Electoral Dynamics in India: A Study of Nagaland

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Abstract

Since the 50’s, Nagaland has endured a relentless fluctuation between elevated violence and hopes of peace. The state has been besieged by decades of armed conflict and unrest over the Naga people’s right to self-determination which was invoked on the basis of their distinct identity and unique history. The Naga conflict began with India’s Independence in 1947. The Naga leaders not only resented the subdivision of their traditional homeland, without the consent and knowledge of the Naga people, between India and Burma by the British and Indian hands, but rebelled their incorporation with the new India nation state. When their demand was rejected by the Indian state, they headed for the jungles and started a guerrilla campaign for independence. In the face of unabated armed conflict, the Indian government to repress the movement typically responded with a reinvigorated security presence and operations.

Keywords: Nagaland, Electoral Dynamics

Introduction

Since the 50’s, Nagaland has endured a relentless fluctuation between elevated violence and hopes of peace. The state has been besieged by decades of armed conflict and unrest over the Naga people’s right to self-determination which was invoked on the basis of their distinct identity and unique history. The Naga conflict began with India’s Independence in 1947. The Naga leaders not only resented the subdivision of their traditional homeland, without the consent and knowledge of the Naga people, between India and Burma by the British and Indian hands, but rebelled their incorporation with the new India nation state. When their demand was rejected by the Indian state, they headed for the jungles and started a guerrilla campaign for independence. In the face of unabated armed conflict, the Indian government to repress the movement typically responded with a reinvigorated security presence and operations.

Rejecting the electoral system offered by the Indian state the Nagas boycotted the first and the second general elections held in 1952 and 1957 respectively. With the granting of statehood on 1st December 1963, the first election for the State Assembly was held in 1964. Politically, the state of Nagaland has witnessed all the major tendencies of the Indian electoral scene, such as, one party dominance, factionalism, defection politics, formation of coalition government, etc. One striking feature of electoral politics in Nagaland has been the phenomenon of constant defection and mergers among the different political parties. This phenomenon became pronounced since the Assembly election of 1974. This largely valid generalization is corroborated by the life span of the duly elected government in the state. For instance, the United Democratic Front (UDF) government which was voted to power after the Assembly election of 1974 lasted for thirteen months because of defection engineered by the Naga Nationalist Organisation (NNO). Similarly, in 1987 the 6th house of the Nagaland Legislative Assembly was prematurely dissolved as 13 MLA’s of the Congress (I) led by K.L.Chishi left the party. The political scenario that emerged thereafter in the Nagaland Legislative Assembly resulted in the dissolution of the assembly and imposition of Presidents Rule on 7th May, 1988. Again the Congress government that came to power after the election of 1989 did not last beyond fifteen months as 10 Congress dissident MLA’s joined forces with 24 Nagaland Peoples Council (NPC) MLA’s resulting in the formation of the United Legislature Party (ULP) headed by K.L. Chishi as the Chief Minister. This experiment lasted for twenty nine days as 17 NPC MLA’s defected and joined hands with the Congress (I) to form the Nagaland Peoples Front (JLP) under the leadership of Vamuzo.

The phenomenon of defection is in part due to the non-ideological character of many political parties in Nagaland, reflected in the way and magnitude of cross carpeting. Shifting alliances between opportunistic political leaders take place on a large scale especially prior to election in the state. There seems to be no stigma attached to party hoping (Maongsangba, 2007). However, pre-poll alliance and mergers between parties had been at best temporary. This dis-functionality of most political parties raises questions about the lack of integrity and public confidence in the outcome of elections.

A large number of political parties came into existence and disappeared at regular intervals. From 1964 till the 80’s, the political landscape of the state was dominated by regional parties such as the Naga Nationalist Organisation (NNO), United Democratic Front (UDF) and Naga National Democratic Party (NNDP). The Congress (I) has been able to dominate state politics for a long time (1982-2003). However, the Congress dominance came to an end after the Assembly Election of 2003, which brought the NPF led Democratic Alliance of Nagaland (DAN) coalition to power. The coalition continues till date.
The Assembly Election of 2003 is significant for many reasons. It not only introduced a factor of competition in the politics of the state so far hegemonised by the Congress but also created room for the entry of new political forces in the state such as the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), Janata Dal (United) (JD(U)), Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) and Samata Party (SAP). This election is also significant in the sense that for the first time the BJP, considered to be a Hindu nationalist party made its electoral debut by winning 7 seats in a predominantly Christian state of Nagaland. The BJP has been a partner of the DAN, a coalition headed by the NPF which dislodged the Congress from power in 2003 and subsequently retained power after 2008 election for the second straight term in the state. The anti-Congress xenophobia whipped up by political elements ably backed by a hostile NDA at the centre helped the BJP stamp its presence in the Nagaland assembly (Nagaland Post, Monday, June 8, 2009). Nagaland is the only state in the predominantly Christian Northeast state where the BJP has been able to make its presence felt since 2003. However the party has been ‘wiped out’ when in May 2009, the BJP legislature party led by the NPF, comprised two MLA’s merged with the ruling NPF.

Congress candidate for the 2009 by poll election from 17th Chizami assembly constituency, K. Therie, lashed out at the NPF led DAN Government for tying up with communal force to run the state government and urged the people to condemn the alliance, adding that Nagaland was a Christian state (Nagaland Post, 25th March, 2009). Increasing attacks on churches in different parts of India may have adverse impact on the party. Churches in Nagaland have also expressed serious concern over attacks on Christians. Since the state election of 2003, the main contenders for power appear to be the Congress and the NPF led Dan alliance partners.

Women and Political Participation

Another feature of state politics is that half of the population of the state is still left on the periphery of representative democracy. Women in Nagaland constitute almost half of the electorate of the state (47.82 %) and are more inclined to vote than their male counterparts (Table1), yet, they have failed to evolve an autonomous political identity. They have been able to establish their political visibility only as voters. In the electoral history of Nagaland, spanning a period of more than four decades there has been no woman member in the state legislature. The traditional institutions around which the Naga social and political life revolves have never recognized the rights of women as primary decision makers. For instance, the Naga Hoho considered as the apex decision-making body of the Naga people and represented by all the different Naga tribes does not have a woman representative till date. At the grassroots level, the Village Council is the highest decision making body. However, traditionally women are not allowed to participate in the decision making of the Village Council.

### Table 1: Gender Difference in Voting in Nagaland Assembly Election, 1969-2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Voters</th>
<th>Voters who Voted</th>
<th>Polling Percentage</th>
<th>Difference in Votes polled by male and female</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>93829</td>
<td>83102</td>
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<td>262772</td>
<td>582301</td>
<td>266033</td>
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<tr>
<td>1988-89</td>
<td>320611</td>
<td>261805</td>
<td>582416</td>
<td>273574</td>
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<td>1993</td>
<td>427450</td>
<td>387355</td>
<td>814805</td>
<td>387448</td>
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<td>123683</td>
<td>260646</td>
<td>110462</td>
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<td>2003</td>
<td>529517</td>
<td>485363</td>
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<td>2008</td>
<td>666391</td>
<td>635875</td>
<td>1302266</td>
<td>573021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>603831</td>
<td>589553</td>
<td>1193384</td>
<td>541919</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Women’s participatory behaviour and representation in the state remain constrained by many factors. Some of these are cultural, in a social environment that does not support the idea of women participation in politics. The Nagaland GB Federation (NGBF) demanding the state Government to withdraw the appointment of a woman GB under Dimapur district on the plea that it was contrary to the customary and traditional practices of the Nagas and the opposition by male councillors to the 33 per cent reservation of seats for women in local bodies – Municipal and Town Councils- on grounds of cultural rationales and unexamined assumptions serves as instances of men’s dominance, if not control over the political space for women. Some of the barriers are self-imposed, in that women simply lack the confidence, and interest to engage in politics. The other impediments are time and economic constraints and the prevailing political environment which has deteriorated in terms of ethics and values over the years (Moamenla, 2009). All these factors combine to define the functional boundaries of women’s mobility, freedom, and choice to engage in electoral activities.

**Difference between Assembly and Parliamentary Election in terms of issues and voters participation**

The dynamics and characteristics of political mobilization in the state remain almost similar for the elections to both the State Legislative Assembly and Lok Sabha in terms of issues that are generated during election campaigns. Local issues tend to dominate the electoral agenda of political parties contesting the Assembly and Parliamentary election. On a larger scale political mobilization frequently operate and are shaped by the dynamics of autonomy and identity affirmation centering on preservation of Naga identity. The trajectory of the articulation and assertion of the Naga identity is predicated on the affirmation of a distinct history, culture and religion apart from the mainstream culture. Such assertions develop given the popular perception about the influence of ‘others’ upon the socio-economic and cultural fabric of the people of state. These concerns have been reflected in the election manifesto of many political parties in the state. For instance, in its manifesto for the 2008 State Assembly Election, the NPF party assures the people of the state to tackle illegal migration so that the demographic composition of the state is not altered and affirms to protect and preserve the unique history, honor and identity of the Nagas.

These concerns have manifested into an identity syndrome. As such, all political parties in the state have taken up the issue of protection of Naga identity and culture. But these references are more in the nature of rhetorical flourishes. In many cases these are just ceremonial statements made by the political leaders to mobilize the voters (Pongsing). Having emotional content, political parties use the mobilisational potential of these issues.

However, on a larger scale, every election in Nagaland, whether Assembly or Parliamentary election has been dominated by the unresolved “Indo-Naga political issue”. This issue has been the centerpiece of all party manifestoes since the election of 1974. For instance, the Congress in its manifesto for 2008 Assembly election, states that it is totally committed for an early and lasting solution of the Naga political issue which is honorable, beneficial and acceptable to all sections of the Naga people. As envisaged in its constitution itself, the NPF party is committed to work and assist in any possible manner on any approach for a peaceful solution of the Indo-Naga issue (NPF manifesto, 2008). Similarly, ‘Peace, Progress and Development’ are the main objectives of the DAN Common Minimum Programme. The Common Minimum Programme is a pact of principles entered between the DAN alliance partners. It continues to be the anchor sheet of governance for the DAN Government since 6th March, 2003 till date. It was on this theme that its consensus candidate for the 2009 Parliamentary election, C.M.Chang, was elected as MP to the lone Lok Sabha seat from Nagaland. Any party which aspires to represent the state in the Parliament or State Legislature promises to resolve the vexed Naga issue in a bid to get voters support. They know that it is an emotive issue and everyone wants an early settlement.

Another issue that predominate elections in Nagaland is the question of Greater Nagaland or Nagalim. The Nagas live on both sides of the hilly border region between India and Burma – in the northeastern states of Nagaland,Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh – and in Burmas Sagaing Division and Kachin state (Baruah, 2003). On the issue of creating a single political unit or the unification of all Naga-inhabited areas, there seems to be an across the board consensus among political parties in the state to press for integration of Naga-inhabited areas with the rest of Nagaland. Even the Nagaland Assembly during the tenure of the NPF led DAN passed a resolution expressing support for integration of contiguous Naga inhabited areas on 18th December 2003. This issue is also being pushed by the NSCN (IM). The Naga political issue, integration of Naga-inhabited areas along with those of development dominated the electoral campaign in the state in the last Lok Sabha election of 2009. It is thus clear that in Nagaland, local issues largely eclipse national issue for both Assembly and Lok Sabha elections.
Coming to the issue of participation, in Nagaland, despite boycott calls by underground organizations, electoral exercise has experienced large voter turnout, exceeding the levels typical in several advanced western democracies (Tab 2). Having started at 50.61 per cent in the first Assembly election (held in 1964), turnout often rises above 90 per cent as in the Lok Sabha election of 2009, which recorded a turnout of 99.22 percent. The causes and factors for such abnormal voter turnout could be understood by the fact that proxy voting is so rampant that it has become the rule rather than the exception (Nagaland Post, Sunday, April 26, 2009). Electoral malpractices in the state take the form of proxy voting, voter intimidation, use of money, arms and violence. People have been known to cast votes for their entire family, a practice respected by both polling agents and election staffs. As per the National Election Study 2009, Nagaland Post Poll survey result, among the reasons given by the sample for not voting, 17.8 per cent did not exercise their franchise because someone had voted for them. This transgression undermines democratic norm of political liberty as electoral choices are made by proxy voters (Imtinaro). Where is democracy in the so called democratic electoral process when people are not given chance to elect their leaders (Neidonuo). Many voters are disenfranchised due to the practice of ‘one person unlimited votes’ (Arep Changkija). Against this background it becomes difficult to equate high turnout as a barometer of successful democratic exercise in Nagaland.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No of Electors</th>
<th>No of Electors who Voted</th>
<th>Polling Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>124166</td>
<td>62719</td>
<td>50.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
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<td>138658</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>400322</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>1193384</td>
<td>1080887</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


Unlike Assembly Election, Parliamentary Election in the state is always low key as far as people’s sense of participation is concerned. The underlying reason for this difference could be because a single MP is not able to do justice to such a large constituency of people. The entire State is taken as a single constituency and there is less chance of actually making an impact as far as the developmental needs of the people is concerned (Along Longkumer).

**Democratic Deficits**

The intrusion of money and violence into election campaign damages the quality of democracy (Shedler, 2002). Yet these are the other characteristic dimensions of campaign irregularities that one comes across in Nagaland. It is widely believed that elections in Nagaland are considered among the most expensive in the country. Candidates spend even to the extent of Rs.10 crore in some assembly constituencies and on an average Rs.5 crore in most constituencies (Nagaland Post, Tuesday, June 30, 2009). All too often, these illegal modes of electoral practice are manifest in explicit acts of vote buying and electoral violence. Issues are often subdued by money and the dispensation of favors by the candidates during election campaign. Some of the electorate sees payment of money for votes as reparation for public funds that politicians are assumed to have stolen. Some voters may succumb to campaign inducement due to poverty. For the poor campaign inducement becomes a sort of industry. The scale and pervasiveness of these abuses has created widespread public skepticism about all electoral exercises. Money power is supplemented by unbridled flagrancy in the use of arms by political thugs and party supporters inspite of a code of conduct committing political parties to non violence. Once the elections are over, there are instances where the armed cadres exact revenge on those who chose not to obey their dictat (Nagaland Post, April 16, 2009). This is one of the reasons why democratic elections in the state are held
under massive military presence to contain the outbreak of violence.

Therefore a large portion of the stress confronting the electoral process in Nagaland comes from the large scale illegal electoral manipulations. This fact alone negates the very principle of getting the right person to contest in elections and which invariably throws open the gates for people with dubious distinction (Nagaland Post, April 16, 2009). These trends set the stage for governance by corruption, vote’s people into elected office who are singularly unfit for public office and perpetuate social evils in the society. These kinds of electoral practices are responsible for all social chaos in the Naga society (Neidonu). A renowned scholar on Northeast similarly comments that corruption in Naga life has been the direct fallout of the introduction of electoral politics in the state (Misra, 1996).

Another feature that needs emphasis in any analysis of political mobilization in Nagaland is the influence and role of traditional political authorities on the nature and outcome of modern liberal multi-party democracy. The traditional institutions and organizations exist alongside modern institutions of governance. In a typical village election scenario a preliminary vote or a pre-arranged agreement takes place between village elders and political parties to select the consensus candidate to be supported by the entire village. Any defiance by anybody is met with strong reprimand (Along Longkumer). This decision is usually taken by the village council, by virtue of it being the highest decision making body at the village level. At times the council takes upon itself the responsibility of voting for the entire electorate under its jurisdiction (Amongla, 2009). In many instances the village elders decide the fate of the political candidate (Joshua). Politicians seeking elected office need endorsement of the traditional authorities making little progress towards consolidating representative democracy.

Insurgent Movement And Electoral Politics

Naga insurgent groups have traditionally opposed participation in elections. However, reports of insurgent groups having influenced the outcome of electoral politics have dominated popular discourse in the state. The existence of these two parallel discourses- separatist politics and electoral politics- which at many points converge brings up a lot of questions. Indeed in some ways insurgencies themselves have become incorporated into the democratic political process. Good political reports of the Northeast know the precise role that insurgent factions play in elections or the ties that these factions have with particular mainstream politicians (Baruah, 2002,p 179). Nagaland is no exception to this problem. A lot of charges and countercharges of the faction’s involvement in the election have been raised from various quarters. Political parties have a complex relationship with all factions of the Naga insurgency and articulate, as occasion demands, the agenda of Naga nationalism (Prabhakara, 2004). Politicians often attempt to use them for their own political gains vice versa. Pervasive corruption also leads politicians to cultivate ties with insurgent groups. They, like others with a reputation of making illegal money, consider it prudent to try to keep the insurgent groups happy by sharing parts of their illicit income with them (Baruah, 2002,p182). Without the help of politicians in power, insurgents in Manipur, Nagaland wouldn’t have been able to carry out daylight extortions from goods-carrying trucks on highways. Insurgents obviously need friendly politicians in power (The Tribune, 2009). This alleged nexus leads to the siphoning off of development funds. Corruption has increased due to Government of India’s policy of financial liberalism in order to buy peace in the state. Another instance where mainstream politics and insurgent movement overlap is that solution to the Naga political problem is pursued by both. So long as the political issue is not settled both politicians and some insurgents stand to benefit from the persistence of the conflict.

Conclusion

Politically, the state of Nagaland has witnessed all the major tendencies of the Indian electoral scene, such as, one party dominance, factionalism, defection politics, formation of coalition government, etc. The phenomenon of defection which is a striking feature of electoral politics in the state is in part due to the non-ideological character of many political parties in Nagaland, reflected in the way and magnitude of cross carpeting. Women electorates have failed to evolve an autonomous political identity despite the fact that they tend to vote more than the male electorate. Further, on a larger scale political mobilization frequently operate and are shaped by the dynamics of autonomy and identity affirmation centering on preservation of Naga identity. These issues remain almost similar for the elections to both the State Legislative Assembly and Lok Sabha. Unlike Assembly Election, Parliamentary Election in the state is always low key as far as people’s sense of participation is concerned and the state also witnesses many of the electoral deficits that occur in other states. Electoral malpractices in the state take the form of proxy voting, voter intimidation, use of money, arms and violence. Reports of insurgent groups having influenced the outcome of electoral politics have often dominated popular discourse in the state.

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