” a “Parliament” of 100 members, and a “Cabinet” of 15 “Ministers.” On 22 March 1956, he officially declared Nagaland an independent state. Immediately after this declaration, Phizo’s “Naga Home Guards” clashed with Indian security forces, while Phizo himself remained in hiding with his followers, successfully evading arrest. The failure of the Naga Home Guards to expel the security forces and the subsequent success of military operations made Phizo increasingly restless.^{lii}

Even during this phase of consolidation, several alternative voices within the movement were either suppressed or pushed to the margins. Phizo’s growing emphasis on violence led to a split within the Naga National Council.^{liv} A section of the Naga National

Council had revolted against Phizo's extremism under the moderate leadership of Sakhrie, who had challenged the efficacy of violent methods and had favoured giving up the demand for complete independence. Instead, he had appeared to advocate a more modest claim for Naga autonomy under the Central Government.^{lv} These disagreements deeply agitated Phizo. After holding several meetings with his core followers, he is believed to have issued instructions to eliminate Sakhrie and Jasokie. Consequently, on the night of 16–19 January 1956, a group of his armed supporters kidnapped Sakhrie and later killed him.^{lvi} Jasokie, the other intended target, managed to escape and later became a Minister in the State Government of Nagaland. Apart from offences against the State, Phizo bears clear responsibility for the deaths of many innocent villagers resulting from the violence and disturbances initiated under his leadership. His involvement in these acts establishes an unmistakable criminal liability. A case is pending against Phizo for conspiracy to murder Sakhrie. A warrant of arrest was issued against him in 1956, and this warrant remains in force.^{lvii}

By the middle of 1957, Phizo's position in the Naga Hills had become rather weak. In November 1957, he escaped to East Pakistan, reportedly carrying about one lakh rupees in cash. He stayed in Dacca for nearly two years and then proceeded to Karachi. In June 1960, he was flown to London via Zurich. He arrived in London from Zurich in June 1960 on a San Salvador passport.^{lviii} After a year's residence he applied for U.K. citizenship and was registered as a citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies on the basis of his Indian nationality. Phizo travelled to the United Kingdom as a necessary step toward reaching New York, where he intended to petition the United Nations to intervene in the intensifying conflict and to restrain what he regarded as India's acts of aggression against Nagaland. During this period, India had effectively isolated Nagaland from external contact, rendering international communication extremely difficult. The Naga people entrusted him with the task of establishing connections with the Western world, as well as with China, Burma, and any other actors willing to hear the Naga case. With the NFG already functioning within Nagaland, and as the President of the NNC, he assumed primary responsibility for managing the organisation's external and diplomatic affairs.^{lix}

By 1957, tensions within the Naga movement had escalated sharply. A series of killings targeting moderate Naga leaders, along with the Naga Federal Government's aggressive and coercive collection of taxes from villages, led to a deep rift. In response, the remaining leaders of the Naga National Council like T. N. Angami, ShiluAo, ImlongkibaAo, and LongriAo—publicly distanced them from Phizo's leadership. Seeking a peaceful resolution, they established the Naga People's Convention (NPC) to engage directly with the Government of India and explore possibilities for restoring stability in Nagaland.^{lx} As a result of these efforts three Naga People's Convention (NPC) was held from 1957 to 1959. The Naga Hills District of Assam and Tuensang area were formed into a separate administrative unit on December 1, 1957.^{lxi} The Nagas, however, were not satisfied. They wanted a separate Statehood for Nagaland. The Third Naga Peoples' Convention convened at Mokokchung in October 1959 and prepared a 16-point draft memorandum proposing the constitution of a separate state within the Indian Union to be called "Nagaland," with a Governor, an administrative secretariat headed by a Chief Secretary, a Council of Ministers and a Legislative Assembly.^{lxii}

A Naga delegation representing the main tribes gave a 16-point memorandum to Mr. Nehru who announced on August 1, 1960, the Union Government's decision to set up a new State comprising the Naga Hills and Tuensang. The Governor of Assam was concurrently made the Governor of Nagaland and the jurisdiction of the Assam High Court was extended to it. An Interim Body was set up on February 18, 1961, with 42 representatives from every Naga tribe to assist and advise the Governor. A five-member Executive Council, headed by Mr. ShiluAo,

was formed to carry on day-to-day administration.^{lxiii} The Prime Minister introduced in the Lok Sabha on August 28, 1962 two Bills to provide for the formation of Nagaland.^{lxiv} The full statehood of Nagaland came into being on September 4, 1962 by the 13th amendment of the Indian constitution.^{lxv} The new State of Nagaland was inaugurated at Kohima by the President, and the first five-member caretaker ministry, headed by Shri ShiluAo, was administered the oath of office on 1 December 1963.^{lxvi}

A.Z. Phizo consistently portrayed the Nagas as an inherently sovereign people whose political identity predated the formation of the Indian state. In an interview recorded in London in 1985, he asserted that “Nagas are independent peoples” and accused India of deceiving uninformed Naga signatories during the negotiations of 1960, thereby undermining the legitimacy of statehood. Phizo argued that the agreement was made without authentic Naga representation and thus “destroyed the cause of the Nagas.”^{lxvii} His position is further elaborated in later writings, where he criticized Nehru’s government for misjudging Naga sentiment and attempting to impose control through “divide and rule” policies. As Steyn observes, Phizo viewed the creation of Nagaland state not as a political solution but as an act that deepened nationalist resolve by exposing the gap between popular Naga aspirations and Indian administrative arrangements.^{lxviii}

The creation of the state of Nagaland marked a significant attempt to safeguard Naga ethnic identity, yet it failed to satisfy extremist factions who remained committed to armed struggle for complete independence. Their continued insurgency prompted the formation of the Church-led Peace Mission in 1964, which facilitated a tripartite dialogue resulting in a ceasefire agreement on 6 September. However, the ceasefire collapsed in 1966 due to disagreements over sovereignty. Although temporary truces followed, the Government of India formally terminated negotiations in 1972 and declared the Naga National Council (NNC) an unlawful body. Civil society initiatives nevertheless resumed peace efforts, culminating in the 1975 Shillong Accord, which was subsequently rejected by the core NNC leadership. According to Pieter Steyn, Phizo interpreted the 1975 Shillong Accord not as a compromise but as a development that further consolidated Naga nationalism. He believed the agreement sharpened the distinction between assimilation into India and the pursuit of independent Naga nationhood, insisting that “true Nagas” would always reject incorporation into the Indian state.^{lxix}

ImkongmerenAo, a prominent Naga leader, asserted that no durable solution to the Naga political question could be achieved without Phizo’s participation or approval. He perceived the 1975 Shillong Accord as fundamentally flawed because key underground factions were excluded from the negotiations, making its implementation inherently fragile. Misra notes that Imkongmeren’s restrained comments nevertheless revealed clear dissatisfaction with the agreement’s legitimacy and representation. Subsequent developments, he observes, confirmed these concerns, as the Accord failed to produce lasting peace in Nagaland.^{lxx}

During this period, the NNC became entangled in a broader regional revolutionary movement and received military training in Yunnan, China, contributing to internal ideological fragmentation. This culminated in a major split in 1980, producing the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), led by ThuingalengMuivah, IsakChishiSwu, S.S. Khaplang, and others, who advocated an armed, class-based struggle for independence. According to Steyn’s account, Phizo interpreted the post-Shillong Accord fragmentation within the Naga National Council (NNC) as a morally and politically divisive development. He believed that the formation of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) by ThuingalengMuivah and IsakChishiSwu stemmed from their ideological shift toward Chinese political thought and their rejection of both the NNC and Christianity as guiding principles. Phizo maintained that their accusations—particularly the charge that he tacitly supported the Shillong Accord—were unfounded and motivated by an attempt to delegitimize his leadership. Despite the flurry of

correspondence between them, he viewed the NSCN's approach as lacking a genuine commitment to unity. Steyn notes that Phizo regarded the NNC and the NFG as the only legitimate representatives of a "Free Nagaland," asserting that even the Tangkhul and Sema communities, from which Muivah and Swu respectively hailed, did not endorse the new organisation.^{lxxi}

Further ideological divergence caused another division in 1988, giving rise to the NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K), each pursuing different territorial visions for a sovereign Naga homeland. After Z. Phizo's death in 1990, additional factional splits emerged over issues of leadership and legitimacy, further complicating the Naga nationalist movement.

Conclusion

The evolution of the Naga Movement between 1947 and 1990 cannot be understood without recognising the central, often polarising, role of AngamiZapuPhizo. His leadership brought clarity, direction, and a distinctive ideological framework to a movement emerging from the uncertainties of decolonisation and the rapid consolidation of the Indian nation-state. His demand on absolute sovereignty, expressed in the form of the 1951 plebiscite, the reform of the Naga National Council (NNC) and his rejection of intermediary political deals formed the intellectual and emotional base of modern Naga nationalism. He transformed a loose network of tribal political assertions into a structured national movement with a shared narrative of identity, history, and aspiration. ImkongmerenAo, one of the leading figures of Naga politics, viewed A.Z. Phizo as the Father of Naga Nationalism.^{lxxii}

However, Phizo's leadership was defined as much by its limitations as by its strengths. His uncompromising political stance strengthened the moral resolve of many Nagas, but it also narrowed the space for negotiation, deepened mistrust between the NNC and the Indian state, and contributed to cycles of violence. His prolonged exile in London ensured international visibility but simultaneously weakened his capacity to mediate emerging internal differences. The fragmentation of the NNC in the 1960s and 1970s—culminating in the rise of competing nationalist groups—reveals the inherent tension between charismatic, centralised leadership and the complex social mosaic of Naga society.

Despite these challenges, Phizo's impact remains enduring. He provided the ideological vocabulary through which generations of Nagas have articulated their aspirations. His framing of nationalism in terms of history, culture, and sovereign identity continues to shape political discourse not only in Nagaland but across the wider Northeast. The Naga Movement of the post-Phizo era—marked by ceasefire negotiations, peace talks, and a more diverse set of political actors—still operates in the shadow of the principles he established. After all, the problem with the legacy of Phizo is that he served as both a unifying leader of Nagas by a stronger vision and, at the same time, was the one who caused the splits that complicated the implementation of the said vision. Understanding his leadership thus offers valuable insight into the broader dilemmas of ethnic nationalism, indigenous rights, and postcolonial state-building in South Asia. The story of the Naga Movement from 1947 to 1990 is, in many ways, the story of Phizo himself—his convictions, his choices, his influence, and the enduring questions he left behind. and the open questions that he had left behind.

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