



Nagaland Legislative Assembly Election – 2023

Lalmuana Guite*

Abstract

Nagaland one of the seven sister states of Northeast India completed its 14th Legislative Assembly Election on the 27th of February 2023. For the last five years, the NDPP-BJP-led alliance formed an opposition-less Government in the State. Before the genuine election fervour, political parties and the public had already expressed their awareness about the coming election and its possible outcome. They did not expect much alteration in power-sharing due to the dominance of state politics by the NDPP party. However, extensive estimations were articulated by the youth in areas of infrastructure development, employment generation, and good governance of the state. Besides, all the other factors a question of the Peace Accord dictate the agenda of every political party including the independent candidates. This article will highlight the development of electoral politics while focusing on the outcome of the election based on the agenda put up by the political parties.

Keywords: Election, Democracy, Peace Accord, Civil Societies, Alliance.

Introduction

The election of the Fourteenth Nagaland Legislative Assembly was held on the 27th of February 2023. It was conducted across 59 constituencies, except in the 31 Akuluto Assembly seats, which was won uncontested by the BJP candidate Kazhito Kinimi. As summed up by Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) Nagaland, V. Shashank Shekar the polling day wine up 'alright' barring some incidents. The NDPP-BJP alliance had won 37 seats with a major thumping victory to form the government. Nagaland political stalwart and longest-serving Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio was sworn in as the new Chief Minister for the fifth consecutive term. Thus, guarantees Nagaland will remain to be the only Indian state with no opposition in the Assembly House. This article will highlight the development of Nagaland electoral politics while focusing on the outcome of the Fourteenth Legislative Assembly election, based on the agenda put up by the political parties. The methodologies for the paper are historical and analytical methods and data are collected from primary and secondary sources.

*Assistant Professor, Unity College, Dimapur, Nagaland, India. Email: gmuana88@gmail.com

Church and Civil Society Calls Clean and Fair Election

The conduct of an election based on free and fair polls, the absence of money, and other inducements for voters is the goal of the Nagaland Legislative Assembly election 2023. On the 19th January 2023, the Nagaland Chief Election Officer (CEO) V. Sashank Shekhar in a press meeting said the state is preparing to hold the poll in a free and fair election in the spirit of true democracy (Ambrocia, 2023). Several civil society organizations and Churches took initiatives in demanding and calling a 'Clean Election'. By publishing notices and pamphlets in the local and daily newspapers they send out a request to all the candidates and the people to refrain from the influence of money during the election (Ghosh, 2023).

Naga Peace Accord and Birth of Opposition-less Government

Since the year 1997, the NSCN-IM had been engaging in dialogue with the central government. In the same year, the two parties concluded an agreement on cease fire which lasted till the present day. In between the Government of India seeks out the possibility of signing a peace treaty with their counterpart. The civil societies and the Church took up the responsibility of an emissary amongst the underground and the Government of India. Their tireless effort resulted in the signing of a framework agreement on the Naga Peace Accord 2015. This once again sends a fresh ray of optimism for the development of long-lasting peace among the people. The agreement was concluded under the witness of the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi. The Indian Government's interlocutor for Naga Peace Talk, Shri R. N. Ravi signed the agreement on behalf of the Central Government (Liz Mathew, 2021). Sri Isak Chishi Swu, the Chairman, and Sri Th. Muivah, the General Secretary was the signatory on behalf of the NSCN.

In the 2018 Nagaland Legislative Assembly election the Nagaland People Front (NPF) won 26 seats. The National Democratic Party (NDP) 18 seats, Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) 12 seats, Nationalist Peoples Party (NPP) won two seats, Janata Dal (United) won 1 seat and the rest goes to independent candidates. In the year 2021, a decision was taken by the ruling People's Democratic Alliance (PDA) partners such as the Nationalist Democratic Progress Party (NDPP), the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), and two independent MLA's on the formation of the Nagaland United Government (NUG) (Arnimesh, 2021). Modalities to include the principal opposition party the NPF was also adopted unanimously. Signatory of the NUG includes Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio, Yangthungo Patton the Deputy Chief Minister, leader of opposition T.R. Zeliang, Chingwang Konyak the party President of NDPP, State BJP Chief Temjen Imna Along and NPF President Shurhozelie Liezietsu. The political parties agree to join together with the hope of facilitating an early solution to the awaiting Naga political issue in a more honorable and acceptable manner.

Nagaland had been experiencing insurgency for more than seventy years now. Therefore the Naga political issue always plays an important factor in state politics as well. This further stress the momentous contribution it adds on in speeding up the pending query with the Indian Government. To achieve that objective the political parties resolve to stand united without opposition which rarely happens in a democratic political system. The five-point

resolution put forward by them includes the aim of promoting the Naga peace talks with a positive approach in the greater interest of achieving peace and moving forward under a positive environment that is conducive to finding a political solution at the earliest time possible. They also resolved to stand together for achieving the goal of an honorable and acceptable settlement while appealing to all Naga political groups to make serious efforts toward unity and reconciliation.

However, even after six years of signing a framework on the Naga Peace Accord 2015, no fruitful agreement could be reached between the NSCN and the Indian Government. Instead, the negotiation process fractured since 2019, particularly due to a misunderstanding between the two parties in interpreting the content of the agreement.

Peace Accord in Election Menu-2023

On 18th January 2023, the Election Commission of India announced the Schedule for the General Elections of the Legislative Assembly of Nagaland, Meghalaya & Tripura. This will be the 14th Legislative Assembly Election of Nagaland since elevated to statehood in 1963. The then Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar gave the date for the election will be on February 27th and the result will be declared on the 2nd of March, 2023 (Express, 2023). The election drive in the Northeast state had already been set in motion way before the declaration of the dates. The formation of the Nagaland United Government in 2021 could be considered one of the most crucial steps adopted by the members of the Nagaland Legislative Assembly. It's a common fact that Nagaland had been affected by insurgency for several years and the separatist groups are still very active in the socio-economic and political activities of the state. Just like every other previous election the agenda of the peace process occupied the central position during an election campaign. Candidates from every political party including independent contenders wanted to capitalize from it. The ruling party at the Central the Bhartiya Janata Party also tries to extend its influence within the state by persuading the peace treaty as one of their key agenda.

The campaign among parties and candidates had become most intensified by the month of January. Several political leaders and star campaigners were involved in an aggressive campaign for their party and candidates. Even the State Chief Minister Rio, who had been a star campaigner on several occasions, had called for peace and development during his election rally. Heavyweights from the central were also doing their bit in feeding the fourteenth Nagaland Legislative Assembly Election. Union Home Minister Amit Shah visited poll-bound Nagaland on the 20th of February after East Nagaland Peoples Organization (ENPO) withdraws their long-standing call to boycott the Assembly election. He highlights the sympathetic attitude of the central towards the demand for separate states put up by them in East Nagaland. Assuring the gathering public that once the NDA government will be formed under Chief Minister Rio, he conveyed all the problems of the Naga will be solved. He also promises that the AFSPA in Nagaland will be removed after 3-4 years (Kalita, 2023). In hindsight, eight years had gone since the signing of the framework of the Naga Peace Accord 2015, but the same Home Minister of India once more visited Nagaland by taking advantage of the political issue faced by the state.

On the 24th of January Prime Minister Narendra Modi set foot in Dimapur to campaign for the BJP-NDPP alliance. He asserted bringing permanent peace in Nagaland is one of the primary goals of the central Government. The Prime Minister further expressed that peace; progress and prosperity for Nagaland are the mantras of his government (Radio, 2023). However, his words were not taken lightly by the Indian National Congress which seeks a comeback in the state. The Congress national President Mallikharjun Kharge charged Prime Minister Modi with 'Cheating' the people of Nagaland. He highlighted the ignorance and failure of the NDA Government in materializing the Naga Peace Accord 2015. He put the question of the Central government's omission from its manifesto and failure to resolve Naga's political issue.

Demand for Unconditional Peace Resolution

The Naga National Political Group (NNPG) comprising six political groups including GPRN/NSCN, FGN, NNC(Parent body), NPGN/NNC(NA), NSCN(R), and the NNC/GDRN(NA) expressing the appeal for a solution than election. In 2017, the Central had signed a preliminary agreement 'Agreed Position' with the NNPG with the hope of providing a solution to the Naga political issue (Singh, 2023). They also highlight the mistake committed by Congress in giving election more priority to the solution of the Naga issues in the 2018 election. Due to their missed calculation, the BJP is now having access to state politics. They confer a word to the wise that if the BJP now engaged them with a comparable blunder, their fate will soon be like that of the Congress.

While talks between the Central Government and NSCN(IM) to resolve the Naga political issue were still stuck due to differences in the National Flag and Constitution issue, the Working Committee of Naga National Political Groups (WC-NNPG) and the NSCN(IM) jointly declared 'unconditional commitment' for the resolution of Naga's historical and political rights with the Government of India. On the 14th of January 2023, the two parties also agreed to form the 'Council of Naga Relationships and Cooperation'. It will function under the guidance of the Convener of NNPG and the Chairman of NSCN, 'to explore, at the earliest, realistic ways for Nagas' to move forward on the basis of Naga historical and political rights'. They also highlighted their unconditional commitment to collaborate with the Central Government in resolving Naga political issues under their existing agreement (Yhoshu, 2023). In this manner, without using guns and violence they warn the Central Government and the party to be formed within the state that the solution to Naga's political issue must be given primary importance for the coming years.

Menace of Money Power

Though the Election Commission of India (ECI) held that money power should not influence the voters, candidates, and other organizations within twenty-four hours enforcement agencies had reported a seizing of Rs. 0.31 crores. Past election experiences show proxy voting and voting in return for bribes becomes a big problem in the Nagaland election. The practice of providing free travel in exchange for a vote, and financial and other benefits, including weeks of feasting activities, serves as normal political activities during the

election. The dangers of employing money power during elections later become the core factor for all kinds of political corruption. Dr. Shurhozelie Liezietsu, former Chief Minister and President of NPF claim that the election in Nagaland has been reduced to a game of money (Arhe, 2023). Among the 184 candidates, 63% are millionaires (crorepatis). Rumors also spread around that candidates were selected by political parties because of their financial assets. In the meantime, despite the lack of socioeconomic and infrastructure development in the states, the assets of the State representative during the last five years had risen tremendously including Chief Minister Rio. To some scholars like Prof. Zuchamo Yanthan, the level of corruption practice within the state had become life-threatening for the Naga society that needs immediate counter-action (Yanthan, 2023).

Polling and Election Result

For the Nagaland Legislative Assembly election 2023, nominations of 225 were received by the Election Commission office. After scrutinizing 200 nominations were accepted out of which 16 candidates withdrew their nominations on the last day of withdrawal. About 13 lacks electors are eligible to choose their representatives in the fourteenth Nagaland Legislative Assembly election.

The Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP), the dominant party of the United Democratic Alliance (UDA), and BJP once again sought an experiment on the chemistry of their alliance. The two parties decide to fight the election jointly under a seat-sharing formula of 40: 20 with the national party as a junior partner. In the last election, the two-party combined won 30 seats helping them to form the government with the support of the other party (Baruah, 2023). The Naga People's Front (NPF) who won 26 seats in the last state election and later became a part of the alliance government in 2021 decided to put up 22 candidates. The NPF lost 21 of its legislative members headed by former Chief Minister TR Zeliang merged with NDPP. The NPP a party that originated from Meghalaya register 12 candidates to add up its two MLA seats in Nagaland. The Nagaland Pradesh Congress Committee (NPCC) is the unit of the Indian National Congress in Nagaland. The party which once was a dominant political force in the state decided to file only 23 candidates for the 2023 Assembly election. The LJP (Ram Vidas) is fighting the polls on 15 seats, the NCP on 12 seats, RPI (Athawala) on nine seats, JD (U) on seven seats, and RJD on three seats. The CPI and Rising People's Party are also fighting for one seat each. Besides the above political party, 19 independent candidates decided to fight the election individually without basing any political party (India.com, 2023).

On the 27th of February voting to elect 59 candidates of the 60-strong State Assembly of Nagaland had taken place. Due to the withdrawal of his only opponent Khekashe Sumi of the Congress party, Kazheto Kinimi BJP candidate was earlier declared uncontested winner from 31 Akuluto assemblies (Sharma, 2023). The destiny of 183 candidates was then decided for the constituency of 59 from 7 am in the morning to 4 pm in the evening. Following the order of the Election Commission of India, re-polling took place at four pooling stations in Zunheboto, Pangti Vin Sanis constituencies, Jakoba village in Tizit constituency, and Pathso

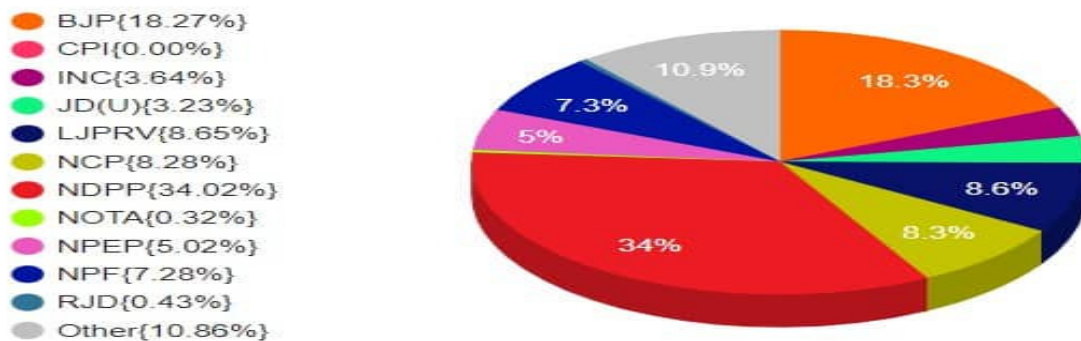
East Wing in Thonoknyu. A total of 13 political parties are registering a candidate in the election. After counting the votes the election has a total of 87.38% recorded voters' turnout. Ahead of the election, many believe the comeback of UDA headed by NDPP and BJP into power. Many exit polls were also predicting a big margin of winning for the two parties. The prediction did not disappoint the election result that the NDPP-BJP alliance secured a majority by winning 37 seats out of 60. The two parties emerged victorious in 25 and 12 constituencies respectively making sure of the reinstallations of the BJP-led Government for the next five years (Talukdar, 2023). Besides the two parties, none of the others can put up a performance to cross the double-digit figure for seat sharing. The NCP and NPP won seven and five seats each while the LJP (Ram Vilas) PRI (Athawala) and NPF equally shared six constituencies. The JDU secure one seat and the other four seats were shared by independent candidates.

Table 1: Nagaland Election-Result Status

| Party | Seats Won |
|--|-----------|
| Bharatiya Janata Party | 12 |
| Independence | 4 |
| Janata Dal (United) | 1 |
| Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) | 2 |
| Naga Peoples Front | 2 |
| Nationalist Peoples Party | 5 |
| Nationalist Congress Party | 7 |
| Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party | 25 |
| Republic Party of India (Athawala) | 2 |
| Total | 60 |

(Source: Hindustan Times)

Table 2: Vote Sharing by Parties in Nagaland Election



(Source: Indian Express)

Assessment of Poll Outcome

The election result portrays the changing dimension of Nagaland's internal politics from several corners. Some of the major shifts within state politics can be discussed as:

Degradation of Congress Party

The outcome of the election highlights the failure of old national parties like the Congress while a lesser-known party with national ambitions had done quite reasonably. Some parties like the Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) of Bihar origins and another from Maharashtra the Republic Party of India (Athawale) had no history in Nagaland before the 27th of February 2023. But the two parties were able to stamp their presence by winning two votes each. Though they might be losing more candidates, the result they produced is a good sign to indicate their long-term presence in state politics. Similarly, other parties such as the National People's Party of Meghalaya, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), and the Janata Dal (United) were also experiencing win-win situations while S.C. Jamir let-Congress seems to be descending after every election.

First Women Representatives

Nagaland election also scripted history by registering two women in the victory stand. Hekanu Jakhalu and Salhoutuonou Kruse of the BJP alliance partner the National Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) became the first two women to be elected to Nagaland Legislative Assembly (Shekhar, 2023). The inclusion of two women as a member of the representative became a fundamental development because Nagaland happens to be the only state in India that had not elected women candidates since statehood in 1963. Even the day after electing two women MLAs, organizations in three urban areas such as the Association of Kohima Municipal Ward Panchayat, All Ward Union Mokokchung Town, and Dimapur Urban Council Chairman Federation had immediately written to the Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio demanding to snub 33% women reservation in the coming civic pools. They oppose the reservation because the Naga customary laws did not allow women to equally participate in political and socio-economic decision-making.

In Nagaland, election with 33% reservation for women is a must under the 74th Amendment had remained to be a point of controversy for a long time. Those who oppose the reservation also argue that Article 371(A) of the Constitution protects the state over the 74th Amendment (Karmakar, 2023). However, after the intervention of the Supreme Court, the state Chief Minister gave a green signal for the election with 33% reservation for women. The decisions of the State Government signify the changing aspects of Naga politics even women who require the undeniable promotion in the political arena. The picking of women candidates in the State Legislative Assembly also uncovers the shifting dimension of the unyielding patriarchal society of the Naga into a much more sympathetic approach to women.

Naga Embracing BJP

The outstanding performance of the BJP highlights the fact that Naga today wholeheartedly embraced the central party. Being a Christian-majority state, there was a growing concern of fear among the people of the Hindutva ideology. However, unlike other Christian states like Mizoram, dispelling all the earlier fear people bestowed them another chance to sit in the driver's seat. According to some party workers, the motive behind BJP's quick penetration within the Naga society was due to the heavy developmental work invested by the Modi

Government during the past years. However, despite the above success story BJP still needs to put up extra efforts in some areas like Kohima where people are still on a reservation.

Opposition-less Government

The election result signifies Nagaland will retain its status of being the only opposition-less state in India. By electing the BJP-NDPP alliance, the people allow an addition to another inglorious chapter in Nagaland's political history. Denouncing the true nature of democracy for which the people cast their vote, the representatives choose to settle the score within their comfort zone of opposition-less in the House. Even the sole MLA from Nitish Kumar-led Janata Dal (United), whose parent body retains a strain relation with BJP had submitted his letter of support to the BJP-NDPP-led alliance. Due to this, the parent party decided to dissolve JDU Nagaland State Committee with immediate effect (Pisharoty, 2023). Criticism pours in from even some of the most prominent citizens because the previous government had failed to provide a solution to the Naga political issue upon which they decided to come united under one umbrella of the Nagaland United Government.

Neiphiu Rio leader of the NDPP took oath as the Chief Minister of Nagaland for the fifth time. To march up the proper scenery of a coalition government TR Zeliang of NDPP and Y Patton of BJP were sworn in as Deputy Chief Ministers. On a positive note Salhoutounou Kruse, one of the two women newly elected to the Nagaland assembly was given a Council of Minister portfolio (Baruah S. 2023).

Conclusion

Though the new Government had just taken over office, censure already poured in from several corners. Multiple queries burst out from prominent citizens questioning the performance of the previous opposition-less government. H. Chishi expressed that the proposition of an opposition-less government is a political gimmick to come to power for vested interests. Niketu Iralu a social activist and a preacher of peace also articulates his notion of an opposition-less government as an opinion-less government. Concerns were also raised over the incompetent nature of the Government in handling the Naga Peace Accord during their time and until their closing date. Under the new Government, they wanted to capitalize on similar substance only to accomplish their selfish interest of being a part of the ruling party. For a democratic system to be effective there needs to be an opposition to question the Government inside the House. But for the time being, Nagaland will be missing out on the benefits due to the decision taken by their representatives.

All things considered, Nagaland had completed its 14th Legislative Assembly election under the watchful eyes of the Election Commission of India. A new government was inducted under the leadership of Chief Minister Niuphiu Rio upon whom the responsibility of State administration will rest for the coming years. For the first time in the history of Nagaland, women candidate got not only elected but was made a part of the council of minister. The participation of women representatives in the House will bring a different perspective of decision-making that was missed out during their absence. In addition, the manner in which money plays the most crucial role in encouraging voters to come out and cast their votes is

saddening. The dominance of money power became the largest roadblock to the emergence of a new capable leader. Just as winning the election is important delivering election promises must be given top priority. Besides the socio-economic and infrastructure development projects, concluding the ruttet peace process with reasonable agreement at the earliest will determine people's belief in the new government.

References

- Mathew, Liz, Deeptiman Tiwari (2013). Framework Agreement the key hrudle in way of Naga Peace Accord. The Indian Express. New Delhi.
- Arminesh, Shankar (2021). How Nagaland has become India's first state to be Opposition-mukt. The Print. Guwahati.
- The Morung Express-Assembly Elections in Nagaland on February 27, Dimapur. See-
<https://morungexpress.com/assembly-elections-in-nagaland-on-february-27> accessed on 10.03.2023
- Kalita, Prabin (2023). Amit Shah in Nagaland: Hopeful of Naga peace talks under PM bearing fruit. The Times of India. Guwahati.
- All India Radio-Campaigning peaks in election bound states of Nagaland and Meghalaya. See-
<https://newsonair.gov.in/News?title=Campaigning-peaks-in-election-bound-states-of-Nagaland-and-Meghalaya&id=456400> accessed on 25.02.2023
- Baruah, Shukrita (2023). In Nagaland,BJP settle for 20:40 seats sharing with NDPP, ignores protests. The Indian Express. Guwahati.
- Times of India. Lists of political parties contesting in Nagaland assembly election 2023. See-
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/assembly-elections/nagaland/parties> accessed on 21.02.2023
- Arhe, Nona (2023). New Faces, old issues, and NDPP-BJP edge: All you need to know about Nagaland's Assembly pools. Newslaundry. New Delhi.
- Yanthan Zuchamo. Without addressing castes for votes, democracy can't flourish in Nagaland. EastMojo. Nagaland.
- Ambrocia, Medoneluo (2023). Nagaland ready to conduct free, fair elections: CEO V Shashank Shekhar. EastMojo. Kohima.
- Ghosh, Abantika (2023). Church, village councils, candidates try to 'clean' Nagaland elections, stem money power. The Print. Kohima.

Singh, Bikash (2023). Solkution of Naga political issue main palnk of election in Nagaland. Economic Times. Guwahati.

Yhoshu, Alice (2023). Naga peace process: NSCN (IM), NNPG's agree to move forward over past divisions. Hindustan Times. Guwahati.

Sharma, Sheenu (2023). Nagaland election 2023: BJP's Kazheto Kanimi win uncontested from Akuluto seat. India TV. Dimapur.

Talukdar, Sushanta (2023). Neiphiu Rio back in Nagaland as NDPP-BJP alliance emerges stronger. Frontline. Guwahati.

Karmakar, Sumir (2023). Nagaland to consuct civic polls on May 16 with 33% reservation for women. Deccan Herald. Guwahati.

Pisharoty, Sangeeta Barooah (2023). Nagaland's Opposition-less Assemblby Dashes JD(U)'s National Party Ambitions. The Wire. New Delhi.

Baruah, Sukrita (2023). NeiPhiu Rio takes oath as Nagaland CM for the fifth terms, will have two deputies. The Indian Express. Guwahati.