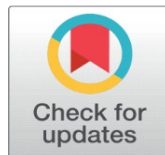


ASSAM MOVEMENT: ITS DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT AND CONSEQUENCES

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.3314](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.3314)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

The organized groups of people united in order to achieve some concrete goals, which are commonly perceived by their various members, generally characterize social movements as uninstitutionalized collective action. The members are trying to bring about changes in society, politics or economics of the national state. A feeling of alienation, deprivation or inequality drives them to move away from it. However, it is important to point out that these movements are not simply mobilisers of resources but they also have a catalytic role in society's socio-political transformation. It is found that there are as many different analyses available in today's studies of social movements as there are diverse and complex movements within them. According to some scholars, social movements unfold itself in a cyclical fashion (both ideologically and socio-politically) and also that their emergence occurs almost in tandem with the larger socio-political crisis in a given society.

Keywords:

1. INTRODUCTION

The organized groups of people united in order to achieve some concrete goals, which are commonly perceived by their various members, generally characterize social movements as uninstitutionalized collective action. The members are trying to bring about changes in society, politics or economics of the national state. A feeling of alienation, deprivation or inequality drives them to move away from it. However, it is important to point out that these movements are not simply mobilisers of resources but they also have a catalytic role in society's socio-political transformation. It is found that there are as many different analyses available in today's studies of social movements as there are diverse and complex movements within them. According to some scholars, social movements unfold itself in a cyclical fashion (both ideologically and socio-politically) and also that their emergence occurs almost in tandem with the larger socio-political crisis in a given society.

Given this insight, it is easy to understand the social context and political reasoning behind a number of important movements, such as the Arab Uprising in West Asia, the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States, Black Movement in United States, Me Too Movement in New York and of course the indigenous movement in Latin America. Social movements could also be seen as directed against prevailing social norms which lead to the persistence of social inequalities among people causing their eventual social exclusion in a given society.

Ghanyasham Sham in his book *"Social Movements in India: A Review of Literature"*¹ traces the evolution of social movements in India, dating back to the pre-independence era. By doing so he creates a framework for understanding the roots and development of various movements. The historical context is crucial in comprehending the dynamics of contemporary movements and their socio-political implications. He highlights the diversity and heterogeneity of social movements in India. India's vast geographical and cultural landscape has given rise to a multitude of movements, each with its unique goals, ideologies, and strategies.

India is a land of multiple languages, cultures, and traditions, and this diversity is reflected in the wide array of social movements that have arisen. From the freedom struggle to contemporary movements related to environmental issues, women's rights, and caste-based inequalities, India has witnessed a range of social movements that reflect the country's complex sociopolitical fabric. When the rising aspirations of the people are not adequately met by the existing political system which is rigid and incompetent, as a result different social movements are occurred. In that sense, Assam is not different from the mainstream India. In Assam people have witnessed several social movements, such as the language Movement of 1960's, the Assam movement of 1980's and other such social movements fought on different burning issues have heavily impinged on the system of Governance in the State.

Assam movement as a social movement did not begin to spread immediately. The East India Company annexed the lower Assam region in 1826, and attempted to establish an empire thorough out Upper Assam. They gave over the administration of Assam to Bengal's Presidency after it did not provide any benefits for them. From 1826 to 1873, Assam was administered as a part of Bengal.

In addition to the tea industry and the jute trade, the British establishment has established new industrial enterprises in Assam. There was a need for regular labour supply in these new enterprises. Thousands of workers from Bihar, Chotanagpur, Uttar Pradesh and Madras have been recruited annually, but most of them have not returned. The peasants of East Bengal, 85 to 90 percent of who were Muslims, were also a major source of migration. In the works of Sandhya Barua, she observes the apprehension of the Assamese in these times, but she also notes that the process of assimilation of these migrant groups was very slow, and that they wanted to be as good as the Assamese in the valley. In settling this more, the United Kingdom administration's straightforward approach. immigrants in the land of Assam was evident as labour legislation related to the recruitment of workers brought in to Assam, their journey to the designated districts and their status in the course of their contract work It was passed at the beginning of 1863.

The immigrants undoubtedly contributed to the economy of Assam by bringing large areas of waste land to cultivation, but their increasing numbers have made the Assamese concerned with their position in society and politics. It was only in the 1930s and 1940s, when elections were introduced, that these waves of immigrants created political unrest. Weiner describes at this junction the numerically strong Bengali Muslims had won substantial control over the State Government and attempted to use their position to facilitate further migration of Bengali Muslims from East Bengal.

1.1. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

- The objectives of the paper
- To understand the demographic context of Assam Movement,
- To analyse the consequences of Assam Movement in the socio-political scenario of Assam.

2. METHODOLOGY OF THE PAPER

The research is analytical in nature. Secondary sources of Data collection is applied in the paper. Secondary sources of the research are the books, journals, articles, Governmental and Non-Governmental reports and other possible sources.

2.1. THE DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT BEHIND THE ASSAM MOVEMENT

However these areas eventually began to produce their own youth equipped with modern education. These ambitious youth grew eager for a share in the opportunities in their own land, which they were being snatched away by

¹Ghanshyam Shah, (2004), *Social Movements in India: A Review of Literature*, New Delhi: Sage Publications

the Bengalis. They attempted to redress the balance by stressing that their own languages be recognized as the languages of administration and law. Bengali supremacy was challenged by the patriotism for languages like Assamese, Oriya and Bihari. In 1852, Assamese nationalist Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan petitioned to Moffat Mills against instruction in the vernacular schools being imparted in foreign language that is Bengali.

Assam lagged behind many parts of India during the medieval times. Low level of economic development, geographical inconvenience and the isolationist policy of the Ahom monarchy were some of the causes for its relative backwardness which could not be recovered even with the downfall of the feudal order. The absence of native capitalist in Assam, was the main reason why Marwari merchants were successful in setting up commercial monopoly who had followed the British into Assam and diligently tapped the few opportunities for moneymaking opened by the British, Like money lending, supplying provisions to the tea gardens, procuring mustard oil and jute for the market outside Assam., and the meeting demand for new cheap and mass produced household implements. This was objected to by Maniram Dewan in his memorandum to A. J Moffatt Mills, during the latter's visit to the province in 1853, under the revenue settlement of Military officers, while a number of respectable Assamese are out of employ, the inhabitants of Marwar and Bengalis from sylhet have been appointed to Mouzadarships and for us respectable Assamese to become the tenets of such foreigners is a source of deep notification.

The significant wave of immigration to Assam starts shortly before the middle of 19th century when the British created tea plantation in hill Areas. However, Weiner recounts that the largest influx took place after the 1900 when Bengali Muslims moved into the Brahmaputra Valley from East Bengal.

These waves of immigrants however did not create political uproar until the 1930's and the 1940's when electoral politics was introduced. Weiner describes at this junction the numerically strong Bengali Muslims had won substantial control over the State Government and attempted to use their position to facilitate further migration of Bengali Muslims from East Bengal. To strengthen their political position and then finally to press for the incorporation of Assam into the proposed Muslim Majority State of Pakistan, The British rejected this demand of the Muslim League, but agreed to partition Assam by transferring Sylhet District to Pakistan. Once sylhet was removed from Assam, the Bengali Muslims lost their political grip on the State mechanism.

After Independence, the Assamese, particularly the Assamese Hindu middle class won control over the Government of the newly formed state of independent India. They used that control to assert the paramount of Assamese cultural identity and to seek economic and social equality in relation to the Bengali Hindu Middle classes – their rivals for jobs in the administrative services, in the professions, and in the private sector. The Assamese dominated Government of Assam made Assamese the official language of the State and established a policy of giving preference to “Sons of the Soil” in employment in the State Administrative services; appointed Assamese teachers in the Schools; and presented for the use of Assamese as the medium of instruction in schools, colleges, and universities. In this campaign to assert their culture and improve the employment opportunities of the Assamese middle classes, the Assamese won the support of two migrant communities, the tea plantation laborers from Bihar and the Bengali Muslims.

After partition, Bengali Muslims turned to the State Government for protection as Muslims did elsewhere in India. Many feared expulsion to East Pakistan, especially after the passage of the immigrant Expulsion from Assam Act by India's Parliament in 1950. This Act, combined with an act passed by the Assam Legislature declaring squatter settlements illegal, led many Bengali Muslims to fear that they could be removed from lands illegally held or expelled from the country. In an effort to dissuade the Assamese from taking this steps, Bengali Muslims sided with the Assamese on issues that mattered to them, by declaring their mother tongue as Assamese, accepting the establishment of primary and secondary schools in Assamese, supporting the Government against Bengali Hindus on the controversial issue of an official language for the State and for the University and casting their votes for congress. This coalition of the Assamese and the Bengali Muslims remained till 1977. It was in 1978 that the sudden death of Hiralal Patwari necessitated by – election in the Mangaldoi Constituency. The process of the Election drew public attention to a rapid expansion of the number of voters since the previous elections two years earlier. The influx became politically alarming when the Election Commissioner reported the unexpected large increase in the electoral rolls. Weiner considers realization of this demographic transformation at this junction as the impetus that launched the Assam movement.

2.2. ANTI-FOREIGNERS MOVEMENT OR ASSAM MOVEMENT AND ASSAM ACCORD

The unabated influx of the foreign nationals has been one of the complex and major challenges faced by the country since independence. Though it is said that it is a major problem of India but now a days it is more vulnerable for the people residing in North-East India especially in Assam. It has been universally accepted that the history of migration is as old as human civilization. From the past the migration from one form to another form has been taking place across the country and continent in the quest of bread-butter and employment. In fact migration has been considered as one of the major factor for determining the shape and destiny of a particular society. In view of this increasing influx of illegal migrants particularly from Bangladesh, the Assamese people demanded their deportation.

The language movement of 1960's, the civil disturbances in the State and the problem of illegal migration gave birth to the one of the strong student and civil organization namely All Assam Student's Union (AASU). In the year 1967 the AASU was formed. In the website of AASU, according to their constitution, they have highlighted their objective as *"To form an organization to establish social, economic and political justice, freedom of thought, equal status, respect for individuals and national unity and dedication towards the establishment of brotherhood and unite the entire community irrespective of caste, creed and region"*.²

AASU launched the Assam movement or Anti-foreigner movement in the year 1979. AASU along with the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) demanded the detection and deportation of the illegal migrants. The movement developed a progress of protests and demonstration to compel the Government to identify and expel illegal migrants. The agitation progress was largely non-violent, but the Neillie Massacre was a case of extreme violence.³ In the year 1979, AASU and AAGSP combine called for the closure of all educational institutes and picketing in State and Central Government offices. Mass picketing was arranged in front of all polling offices where candidates' nomination could be filed. In that time candidates are barred from filing candidature. In the year 1983 the Assam Movement was on full swing. AASU led the six years movement against the illegal migrants from Bangladesh. AASU during the time of movement tried to pressurize the State Government led by Hiteshwar Saikia by many ways. The AASU accused the State Government was responsible for the illegal influence in Assam.

The AASU and AAGSP had protested strongly against the move by the *"Illegal"* State Government to bring back without any verification 20,000 refugees from West Bengal. The organization said that it was Government's strategy to legalize the illegal entrants to the State to infiltrate the vote-bank politics of the ruling party. In this time AASU for this reason was supposed to take the programs of obstructing ministers and MLA's from performing their duties. Many Assam Bandh programs were taken against the Government. They took movement against the imposition of an illegal Government on the people through an illegal election by the Central Government instead of finding a solution to the foreigners issue demanded by the people for the last four years. The agitation is not only against illegal foreigners but the people of Assam had come to realize that the mass-migrations from not only Bangladesh but also from other provinces of India were the root cause of increasing population and creating many issues in the socio-political discourse of Assam. As such the agitation initially was against outsiders and not just foreigners. Later, in order to bring the agitation under the constitutional framework of the India, the issue of foreigners took over.

The Congress Party led by Mrs. Indira Gandhi in the Centre in the year 1980, AASU wrote a letter to the Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi to draw her attention on the foreigners' issue of Assam. They have submitted some broad proposals for detecting and deporting the foreigners from Assam. Some of the proposals are as follows-

- Updation of NRC of 1951,
- Cross checking of electoral rolls with the updated NRC,
- Demarcation of the Indo-Bangladesh border and creation of a free uninhabited Belt,
- Issuing of Identity cards throughout the North-East region,
- Strict maintenance of Birth and Death Register at all block and village levels,
- Raise the additional armed Police battalions and River Police Force with a view to checking infiltration.⁴

²Nilim Akash Kashyap (2014), *AASU-Swapna: Duswapna: Itihaax*, Guwahati: Assam Publishing Company, p. 09.

³ Monirul Hussain(), Assam Movement.

⁴B. L. Abbi ed. (1993), *Northeast- region: problems and prospects of development*, Chandigarh. P. 283.

Following this letter, the members of AASU was invited for meeting by the Prime Minister of India Mrs. Indira Gandhi. After several discussions, they come to a decision. Firstly, the parliament passed the “*Illegal Migrant Act*” in Oct, 1983 and began to implement in Assam. Negotiations took place between the Government and AASU-AAGSP during the later parts of 1984 and first part of the year 1985. In May, 1985, formal talks started and the Home Secretary led the Central Government team. Several rounds of talks took place during May, June and July, 1985. Initially the Assam coalition wanted immigrants from the 1961-1971 waves to be disfranchised and dispersed to other areas of the country. On August 15, 1985, the Historic Assam accord was signed between the Leaders of AASU and the Government of India.

3. THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE MASSIVE MOVEMENT:

Even in British Colonial days when East-Bengal was integral part of India, a number of land-hungry people from East Bengal trekked into Assam.⁵ Today, the influx has become a grand political issue in the State. In 1950s, the problem of influx from East Pakistan had assumed alarmingly large proportions. The factor underlying the political turmoil is the demographic transformation of the frontier region, which includes the present State of Assam as well as other smaller States in North Eastern region of India, through the large-scale immigration from many parts of the subcontinent, but mostly from the neighboring areas of East Bengal; over the decades.⁶ *The Immigrants’ Expulsion from Assam Act* (Act X of 1950) was passed and implemented to some extent but the promise made by centre did not work out. The Nehru-Liaquat pact of December 1950 was not helpful for Assam. Even it took back three lakhs of Muslims into Assam who were supposed to have left the western parts of Assam and entered East Pakistan.⁷ The flow of nationals from East Pakistan continued unabated.

Centre acknowledged the gravity of the problem of Non-Citizens in Assam and felt that the infiltration should be stopped and effectively dealt with. Prime Minister of India Mrs. Indira Gandhi expressed her sympathy with the major demands of Assam Agitation and assured measures to protect the cultural identity of Assam. She conceded five points out of the AASU’s (All Assam Students Union) eight point memorandum. Such as- a) the foreign nationals must be detected and deported from the country, b) the names of foreign nationals must be removed from the electoral rolls before any fresh election is held, c) the inclusion of foreign nationals in electoral rolls should be made impossible through the proper election machinery, d) India’s border must be fully protected against infiltration and e) Indian voters in Assam should be issued identity cards with photo cards.⁸

1) Assam Accord

The members of AASU were invited for meeting by the Prime Minister of India Mrs. Indira Gandhi. After several discussions, they come to a decision. Firstly, the parliament passed the “*Illegal Migrant Act*” in Oct, 1983 and began to implement in Assam. Negotiations took place between the Government and AASU-AAGSP during the later parts of 1984 and first part of the year 1985. In May, 1985, formal talks started and the Home Secretary led the Central Government team. Several rounds of talks took place during May, June and July, 1985. On August 15, 1985, the Historic Assam accord was signed between the Leaders of AASU and the Government of India.

2) The IM(DT) Act

The Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act was the state’s response to the Assam movement. The IM(DT) Act, 1983 was to provide for the establishment of tribunals for the determination, in a fair manner, of the question whether a person is an illegal migrant to enable the central government to expel illegal migrants from India and for matters connected therewith. The Act set up tribunals in each district, which are to be presided over by retired district/additional district judges. Congress (I) ruled both at the centre and in Assam at the time of its formulation. The parliament passed the Act to address the issue raised by the Assam movement, i.e., the identification and deportation of illegal foreigners from Assam.

⁵ H.K Barpujari, (1998), *North-East India: Problems, Policies and Prospects- since Independence*, Guwahati: Spectrum Publications. P. 30.

⁶ Sanjib Baruah “*Immigration, ethnic conflict and political turmoil-Assam 1979-1985*”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 26, No. 11 (Nov., 1986), p. 1187.

⁷ B. L. Abbi ed. (1993), *Northeast- region: problems and prospects of development*, Chandigarh. Pp. 277-278.

⁸ Ibid, P. 283.

3) Form of Regional Political Party:

Asom Gana Parishad is a political party in the state of Assam, India. The AGP was formed following the historic Assam Accord of 1985 and formally launched at the Golaghat Convention held from 13 to 14 October 1985 in Golaghat, which also allowed Prafulla Kumar Mahanta who was the youngest chief minister of the state to be elected.

4) Emergence of new political leaders:

It was found that the most prominent leader of that time comes out from the movement such as Mr. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, Mr. Bhriku Kumar Phukan, Mr. Brindaban Goswami, Mr. Biraj Kumar Sarma, Mr. Atul Borah (Present Cabinet Minister, Government of Assam), etc. They were the front ranking leader of the six years long Assam Movement. Later they became political leader and formed Political Party as Asom Gana Parishad. As a result of the movement they are able to get enormous support and trust from the people and further by contesting election they form the Government.

5) National Register of Citizens:

In Delhi Talks of 16th October, 1980 where the leaders of AASU and AAGSP (All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad) said their willingness to consider accepting the entrants coming between 1951 and 1961 if the Government agreed to deport those who migrated between 1961 and 1971. The leaders sought to refer the whole issue to National Register of Citizens 1951 (NRC).

Since 1979, the Assam movement started by two political organization namely, All Assam Students Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP). In this period, the emergence of pressure groups in Assam and North-Eastern States created pressure upon the Government and other political parties of those respective states. But it seemed that the effort of Central Government to stabilize the North-East region destabilized the region even more. Its consequences emerged in the form of severe difficulties in the North-Eastern part, especially in Assam.

In Assam the problem of foreign nationals or illegal migration has got special attention in the socio-political milieu of Assam. There was an alarming situation created by the unabated infiltration from the neighboring countries particularly from Bangladesh. The problem has started from the days of independence of India. It agitates the minds of the people of North-East region and the situation becomes so much serious that it creates a feeling of fear psychosis in the minds of every indigenous people. The political parties in a sense play a crucial role towards the foreigners to get the maximum votes for their support in the election. The "Vote Bank" politics of the political parties encourages the influx of illegal migrants into Assam. The threat to the territorial integrity poses by the influx of the foreign nationals can be understood from the following table.

Table: 1

Percentage of increase population per decade: Assam and India

Year	Population of Assam	Percentage of increase in Assam	Percentage of increase in India
1951	8,028,856	..	..
1961	10,837,329	34.98%	21.64%
1971	14,625,152	34.95%	24.80%

Source: Letter to the Prime Minister from Prafulla Mahanta (President of AASU), 1980.

The number of foreign nationals has become explosive in Assam. Therefore the battle of detection and deportation of foreign nationals has started. Not only AASU and AAGSP fought against it but the whole people of Assam give their support to these pressure groups. They also focused on the necessity of NRC updation in Assam. The first and foremost proposal of AASU to the Government of India is to

- 1) The National Register of Citizens (NRC) of 1951 should be made up to date by including the additions to the number of each family since the of the compilation of the Register and
- 2) The comparison of NRC with the successive electoral rolls since 1952 may also be helpful in making up to date.⁹

⁹Prafulla Mahanta, (1982), *The Struggle in Assam: Foreigners vs. Indian citizens* in Pankaj Thakur's (ed) book *India's NorthEast, A multi-faceted View*, Pp. 249-267. Prakash Publishing House, Tinsukia, Assam, India. P. 262.

6) The Citizenship (Registration of Citizen& Issue Of National Identity Cards) Rules, 2003:

The Government of India has made the rules for preparation of National Register of Indian Citizen in the State of Assam in accordance with the Citizenship Act Of 1955.¹⁰

7) The Citizenship Rules, 2009:

Another legal provision taken by the Government is to make citizenship rules in accordance with the Citizenship Act 1955. The Central Government had made rules in exercise of powers conferred by Section 18 of Citizenship Act, 1955 in respect of (a) Application for Citizenship, (b) Issue of certificates of Citizenship and maintenance of Registers and connected papers. (c) Provisions as to citizenship of India for persons covered by Assam Accord. (d) Renunciation and deprivation of Citizenship of India. These rules have repealed the earlier citizenship rules, 1956.¹¹

8) Focus on Border Security:

The Accord mandated measures like fencing the Indo-Bangladesh border and improving border management, although implementation has been inconsistent.

9) Created Ethnic Tensions:

The movement exacerbated ethnic divisions, especially between Assamese people and Bengali-speaking migrants, leading to episodes of violence and mistrust.

10)Nellie Massacre (1983):

One of the most tragic consequences was the Nellie massacre, where over 2,000 Bengali Muslim villagers were killed during the height of the movement. This remains a dark chapter in Assam's history.

11)Demographic Anxiety:

The fear of losing cultural and linguistic identity due to demographic changes became a dominant sentiment among the Assamese population.

12)Impact on Development:

The prolonged agitation disrupted the economy of Assam, with strikes and blockades affecting tea, oil, and transportation industries.

13)Migration and Labor Shortages:

The tension led to the exodus of migrant workers, creating labor shortages in sectors like agriculture and construction.

14)Cultural Revival:

The movement led to a resurgence of interest in Assamese culture, language, and traditions, with policies to protect and promote the Assamese identity.

15)Alienation of Minorities:

Communities like Bengali Hindus, Bengali Muslims, and other migrants often felt alienated and targeted, impacting social harmony.

16)Debate on Illegal Immigration:

The Assam Movement brought the issue of illegal immigration into the national spotlight, influencing immigration policies across India.

17)Assamese as the Classical Language of Assam:

The Assam Accord, signed in 1985, was a landmark agreement between the Government of India and the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), which aimed to address issues stemming from the Assam Movement. This movement, which began in the late 1970s, primarily sought to curb illegal immigration into Assam and protect the rights of indigenous people, including their linguistic and cultural heritage.

The Assam Accord did not directly address the issue of Assamese being recognized as a classical language, as it was signed long before the classical language status was granted in 2008. However, the Assam Accord laid the foundation for the protection of Assamese language and culture through several key provisions:

¹⁰Ibid, p. 262.

¹¹Ibid, p. 262.

- 1) **Language of the State:** The Assam Accord reaffirmed Assamese as the official language of the state of Assam, thereby ensuring its primacy in governance, education, and administration.
- 2) **Protection of Assamese-speaking People:** The Assam Accord aimed to protect the linguistic and cultural rights of Assamese-speaking people, which was a major concern for the indigenous population during the Assam Movement. This played a significant role in strengthening the demand for the protection and promotion of Assamese as the state's dominant language.

While the Assam Accord doesn't specifically mention the classical language status of Assamese, the accord's emphasis on the preservation of Assamese culture and language resonates with the later move to grant it classical language status. The Accord's goal of safeguarding the linguistic identity of the indigenous Assamese people has contributed to a broader sense of pride and recognition for the Assamese language, culminating in its official classical status. Assam Accord itself does not directly mention the classical language status of Assamese, its provisions laid the groundwork for the recognition of Assamese as the cultural and linguistic backbone of Assam. The granting of classical language status further reinforced the state's commitment to preserving and promoting Assamese as a vital part of its identity.

In conclusion, while the Assam Movement achieved some of its objectives, such as the Assam Accord, it left a legacy of ethnic tensions, political transformations, and unresolved challenges related to identity and immigration. While the movement succeeded in mobilizing widespread public support and bringing attention to Assam's unique challenges, its outcomes were mixed. On the one hand, it led to political empowerment with the rise of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and initiatives like the update of the National Register of Citizens (NRC). On the other hand, the implementation of the Assam Accord has been inconsistent, and tensions over immigration and identity remain unresolved.