



Electoral Politics and Coalition Government: A Study of Mara Autonomous District Council (MADC), Mizoram

Steffi C Beingiachhiezi*

J. Doungel†

Abstract

Since the formation of the Mara Autonomous District Council (MADC), the Indian National Congress (INC) and Mizo National Front (MNF) were voted into power interchangeably even though, there were times when smaller regional parties joined the bandwagon on and off with INC or MNF to form government. The first term of MADC was dominated by the Mara Freedom Party (MFP), the only political party that contested the election, and the government was also formed by it (MFP). But MFP could not complete its first term and was first merged with Congress, later merged with the Janata Party and the MFP merged again into the INC. A coalition government was formed in the third term, seventh, eighth, ninth, and twelfth term of MADC. Coalition government was characterized by instability due to power struggles among the elected members. The government was formed by INC in the tenth term by securing 15 seats out of 25 seats and functioned smoothly till the end of its term. Before the eleventh election to MADC, a pre-poll alliance was formed by MDF and MNF. In this election, MDF secured 2 seats and MNF secured 4 seats. The poor electoral performance of the MDF led to its merger with the BJP. The eleventh term of MADC witnessed the formation of government by the INC which emerged as the single majority party by winning 17 seats. During the middle of its term, the Congress government formed under the leadership of N. Zakhai willingly signed a declaration on 19th October 2019, merged itself with the BJP, and transformed itself into the BJP government. The twelfth term also witnessed another coalition government between INC and MNF, the two biggest political opponents in state politics. The BJP which secured the largest number of 12 seats in the house of 25 members, now sits in the opposition bench. This paper attempts to study the electoral politics and coalition government in Mara Autonomous District Council of Mizoram.

*Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Mizoram University, Aizawl - 796004, Mizoram, India. Email: steffichhaihlo@gmail.com

†Professor, Department of Political Science, Mizoram University, Aizawl - 796004, Mizoram, India. Email: jdoungel@gmail.com

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Introduction

The Pawi-Lakher Regional Council (PLRC) which was created as provided under sub-paragraph (2) of paragraph 1 of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India by the Government of Assam was inaugurated by Ch. Saprawnga, the then Parliamentary Secretary to the Government of Assam with Headquarters at Saiha at Lunglei on 23rd April, 1953.¹ The Pawi-Lakher Regional Council (PLRC) functioned for a period of 19 years from 1953 till its trifurcation into three regional councils on 2nd April, 1972. On 21st January 1972, the erstwhile Mizo Hills was separated from Assam with the formation of the Union Territory of Mizoram by the North Eastern Areas Reorganisation Act, 1971.

The Pawi-Lakher Regional Council was trifurcated into three Regional Councils, namely, the Pawi Regional Council, the Lakher Regional Council, and the Chakma Regional Council on 2nd April 1972 as per the Administrator of Mizoram Notification No. CCMP/3/72-77 of 1.4.1972. On 29th April 1972, the three Regional Councils were upgraded to the status of full-fledged Autonomous District Councils and were governed by their respective interim government till the conduct of the District Council election in June 1973. After the trifurcation of the PLRC, an administrative arrangement was made in such a way that the existing Members of the PLRC would become Members of their respective Regional Council.² Thus, the Mara began to have their separate Autonomous District Council. Mara Autonomous District Council (MADC) is one of the three Autonomous District Councils in Mizoram which was created as provided under Article 244 (2) and 275 (1) of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India on 29th April 1972.³

Electoral Politics of Mara Autonomous District Council

In the first term of MADC, the government was formed by the Mara Freedom Party (MFP) by winning all 9 seats. The MFP was able to win the hearts of the Mara people with its policy of championing the political slogan of a separate Autonomous District Council solely for the Mara tribe. However, before the completion of its first term, the MFP merged with the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1975 and with the Janata Party which formed government at the Central in 1977.¹ Mylai Hlychho, founder Secretary of the MFP states that the reason behind the merger of the MFP to the Janata Party in 1977 was that as the party already succeeded in its main agenda of achieving separate Autonomous District Council (ADC) for the Mara tribe, it was felt necessary to join a national party for the political stability of the MADC (Mylai Hlychho, “personal communication”, April 13, 22). The Second term election of the MADC was won by the Janata Party and it formed the government, however, before the completion of the second term, the Janata Party was defeated by INC in the mid-term Lok Sabha poll and INC Government led by Indira Gandhi was formed in 1980. Subsequently, the erstwhile Mara Freedom Party or the then Janata Party of the MADC rejoined its parent party in 1980, as such, the Janata Party government was also transformed into the INC Government.²

The INC could form government in the middle of the term in the first term and second term of MADC but the government formed in the said two terms was due to the defection of Member of District Council (MDC) only but it was not due to electoral victory. Therefore, the INC began contesting elections in MADC since the third term election but it could not form the government. Although INC could not form government in the third term, it continued to appear in every election of the MADC afterward. The INC then dominated the political scene and formed the government with an absolute majority from the fourth term to the sixth term of MADC.³ In the Seventh election of the MADC which was held on 9th February 2000, there was a hung Council and no single party was in the position to form government. As a result, a coalition government was formed by Mizo National Front (MNF) and Maraland Democratic Front (MDF). The said government (Executive Committee) was formed under the leadership of P. P. Thawla but it could not last long due to the withdrawal of support by the MNF and a new coalition government was formed by INC and MNF with I.P. Junior as the Chief Executive Member on 11th November, 2000.⁴

The Eighth term of the MADC witnessed another coalition government formed by INC and MDF which was supported by an Independent candidate. In the eight-term election of the MADC, it may be noted that MNF which secured 10 seats, remained in the opposition bench. The coalition government was headed by N. Viakhu (an independent candidate) as the Chief Executive Member (CEM). Before the completion of the eighth term, the existing government was voted out as N. Viakhu, an independent candidate joined the MNF which made MNF as a single majority party and thus a new government was formed by MNF. The government, formed by the MNF under the leadership of N. Viakhu was again, dissolved on 5th March, 2007 which resulted in another election to MADC.⁵

In the Ninth term of the MADC in 2007, coalition government, headed by S. Khipo as Chief Executive Member (CEM) was formed by the INC and the MDF. This government functioned for 10 months and on 30th March 2008, it was voted out as elected members from MDF withdrew their support and formed a coalition government with the MNF, headed by M. Laikaw as CEM. However, this government was also dissolved by the Governor of Mizoram on 17th January, 2009 as 3 elected members from MNF and 2 elected members from MDF defected from their parent party and joined INC. A new Executive body was formed on 20th January 2009 with S. Khipo as CEM and remained in office till the next election of MADC.⁶

In the tenth term election of the MADC held in 2012, the government was formed by the INC as it secured a majority of 15 seats out of 25 seats. The government was headed by RT. Zachono as the CEM and this government functioned smoothly till the end of its term. When the tenth election to the MADC in 2017, the INC formed a government by securing 17 seats out of 25 seats. A new government was formed by the INC with N. Zakhai as the CEM.⁷ Before the Eleventh election, MDF and MNF formed a pre-poll alliance, however, MNF could win only 4 seats and MDF won only 2 seats. Due to its poor electoral performance, the MDF declared the dissolution of the 20-year-old party and merged with the BJP on 25th

October 2017 along with the two elected Members of District Council (MDC) right before the Eighth Mizoram State Legislative Assembly election.⁸

In the meantime, the 17 elected MDCs and 3 nominated MDCs from INC under the leadership of the then CEM, N. Zakhai willingly signed a declaration and merged with the BJP on June 19, 2019, and the INC Government in MADC transformed itself into BJP Government. This BJP Government functioned smoothly till the end of its term. The merger of INC MDCs with the BJP did not necessarily mean the merger of INC and to BJP because only elected and nominated MDCs from the INC merged with the BJP. It is clear that the merger took place for the continuation of government and to avert dissolution which was initiated by the MNF Government of the state.⁹

The election to the twelfth term of the MADC which was held on 5th May 2022 marked an important landmark in the history of the MADC election. In this election, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which never played a key role in the past elections contested the election and set up 24 party candidates out of the 24 constituencies. The electoral performance of BJP was indeed outstanding as it emerged as the single largest party by winning 12 seats, though one short of the majority mark of 13; whereas, MNF won 9 seats and INC won 4 seats.¹⁰ The merger of the INC elected members to BJP in 2019 played a significant role in the electoral success of BJP in the twelfth election. All the 17 elected MDCs of INC who joined forces with BJP except two MDCs who remained in BJP and 2 MDCs who later rejoined their parent party Congress contested the election from the BJP party ticket. Though BJP secured 12 seats, the biggest political rivals in the State, MNF, and INC formed a coalition government despite a clear instruction, given to the MDCs of INC not to ally either with MNF or BJP by the Pradesh Congress of the state. The ruling party in the State, MNF's performance in the twelfth election was not quite satisfactory, it could win only 9 seats. This is indeed disappointing though the Party used the Socio-Economic Development Programme (SEDP) as its main propaganda for this election.¹¹

Political Instability and the Politics of Coalition Government in Mara Autonomous District Council

The politics of Mara Autonomous District Council has a unique feature that despite being a rival in the State or the Central, it did not have much impact in forming government in ADCs. This trend of rival parties in state politics and national politics is a common feature in the Sixth Schedule Area of Mizoram. It should be recollected that the INC and BJP had also formed a coalition government in the Chakma Autonomous District Council (CADC) in 2018. Therefore, what was witnessed in CADC in 2018 was repeated in MADC in 2022. Though winning the election is important for every political party, the formation of government is another crucial goal that political parties are always struggling for it. To accomplish this goal, keeping aside the policies and cause of the parties whether they are from rival political ideologies, such as rightist, leftist, or centrist backgrounds, parties joined hands to form the government which often proves the popular saying that there is no permanent enemy and permanent friend in politics. In the Seventh term of MADC in 2000, MNF and MDF formed a coalition government. MNF always stands for the promotion of

“Mizo Nationalism” and MDF stands for “Union Territory for Maraland”. Despite the contradiction and clash in policies of both parties, the two parties formed a coalition government that lasted for a period of 9 months. In this term, INC and MNF formed another coalition government on 6th December 2003 and functioned till the end of the seventh term. The Eighth and Ninth term of MADC also witnessed another coalition government. However, in the tenth term of MADC, the Indian National Congress (INC) emerged as a single majority party by winning 15 seats, formed the government, and functioned smoothly till the end of its term.

The twelfth term of the MADC also witnessed a coalition government between the INC and MNF, the two biggest rivals in state politics. The outcome of the election was a hung Council where there was no single majority party to form the government. As a result, the INC and the MNF set aside their political rivalry and formed a new government. This decision was approved by the State MNF leadership while the Mizoram Pradesh Congress Committee (MPCC) has issued a show-cause notice to its MDCs for violating its instruction not to align either with the BJP or the MNF. However, despite the show-cause notice of the Mizoram Pradesh Congress Committee to the party MDCs, the INC does not withdraw from the coalition government up till now and the coalition government of the INC and MNF is still functioning.¹²

The Mara Autonomous District Council (MADC) is also characterized by unstable government mostly in all coalition governments. It should be recollected that none of the coalition governments formed in MADC completed its full five-year term up till now. Therefore, it should be observed whether the fate of stability which the coalition governments in the past could not achieve can be accomplished by the present coalition government of the MNF and INC. The main reason for the instability of coalition governments of MADC in the past is the defection of elected MDCs from their sponsored party to another party for political opportunism and hunger for political power. This defection usually happens when there is a change of government in the State. In fact, it was a common occurrence in the three Autonomous District Councils in the Sixth Schedule Area of Mizoram that, whenever a party different from the ruling party in the Autonomous District Council formed a government in the state, the existing government in the Autonomous District Council would automatically destabilize in one way or the other. The MDCs were also lured by the state ruling party to switch over to its party which subsequently led to continuous defection in the Autonomous District Councils of Mizoram. Another reason is the greed and power-hunger nature of the politicians, who often switch their support to get higher or better executive posts. The Parliament enacted the Tenth Schedule popularly known as the Anti-Defection Law via the Constitution Fifty-Second Amendment Act, 1985 and the Constitution Ninety First Amendment Act, 2003. The anti-defection Law sets the provisions for disqualification of elected members on the grounds of defection to another party in Parliament and State Legislature. However, the ambit of the Anti-Defection Law does not cover Autonomous District Councils and various local bodies under the Constitution Seventy-Third Amendment Act, 1992 and the Constitution Seventy-Fourth Amendment Act, 1992. The purpose of the Anti-Defection Law was to bring stability to the governments by discouraging legislators

from defecting. The disqualification of members stands for two House of Parliament and the State Legislative Assembly.¹³ The Anti-Defection Law is not applicable for the disqualification of membership of Autonomous District Councils and local bodies. In fact, the Mara Autonomous District Council has enacted legislation providing a provision for disqualification of a sitting member of the District Council under sub-rule (5) clauses (a), (b), and (c) under the Mara Autonomous District Council (Constitution, Conduct of Business, etc), but it is a bit controversial. The reason is that the ambit of disqualification of members of legislature who defect from one party to another party covers only Parliament and State Legislature but not Autonomous District Councils and Local Bodies. As such, the provision of Anti-Defection Law which the Autonomous District Council legislated and incorporated in the Autonomous District Council (Constitution, Conduct of Business seems to be controversial constitutionally and legally. It is evident that all disqualification issues of different Autonomous District Councils of North East India which have been brought to the High Court were always adjudicated that anti-defection law is not applicable in Autonomous District Council.¹⁴

According to Sub-rule (5) clause (a), a sitting Member of the District Council (MDC) shall be disqualified if, “he has voluntarily given up the political party which sponsored him as a candidate on the date of his nomination and joined any other political party after his election or his nomination as a member”.¹⁵ Though the CCB Rules clearly states the ground on which a member can be disqualified, when the executive body formed by Congress under the leadership of N. Zakhai willingly signed a declaration and merged to BJP on June 19, 2019 and formed BJP government, this government functioned smoothly till the end of its term with no hurdle from the opposition party.

The politics of MADC is also influenced by who holds power in the Central Government and the State Government which automatically led to the merger of smaller regional political parties to national parties. This is clear from the merging of the Mara Freedom Party (MFP) to the national party, namely, the Indian National Congress (INC) and Janata Party in 1975 and 1977 respectively. Likewise, the Maraland Democratic Front (MDF) also merged with the BJP in 2017, and the merger of INC MDCs with the BJP in 2019. Whenever a merger of political parties takes place it is always a merger with the national party but not with the regional party or state political party as it is more favorable and advantageous for them to join a national party to achieve their political desires. The merger of INC MDCs to BJP was also motivated by the Central Government’s promise to amend the Sixth Schedule provision to give more autonomy and direct funding to the ADCs in Mizoram.

In the latest election i.e. the twelfth election to MADC held on 5th May 2022, the election results show that BJP with its policy for amendment of the Sixth Schedule provision and the promise for more power to ADCs has helped in securing 12 seats out of 25 seats. The promise of the Sixth Schedule Amendment is also exaggerated by some politicians and political parties in the Sixth Schedule Area of Mizoram as direct receipt of both plan and non-plan funds of the Autonomous District Councils of Mizoram bypassing the State Government but it seems to be utopian advocacy which will never be fulfilled. Looking at the

constituencies secured by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), all the 12 seats are from Palak MLA constituencies. Only two constituencies namely, Tipa-I constituency and Phura constituency are secured by MNF candidate and INC candidate respectively. In other words, the BJP failed to secure even a single seat in the Saiha MLA constituency. MNF being the ruling party in the State government and with the State flagship programme- the Socio-Economic Development Programme (SEDP) could secure 8 seats and Congress secure 3 seats. This election result acts as an important indicator of where each party stands for the State Legislative Assembly to be held in 2023. Many observe that the State Legislative Assembly Elections to be held in 2023, Palak Constituency with 12 elected BJP MDCs, the party will have more chance to win the seat and in Saiha constituency with 8 elected MNF MDCs, MNF will have a bigger chance. Though MNF and Congress formed a coalition government in MADC, it is still too early to predict whether both parties will enter a pre-poll alliance in the MLA election as they are the biggest rival in state politics. It should also be stated that depending upon the political atmosphere in the Mizoram State Legislative Assembly election which is likely to be held in November 2023, there may be change in the political grouping or structure in the formation of government in MADC. Many questions have been asked about the winning of 12 seats by the BJP in the Mara Autonomous District Council (MADC) election of 2022 whether the electorates have been influenced by BJP ideology or Hindutva teaching. In this regard, it should be plainly stated that BJP manifesto and Hindutva ideology have no influence at all in Mizoram in general and MADC in particular. The voters cast their votes for BJP candidates and 12 MDCs were elected in BJP ticket only due to the influence of their political leaders but not by Hindutva ideology and BJP manifesto. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) managed to win one MLS seat from Tuichawng Assembly constituency in the Mizoram State Legislative Assembly Election in November 2018. In fact, the BJP candidate from Tuichawng assembly Constituency, Dr. B. D. Chakma was a former Minister in the INC Government led by Lalthanhawla and he defected to the BJP. Dr. B.D. Chakma was elected not due to Hindutva influence or BJP manifesto but he was elected due to his popularity and due to voters who switched over from INC to BJP. Likewise, the same situation was also witnessed in the victory of 12 BJP MDCs in the twelfth election of the MADC in 2022.¹⁶

Conclusion

Analysis of electoral politics in Mara Autonomous District Council (MADC) proves that none of the coalition governments, formed so far completed its five full year's term. The present coalition government is also surrounded with uncertainty and doubts as from the past experiences, coalition government in MADC witnessed instability which hurdle the smooth functioning of the government due to defection of elected members, fight for executive post etc. The present government may last till the State Legislative Assembly Election and MADC may or may not witness another election or formation of a new government before the completion of the twelfth term.

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