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Appointment of a New Chief Minister in Nagaland: An End to the Power Struggle?

The appointment of T R Zeliang as Nagaland's new Chief Minister (CM) on 22 July 2017 was an unexpected decision.¹ He was chosen by Governor P B Acharya after the latter dismissed the CM Shürhozelie Liezietsu for skipping the floor test of a special session of the legislative assembly three days earlier.² He had been facing criticism from some party members for picking his son Khriehu Liezietsu as his advisor with cabinet status and salary. The Governor's decision may be seen as a prudent move that might quell the disquiet within the ruling Nagaland People's Front and set the stage for an orderly conduct of the 2018 legislative assembly elections.

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Introduction

On 19 July 2017, Nagaland's Governor P B Acharya sacked the barely five-month-old administration led by Chief Minister (CM) Shürhozelie Liezietsu under Clause (I) of Article

¹ PTI, "Zeliang appointed Nagaland Chief Minister", *Hindu*, 19 July 2017.

² Indo-Asian News Service, "Nagaland governor appoints TR Zeliang new chief minister, floor test on July 22", *Hindustan Times*, 19 July 2017.

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164 of the Constitution.⁴ The special session of the legislative assembly was called by the speaker Imtiwapang Aier for the CM to prove his majority. The House was then postponed *sine die*.⁵ Thereafter, Acharya handpicked lawmaker T R Zeliang, who was present in the House, to form a new government. Zeliang took the oath as the new CM at the Raj Bhavan after he was able to prove his majority on 22 July 2017.⁶

Shürhozelie Liezietsu, also the president of Nagaland People's Front (NPF), had been facing opposition from some party members after being accused of nepotism for choosing his son Khriehu Liezietsu as his cabinet advisor.⁷ Although Khriehu had rejected his father's offer through a letter, the move was unable to pacify his opponents.⁸

Zeliang's Background

Zeliang's appointment as Nagaland's CM is his second stint in the position. In May 2014, he had succeeded then-CM Neiphiu Rio after the latter decided to move to national-level politics in New Delhi.⁹ Zeliang has helmed a number of ministerial seats and was a member of parliament to the Rajya Sabha from 2004 to 2008.¹⁰ He has also been recognised for his contributions on environmental preservation and development. In September 2016, he was the recipient for the Pangkor Dialogue Award at the 4th Pangkor Dialogue in Malaysia.¹¹ The award reflected Zeliang's credibility and merits as a leader.¹²

⁴ Indo-Asian News Service, "Nagaland governor appoints TR Zeliang new chief minister, floor test on July 22", *Hindustan Times*, 19 July 2017.

⁵ PTI, "Nagaland CM Shurhozelie Liezietsu fails to turn up for floor test, house adjourned", *Economic Times*, 19 July 2017. *Sine die* literally means 'without day' – 'without assigning a day for a further meeting or hearing'.

⁶ Acharyya, Kangkan, "TR Zeliang proves majority in House: Party-less Nagaland CM achieves new feat in Indian politics", *Firstpost*, 22 July 2017.

⁷ Indo-Asian News Service, "Nagaland governor appoints TR Zeliang new chief minister, floor test on July 22", *Hindustan Times*, 19 July 2017.

⁸ Kashyap, Samudra Gupta, "Nagaland CM's son rejects cabinet-rank post to save father's chair", *Indian Express*, 10 July 2017.

⁹ "Chief Minister", Government of Nagaland, Available at: <https://www.nagaland.gov.in/portal/portal/StatePortal/Government/ChiefMinister>. Accessed on 2 August 2017.

¹⁰ Experts, Disha, "Quarterly Current Affairs - January to March 2017 for Competitive Exams", (New Delhi, Disha Publication, 2017), p 105.

¹¹ Press Trust of India, "Zeliang receives Pangkor Dialogue Award in Malaysia", *Business Standard*, 7 September 2016.

¹² Ibid.

Despite his outstanding achievements, Zeliang was almost removed from power in 2015 when some MLAs showed no confidence in his leadership.¹³ However, in February 2017, he was indeed forced to tender his resignation against the backdrop of mass demonstrations by tribal non-government organisations which opposed against the government's decision to reserve seats (33 per cent) for women in the Urban Local Bodies.¹⁴ The social unrest brewing in the State turned violent when two civilians were killed during police clashes.¹⁵ The Nagaland Tribes Action Committee and the Joint Coordination Committee also accused Zeliang for the eruption in violence in the State.

Following Zeliang's removal as CM, his office stated that, "Since there cannot be a discontinuity, the chief minister has drafted the resignation letter which will be placed before the legislature party tomorrow where the new leader will be elected and, together, they will go to Raj Bhawan, where the CM will submit his resignation and the new leader will stake claim."¹⁶

There were speculations that, Rio, who had earlier served as Nagaland's CM for three terms, would take over again as the CM after Zeliang's resignation.¹⁷ Ultimately, Shürhozelie Liezietsu was named as the new CM. He has been elected to the Nagaland Legislative Assembly on eight different occasions from the Northern Angami assembly constituency.¹⁸

The ruling NPF had seen divided party loyalties between the Liezietsu and Zeliang camps. Shürhozelie Liezietsu even dismissed four ministers and 10 parliamentary secretaries in July 2017 amid the power struggle. The Home Minister Yanthungo Patton, Power Minister Kipili Sangtam and National Highway and Political Affairs Minister G Kaito Aye were some of the politicians who were sacked.¹⁹

¹³ Pisharoty, Sangeeta Barooah, "In Nagaland, calls for Zeliang to resign likely to work in BJP's favour", *The Wire*, 8 February 2017.

¹⁴ Indo-Asian News Service, "Nagaland governor appoints TR Zeliang new chief minister, floor test on July 22", *Hindustan Times*, 19 July 2017.

¹⁵ Fb Staff, "Nagaland unrest: Army called in Kohima after two Naga deaths spur violence", *Firstpost*, 2 February 2017.

¹⁶ TNN & Agencies, "Nagaland chief minister TR Zeliang resigns amidst political turmoil", *Times of India*, 19 February 2017.

¹⁷ Express Web Desk, "Nagaland: After Zeliang's exit, Shurhozelie Liezietsu to be next CM, say party sources", *Indian Express*, 20 February 2017.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ IndiaToday.in, "Nagaland: Political crisis deepens; CM sacks 4 ministers, 10 parliamentary secretaries", *India Today*, 9 July 2017.

While Shürhozelie Liezietsu was backed by 10 NPF lawmakers and one independent member, Zeliang was supported by 35 NPF lawmakers, four BJP legislators and seven independent members.²⁰ Over 30 NPF lawmakers went to the Borgoch Resort in Kaziranga National Park in Assam in July 2017 to lend their support to Zeliang to become the CM again.²¹ The Borgoch Resort has become a centre of party rebellion. Ironically, the situation was similar to events in February 2017 when most NPF members barged into the same resort to mount pressure on Zeliang to resign and extended their support to Rio to assume the CM's seat.²²

Incidentally, in spite of his ouster as CM, Shürhozelie Liezietsu won the Northern Angami-I by-polls on 29 July 2017. He contested on a NPF ticket and was elected as a member of the Nagaland State Assembly.²³ His victory indicates that he is still very much part of the State's political sphere.

Change in Leadership

Zeliang's recent appointment may be seen as a tactical move by the NPF move to gain back public trust and unite the party for the forthcoming 2018 legislative assembly elections. The NPF, a regional outfit, has formed a State level coalition of the Democratic Alliance of Nagaland (DAN) with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Janata Dal (United). The pre-poll alliance achieved an absolute majority during the 2013 assembly polls after securing 40 seats in the 60-member assembly.²⁴

Nagaland is a classic example of alliance politics where a regional party has aligned itself with a national-level player. The electoral support for the DAN is strong since the alliance has uninterruptedly been in power since 2003.²⁵

²⁰ INAS Feeds, "Nagaland Governor sacks government, Zeliang to be sworn in", *India News*, 19 July 2017.

²¹ Karmakar, Rahul, "Political crisis in Nagaland again: NPF legislators revolt against CM Shurhozelie", *Hindustan Times*, 8 July 2017.

²² Fb Staff, "Nagaland CM TR Zeliang resigns amid protests: All you need to know about the unrest", *Firstpost*, 20 February 2017.

²³ PTI, "Voting for Northern Angami bypoll begins; ex-Nagaland CM Shurhozelie Liezietsu in fray", *Zee News*, 29 July 2017

²⁴ Election Commission of India, "Statistical Report on General Election, 2013 to the Legislative Assembly of Nagaland", p 8.

²⁵ Arora, Vibha, Jayaram, N, "Democratisation in the Himalayas: Interests, Conflicts, and Negotiations", (New York: Routledge, 2017), p 61.

There has also been an induction of new ministers and disqualification of current MLAs in the new administration. Zeliang expanded his ministry by appointing 10 new cabinet ministers (eight from the NPF and two from the BJP) after proving his majority on 22 July 2017.²⁶ Two days later, he appointed one more minister to his cabinet.²⁷ Recently, Zeliang filed a petition under Paragraph 2(1)(b) of the Tenth Schedule to disqualify 10 MLAs from the ruling party. Zeliang said that the 10 NPF MLAs should be dismissed for not turning up for the 19 July 2017 emergent special session.²⁸ The new administration has made these drastic changes to strengthen its stand and develop its capacity ahead of the elections.

Fortunately for the NPF, there has been no sign of the opposition parties trying to gain political mileage from the internal squabbling. The opposition camp has traditionally been weak in the State. The Indian National Congress won just eight seats during the 2013 assembly elections, after winning 23 seats in 2008.²⁹

Conclusion

The new administration in Nagaland is gradually galvanising itself after months of political chaos and power struggle between the Liezietsu and Zeliang factions. While Zeliang's appointment was a surprise move by the Governor, his appointment may not necessarily mark the end of the power struggle in the State. Shürhozelie Liezietsu is still very much a part of the political landscape and the State is beset with uncertainty in its political affairs. However, having crossed an important hurdle with Zeliang's recent appointment, the government will now need to quickly restore public trust in order to pave the way for an orderly conduct of next year's elections.

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²⁶ Scroll Staff, "Nagaland CM TR Zeliang expands Cabinet with induction of 10 ministers", *Scroll.in*, 24 July 2017.

²⁷ PTI, "Nagaland CM T R Zeliang expands cabinet with induction of one more minister", *New Indian Express*, 3 August 2017.

²⁸ IANS, "Nagaland CM T. Zeliang seeks disqualification of 10 NPF MLAs", *Economic Times*, 5 August 2017.

²⁹ Election Commission of India, "Statistical Report on General Election, 2013, to the Legislative Assembly of Nagaland", p 8.