

BJP Cements Position in Northeast India

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Summary

The election results in three Northeastern states of India saw the Bharatiya Janata Party return to power in Tripura, be a part of the winning coalition in Nagaland and form the government, along with a host of regional parties, in Meghalaya.

The results of the elections in three Northeastern states of India – Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura – announced on 2 March 2023 did not throw up any major surprises. In all three states, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is set to form the government independently or as a junior partner. In Tripura, the BJP returned to power although with a reduced majority; in Nagaland, the BJP and its senior coalition partner, the Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP), won a comfortable majority; and in Meghalaya, the National People's Party (NPP), which snapped ties with the BJP before the elections, has taken its support to form the government. The BJP's presence in the three states would have been unimaginable a decade ago with two of them – Meghalaya and Nagaland – having a Christian majority and all of them having a significant tribal or indigenous population.

Tripura

In Tripura, the incumbent BJP, in alliance with the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT), returned to power by winning 33 of the 60 seats in the state assembly and 40 per cent of the vote share, down from 44 seats and 50 per cent of the vote share in 2018. One of the main reasons for the dent in the BJP's tally was the presence of the Tipra Motha Party (TMP) – a two-year-old outfit floated by former Congress state president and scion of the Tripura royal family, Pradyot Kishore Manikya Debbarma – which won 13 seats and nearly 20 per cent of the vote share. All the seats won by the TMP were earlier held by the BJP-IPFT alliance. In fact, one of the prominent faces of the incumbent government, Deputy Chief Minister Jishnu Dev Varma, lost to a TMP candidate.

According to the [Lokniti-CSDS post-poll survey](#), over 90 per cent of the Adivasi or Scheduled Tribes voted for the TMP. The TMP's electoral performance, which followed a sweep in the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council elections in 2021, signalled that it might now be the main opposition in the state. In contrast, the alliance of the Left Front, which was in power for over two decades till 2018, with the Congress did not pay dividends, ending up with a tally of 14 seats and 36 per cent of the vote share.

Nagaland

The NDPP, in alliance with the BJP, enjoyed a comfortable victory in Nagaland, winning 37 of the 60 seats and 50 per cent of the vote share. The person who masterminded the win is the

incumbent Neiphiu Rio who will now have a record fifth term as chief minister. Although the NDPP did not win a majority on its own, it won 25 of the 31 seats needed for a majority.

The NDPP's strong performance came on the back of a split engineered by Rio, with the political and financial backing of the BJP, of the main opposition party, the Naga People's Front (NPF), in 2022. In the 2023 election, the NDPP was victorious in 13 seats that the NPF won in 2018. The BJP too increased its seat tally to 12 seats and its vote share to 19 per cent. As a result, the NPF was reduced to two seats in the 2023 election. The Congress, which ruled the state for a decade between 1992 and 2003, could not win a single seat.

Meghalaya

When the election results were announced, the NPP, which broke its alliance with the BJP, was the single largest party with 26 out of 60 seats. Subsequently, the NPP leader and incumbent chief minister, Conrad Sangma, has formed the government with the support of the BJP, which won two seats, and some of the other regional parties. The Congress, which won 21 seats in the 2018 election, was relegated to a distant third, with five seats behind the United Democratic Party, which won 11 seats and is part of the new government.

One of the reasons for the Congress's poor performance was the mass defection in 2021 of a majority of its Members of the Legislative Assembly, led by former chief minister, Mukul Sangma, to the Trinamul Congress (TMC). Though the TMC opened its account in Meghalaya by winning four seats and with a vote share roughly similar to that of the Congress, its hope of playing kingmaker was dashed by the NPP's strong performance. This, however, was not the first foray of the TMC, which has been harbouring national ambitions, into the Northeast. In Manipur, in 2012, the TMC won seven seats and 17 per cent of the vote share, which remains its best performance outside of Bengal.

The Bigger Picture

Since the three states of Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura send a combined five members to the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament), they are considered somewhat marginal for national politics. However, the BJP's electoral success in this region since 2014 underscores the party's ambition to be a national party not restricted to the Hindi heartland. Its ability to form the government, albeit as a junior partner, in Christian-majority states such as Nagaland and Meghalaya dispels, to some extent, the Hindu nationalist image of the BJP.

In contrast, the Congress, on its own, did poorly in Meghalaya and Nagaland, and its alliance with the Left in Tripura too failed to bring votes. The continuing decline of the Congress in this region detracts from its desire to be the natural axis of opposition politics in the 2024 national election.

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