

## Electoral Reform: A Lesson from Mizoram People Forum (MPF)

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### Abstract

*In order to enforce effective voting system, the Election Commission of India has issued a model code of conduct for political parties and the candidates at the time of election. The first model code had been circulated at the time of the fifth general elections held in 1971. Since then the code has been revised from time to time to come up with the changing political situation of the time. The code of conduct has laid down the guidelines as to how political parties and the candidates should conduct themselves during elections for the implementation of free and fair polls. Despite the acceptance of the model code of conduct by political parties, the cases of the violation of the code of conduct are on the increase. Hence, electoral reform continues to be one of the most important issues in Indian politics. This paper analyses the origin, organizational set-up and the interesting role of the MPF for implementing electoral reform in the State of Mizoram. The conformity of Election Model Code of Conduct and the activities of the MPF is also discussed.*

**Key words:** Election, Mizoram People Forum, Electoral reform, Model code of conduct.

Today, it is no exaggeration to state that conducting elections has become more critical and election related issues happen to be the most burning topics in national and state politics. As the largest democratic country in the world, election occupies an important place in Indian political system, so election at all levels cannot be neglected for the successful functioning of democratic system. If we look at the Constitution of India, it attaches great importance to elections by making an independent powerful body known as Election Commission of India in Article

324 to conduct free and fair election at Parliamentary and State Assembly elections (MP, MLA) as well as the election of President and Vice President of India. Even at the State level elections like municipal council, autonomous district council, panchayat and village council, an autonomous body known as State Election Commission (SEC) is functioning in different states. If we look at the elections in India, the major defects which come in the path of electoral system in India are money power, muscle power, criminalization of politics, poll violence,

booth capturing, communalism, casteism, non-serious and independent candidates etc. In fact, all these bad things today have become the features of election politics in various parts of the country.

Elections are the most important and integral part of politics in a democratic system of governance. While politics is the art and practice of dealing with political power, election is a process of legitimization of such power. Democracy can indeed function only upon this faith that elections are free and fair and not rigged and manipulated, that they are effective instruments of ascertaining popular will both in reality and in form and are not mere rituals calculated to generate illusion of difference to mass opinion. It cannot survive without free and fair elections. The first three general elections (1952-1962) were free and fair, but, the standard of elections seemed to decline in negative ways from the fourth general elections in India. The distortion of electioneering process appeared for the first time in the fifth general elections in 1971. After some candidates and political parties started to appear in the elections so as to win them at all costs, our electoral system suffered from various shortcomings. Several unfair practices during elections have now become a tradition in election politics in many states of India. In fact, several loopholes in the election system are the breeder of the so called political corruption in our country.

Mizoram, the 23<sup>rd</sup> State of India, located in the North Eastern part of India

bordering Myanmar and Bangladesh, has a peculiar characteristic about elections. Compared to many other States in the country, the voters in Mizoram witness very cool and free atmosphere during elections since the first electoral activities took place. Despite the State having insurgency around 20 years (1966-1986), the electoral activities particularly MLA and MP elections were not much disturbed by the long insurgency. The elections in Mizoram are free and fair compared to other States in various ways though the State is not at all free from other problems.

#### **Origin of MPF**

Since the first Assembly elections in 1972, the largest denomination in Mizoram i.e. the Mizoram Presbyterian Church Synod has made a serious appeal to the public in every election in Mizoram for conducting free and fair election. The people of Mizoram had attached great importance to the election guidelines issued by the Mizoram Presbyterian Church in the earlier times. In these election guidelines, the Church requested the political parties to put up honest and upright people with high standing in the society as candidates. Even the political parties had been requested to organize peaceful election campaigns and to refrain from buying votes, giving unrealistic promises and other illegal means. Simultaneously, the Church also strongly requested the people not to sell their votes and to exercise their franchise freely and without fear. Moreover, Mizoram Presbyterian Church used to organise

seminars and political education campaign through one of its wings, namely, the Synod Social Front at various places of Mizoram. The Synod Social Front is the committee set up by the Mizoram Presbyterian Church Synod, to strengthen and widen the Ministry of the Church especially in the Society. And right from the time of its inception, the political education programme has been followed up keenly and effectively for the purpose for which the Synod Social Front was set up. However, it was realised that all these activities of the Mizoram Presbyterian Church were not effective enough for the public since the 2003 State Assembly elections of Mizoram.

The unusual electioneering activities that took place in 2003 Legislative Assembly Election where indirect involvement of certain armed groups was said to be detected for the first time by the media and there was also rampant use of money which automatically led to huge election expenditure. Even the people of Mizoram were largely surprised when Suangpuilawn kidnap incident occurred in which some candidates of Suangpuilawn constituency were kidnapped before the polls in 2003 Assembly polls. In view of the emergence of various untoward incidences which erupted in 2003 State Assembly election of Mizoram, the Synod Social Front prepared questionnaires to study the view and attitude of public regarding the said election. The answers of 3480 questionnaire collected from 84 pastorate circles had revealed that the atmosphere of election politics in

Mizoram was not fair enough like before and it deteriorated since 2003 elections. The Synod Social Front also carried out a serious study on other election related matters and tried to introduce reform in electoral politics so as to bring solution the arising problems.

As the Synod Executive Committee (SEC) agreed cooperation with different civil societies and churches to reform the political system in Mizoram, the responsibility was given to the Synod Social Front. The Synod Social Front organised consultations and discussions with other voluntary associations, civil societies and churches; and all agreed that it was necessary to form non-political social reform body for initiating campaign and awareness for conduct of free and fair election. Finally, at their fifth meeting, the leaders of different civil societies and churches in Mizoram had unitedly formed Mizoram People Forum popularly known as MPF on 21st, June, 2006. Even though, MPF is established under the initiative of Presbyterian Church of India (PCI), Mizoram Synod, there are also other church associations and civil societies as affiliate members of the forum. The MPF has eleven Constituent members and six Associate members. The Constituent members are also the founding members of the MPF.

They are as follows:

- i) Mizoram Presbyterian Church Synod.
- ii) Catholic Church, Mizoram.

- iii) Wesleyan Methodist Church.
- iv) Evangelical Church of Maraland, Saiha.
- v) Evangelical Free Church of India.
- vi) Lairam Isua Krista Kohhran (Lairam Jesus Christ Church).
- vii) Young Mizo Association.
- viii) Mizoram Upa Pawl (Elder's Association).
- ix) Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl (Largest Women's Association in Mizoram).
- x) M.T.P Headquarters, Saiha (Mara Youth Association).
- xi) Young Lai Association (YLA) Headquarters, Lawngtlai.

The following organizations are the Associate members of the MPF:

- i) Mizoram Young Chakma Association, Chawngte.
- ii) Mizoram Chakma Student Union.
- iii) Mizoram ChakmaMahilaSamiti.
- iv) Mizoram Buddhist Association.
- v) B.R.K Headquarters, Chawngte (Buddhist Association).
- vi) M.CH.P Headquarters, Saiha (Mara Women's Association).

Unfortunately, some Church organizations in the State like the Salvation Army, the Seventh Day Adventist, United Pentecostal Church-Mizoram, United Pentecostal Church-North East India and the Baptist Church

of Mizoram have not joined the MPF. Among them, the Baptist Church of Mizoram has the second largest number of members in Mizoram and is the most influential and strongest Church organization in the Southern part of Mizoram so their absence in the MPF is certainly weak point for the smooth functioning of the MPF especially in the Southern part of the State. All of them opted to remain out of the MPF and its activities since the establishment of the MPF till date.

#### **Structure & Objectives of MPF**

The MPF has been registered under the Mizoram Societies Registration Act, 2005 (Act No.13 of 2005) as a registered body. It is also desirable to highlight that more than 80 percent of the population in Mizoram are members of the MPF by virtue of their membership in the church, civil societies and voluntary associations.

The major areas focussed by the MPF are electoral reforms, political education, good governance and awareness. Hence, the MPF strongly opposes nepotism, favouritism, criminalization of politics and corruption in administration. In order to achieve its aim and objectives, the MPF has done the following activities such as, organising seminars and conferences at the State level, conducting trainers' training programmes, organising seminars and awareness programmes in all districts of the State and consultation with all political parties of the State for the implementation of free and fair polls in Mizoram. The **goals and objectives** of the MPF are as follows:

- (1) To work towards establishing democratic government through free and fair elections.
- (2) To reform the electoral process and do away with the corrupt and malpractices in the electoral system in the State.
- (3) To put in place a transparent, accountable and responsible government.
- (4) To educate the people on the governance issue and make them responsible citizens.
- (5) To guide and advise the government on developmental issues.
- (6) To conduct social audits for the social reforms.
- (7) To counter any form of violence, use of arms and terrorism.

The organisational structure of MPF has properly been set-up in the following stratum, such as, Headquarters, District Forums, Constituency Forum (MLA Constituency) and Local Forums. Its headquarter is located at Aizawl the capital of Mizoram and it is also known as the Central Forum. There are twelve (12) Office Bearers in the headquarters of MPF, namely, President, Senior Vice President, three Vice Presidents, General Secretary, Secretary, three Joint Secretaries, Treasurer and Finance Secretary. Besides, there are also 18-Governing Board Members and 5-Advisers in the headquarters. There are District Forums in all Revenue Districts and Autonomous

District Councils except Aizawl and Lunglei District, because Aizawl can be effectively mobilised and organised by the Central Forum, however in the case of Lunglei, the largest church association of the district, namely, Baptist Church of Mizoram (BCM) is not a constituent member of the Forum. There are now seven District Forums of MPF in Mizoram and the District Forum also has Office Bearers and Executive Committee Members. Constituency Forum is supposed to be established in every constituency of MLA especially in times of MLA election to enforce the guidelines of MPF but it cannot be established in all constituencies of MLA. Local Forums set-up in every village and locality all over Mizoram is the grassroots unit of the MPF. The Local Forums of MPF are established in all Village Council jurisdictional area as well as Local Council jurisdictional areas (in the City) and more than one Local Forum can be established in big villages as well as large areas of Local Council. It is interesting to note that all constituent members of the MPF have been accommodated in the Office Bearer Posts as well as Governing Board Membership in the Forum. As the Forum is a non-political body, office bearers as well as executive members at every level starting from the grassroots level i.e. Local Forum up to the apex layer i.e. Headquarters are strictly forbidden to become primary member of any political party. Hence, any office bearer or executive committee member who joins a political party is automatically suspended from the MPF.

With regard to membership of MPF, Church Association can become constituent member with payment of Rs.1000 while the Civil Societies and Voluntary Associations can become constituent members with the payment of Rs.500 to the MPF Headquarters. Even individual from non-constituent bodies can personally become member with the payment of Rs.100. However, as stated above, the MPF has strictly monitored its leaders at various levels to be a non-political body as well as a non-political forum working for the well being of the society and state especially for the implementation of free and fair elections at various level elections and good governance in the State of Mizoram.

After its establishment, the MPF convened an All-Party meeting and invited the major political parties in Mizoram on September 25, 2006. In the meeting, leaders of the political parties gave advice and suggestions for the functioning of MPF. Even the party leaders expressed their views about the election expenditure and stated that election expenditures had now become considerably high. The expenditures incurred during election campaigns, mainly for organizing public meetings, feasts, posters, banners, house to house campaigns etc became a great burden for the candidates of all political parties. So, if this trend continued in the electoral process it would be very difficult for some candidates to campaign for elections with such high election expenditure. Therefore, the political parties stated that the MPF must stop such

events and occurrences like buying of votes, public feasts, house to house campaigns, providing transportation for voters, hiring singers and other entertainers, excessive use of flags, posters and banners etc, which amounts to high expenditure during elections. Various suggestions and advice from the leaders of political parties were seriously taken up by the MPF and Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was drafted on the basis of the views and opinions of the political leaders, an agreement was reached and a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between the MPF and major political parties. Finally, the MPF and political parties held another joint meeting and completed the final draft of Election Guidelines on April 30, 2008. And the Memorandum of Understanding became the main principle and the basis of the activities of the MPF and election guidelines till date. And we should not forget that the Election Guidelines is prepared in keeping the Election Model Code of Conduct issued by the Election Commission of India, the legal, social and moral aspects, as well as the sentiments of the general public of the State.

#### **MPF & Model Code of Conduct**

The Election Model Code of Conduct is a comprehensive book of guidelines which is to be followed by political parties, candidates, officials and the public and violation of Model Code of Conduct (MCC) is punishable by the Election Commission of India, even censure from the Election Commission of

India (ECI). The Election Model Code of Conduct had been drawn up based on the People's Representative Act, 1951 for free and fair elections. With the announcement of the date of elections by the Election Commission of India, be it MLA or MP elections, the Election Model Code of Conduct comes into force with effect from that day. As already mentioned above, violation of the Model Code of Conduct attract disapproval and punishment from the Election Commission of India. Indeed, the ECI asks the Center and State governments, the political parties and candidates to observe the Model Code of Conduct. This Code of Conduct is expected to restrict and control the behaviour of contesting candidates and political parties in their campaigns and performances to capture voters during elections. The Center and State governments are also clearly given the notice of what to do and what not to do. But, in our present context, the Election Model Code of Conduct set by the ECI does not appear to be effective enough for the implementation of free and fair elections. Today's elections see that the wealthy and powerful candidates mostly survive, and any candidate contesting the elections with less financial and manpower resources hardly wins the elections. This means the personality and vision of the Candidates may not be given priority while casting the votes.

The MPF called a meeting with all political parties to discuss what the parties themselves wanted towards a free, fair and inexpensive election. Among the many

issues discussed was, as already highlighted above, the abandonment of house to house campaigns and entertainment programmes like organising concerts and road shows employing singers to attract the crowds. These two things take the lion's share of the election budget of the candidates, and political parties believed that if all agreed to discontinue these practices, which seem to be traditional practices in various elections, then the expenditure for elections would come down considerably. The MPF also wanted that all public meetings be conducted by their local forums which function at village and city locality levels to ensure that no-political party has advantage over another political party at any public rally. The MPF even discouraged public feasts to attract the voters. In the beginning, this seemed to cause more problems for MPF than the political parties who accused one another of preparing feasts even if it was only meant for party members at block and unit level conferences. However, what the MPF is trying to discourage is the community feasts funded by candidates of the area for the general masses.

Alongside the Election Commission of India's Code of Conduct, the church issued its own code to help prevent practices which could hamper the smooth and free atmosphere of elections in Mizoram, like door to door campaigns, organising community feasts, use of loud-speakers and musical bands. The MPF even put out guidelines describing an "ideal candidate" as somebody upright

and free from corruption and alcoholism. In Mizoram, around 60 per cent of the total population adheres to the influential Presbyterian Church that backs MPF.

#### **Evaluation of the MPF**

The function of MPF is deeply appreciated and welcomed by different political parties, churches, civil societies, State Government and the citizens of Mizoram. Since its establishment, many awareness programmes for political reforms like seminar, consultation and trainers' training have often been conducted in various places of Mizoram by MPF. No doubt, these MPF programmes have imparted ethical values and political integrity to the people of Mizoram. Further, the MPF consulted leaders of various political parties on the eve of elections and concluded acceptable agreements with them for conducting free and fair elections. Starting from Tlungvel MLA by-election-2006, it is evident that election at different levels, namely, MP, MLAs, Autonomous District Council, Municipal Council, Local Council and Village Council could be smoothly conducted in Mizoram and that this was made possible mainly due to the painstaking efforts of the MPF. The contributions of MPF in various elections for electoral reform in Mizoram shall be highlighted as given below:

- Tlungvel Assembly Constituency Bye Election, held on October 30, 2006.
- Mara Autonomous District Council (MADC) Elections 2007 & 2012.

- Chakma Autonomous District Council elections 2008 & 2013.
- Mizoram Legislative Assembly elections, 2008 & 2013.
- Lai Autonomous District Council (LADC) Election, 2010.
- Lok Sabha Elections Mizoram, 2009 & 2014.
- Aizawl Municipal Council (AMC) Election, 2010.
- Chalhfilh MLA Bye Election, 2013.

Besides electoral reforms, the MPF has widened its activities upon the issue of good governance in Mizoram. Due to this, the MPF Hqs. had also organised District level seminar for good governance in different districts of Mizoram. The participants and organisers felt that the seminars for good governance held in different parts of the state were beneficial for inculcating awareness among the citizens. Further, the MPF had organised seminar related with good governance and the responsibility of the citizens in different places of Mizoram every year.<sup>1</sup> The MPF leaders also met the top ranking leaders of the government just after the new ministry led by Lalthanhawla had been installed, urging them to pursue their election manifesto and promises effectively without discrimination.

The movement and efforts of the MPF for electoral reform and good governance is distinctive from other social movements in other parts of the country. Popular social movements in mainland

India mainly focusses on the issues of livelihood, opportunities, dignity and development and there is no exaggeration to state that none of the movement focus upon good governance and electoral reform. As such, the movement and activities done by the MPF for electoral reform as well as good governance is unique and not focused by any civil society or group in other parts of the country till today. The conduct of free and fair poll happens to be one of the most essential features for successful working of democracy, whereas, unfair poll and bogus voting automatically destroys the democratic values. The constructive role of the MPF in electoral reform has been acknowledged by the media, Election Commission of India and even by the former Governor of Mizoram. Thus, the MPF has performed a herculean task for implementation of electoral reform in Mizoram. No doubt, there may be some limitations and shortcomings in the performance of MPF and there is a room for improvement. But, the great contribution and tireless effort of the MPF for electoral reform in Mizoram is valuable and emulative for other States of the country so as to introduce reform in the electoral system of India on the whole.

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