

An experimental political choice by the Mizo electorate

The ninth Mizoram Assembly election results, 2023, mark both a continuity and a change in Mizoram's electoral politics. Like in the past, this election not only leveraged a multiparty electoral contest within the framework of what Balveer Arora in a different context calls the 'binodal' system but also ensured that the Mizo National Front (MNF) lost after a term in power. In other words, this system perpetuates a system of a 'revolving door' wherein an alternate party has come to power in every one or two-election cycle since 1987. The impressive win by the Zoram People's Movement (ZPM), a regionalist party formed in 2017 and registered with the Election Commission of India barely four years ago – it won 27 seats and an over 37% vote share – is a spectacular improvement from its tally of eight seats and a 22% vote share in 2018. This marks a break from the past.

An interesting break from the past

Unlike in the past, where the binodal electoral contest was always between a national party and regionalist parties, this election pivoted around a contest between two rival regionalist parties, i.e., the ZPM and the MNF. The Congress was reduced to a status of a bit player and managed to get just one seat out of the 40 seats being contested. Yet, the Congress's ability to retain a 20.8% vote share suggests the fluid possibilities of a binodal electoral contest in the future. Again, unlike the past where Mizoram broadly follows the 'small State syndrome' where a similar party or a party in coalition with the party-in-power at the Centre is voted to power in a State because of its dependence on the Centre's financial largesse, this election defies this and marks an experimental political choice by Mizo electorates by ensuring the ZPM's victory. This presents an interesting electoral puzzle.

Under this rubric, the way the ZPM managed to penetrate and consolidate its electoral purchase across the State is remarkable given that Mizoram's electoral landscape is marked by a fairly stable party support-base. While the saliency of anti-incumbency against the MNF after being in power for a term is apparent, a key explanation to this is the emergence of a new opportunity structure opened by the diminished electoral appeal of the Congress. In this sense, Mizoram follows a similar pattern of electoral



Kham Khan Susan Hausing

is Professor of Political Science at the University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad

contests between regionalist parties that was set by Nagaland since 2013. The failure of the Congress to promote popular and charismatic leaders such as S.C. Jamir in Nagaland post the election in 2013, and Lal Thanhawla in Mizoram since this election have important bearings on its electoral purchase. The electoral space vacated by the Congress in Mizoram is apparent (it struggled to secure a seat and was in a distant second position in six constituencies). The only exception is the Thorang constituency where Zodinluanga Ralte, a Congress candidate, lost by a whisker of 62 votes against his MNF counterpart, R. Rohmingiana.

The ZPM's strategy

Against this backdrop, the ZPM successfully presents itself as a viable and attractive electoral alternative to the MNF for efficient and 'corruption-free' governance. By fielding a mixture of experienced, educated and star-packed candidates including Lalduhoma (a former decorated Indian Police Service officer who effectively used his proximity to the Gandhi family and central political leaders in the 1980s to broker peace in Mizoram), Jeje Lalpekhlua (national football player), Baryl Vanneihsang (radio jockey and municipal councillor), and Vanlalsailova (gospel singer who eventually lost by 292 votes), the party could effectively send out the right political vibes to the electorate.

In a regionalist space where ethnicity, development and governance issues overlap across parties, the ZPM skilfully projected its commitment to promote the Zo nationalist cause and aspirations and wove these together with a vision of governance reform and development initiatives. Although Mr. Lalduhoma does not articulate Zo nationalism and aspirations with a rhetorical flourish like Mr. Zoramthanga, his stellar commitment and association with the Zo nationalist cause under the banner of the Action for Peace Committee (1986), the Zoram Nationalist Party (Mizo National Front (Nationalist) since 1997), and now the ZPM, is seen by many as genuine and an invaluable asset – a reward and recognition for what is long overdue.

Apparently, the ZPM's promise for minimum support price for rural cash crops such as broom grass, chillis, ginger, and turmeric has also gained electoral traction as over 60% of the Mizo

continue to rely on agricultural income. This becomes compelling especially in light of recent reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India exposing the inefficacy and irregularities in the rural development programme under the New Land Use Policy launched by the Congress (and replicated by the MNF without much success). These reports and the continued precarity of farmers' economy in rural Mizoram was effectively used by the ZPM to galvanise a groundswell of support for its pet development project aimed at alleviating poverty and raising rural income.

The ZPM's subtle political messaging to arraign the MNF for its alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party and the latter's failure to protect Christian minorities and Zo (Kuki-Zomi) people in Manipur since the outbreak of violence from May 3 seem to have worked in its favour. Indubitably, this has helped the ZPM in neutralising the MNF's attempt to electorally appropriate the protection and rehabilitation it extended to over 40,000 Chin refugees who fled from the February 2021 military *coup de etat* in Myanmar, and over 12,000 Zo (Kuki-Zomi) internally displaced persons from Manipur's violence since early May.

The Opposition cannot be taken for granted

The remarkable electoral success of the ZPM certainly presents an undercurrent of electoral transformation in Mizoram which simultaneously leverages continuity and a subtle yet definitive break with the past. Although the resounding loss of the MNF is apparent in the convincing defeat of Zoramthanga and Tawnluaia, the topmost leaders, and the 10 seats it managed to secure, Mizoram's binodal electoral landscape is likely to remain fluid as the MNF continues to enjoy an over 35% vote share and manage a second place in 28 constituencies.

Given the considerable electoral support the Congress and the MNF enjoy in the State, the nature of the electoral contest will largely be a function of the ability of these parties to revive their organisation and inculcate popular leaders beyond Lal Thanhawla and Zoramthanga. Till then the jury is out if Mr. Lalduhoma, the incumbent Chief Minister, will successfully harness his previously rich experience to forge a new equation or tacit agreement with the BJP at the Centre in ways which help steer Mizoram as an autonomous 'corruption-free' State.

The remarkable electoral success of the Zoram People's Movement highlights an undercurrent of electoral transformation in Mizoram

EVASTALIN

Act
Go i

The Ambedkar touch in rethinking social justice policies

Modern democracy is synonymous with both the values of social harmony and reforms that ensure dignity and self-respect to its participants, especially the historically deprived and socially marginalised people. Further, democratic institutions are mandated to engage with the worst-off social groups and ensure their substantive participation as a significant governing class in political affairs. The socially oppressed groups in India, especially Dalits, adored and celebrated such modern virtues because of their liberative potential and egalitarian goals. Babasaheb Ambedkar emerged as a torchbearer of liberal enlightened ideas and expected that post-colonial India would be distinct from the exploitative Brahminical past and invite Dalits and other marginalised communities to be equal shareholders in the nation's economic and political development. Ironically, the modernist objectives have been partially achieved only today. With the ascent of neo-liberal economic development, the conventional support that Dalits and Adivasis have received from state institutions, has derailed.

A tokenistic presence

In current times, it is a norm to witness the domination of the social elites as powerful authorities, national leaders, business tycoons, and cultural influencers. The control and the hegemony of the conventional ruling class have been perpetuated without much disturbances, whereas the socially marginalised groups have only managed to have a tokenistic presence in the domain of power and privileges. Though various political regimes vouch to implement social justice policies, this has little impact in ensuring the significant participation of the worst-off social groups in the domain of power. B.R. Ambedkar's principles of social justice would reprimand the current realm of neo-liberal economy for its neglect of the concerns of Dalits and Adivasis and would direct the market to be more responsible towards the worst-off social groups. It would also direct the state to reduce the pitfalls and slippages now in social justice policies and make



Harish S. Wankhede
is Assistant Professor,
Centre for Political
Studies, School of
Social Sciences,
Jawaharlal Nehru
University, New Delhi

The leaders of the market economy should be educated to adopt welfarist measures for the worst-off social groups, in turn making them integral to economic development

them more relevant in the present day.

Ambedkar becomes crucial in such a discourse because his approach allows us to diagnose illnesses in the social and economic order. He offers ethical corrective measures to make institutions more democratic, representative and closer to the claims and the desires of marginalised social groups. Though the mechanism of social justice is not radical and transformative (unlike the Marxist model), it provides moral sensibilities to institutions and makes it responsible towards the diverse population.

It is well-documented that the neo-liberal market is alien to such ethical values and overtly celebrates the exclusive control of few corporate bodies and businessmen over capitalist development. Such a distancing of the market from social responsibilities, especially its neglect towards the aspirations and the demands of Dalits and Adivasis has made the market enterprise more exploitative and closer to a crony capitalist mode. This version of the market economy needs reforms.

Reimagine the new order

It is an appropriate time to imagine how the worst-off social groups can become an integral and substantive part of the new economic order, reducing their perpetual subjugation as a passive exploited class. It is required that the new social justice policies be expanded to the private economy, with a focus to democratise the working classes and to reduce poverty. A substantive integration of social justice policies in directing the prospects of the market economy would integrate Dalits and Adivasis as a part of the working classes and also elevate their stature as influential upholders of capitalist assets.

Adivasi concerns to protect their habitats, ecological order and cultural autonomy must be addressed, while endorsing the fact about the market economy's inevitability. Therefore, it is necessary that the current phase of economic development, technological innovations and the expansion of the market economy should also be directed toward making Dalit and Adivasi groups

as influential arbitrators in the neo-liberal discourse. Newer conditions and reparation policies should be adopted to fight the historical wrongs and social discrimination against these groups, ensuring their equitable participation in the diverse spheres of economic development.

The new framework of social justice must ensure that an impressive class among Dalits and Adivasis emerges as the leaders, business entrepreneurs and influencers in the economic sphere. Such a prospect would allow policymakers to look beyond the conventional social justice policies that often address Dalit-Adivasi groups as the passive recipient of the state's welfare packages.

Further, Dalits and Adivasis should not be identified only as the poor and migrant working class that is dependent upon the benevolence of corporate social responsibility for their livelihood. Instead, these groups should be advanced as the essential components of urbanisation, industrial production and technological innovations. More affirmative action policies are required to democratise the niche sphere of big businesses so that the Dalit-Adivasi class should also emerge as industrialists, market leaders and crucial influencers in the global economy.

The state deviates from its responsibilities

Ambedkar looked upon the modern state as the key transformative force for the emancipation of Dalits and Adivasis. However, in the neo-liberal realm, the state has been converted as the passive associate of big business that readily deviates from its social responsibilities and welfarist values. The new agenda of social justice should be oriented towards the leaders of the market economy, educating to adopt welfarist measures for the worst-off social groups, and making them integral to economic development. Ambedkar's version of social justice would help us to redefine capitalism as a pluralist and cooperative mode of economic order that guarantees the substantive participation of Dalits and Adivasis in the market economy and in the associated institutions of power and privileges.

EVA STALIN