

ISAS Brief

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Focus on Policies and Personalities in Mizoram Assembly Elections 2013

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Even as the Congress faces strong anti-incumbency factors in Rajasthan and Delhi and an uphill climb in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh states in India, retaining Mizoram has become a matter of greater importance to the party. The results of the assembly elections to be held in these five states in November and December 2013 will be crucial in determining the tone of the General Election that will follow a few months later.

On 25 November, as many as 686,000 electors will exercise their franchise to elect the new 40-member State Assembly in Mizoram, where the Congress government headed by Mr Lalthanhawla is seeking to retain power. Thirty nine of the constituencies in Mizoram are reserved for Scheduled Tribes. In 2008, the Congress swept to power with an overwhelming majority, riding on the back of anti-incumbency as also the alleged rampant corruption of the Mizo National Front (MNF) government and by promising the revival of the New Land Use Policy (NLUP), a direct cash transfer scheme aimed at village farmers to develop self-sufficiency in agriculture while diversifying their income through allied activities such as poultry farming.

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Table: Mizoram Assembly Election Results 1998, 2003 and 2008.

| Party | 1998 Votes (% votes) Total Votes: 337,938 | 1998 Seats | 2003 Votes (% votes) Total Votes: 418,113 | 2003 Seats | 2008 Votes (% votes) Total Votes: 611,618 | 2008 Seats |
|-----------------------------------|--|-------------------|---|-------------------|--|-------------------|
| Indian National Congress (INC) | 100,608 (29.77%) | 6 | 125,690 (30.06 %) | 12 | 195,614 (38.89%) | 32 |
| Mizo National Front (MNF) | 84,444 (24.99%) | 21 | 132,507 (31.69%) | 21 | 154,132 (30.65%) | 3 |
| Mizoram People's Conference (MPC) | 69,078 (20.44%) | 12 | 67,576 (16.16%) | 3 | 52,222 (10.38%) | 2 |
| Zoram Nationalist Party (ZNP) | 31,190 (9.23%)# | 0 | 61,466 (14.70%) | 2 | 51,403 (10.22%) | 2 |

Source: Compiled from the website of the Chief Electoral Officer, Mizoram.

Then known as Mizo National Front (Nationalist)

Electoral Issues

While the NLUP has achieved some measure of success, the going may not be easy for the Congress as it is already facing strong anti-incumbent sentiments. There are allegations of corruption and the MNF has forged an alliance with the Mizoram People's Conference (MPC) and the Mara Democratic Front (MDF), with the latter two joining as junior partners. The last time when the MNF and MPC worked together in 1998 as equal partners, they won 33 of the 40 seats but the alliance was short-lived as the MNF gained enough seats to form the government on its own. The fourth main party, the Zoram Nationalist Party (ZNP) headed by Mr Lalduhawma has decided to go on its own.

In an effort to negate any advantage that the Congress might reap from the NLUP, the three regional parties have announced their intention to replicate the success of the NLUP should they come to power and promised to add on to it. The main opposition party, the MNF has announced what it calls a Socio-Economic Development Programme (SEDP), which "aims to make Mizoram economically self-sufficient in agriculture and power". Party president and former

Chief Minister Mr Zoramthanga added that the SEDP incorporates certain points from the ‘Six Basic Needs’, the 30-year-old policy of Brig T Sailo’s party, MPC, which remained unfulfilled.²

The MPC itself, now headed by Brig T Sailo’s son and retired civil servant Mr Lalmangaiha Sailo, has reiterated its commitment to work towards the fulfilment of the ‘Six Basic Needs’ programme and ensure self-sufficiency in the generation of power. In addition, the MPC has added a ‘Social Security Policy’ to its manifesto which will help small farmers carry their produce to the market, provide price support to farmers and ensure adequate health and nutrition cover for families with young children.

The ZNP, the only party which has reservations about the idea of cash transfer schemes, has also echoed similar support policies in the form of an Immediate Economic Package (IEP) and an Urban Poor Package (UPP), both aimed at providing market access to the poor in the rural areas and helping the urban poor to gain meaningful employment through technical education, respectively.

All the parties also make tall promises aimed at harnessing the youth of the state. The development of sport infrastructure, educational reforms and the use of information technology in governance feature prominently in their manifestoes. Despite the rise in unemployment, including large number of unemployed graduates, political parties have not been able to articulate clear plans on how they will create jobs. The regional parties also espouse strong Mizo nationalist ideologies and promise to safeguard cultural practices and keep immigration in check.

Except for the Congress, which has announced its policy preference towards the abolition of illegal border trade in favour of formal trade along the Myanmar and Bangladesh borders, the other parties have not paid much attention to this issue.

Law and Order

Elections that will be held in over 1,126 polling stations across the state are expected to be largely peaceful with only 94 stations designated as ‘Critical’ and under special watch. Mizoram, which is the only state in India to have completed the process of issuing identity cards, benefits from the active involvement of the church and civil society, under the umbrella of the Mizoram People’s Forum, which has issued guidelines that political parties and candidates are expected to adhere to. Besides ensuring that the parties stick to the Election Commission of India Model Code of Conduct, MPF conducts public meetings and rallies for the parties, negotiates with them to ensure that they minimise costs in the setting up of election offices and refrain from the use of

² ‘Mizo National Front Unveils economic blueprint’, 19 June 2013. *The Shillong Times*. <http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2013/06/19/mizo-national-front-unveils-economic-blueprint/>. Accessed on 5 November 2013.

language that may disrupt the peace of society. The MPF also keeps a check on the use of money and discourages door-to-door campaigning. Voter turnout in Mizoram is usually high with the last one election registering 74%.

Leadership

As is true for many parts of India, elections in Mizoram centre on personalities, and much attention has been focused on the leaders of the political parties. Two extensive surveys were carried out by the Mizoram University and a local news channel, Zotalk. A majority of those who responded preferred Mr Lalduhawma of the ZNP for Chief Minister but most respondents felt it would be either the Congress or the MNF that would come back to power. The main reason given for the preference for Mr Lalduhawma was that he is an untested leader who is able to articulate a better vision and take the youth with him. There was however a feeling that his party lacks a team of leadership that could help him in governing the state.

Mr Zoramthanga of the MNF and Mr Lalthanhawla of the Congress also remain popular choices for Chief Minister, and their parties are seen as having a better chance of winning to form the government. For Mr Zoramthanga, a former guerrilla leader, a win would mean a third term as Chief Minister, whereas for Mr Lalthanhawla, who is known to be in the good books of the Congress President, Ms Sonia Gandhi, it could be a record fifth term at the helm of the state government. Mr Lalhmangaiha Sailo of the MPC who joined politics more recently is relatively unknown yet. What is however clear from the opinion polls is that there is a desire for change, particularly for new leadership, but a seeming lack of choice.

The Congress has fielded all 32 sitting legislators again and Mr Lalthanhawla will stand from two constituencies. Mr Lalduhawma will also contest for two seats. Other prominent candidates include sitting Rajya Sabha MP Lalhmgingliana of the MNF, former Home Minister Mr Tawnluia of the MNF and former Speakers Mr Lalchamlia of the MNF and Dr Kenneth Chawngliana of the MPC. The Congress and the MNF have fielded one woman candidate each.

Conclusion

Meanwhile, a month ago, ten regional parties of the Northeast including the Asom Gana Parishad, the Naga People's Front — the ruling party in Nagaland — and the MNF met and resolved to form a new political front — the North-East Regional Political Front (NERPF) — to work together to safeguard the “territorial, cultural, social, political and economic rights of the people of the region and to continuously strive to protect the distinctive identifies of the ethnic tribes and of all the people of the region”. The grouping adopted a resolution seeking a fresh look

at Centre-State relations.³ This development is clearly a collective strategy among the regional parties, with the General Election 2014 on their minds.

In Mizoram, these elections are significant as it is the first time that the proliferation of new media has allowed for the participation of a large section of society, including the youth who are active and keen to be part of the political process. However, the Mizo society, which has strong cultural codes, is still struggling to negotiate with the youth in creating space for them to take part in the political process and assume leadership positions. Nevertheless, even as the old guard struggles to stay at the top, the young Mizos have raised some pressing questions and lamented the inability of the present set of politicians to articulate a clear vision for the state and their lack of determination and capacity to take them to the next level of development and change.

Votes will be counted on 9 December, (Monday), a day after the results are announced in the four other states that are going to polls now. This is to ensure that there is no disruption of church services in the Christian-majority state.

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³ Ten north-east parties float regional front', 21 October 2013, *The Hindu*, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/ten-northeast-parties-float-regional-front/article5255125.ece>. Accessed on 5 November 2013.