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Meghalaya Elections 2018: Issues and Perspectives



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Mendipathar-25-02-2018-A Garo tribal girl wears their traditional headgear while attending a election rally the last day of the Meghalaya election campaigning in 38 Mendipathar constituency in north Garo Hills district in Meghalaya on Sunday, February 25, 2018. Meghalaya and Nagaland Legislative Assembly elections will be held on 27 February 2018 and results to be declared on 3 March 2018. Photo: Ritu Raj Konwar - The Hindu

A history of fragile governments, even a Chief Minister selected by the toss of a coin, and the search for identity by tribal groups forms the backdrop for the State Assembly elections in Meghalaya, which will go to the polls on February 27. Patricia Mukhim, Editor, The Shillong Times, writes on the complexities in a State where identities, and to a larger extent, personalities, and not ideologies appear to have shaped electoral outcomes.

India's 21st State, Meghalaya, was carved out of the erstwhile State of Assam on April 2, 1970, under the Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Act 1969. It consists of the former districts of Assam, Garo Hills and United Khasi and Jaintia Hills and shares a border with Bangladesh. It became a full-fledged State on the midnight of January 20-21, 1972, in accordance with the provisions of the North Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971. Assembly elections have been held here in 1972, 1978, 1983, 1988, 1993, 1998, 2003 and 2013.

In the first elections in 1972, the All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) that had led a peaceful struggle for an independent Meghalaya won 32 seats, the Congress, that had just made its debut in the State, nine. A record 19 Independent candidates were also victorious -- they included members of the Hill State Peoples' Democratic Party (HSPDP) that had broken away from the APHLC, following ideological differences over a clear demarcation of the boundary with Assam. The HSPDP had not, at the time, yet registered as a political party with the Election Commission. A regional party-led government under B.B. Lyngdoh was formed but it lasted only six months, as some APHLC MLAs deserted the party for the Congress, leading to the formation of a Congress-led coalition government.

That set the tone for the political instability that has been the hallmark of the hill State that has seen 21 Chief Ministers between 1972 and 2017. Meghalaya has also had spells of President's Rule from October 1991 to February 1992 and from March to May 2009. Not just that, the State once chose a Chief Minister by lottery, splitting a five-year term equally between two parties with the toss of a coin to decide who would rule first, and made a lone independent MLA, F.A. Khonglam, the Chief Minister, in December 2001.

In 1978, the Congress made incremental progress by winning 20 seats, the APHLC was reduced to 16, the HSPDP cornered 14, and Independents got the remaining 10. A government of regional parties was formed only to be toppled by the Congress that poached some of their MLAs. This has been the history of government formation in Meghalaya. Only twice, 1993 to 1998 and 2013 to 2018, the Congress, supported by some Independents, completed a full term.

In 1972, Meghalaya—which has a 85 per cent plus tribal population—had 10 open or general category seats. But, by the time the next elections came around, this category of seats was reduced to five in a house of 60, with 55 seats reserved for tribals, an arrangement that continues to the present day. Interestingly, the first Assembly saw the election of only four non-tribal MLAs; the five other seats were won by tribal candidates.

In 1983, out of five open seats, only three were won by non-tribals. Since then, the open seats have nearly always been captured by tribal candidates, barring one or two instances. This has created disaffection among non-tribals who feel that their aspirations and angst are not heard in the Assembly. This feeling increased after the 1979 ethnic violence that was aimed at cleansing the State of “outsiders”. The term “outsider”, unfortunately, was used indiscriminately for all non-tribals, equating them with Bangladeshis from across the border who are caricatured as crossing over to Meghalaya to capture the economic space here.

Bengalis who have been living for generations in the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills districts when these were part of undivided Assam were first brought here by the British to work as clerks. Later generations became the intellectual capital of Meghalaya as they took to medicine, law, teaching, banking and government service. The Bengalis bore the brunt of the 1979 violence that was triggered by the throwing of a stone at the idol of Goddess Durga during the Puja celebrations. Even after all these years, the real reason for the outbreak of the violence is unclear but many people lost their lives. Following the violence in 1979, Durga Puja was held under tight security, robbing it of the vigour and enthusiasm of a real celebration.

The Khasi Students’ Union (KSU) created a fear psychosis around the narrative that Meghalaya would be reduced to a Tripura-like situation where the tribes currently constitute roughly 30 per cent of the population. There was no one to effectively counter slogans such as “Khasi by birth, Indians by accident” painted on the walls of public institutions during those tumultuous years. Fear pervaded the atmosphere and the few tribals who spoke out were listed as “traitors”. While the influx from Bangladesh is a real and present challenge, detecting infiltrators is difficult and requires an official mechanism.

In 1982 and again in 1987, similar bouts of violence followed: Nepali-speaking people were targeted but other non-tribals, too, were not spared. It took a while before things could return to normal. And, as always, the violence escalated before the Assembly elections. Politicians who failed to achieve anything substantial on this front, it was widely believed, created a climate of unease to divert people's attention from the main issues. Indeed, on the eve of every election, anti-non-tribal feeling is whipped up while the politicians project themselves as saviours of the people. Till 1988, people succumbed to this frenzy of a politically cultivated ethno-narrative but they soon realised that were being taken for a ride.

By 1994, Meghalaya again entered another violent phase with the emergence of militant outfits with different acronyms. In the Khasi Jaintia Hills, extortion was rampant and those who did not comply with the extortion notices were gunned down. At first, the targets were non-tribals, but later, tribals, too, were targeted and that was when civil society fought back. By 2001, militancy in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills was brought to a halt but Garo Hills continues to remain a militant domain. In recent times, militant activities in Garo Hills, too, have subsided.

It is against this backdrop that elections in Meghalaya will be held on February 27. This time, the ruling Congress is being challenged by regional forces like the homegrown National People's Party (NPP), a rare pre-poll alliance of the United Democratic Party (UDP), Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP) and the Garo National Council (GNC), and the new entrant BJP. The NPP, formed by former Lok Sabha Speaker P.A. Sangma in 2013 when he contested the Presidential elections after being expelled from the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), is now led by his son, Conrad Sangma: in the outgoing Assembly, the party had only two MLAs, but, this time, they have fielded 50 candidates, encouraged by the fact that several senior Congress MLAs (who had been ministers in the Congress-led Meghalaya United Alliance (MUA) Government headed by Mukul Sangma) recently joined the party, citing their dissatisfaction with Mr Sangma's style of functioning. They have accused the Chief Minister of retaining charge of nearly 18 departments of government, taking arbitrary decisions and bypassing the Cabinet. The rebel Congressmen include Rowell Lyngdoh (Deputy Chief Minister and legislator since 1983), Prestone Tynsong (a three-term legislator), Sniawbhalang

Dhar, Ngaitlang Dhar, and Comingone Ymbon (who helped bankroll the Congress in the last elections). The NPP, banking heavily on its new acquisitions, is confident it will emerge as the single largest party. It bears mention that those who have defected from the Congress to the NPP have financial clout and that is what the NPP is banking on since its own financial resource bases are weak.

The Congress that has fielded candidates in all 60 constituencies is battling anti-incumbency after 10 years in power, with Chief Minister Mukul Sangma facing the charge of running a Presidential form of government and concentrating all important projects in his constituency, Ampati, Garo Hills. But political analysts believe the Congress might still secure a simple majority. But, even in that case, Mukul Sangma may find it difficult to retain the chief ministership, with large sections of party workers and even ministerial colleagues describing him as being unapproachable.

The BJP that has fielded only 47 candidates has publicly claimed it will form the next government, with senior BJP leader Rajiv Pratap Rudy telling reporters his party will form governments in Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Tripura. But ground reports suggest the BJP is unlikely to win more than five seats in Meghalaya, largely because it is seen as an anti-Christian party, illiberal and one that is working to curb personal freedoms and choices. For instance, when the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) came to power at the Centre, it announced Christmas Day as Good Governance Day, offending the Christian community that account for over 80 per cent of the population. Subsequent incidents of lynching of people for carrying beef or transporting cattle have triggered fear among the beef-eating tribals: when BJP president Amit Shah came to Shillong in 2015, some groups—consisting largely of young people—organised a beef party at a public place along the route he was supposed to be driving past. The idea of a political party and its affiliates taking the law in their hands, persecuting priests and nuns for singing Christmas carols and dictating people's food habits is not acceptable to the liberal tribal mindset.

Even those who had reposed some faith in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's promise of development (vikas) have now begun to weigh their options. "How can the idea of development co-exist with the regressive mindsets of changing history, and violating well-evidenced scientific theories?" is a question that young and informed citizens of Meghalaya are asking.

When K.J. Alphonse, the new “Christian” Tourism minister at the Centre, announced his ministry would spend Rs 70 crores to renovate churches to turn them into tourism destinations, the leaders of two mainline churches outrightly turned down the offer. But this caused mild annoyance compared with the anger against the BJP for the rejection (by the Indian Consulate in South Africa) of a visa application by Paul Msiza, President of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA), who was scheduled to attend a celebration of 150 years of Christianity amongst the Garo Baptists at Rajasimla in North Garo Hills. This has led to an uproar amongst members of the community. The Congress, not surprisingly, has used the denial of a visa to its own advantage, accusing the BJP of unleashing its anti-Christian agenda even before having a foothold in Meghalaya.

Mzisa was scheduled to make a tourism visit to Meghalaya and also witness the five-day religious celebration held on February 10-11 last. He was due to travel from Johannesburg in South Africa. An official release from the Baptist organisation said that Dr. Msiza had applied for visa on January 29 and was informed of the rejection in the evening of February 7¹.

Beaten back on the Christian front, it is not surprising that the BJP has produced a document called “Chargesheet” that lists all the financial scandals involving the Congress. Indeed, if the BJP has gained traction here, it is only because of the Congress’s governance failure over the last decade. In the ‘White Ink scam’, for instance, state education minister, Ampareen Lyngdoh, tampered with the list of teachers who qualified on merit for the posts of Lower Primary School teachers in Government Schools. Lyngdoh is said to have used the Joint Director of Education JD Sangma and her supporters to cover with white ink the names of meritorious candidates and replace them with other names. A subsequent investigation by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) found Lyngdoh guilty and submitted its report to the Meghalaya High Court. Meanwhile, the MLAs who had recommended names of people from their constituencies have taken anticipatory bail even as Lyngdoh submitted all the recommendatory letters/slips to the CBI. The intelligentsia may look askance at Lyngdoh but she is a smart constituency manager and is able to address the personal needs of the most depressed sections of her constituents, who incidentally form the bulk of her vote bank.

Meanwhile, the organisationally weak BJP may win just a handful of seats in Meghalaya this time (even though the RSS has been working in the State for over two decades, particularly in the rural areas), but the speculation here is that the party has made a pact with the NPP, its partner in the NDA government at the Centre, to form a coalition government after the last vote is counted. The Congress, not surprisingly, has been attacking the NPP, calling it the BJP's Team B. This speculation has also been fuelled by NPP leader Conrad Sangma: in a recent interview, he said, it is important for a party ruling Meghalaya to be on the same page as the ruling party at the Centre. Additionally, it cannot altogether be ruled out that the regional parties would not throw in their hat with such a coalition.

Credit must be given to the BJP also for its strategic planning. The BJP-RSS think tank, India Foundation, posted some of its foot soldiers in Meghalaya a year ago to study the election scenario here, give constant feedback about what needs to be done and engage with the media, study media trends vis-a-vis the BJP and counter all anti-BJP propaganda over the social media. The Congress, in sharp contrast, despite its deep roots in Meghalaya did not have a robust media cell. It belatedly engaged with the media by sending some of its party workers to man the media cell in Shillong only after party president Rahul Gandhi visited the State in the last week of January.

In the final analysis, however, it must be stressed that:

Issues don't mean much to the voters of Meghalaya. Patronage democracy sees MLAs using their annual MLA Development Fund of Rs 2 crores, intended to create public assets such as sports fields, footpaths, water supply augmentation etc, to literally buying votes. The fund is used to buy tea and dinner sets, plastic chairs, water tanks, and other personal freebies that are distributed, especially on the eve of elections. One MLA even bought carpentry tools for his male constituents. If there is one area where a scam is brewing, it is in the purchase and distribution of corrugated galvanised iron (CGI) sheets. Purchases made by almost every legislator under the MLA fund shows that the major expenditure was incurred in buying bundles of CGI sheets. Whether the purchases are real or whether the money is rerouted through these companies to be distributed as cash to voters is something that needs investigation.

Issues, therefore, of unemployment, a broken education system, very poor or no access to healthcare, poor road infrastructure, an ailing power sector which results in power cuts several times a day in Shillong and for several weeks or even months in the rural outback are talking points only amongst city-based intellectuals. The majority of the people in the State are too fragmented to make their voices heard or things have not reached a tipping point for them.

In Meghalaya, people don't vote for parties or ideologies, but personalities. Political parties merely bring people together after the elections are over when government formation becomes the real business.

The incumbent Chief Minister, Dr Mukul Sangma, has approached this election on the plank of security, peace, and stability. While there is no denial that the eight-year term of Dr Sangma has brought an end to the era of bandhs and strikes and there has been political stability, which is a rarity in Meghalaya, an IED blast that killed Wiliamnagar NCP candidate Jonathone N Sangma on February 18 has shattered this peace and belied Dr Sangma's claims. While a general climate of peace has prevailed in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, the Garo Hills have seen several killings by the dreaded Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA) and its commander-in-chief, Sohan Shira, who is known to glide seamlessly between the borders of Meghalaya and Bangladesh and has been the most elusive rebel yet. He had given the slip to the Meghalaya Police countless number of times. Interestingly, Sohan Shira was killed ostensibly by the Special Force of Meghalaya Police on February 24. Sources said Shira was shot at from behind and that could only mean that he was killed by a trusted comrade. There is no sign of an encounter and that is mystifying because Sohan is known to have learnt to sense danger and shoot first rather than be shot. The sources claimed that Dristi Rajkhowa, whose real name is Manoj Rabha, of the ULFA (Independent) based in Myanmar, had been keeping close touch with Sohan for a joint operation. Rajkhowa is a tried hand and an IED expert and has not been in touch with the ULFA (I) chief Paresh Baruah since 1993. Sources believe that Rajkhowa has turned rogue and wants to rechristen GNLA so that it includes cadres from Lower Assam and then challenge Paresh Baruah's leadership. If this game plan materialises, Garo Hills, and the entire Meghalaya, may erupt yet again. This time it would require a dynamic leadership to tackle the menace.

Now, as Meghalaya votes its next government on February 27,) in Garo Hills, the mood is sombre. The NPP and the Congress will lock horns in most constituencies in the Garo Hills, whereas in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, the NPP, the Congress and the regional parties are expected to share the 36 seats in the ratio of 10:10:8, respectively, leaving the rest for smaller parties and Independents. But there is sense of foreboding that a hung assembly will bring in horse trading which will belie the hopes and aspirations of the people for a government that will serve their interests. Many voters expressed despair and cynicism about the much touted “change” that every political party promises. The question every voter is asking is: How can the same people fighting elections from different parties bring change? The question will be answered on February 27 when people vote, and the results on March 3 will show whether all voters share the despondency of the urban citizenry. Not a few have said they will vote NOTA to spite the political parties for putting up candidates that do not meet their approval and for fielding people with a known track record of corruption.

Whatever the outcome, a total of 370 candidates are in the fray, of which 32 are women. The Congress has fielded candidates in 59 seats (election in Williamnagar is countermanded due to the death of Jonathone Sangma, the NCP candidate). The BJP has put up candidates in 47 constituencies, NPP in 52 seats and the regional parties between them are contesting 42 seats. Most of the faces are tried and tested, hence the pessimism!

The prediction this time is that Meghalaya will have a hung assembly and no party will get an absolute majority. This is a rerun of past elections, barring 2013 when the Congress got 29 seats, two short of an absolute majority. Independents later supported the Congress in Government formation. This time around, it will be difficult for the Congress to mop up so many seats as it is also battling anti-incumbency after an eight-year rule.

Whichever way we look at it, politicians will continue to have a field day while for the large majority of people it will be back to business as usual post-March 3. Unless a new government brings with it some policy changes and public policy prescriptions that Meghalaya has lacked all these years! For decades, Meghalaya has functioned without any policy on all key areas of human development. There is no education,

health or youth policy, no tourism policy, or no IT policy. Successive governments have indulged in ad-hocism. Despite the ban on coal mining by the National Green Tribunal in 2014 on account of the environmentally destructive and humanly unsafe rat hole mining for want of a mining policy, the state is yet to come up with one. This should tell us how effective governance has been for the Mukul Sangma government. As someone rightly said, "We have been moving on auto-pilot."

Note:

The Shillong Times. 2018. "[Simmering Discontent Over Denial Of Visa To Christian Preacher From SA](#)", February 8. Last accessed February 26, 2018.