

*Commentary*

## **Mizoram Assembly Election 2023: Bucking Bipolarity and Regurgitating Ethnicity and Governance**

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The recent Mizoram assembly election gave a clear verdict in favour of the Zoram People's Movement (ZPM), a third political force in the state, against the conventional binary electoral politics centred on the Mizo National Front (MNF) and the Congress. While the incumbent MNF government, in its last leg of the tenure, clinched on new wave of ethno-regionalism to beat the perceptible anti-incumbency, the Congress tried to regain its lost electoral space promising efficient, transparent and corruption-free governance. The BJP unleashed a high-voltage campaign, but its outreach mostly confined to smaller ethnic minorities like the Chakmas and Maras than the dominant Christian Mizo ethnic community. Despite all these, ZPM's promise of good governance with the slogan of "vote for a change, give this new party a chance" won the mandate of the electorate, both in rural and urban areas of the state. However, fulfilling its promises would be a daunting task.

**Keywords:** Northeast India, Mizo National Front, Zoram People's Movement, Bharatiya Janata Party, Ethnic Politics.

### **Introduction**

The verdict of the ninth Mizoram assembly election 2023 sets new trends in the state politics. It ended the bipolarity of electoral politics and shifted the mantle of political power swing either for the Congress or the Mizo National Front (MNF) since the formation of the state in 1987. In the high-voltage electoral campaign unleashed by the three-cornered contest of the ruling MNF, the opposition Congress and the newly emerged regional outfit Zoram People's Movement (ZPM), the second highest literate state in India witnessed around 80% of voter turnout in the polling held on 7 November 2023 to all the 40 assembly constituencies. The counting was postponed to one more day as the Mizoram Kohhran Hruaitute Committee (MKHC), a conglomerate of major church leaders in the state, demanded deferring the counting day from 3 December (which is Sunday) to Monday, as Sunday is the day of worship and prayers.

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The electoral verdict indicates the fading ethno-regionalist image of the MNF, the diminishing electoral presence of the Congress and shifting loyalty of the electorate to a third alternative. Although MNF is part of the North East Democratic Alliance and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at the centre, and extends its support to the Union government, it contested all seats without alliance with the BJP in the state. While the incumbent MNF government tried to beat the anti-incumbency wave projecting it as the protagonist of Mizo–Zo unification in the last leg of its government and during the election campaign, the MNF fell in the strong anti-incumbency wave which swept in the state. The incumbent chief minister Zoramthanga was defeated in the Aizawl East constituency, and 11 ministers, who contested in the election, too lost due the wave of ZPM. Although the Congress tried to regain its prominence in the hilly state with its high-voltage campaign, it ended with a dismal record of seats. The BJP, though projected to emerge as a kingmaker in the possibility of hung assembly, reduced its vote share compared to the previous assembly election. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which contested the election for the first time, hoping to get some dividends with its campaigns and newspaper advertisements, failed to make its presence felt.

Promising change and a new system of good governance with the slogan of “vote for a change, give this new party a chance”, the ZPM tide over the popular mandate. The ZPM won 27 seats with a vote share of 37.86%, the ruling MNF won 10 seats with 35.10% votes, the BJP secured two seats with 5.06%, while the Congress party won only one seat with a vote share of 20.82%. In the 2018 assembly election, the MNF won 27 seats with a vote share of 37.7% against the incumbent Congress, which secured only four seats with a vote share of 29.98%. Although much hype was created throughout the electioneering, the BJP could win only one seat and secured 8.09% of the vote share. In fact, the real challenge to the Congress and the MNF, to a lesser extent, came from the multitude of independent candidates who won eight seats with a vote share of 22.94%.

### **Performance of Parties in the Mizoram Assembly Election 2023**

<b>Parties</b>	<b>No. of Seats Won</b>	<b>Vote Share(in %)</b>
Zoram People’s Movement	27	37.86
Mizo National Front	10	35.10
Bharatiya Janata Party	2	5.06
Indian National Congress	1	20.82
Aam Aadmi Party	0	0.9
Others	0	0.68

Source: Election Commission of India, <https://www.eci.gov.in/>

### **Emergence of ZPM**

One of the significant developments in the 2023 election is the emergence of ZPM as the major political force in the state ruled by the Congress and MNF. ZPM won in both urban and rural areas. It won all the 16 seats in the capital city Aizawl, and all

the four seats in the second most populous district, Lunglei. The ZPM was originally formed in 2017 after the merger of seven political parties – Zoram Nationalist Party (ZNP), Mizoram People’s Conference (MPC), Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), Zoram Exodus Movement (ZEM), Zoram Decentralization Front (ZDF), Zoram Reformation Front (ZRF), and Mizoram People’s Party (MPP). It emerged as the new epitome of ethno-regionalism and votary of alternative governance. However, in 2020, the ZNP left the ZPM for its alleged “dictatorial style” of functioning. In 2018 election, though ZPM was not a recognised party, it won eight seats thereby replacing the Congress as the major opposition party in the assembly. The ZPM became a recognised party in 2019. On 29 March 2023, in the election to the Lunglei Municipal Council (LMC), the second urban civic body after the Aizawl Municipal Council, the ZPM won 11 wards with a vote share of 49.31%. The MNF got only 29.4% votes, while the Congress 20% and the BJP merely 0.75%. In April, the ZPM won all the seven seats in the bye-election to the Zemabawk local council. The election to the LMC is considered as the prelude to the performance of ZNP in the assembly election.

In 2023 assembly election, ZPM fielded mostly newcomers giving seats to prominent personalities, media owners, ex-bureaucrats, footballer, gospel singer, etc. It mobilised youths, ex-bureaucrats, and civil society organisations (CSOs) as a third force both in rural and urban areas. ZPM promised a “new system of government” with corruption-free governance and inclusive development, educational reforms, health care, and to revive the rural farm economy in the state offering remunerative prices for agricultural products by guaranteeing minimum support price (MSP) for ginger, turmeric, chilli and broom grass.

In the bipolarised electoral politics dominated by Zoramthanga of the MNF and Lal Thanhawla of the Congress, the emergence of Lalduhoma as a mass leader is a reckoning development in the state. Lalduhoma, the former IPS officer of 1977 batch who quit the job and joined Congress in 1984, got elected to Lok Sabha as a Congress candidate. However, in 1988, he was disqualified under the anti-defection law, the first MP to be disqualified, after he resigned from the Congress. In 2003, Lalduhoma contested election as the candidate of the ZNP founded by him, and got elected as MLA. In 2018 election, he was elected as an independent and later got actively associated with the MNF. In 2020, 12 MNF MLAs filed a complaint against his switching over to ZPM and he was disqualified by the assembly speaker Lalrinliana Sailo. In 2021, Lalduhoma won as ZPM candidate in the Serchhip bye election. In 2023 election, Lalduhoma won by 2982 votes in Serchhip constituency. Contesting the MNF’s claims of Mizo–Zo unification, Lalduhoma asserted that ZPM as a true regional party protecting Mizo nationalism. Accusing the MNF of diluting its identity by joining with NDA in Delhi, Lalduhoma, time and again promised that ZPM won’t join the NDA.

### **MNF’s Failed Bid to Construct Ethnic Solidarity**

During the MNF regime, the state witnessed growing unemployment, lack of doctors, and corruption in developmental schemes, increasing flow of drugs into the state, cross-border and narco-terrorist activities. The boundary dispute between Assam and

Mizoram resulted in violent clashes in July 2021. All these added further burden on the party during the election. Closer to the election, the MNF government constituted a five-member study committee to look into the possibility of reintroducing the Old Pension Scheme in a bid to woo the government employees. Sensing the strong anti-incumbency wave sweeping the state and the belligerent campaign unleashed by ZPM, the MNF, clinching on its ethnic sacrifices for reasserting ethno-regional sentiment, invoked the MNF movement's legacy in the state. The party often claimed that it was "baptized with martyrs' blood". Zoramthanga once observed that "many martyrs' cemeteries all across the state are a manifestation of the MNF fighting for independence of Mizos and no other party has such sacrifice for the cause of the Mizos". However, realising that the old ethno-regional sentiment may not yield much electoral dividends, the MNF championed the cause of Mizo-Zo unification. It vigorously supported the cause of broader ethnic identity—Kuki, Zomi, Hmar, Chin (Myanmar), Kuki-Chin (Bangladesh) communities—as they share same ancestry, culture and tradition across the borders. MNF, time and again, asserted that it was building cross-border ethnic bonds between communities, especially the Zo community. Its manifesto promised the unification of Mizo-Zo people under one administration; one government with higher authority in accordance with the UN's 2007 Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous People.

As a border state Mizoram shares 510 km and 318 km long international borders with Myanmar and Bangladesh, respectively. Hence, migration and refugee issues often figure in the body politic and during the polls. Many political parties in the state compete with each other to project them as new saviours of refugees coming from these two neighbouring nations. Recently Mizoram government gave asylum to about 33,000 Chin people from Myanmar. It needs to be mentioned that Chins and Kuki-Chins are ethnically related to the majority Mizos of Mizoram. Due to civil war and military coup in Myanmar in February, the state witnessed refugee migration to the state. Moreover, there has been refugee migration from Bangladesh, especially from neighbouring Chittagong Hill Tracts. During the recent ethnic clashes in the neighbouring Manipur, many Kuki-Zomi people took asylum in Mizoram. Most of them were accommodated in relief camps in Aizawl, Kolasib and Saitual. It is estimated that out of 40 assembly constituencies in the state, 18 have witnessed refugee migration from Manipur. The MNF reminded that it had declined the Union government's directive to collecting biometric data of refugees from Myanmar in the state and deporting them, instead provided them asylum and rehabilitation citing humanitarian cause, thereby strengthening ethnic bonds between Mizo and Zo communities. As Joy Pachuau argued the MNF government's refusal to collect biometric data of Myanmarese refugees taps into that sentiment for electoral gains.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the MNF's stand for ethno solidarity was motivated by the belligerent stand of the Young Mizo Association (YMA) and the Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP).

Contesting the opposition charges of aligning with the NDA at the Centre and allowing the BJP for propagating Hindu nationalist politics and thereby diluting Mizo nationalism, the MNF asserted that it was critical of the Union government's move to implement the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) and reiterated its commitment to the

protection of Article 371 (G) of the constitution. It reminded that the MNF opposed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and later supported it after Mizoram was exempted from its purview. Further, the MNF government refuted the charges of financial mismanagement arguing that the government's activities during COVID-19 has helped the country to emerge out of economic slowdown.

### **Congress' Unprecedented Setback**

In spite of the high-voltage campaign unleashed by the Congress under Rahul Gandhi, the verdict dashed the hope of the party to regain power in the state. Its tally went down to one from four in the last assembly election, though it secured 20.82% vote share. The Congress, during the campaign, hinged on its legacy of the Mizo Peace Accord (signed during the Rajiv Gandhi government on 30 June 1986) and its commitment to the people of the state, especially protecting Article 371(G) of the Constitution. The party accused the BJP of distorting the cultural values of the Christian-dominated state through pushing its Hindutva agenda, and alleged MNF and ZPM as the masks of BJP helping it to make inroads into the state.

The Congress accused the MNF of failure to fulfill its promise of jobs to youth, rampant corruption and trailing infrastructure development throughout its campaign. The MNF's flagship programme of Socio-Economic Development Programme (SEDP) once helped it beat the Congress government's New Land Use Policy (NLUP), but back staking the party in course of time as it faces corruption. The Congress contended that the SEDP is an inflated version of its NLUP launched in January 2011. It promised efficient, transparent and corruption-free governance. The party in its manifesto promised Rs.15 lakh health insurance, old age pension scheme, subsidised LPG and creating one lakh jobs. However, the verdict proved that the emergence of ZPM as a third political force cut its vote share, and the party was not able to retain its social constituencies and youth both in urban and rural areas. Replacing Lal Thanhawla, former chief minister, who dominated in the state as the Congress face, with Lalsawta, who was projected as the chief ministerial candidate, did not also evoke much enthusiasm among the new voters.

### **BJP's Lateral Entry**

Despite the fanfare and contesting 23 seats, the BJP could won only two seats—Saiha and Palak—in the minority Mara ethnic community dominated constituencies. Moreover, the party could not retain the lone Tuichawng constituency dominated by the Chakma minority ethnic community. It needs mention that the BJP opened its account in the Mizoram assembly for the first time in 2018 election when its candidate Buddha Dhan Chakma defeated the nearest MNF candidate Rasik Mohan Chakma by a margin of 1594 votes in Tuichawng constituency of Lawngtlai district. In the Tuichawng constituency, the only assembly constituency under the Chakma Autonomous District Council (CADC), the sitting Congress legislator Buddha Dhan Chakma quit the Congress and later joined BJP. Like many other states of the Northeast, where BJP does not have popular leaders, it could lure leaders from the ruling party and fielded them in the election as its candidates. Moreover, the BJP adopted a strategy of co-opting the dissidents from other political parties. It largely

drew candidates from MNF and other smaller parties. The BJP got Lalrinliana Sailo, the former speaker and MNF leader and fielded him as its candidate. Closer to the election, another MLA from the ruling MNF, K. Beichhua, resigned and joined BJP. The BJP gave ticket to T. Lalenthanga, who was the former MNF advisor. BJP appointed Kiren Rijiju as election-in-charge of Mizoram and managed electoral campaign by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Union cabinet ministers like Amit Shah and Rajnath Singh, and its prominent leaders. It heavily relied on the Union government's role in the development of the state, especially rail, road and air connectivity. The BJP's manifesto promised drug-free Mizoram, drug de-addiction programmes, women empowerment, providing free quality education to all girl students from KG to PG, reserving 33% government jobs for women and providing cumulative financial assistance of Rs. 1.5 lakh for every girl child. Countering the MNF's SEDP, and previous Congress government's NLUP, the BJP promised Livelihood Opportunity Transformation and Upliftment Scheme (LOTUS), as the social welfare scheme. Countering the Congress claim as the architect of peace in the state signing Mizo Peace Accord, Rajnath Singh, the Union Defence Minister, in a rally at Tipa in Saiha district of Southern Mizoram reminded the people of Mizoram of air strikes in 1960s during the insurgency by the Congress government at the Centre.<sup>2</sup>

Although the BJP could won two seats in spite of the anti-BJP sentiment in the state due to the effect of Manipur ethnic violence, its vote share went down by 5.06% from its 2018 election vote share of 8.09%. It is to be recalled that in the 2018 assembly election, the BJP fielded 39 candidates in the state in contrast to 17 seats which it contested in 2013. The electoral verdict further underlines that the BJP outreach is mostly among smaller ethnic minorities like the Chakmas and Maras, and it is still far away from the dominant Christian Mizo ethnic community.

## **Conclusion**

In the context of Northeast, many ethno-regional parties pushed ethno-regionalist agenda over development and governance, which made them unpopular over time. The ZPM, on the other hand, crafted the strategy of combining ethnicity, development and governance. However, fulfilling ZPM's ethno-regional commitment depends on its government's approach to the settlement of refugees coming from Bangladesh and Myanmar, and compliance on the Centre's decision for their detention and deportation. Another daunting task before the ZPM government is to address the worsening economic situation in the state, as evident from the Reserve Bank of India's report on state governments' budgets for 2022–23, which says that Mizoram's debt-to-GDP ratio is the highest in the country at 53.1%, followed by Punjab (48%) in the second position. Moreover, Mizoram has among the highest Union transfers to revenue receipts ratio in the country. In a state where 85.7% of the revenue coming from the Union, fulfilling the promise of development and governance depends on Lalduhoma government's approach to the ruling BJP at the centre. Further, generating employment opportunities, satisfying the aspiration of the youth and ensuring good governance, its engagement with the often belligerent CSOs, which mostly indulge in virulent ethnic activism in the state, are important. Finally, fulfilling the promise of alternative

governance critically depends on its commitment to tackling the recurring boundary disputes and clashes with Assam and Meghalaya.

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Pachau, Joy L.K (2023): “Riding the Kinship Wave”, *The Indian Express*, available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/mizoram-national-front-and-the-politics-of-cross-border-kinship-8967182/>

<sup>2</sup> See “Rajnath Urges Kukis, Meiteis to build trust through dialogue”, *The Hindu*, available at: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2023/nov/01/rajnath-singh-urges-kukis-meiteis-of-manipur-to-have-heart-to-heart-conversation-2629075.html>