

Understanding the peace pact with ULFA

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The pro-talks faction of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) signed a tripartite peace deal with the Centre and the Assam government on December 29, 2023. The memorandum of settlement has several clauses for accelerating the State's development and safeguarding the land and political rights of indigenous communities but a worry remains in the form of the anti-talks faction headed by Paresh Baruah.

How was the ULFA formed?

The ULFA is a by-product of the anti-foreigners Assam Agitation that began in 1979 and ended with the signing of the Assam Accord in August 1985. The fear that the Assamese and other indigenous communities would be pushed out of their own backyard by "illegal immigrants" (people from Bangladesh) one day had triggered the agitation. While social organisations and students' bodies chose the path of agitation, a group of radicals, including Arabinda Rajkhowa, Anup Chetia, and Paresh Baruah formed the ULFA on April 7, 1979, to launch an armed struggle with the objective of establishing a sovereign Assam. The group took a decade to recruit and train its members in Myanmar, China, and Pakistan before striking with a series of abductions and executions. The government responded in 1990 with an offensive codenamed Operation Bajrang and banned the ULFA. Assam was declared a disturbed area with the imposition of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act.

When did the peace process start?

Counter-insurgency operations led to the arrest of 1,221 ULFA members in the early 1990s. In 1992, a group of ULFA members decided to surrender and engage in dialogue with the government. Collectively, they came to be known as SULFA or Surrendered ULFA who were later allegedly used by the State forces to help identify and execute hardliners and members of their families in what came to be known as "secret killings". With support from terror groups such as Harkat-ul-Jihad-e-Islami and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, the ULFA hardliners set up camps in Bangladesh and Bhutan. A military offensive by Bhutan in 2003 and the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League's return to power in Bangladesh in 2009 saw most of the ULFA members being flushed out from these countries. In 2005, the ULFA raised hopes of peace when it formed an 11-member People's Consultative Group only to backtrack and unleash a fresh phase of terror. After falling in the net of the security forces in India in 2009, the leaders of the Rajkhowa-led faction signed a ceasefire agreement with the Centre in September 2011. Opposed to talks, Baruah "expelled" Rajkhowa from the ULFA in 2012. In April 2013, the anti-talks group was renamed ULFA (Independent). The pro-talks group signed the peace accord 12 years after the agreement to suspend subversive operations.

What does the peace accord offer?

According to the memorandum of settlement, the ULFA has agreed to renounce violence, disarm, disband the armed organisation, vacate their occupied camps, and participate in peaceful democratic process established by the law. Marking a shift toward non-violence, it aims to ensure the integrity of the country contrary to what the ULFA had initially demanded. The Ministry of Home Affairs will make a time-bound programme to fulfil the demands of the outfit and a committee would be formed for its monitoring. The pact underlines a comprehensive package entailing an investment of ₹1.5 lakh crore for the all-round development of Assam. The most significant part of the accord is the commitment to address the political demands of the ULFA.

These include maintaining the territorial integrity of Assam through amicable settlement of boundary disputes with neighbouring States in the Northeast and continuation of the "guidelines

