

ISAS Brief

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State Elections in Northeast India

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A series of state assembly elections will precede the next general election in India where the current term of the Lok Sabha (lower House of Parliament) is set to last until 31 May 2014. In 2013, at least eight states will hold legislative assembly elections. In Northeast India, the states of Tripura, Meghalaya and Nagaland are now going to the polls. Each of these three states has a 60-member assembly. Tripura went to the polls on 14 February while the electorate in Meghalaya and Nagaland will vote on 23 February.

In India, state elections are often seen as the barometer of the mood of electorate towards national parties in the context of their likely fortunes in a countrywide general election. Over the years, however, the voting patterns in general elections have not always followed the assembly election trends.

By-elections will also be held in Mizoram (23 February) and Assam (24 February) to fill the assembly seats that have fallen vacant. Besides these elections in the Northeast, by-elections will be held in Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Punjab on 23 February; and in Bihar and Maharashtra on 24 February. Results of the current round of elections will be announced on 28 February.

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Tripura

Tripura saw a massive voter turnout of 93.57 per cent on the polling day, 14 February; and, barring a few incidents, the voting went off peacefully. In the last elections in 2008, the state saw a turnout of 91.22 per cent.

The Left Front government led by Manik Sarkar of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) – CPI (M) – is expected to win again, with Sarkar likely to get a fourth term as Chief Minister. Should this happen, Tripura, as the lone state to stay with the Left at present, will be crucial to the party in keeping up the morale of its cadre. Sarkar's image as a clean administrator (also portrayed by critics as the poorest Chief Minister in India) has been a great advantage for the party.

Besides Sarkar and his cabinet colleagues, those in the fray include the former chief minister and veteran Congress leader, Samir Ranjan Barman; his son and the Pradesh Congress chief, Sudip Roy Barman; the opposition leader, Ratan Lal Nath; and the Indigenous Nationalist Party of Tripura (INPT) president, Bijoy Kumar Hrangkhawl.

The Congress is contesting 48 seats and its alliance partners INPT 11 and National Conference of Tripura (NCT) one. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has never won a seat in Tripura, has fielded 20 candidates.

The CPI (M) has gone to the electorate taking credit for ending the four-decade-old insurgency in the state and ensuring peace and communal harmony. The party has also highlighted the 15 awards it received from the Centre for successful implementation of various schemes.

The Congress-INPT-NCT alliance, on the other hand, is projecting the "bad governance" of the Manik Sarkar-led government as a poll issue, alleging that despite the availability of central funds, employees, the unemployed and farmers remained deprived during the 20-year Left Front rule. The alliance has also focused on allegations of corruption and nepotism among party leaders and partisan behaviour by the government. Further, Congress claimed that insurgency was tamed because of the attractive rehabilitation package offered by the Centre and the favourable action of Sheikh Hasina's government in Bangladesh which launched a crackdown on the Indian insurgent groups operating from there.

Prominent leaders who campaigned in the run-up to the election include Congress Vice-President Rahul Gandhi, Union Minister Deepa Das Munshi, Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Nabam Tuki, Union Finance Minister P Chidambaram, CPI-M leaders Prakash Karat, Sitaram Yechury, Surya Kanta Mishra and Brinda Karat.

Of the 3,041 booths, 409 were identified as very sensitive (A+), 535 as very sensitive (A) and 726 as sensitive. Altogether 250 companies of central paramilitary forces have been deployed in the state to maintain law and order.

The Border Security Force has sealed the 856 km border with Bangladesh and deployed additional forces to prevent infiltration. This has however, reportedly, disturbed border trade but is expected to return to normal once the election process is over.

Meghalaya

Meghalaya, which has seen a very high turnover of Chief Ministers over the last many years, is generally expected to return the Congress to power. The incumbent Chief Minister Mukul Sangma of the Congress has been at the helm since April 2010.

Journalists and civil society activists have lamented the inability of political parties to raise major issues affecting the state during their campaigns. Rather, electoral outcome is expected to be determined mostly by the emotional bonds between the voters and individual candidates.

The state faces enormous social and environmental challenges due to massive coal- and limestone-mining; and there is a perception that the ‘deteriorating’ law and order situation must receive greater attention. Several media reports have also raised concerns about the exponential growth of the assets of politicians in the state.

According to the Meghalaya Election Watch (MEW), a non-governmental organisation, the assets of 111 candidates grew at an astonishing 252 per cent. MEW noted the average assets of these 111 politicians, worth Rs 66.20 lakhs in 2008, rose to Rs.2.33 crore in the course of five years – average growth of Rs 1.66 crore.

P A Sangma, former Lok Sabha Speaker and former Chief Minister of the state, who unsuccessfully contested the presidential election against Pranab Mukherjee last year, has since launched a party, the National People’s Party (NPP). But he is expected to have a limited impact on the fortunes of the Congress. He is expected to win a handful of seats in his stronghold, the Garo hills. Should there be a fractured mandate, he could however end up playing kingmaker along with other regional players like the United Democratic Party (UDP). In the last elections in 2008, when Sangma led the state unit of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), the party bagged 15 seats from across the state.

Having allied with the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) over the presidential election, Sangma may be looking to play a bigger role in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls and is said to be pinning his hopes on an NDA victory in the general election.

Besides the Congress among the national parties, the BJP has fielded nine candidates while the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) has fielded 21 candidates.

Nagaland

In Nagaland, which has seen unrest for the last six decades, security has been a crucial issue during the electoral campaign. As many as 180 additional companies of the central paramilitary forces have been asked to supplement the two battalions of Central Reserve Police Force, 26,000 police personnel, 9,000 village guards and more than 2,000 home guards already in the state.

In a state reported to be flush with money during elections, expenditure monitoring has been beefed up. Observers and flying squads – each comprising a magistrate, a police officer and a videographer – have been deployed in all the districts.

The powerful Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC) has called for a 'clean election' and issued 13 guidelines that included an appeal to the people not to falsify the date of birth in order to register as voters. Other guidelines included: “keeping only one voter identity card, honouring individual right and freedom of choice and exercise one's wisdom to vote for god-fearing, principled and capable candidates”.

The main contest here is between the current ruling Naga People's Front (NPF) led by Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio – which has a pre-poll alliance with the BJP and JD-U under the banner of Democratic Alliance of Nagaland (DAN) – and the Congress on the other side. Rio is seeking a third term as Chief Minister.

The main campaign issues are economic development and the finding of a solution to the Naga problem. The Congress has alleged that despite the Central government allocating adequate funds to the state, the benefits have not reached the people. Prominent in the manifestoes of the political parties are the issues of youth empowerment and the promise of job opportunities for the young.

While the peace talks are ongoing, the powerful apex body of Naga traditional organisations, the Naga Hoho, had asked for a deferment of the elections and urged that a settlement be reached first. Last year, all 60 legislators, cutting across parties, had conveyed their willingness to step down to pave way for a political solution if it helped. The Naga Hoho is of the view that the political negotiations are at a critical juncture and that elections would derail and delay the process.

Some star campaigners of BJP to visit Nagaland were Rajnath Singh, Sushma Swaraj, Nitin Gadkari and Varun Gandhi. From the Congress, Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi, AICC general

secretary in-charge of Nagaland, Luizinho Faleiro, senior leader Ambika Soni and Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Nabam Tuki have held rallies.

While analysts expect Rio to get a third term, he does face anti-incumbency sentiments. And, the Congress, led by I. Imkong and a line-up of stalwarts like Legislative Party Leader Tokheho Yephthomi and former Chief Minister S C Jamir, will likely try and pull out all the stops.

These three Northeast states together account for only five seats in the Lok Sabha, India's powerful lower house of Parliament, but these state election campaigns have been fierce. For the regional parties, the assembly elections are the really big contests as they are unlikely to make an impact at the national stage even if they win the Lok Sabha seats from their states. So, the stakes for them are high indeed during the assembly elections.

Interesting indeed is the amount of interest evinced and effort made by the national parties in these elections, with a record number of central leaders holding rallies across the three states. This is perhaps a sign that the national parties hope to boost the morale of their cadre for the next national general election through a good showing at the state levels in the first place.

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