

ISAS Brief

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Elections in Meghalaya: The Stakes for the Political Parties

The Assembly elections in the hill State of Meghalaya in India on 27 February 2018 will be keenly watched as they could indicate the direction in which the political headwinds are blowing in Northeast India. It would also be interesting to see if the Bharatiya Janata Party's electoral agenda and efforts are able to find favour with the populace of this Christian-dominated State.

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The elections to the State Assembly in Meghalaya in India on 27 February 2018 are likely to see a keen contest between the ruling Congress party and a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is raring to make its mark in this Northeastern State. The term of the present Meghalaya Assembly ends on 6 March 2018.² The BJP has been actively making inroads into Northeast India ever since its landslide electoral victory in the country's general elections in May 2014. It formed the government in Assam and then in Manipur (in alliance with several other parties). In the Lok Sabha (Lower House) elections in Assam in April 2014, the BJP won seven out of the 14 seats at stake while the Congress managed to only win three seats. In

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² "AAP to contest 35 seats in Meghalaya Assembly election", *Indian Express*. 8 January 2018. <http://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/meghalaya/aap-to-contest-35-seats-in-meghalaya-assembly-election-5016707/>. Accessed on 12 January 2018.

the Assembly elections in Assam in April 2016, the BJP came to power on a massive mandate, singly winning 60 seats while the Congress suffered a severe setback after ruling Assam since 2001.

The political dynamics of the Christian-dominated State of Meghalaya is quite different from the other parts of the country. The BJP Chief Amit Shah has been making regular visits to the State and so has the Union Minister of State (Independent Charge), K J Alphons, who is a Christian and has been deputed as the BJP's Meghalaya in-charge. The BJP has also deputed local party bigwigs in the Meghalaya election campaign. They include Assam's Health Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, who played a key role in turning around the fortunes of the party in Assam. In order to reach out to the voters in Meghalaya, the BJP is focussing on issues of development, which find resonance among people across all faiths and economic strata.

Meghalaya's Chief Minister Mukul Sangma has been in office since 2010 and is one of the few Congress strongmen now left in India's political landscape. There are 60 seats in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly. Out of the total of 3,082 polling stations in the hill State, 60 will be exclusively run by women.³ This is important as women outnumber men and make up 50.4 per cent of the registered voters.⁴ Meghalaya has three distinct regions – the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills. There are 29 seats up for grabs in the Khasi Hills, 24 seats in the Garo Hills and seven in the Jaintia Hills.

The final voter list was released on 9 January 2018 after the Election Commission had addressed claims and objections filed by people from different quarters in Meghalaya. The list is significant since nearly 45 percent of the electorate will vote for the very first time.⁵

³ "Meghalaya will have 60 all-women polling booths for assembly election", *The Times of India*, 26 December 2017. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/shillong/meghalaya-will-have-60-all-women-polling-booths-for-assembly-election/articleshow/62253287.cms>. Accessed on 13 January 2018.

⁴ "Election Commission may announce dates for Tripura, Meghalaya and Nagaland Assembly elections today", *First Post*, 12 January 2018. <http://www.firstpost.com/politics/election-commission-may-announce-poll-dates-for-tripura-meghalaya-and-nagaland-assembly-elections-today-4299309.html>. Accessed on 14 January 2018.

⁵ "Meghalaya Assembly Elections 2018", *First Post*, 14 February 2018. <http://www.firstpost.com/politics/meghalaya-assembly-elections-2018-clout-of-independent-mlas-first-time-voters-likely-to-tilt-balance-4351017.html>. Accessed on 19 February 2018.

Key Players

Apart from the Congress and the BJP, the National People's Party, led by Conrad Sangma, the son of late P A Sangma, former Speaker of the Lok Sabha, has a strong presence in the Garo Hills. Besides, in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, other regional parties such as the United Democratic Party and the Hill State People's Democratic Party could be an influencing factor in the State.

In addition to these parties, the Aam Aadmi Party is trying to make inroads into the State. However, in the absence of a dedicated party machinery, it is not expected to make much of an impact at the polls.

Factors at Play

There are many factors at play which could impact the elections. These include anti-incumbency and the growing popularity of the BJP. The Congress, under Sangma, is trying hard to hold onto its ground. Should the Congress lose in Meghalaya, it would remain in power in only three States in India.

As Meghalaya has a high literacy rate, one of the main challenges facing the government in ensuring gainful employment for the educated youths in the State. Most of them have to travel out of their State to earn a living. Within Meghalaya, the unemployment issue became an even more serious concern after April 2014 when the National Green Tribunal imposed a ban on coal mining in the State.⁶

There are also several insurgent groups in Meghalaya and many educated youths have taken to guns in the State. A Nationalist Congress Party candidate, Jonathone Sangma and three

⁶ "NGT mining ban violations", *The Telegraph*, 22 August 2017. https://www.telegraphindia.com/1170823/jsp/northeast/story_168626.jsp. Accessed on 19 February 2018.

others were killed in a blast from an improvised explosive device in Meghalaya on 18 February 2018, showing that insurgent outfits are still active in some parts of the State.⁷

Infrastructure development in the State has also been minimal. This has been largely due to the difficult terrain, weather conditions, differences between the Central and State governments, and corruption, among other issues. The problem is acuter in the remote areas of the State.

All these issues may create an anti-incumbency factor in the State. The Congress, however, is vouching for stability. Although the BJP is relatively nascent in Meghalaya, it is looking to reap rich dividends in Northeast India and has given important posts to leaders from the Northeast like Kiren Rijiju who is Minister of State for Home in the Union government.

The Union government has been paying increasing attention to Northeast India as a part of India's 'Act-East' policy.⁸ The Northeastern States share borders with countries like China, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Meghalaya shares its border with Bangladesh. While the Northeast is important for India's 'Act-East' policy, immigration is an issue for the Northeastern States. Voters in the Northeast are increasingly rejecting political parties which are seen as being soft on illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

Tourism could be a big revenue earner for Meghalaya as it is breathtakingly beautiful. Mawlynnong village in Meghalaya has been listed as the "cleanest village in Asia"⁹ while there are many spectacular waterfalls across the State. As such, both domestic and international tourism can be a big draw for Meghalaya. However, a concerted strategy is needed to take advantage of this. Tourism could generate jobs for the educated unemployed youths in Meghalaya. Mawsynram in Meghalaya has been listed by the Guinness World

⁷ "NCP Candidate In Meghalaya Jonathone Sangma, 3 Others Killed", 19 February 2018. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/ncp-candidate-in-meghalaya-jonathone-sangma-3-others-killed-1814282>. Accessed on 20 February 2018.

⁸ The 'Act-East' policy aims to strengthen India's relations with countries in Southeast Asia and East Asia. It was earlier known as the 'Look-East' policy until the Narendra Modi government gave it a new moniker in 2014.

⁹ "The Cleanest Village in Asia", BBC Travel, 8 June 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20160606-the-cleanest-village-in-asia>. Accessed on 16 January 2018.

Records as the “wettest place in the world”.¹⁰ It could also be a draw for tourists from other parts of India and from abroad.

Conclusion

The ruling Congress government in Meghalaya may have an uphill battle in the upcoming elections in the face of anti-incumbency and a series of developments issues, as well as due to a spirited election campaign by the BJP. If the BJP is successful in Meghalaya, it would be a huge boost for the party’s efforts in making inroads into the region. The Meghalaya elections could a litmus test for the political future of the Congress and the BJP in Northeast India.

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¹⁰ “Highest Rainfall Annually”, Guinness World Records. <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/highest-rainfall-annually/>. Accessed on 17 January 2018.