

An assessment of the Role of Political Parties in the Socio-Economic Development of Mizoram

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Abstract

Political parties are essential to the functioning of democracy; they performed varied functions within and outside the realm of politics. Their role in political mobilization, governance, the formulation and implementation of economic and social policy, ethnic conflict and the working of democracy has been intensified and gained importance in the democratic set up. Their centrality arises from the fact that they are the key link between the individual and the state, the state and the society. Political parties provide crucial connection between social process and policy makers, and influence debate and policies affecting the interest of various social groups in the political system. Election is an important part of democratic process. Political parties issue their agendas, goals and objectives to the voters in the form of election manifesto. It is a statement by political party what it will do if they win the elections. Political parties are evaluated and examined their performances based on their election manifestos.

This paper aims to analyse and seek the role of political parties in socio- economic development of Mizoram through their electoral performances and their policies since the attainment of statehood in 1986 till the last State Legislative Assembly Elections of 2018.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Mizoram is located in the north east corner of India sharing boarder with Assam in the north, Manipur and Burma in the east and the south, Tripura and Bangladesh in the west. The British entered the Mizo Hills in 1882 and officially established their authority in Mizo Hills by 1891.¹ After India got independence, Mizo Hills was put under the administration of Assam as Lushai Hills District in 1952 under the 6th Scheduled of the Indian Constitution. In course of time, the District Council became Union Territory and was renamed as Mizoram. Along with this, three Autonomous District Councils namely the Chakma District Council, the Lakher District Council and the Lai District Council were formed under the Re- Organisation of State Act, 1971. In 1986, the underground Mizo National Front (MNF) and the Government of India signed a peace accord and Mizoram became the 23rd State of the Indian Union on 20th February 1987. The State comprises of 11 Districts with Aizawl as the Capital of the State. According to 2011 census, population of Mizoram is over 10.91 lakhs; about 5.52 lakhs are males and 5.38 lakhs are females.

Political awakening among the Mizos had started during the early 1920s². It appears that the Mizos were politically motivated since the passages of the Government of India Acts 1919 and 1935. There two Acts had already given political aspirations to Mizoram by giving special status to the people. The Mizos were aware that they must do something so that their future political aspirations could be achieved. But the district authorities banned any political activities on the part of the local people other than what the authorities allowed them to do³. However, this sowed seeds for the formation of the first regional political party; the Mizo Union in 1946. This party favoured joining the Indian Union and the abolition of the institution of chieftainship. This was followed by the formation of the United Mizo Freedom Organization (UMFO) in 1947, the Mizo National Front in 1961, the Indian National Congress Party in 1961, the People's Conference Party in 1975, and the Zoram Nationalist Party (ZNP); the factional group of the MNF in 1997..

¹ J. V. Hluna (1992), *Education and Christian Missionaries in Mizoram*, p. 27.

² Sangkima (2004), 'Political Consciousness Leading to the formation of the Mizo Union Party in Mizoram' in *Historical Journal Mizoram*, vol- V, Issue- I, p. 2.

³ *ibid.*, p. 5.

The 1987 State Legislative Assembly Elections:

The Congress Party in its 1987 State Legislative Assembly Election manifesto expressed the objective of economic self- sufficiency, control of jhumming, adoption of high- yield variety, construction of rural godown and cold storage, provision of marketing facilities and the promotion of rural industries⁴. In regard to infra structure development, the manifesto mentioned projected schemes of construction of railway and airport link to Mizoram with the rest of the county, establishment of more hospitals, extension of educational libraries and sport facilities etc. Finally, the Congress Party boldly asserted that it would erase all corrupt practices from the administrative machinery of the state.

The Mizo National Front (MNF) in the preamble of its manifesto pledged to implement all the terms in the memorandum of settlement, ensuring lasting peace to transform Mizoram into a 'model state' by bringing all round development in the state. The main points of the manifestos are⁵ - to introduce large scale cash- crops with proper marketing facilities; improvement in electricity and develop and expand tele- communication link to the remotest part of the state; to develop roads connecting all towns and villages, adequate water supply to all.

The People's Conference Party promised to electorates to eradicate nepotism, corruption of all sorts. In regards to social reforms, it would take the opinion and advice of the Church leaders and voluntary organizations. Their main promised was to finished the works which they did not complete during their tenure in the government according to 'Six Basic Needs' and top priority was given to the infra- structure development especially development in Hydro- Electricity⁶.

Despite the sheer lack of time for structuring the party organization to face the assembly election, the MNF Party was able to secure overwhelming majority with 24 seats, the Congress- I with 13 seats and the PC Party with 3 seats⁷.

The Second State Legislative Assembly Elections of 1989:

The MNF Ministry of 1987 did not last long due to internal faction within the Ministry. Fresh election was held on 21st January, 1989. The Congress Party won the election by securing 23 seats in the Assembly. It is clear from the election manifestos that different political parties made almost similar appeal and promises to the voters, they all strived to make a promises as good as they could without realistic aspects. It is noticeable that the political parties were guided parochial interests to a great extend since the manifestos failed to reflect any awareness of national programmes or objectives of the socio- economic changes. Both the national and state parties laid emphasis on regional grievances and problems only. An important federal relation between the Centre and the state regarding financial relations was the implementation of the New Land Use Policy (NLUP). Under this scheme, with the approval of the Planning Commission, 50,000 families were to receive Rs. 3000 per year for five years for the development of agriculture, veterinary and animal husbandry, forest and small and cottage industries⁸.

The Third State Legislative Assembly Elections of 1993:

The third State Legislative Assembly was held on 30th November, 1993. Prior to this, the PC Party converted itself into 'Mizoram Janata Dal (MJD). The Congress-I and its alliance the MJD won 30 seats out of 40 and formed the government. Not many changes were visible in all the parties' manifestos. The political parties based their promises on regional demands only. The Congress like the previous election on its economic front gave importance to rural economy by promoting NLUP policy. The MJD mainly highlighted the plans to improve and developed hydel- electric power. The MNF too made similar pledge in social, economic and political all- round development of the state⁹.

A study of the election manifestos shows that none of the parties stressed the need for progressive measures to bring about the socio- economic transformation in Mizoram. It is quite clear that the manifestos were designed to suit the local taste and interests. At best, some parties were committed to bring about agricultural self- sufficiency within a stipulated period of time without indicating the policy package. It clearly shows that the political parties retrieved their programmes from abstract idealism to concrete items of socio- economic change.

⁴ KM Zakhuma (2001), 'Political Developments in Mizoram from 1946- 1989', Aizawl, p. 296.

⁵ Election Manifesto 1987 published by the MNF Headquarters, Aizawl.

⁶ Election Manifesto 1987 published by the People's Conference headquarters, Aizawl.

⁷ CSDS Databank.

⁸ Kenneth Chawngliana (2002), 'Mizoram Hruaitute Sulhnu Vol- I', Aizawl, p. 203.

⁹ KM Zakhuma, op.cit., p. 250.

The Fourth State Legislative Assembly Elections of 1998:

The growing importance and recognition of regional and state parties in India was seen in the 1990s and there was a decline of 'the dominance of the Congress system in Indian politics'. Even in Mizoram, people began to lose their faith in the Congress government. This could be due to the fact that there was no improvement in the economic status of the state. The agricultural and industrial policies, the NLUP all failed to bring changes in economic development of the state, and subsidies were misused by both the authorities and the people. Taking advantage of these situations, the two state parties the MNF and the Mizoram People's Conference Party (MPC)¹⁰ joined hands together and won majority by securing 33 seats in the Assembly.

The MNF- MPC manifesto was divided into fourteen main points which mainly comprises of promises in the field of political, economic, administration and social development. Better transport facilities in road, railways and airways; revision of Mizoram Industrial policy; creating better education policy. Importance was given to the development of hydel- power projects; investments from foreign companies for more projects and complete them at the earliest. The coalition also talked about eradication of poverty by arranging financial assistance to those who lived below poverty lines; improvement of infrastructure in sports and giving financial assistance in different areas of sports. They also pledge to protect and empower women's status in the state and promised to revise the existing Mizo Customary Laws¹¹. The Congress party, like the previous election gave utmost importance to NLUP policy; this lack of changes in the party policy led to the downfall of the party in 1998 election.

One important development during the MNF- MPC Ministry was that the support gave by the coalition to the NDA government at the Centre in the Lok Sabha Election of 1999. As promised in the Memorandum of Settlement in 1986, Mizoram achieved its own University under the Act of Parliament, 2000 and it came into existence from 2001. Efforts were made by the coalition ministry in settlement of the ex- undergrounds in getting grants and aids. Notable achievement gained by this coalition government was received of 'Peace Bonus' scheme from the NDA government¹². This scheme, which came from the Central government, was used for development works in various areas, mostly for rural development and construction of roadways.

The Fifth State Legislative Assembly Election of 2003:

In this election, the main competition was between the Congress- I and the MNF party. The MNF came out with single majority by getting 22 seats¹³. The Congress party fought the election on the basis of national issues, at the same time giving importance to regional needs and demands with special focus on development in areas of power and roadways. The party promised to revise the policy of NLUP and implement it in a proper manner so that the funds would be utilized in a right way. On the issue of the welfare of the youth, the party promised to form Youth Welfare Commission to promote the interest of youth in various fields. Education system of the state would be revised and implemented with the introduction of information technology to all educational institutions. On the issue of local self- governance, the party pledge to set up District Development Councils in all the eight districts, and setting up of Municipal Council/ Corporation. Importance would be given to rural development in all round activities so that the gap between the rural and urban areas could be minimized¹⁴.

The MNF party based their policy and programmes on regional demands; at the same time importance had been given to uplift the state in all economic, political and social spheres. The party promised to implement 'Right to Information Act' for the transparency and accountability of the government towards the people. Again, importance had been given to rural development by providing better road facilities and proper communication system. The party promised the farmers that their agricultural products would be purchased by the government in a higher rate and better channelization of distribution of their crops. Regarding the education system, it pledged for better infra-structures and necessary facilities to all educational institutions starting from primary schools to University¹⁵.

The MPC and ZNP made a pre-poll alliance and their Common Programme issued by both the parties was mainly based on regional demands, where importance had been given to develop hydel- electric power and forming transparency government so that it would include masses from urban as well as rural areas to meet the

¹⁰The prior MJD again changed back its name to Mizoram People's Conference Party on 23rd march, 1993; cutting off all its ties from Janata Dal. See Kenneth Chawngliana (2002), op.cit., p. 197.

¹¹Joint Election Manifesto 1998 published by the MNF- MPC Headquarters, Aizawl.

¹²C. Hermana (1999), 'Zoram Politics ThliTleh Dan Vol- II', Aizawl, p. 147.

¹³CSDS Databank.

¹⁴Election Manifesto of 2003, issued by Mizoram Pradesh Congress Committee, Aizawl.

¹⁵Election Manifesto of 2003, published by Mizo National Front General Headquarter, Aizawl.

needs and demands of all equally¹⁶. There wasn't much difference between the programmes and policies by different political parties.

The Sixth State Legislative Assembly Elections of 2008:

The State Legislative Assembly election was held on November, 2008. The Congress party won majority by getting 32 seats, the MNF won 3 seats, the MPC with 2, ZNP with 2 seats and Mara Democratic Front with 1 seat. The MNF, who was forming government for ten years, was voted out of power. Nepotism, scams, corruption and failure to deliver what was promised to the people all contributed to the fall of the MNF ministry. The Congress Party, under the theme 'Good Governance' promised de-centralization of administration; starting of separate Women and Child Welfare Department for protection and promotion of their welfare. In educational aspects, the party promised quality education by starting Education Reforms Commission. On the issue of health care, the party pledged to have its own medical college and better health care facilities even for the rural areas. The party in its manifesto focuses on the welfare of the youth at length. Regarding development of infrastructure, the Congress enhanced development in areas of power, roads, railways, waterways and airways; creating meaningful Infrastructure Development Authority; to explore the on-going Oil and Gas exploration in a larger and more focused perspective. The main economic development issue lies in NLUP; where it promised to deliver rupees one lakh to the chosen family in order to eliminate jhum cultivation¹⁷. These programmes and policies attract the voters in great number.

The manifestos of the state parties such as the MNF, the PC Party and the ZNP were more or less the same, hardly any changes were found; highlighting the same developmental issues which they tackled in their earlier manifestos.

The Seventh State Legislative Assembly Elections of 2013:

The seventh State Legislative Assembly election was held on 25th November, 2013 and results were declared on 9th December. The main contest was between the Congress- I and the MNF led Mizo Democratic Alliance which comprises of the MNF, the MPC and the MDF. The Congress won majority by securing 34 seats, MNF with 5 seats and the MPC with 1 seat. The ZNP failed to secure any seat.

The 'Common Manifesto' issued by Mizo Democratic Alliance highlighted the protection of Mizo language and its inclusion in the 8th Schedule of the Indian Constitution; decentralization of power for good governance; Socio- Economic Development Programme (SEDP) and fulfilment of Six Basic Needs; promotion of quality education which focus IT subject; better Health Care Scheme especially for the BPL families; better policy for the Youth in enhancement of skill based trainings; starting of Lok Ayukta/ Vigilance Commission to end corruption in the state; better transport facility in air, water, road and railway transport with additional airport construction in the southern part of Mizoram. Lastly, the party highlighted the plan to improve and developed hydel- electric powers such as Chhimituipui Hydel Project- 635 MW, Tuirial Hydel Project- 60 MW, Bairabi Hydel Project- 120 MW and Tuivai Hydel Project- 210 MW¹⁸.

The main issue of the Congress was their flagship programme of NLUP and its continuation in order to eradicate poverty and jhum cultivation in the state. Utmost importance was given to the welfare of the youth in areas of employment, education, skill- based training and in areas of sports and recreation; the party pledged to build proper sport stadium in each district headquarters. On health issue, like the previous manifesto, the Congress pledged to fulfil its own medical college. Power development remained one of the core issues which the party promised to give power supply to all the villages in Mizoram within five years. Issue of tourism was another important development one finds in the policy of the party; introduction of ropeways, strengthening all the bridges across the state; promotion of eco- tourism; attraction of tourists in adventure and motor sports were found in the programme. Strengthening furniture industries based on bamboos and creation of Women and Child Department separately in taking care of the needs of these groups¹⁹.

The ZNP Party fought the election with the economic policy of FOSEP- Family Oriented Sustainable Economic Policy, which focus on inclusive growth and stable economic policy. On the issue of youth welfare, its policy of YES- Youth Empowerment Scheme based on National Youth Policy and skills development, creation of job counselling centres and capacities building programmes, entrepreneurship courses, introduction of vocational schools etc were mentioned extensively. Regarding the industrial policy, the party programme included maximum foreign investments, privatization, better industrial estates, better loan facilities, improvement in handloom and handicraft industries. On social issues, the protection of customary law under Article 371G of the Indian Constitution, creation of community healing centres in every district, to establish

¹⁶Common Programme 2003, issued by MPC and ZNP Co- ordination Committee, Aizawl.

¹⁷Election Manifesto of 2008, issued by Mizoram Pradesh Congress Committee, Aizawl.

¹⁸Common Manifesto 2013, jointly published by MNF, MPC and MDF General Headquarters, Aizawl.

¹⁹Election Manifesto 2013, published by Mizoram Pradesh Congress Committee, Aizawl.

better relationship with the Church and the NGOs in eradication of substance abuse and HIV/AIDS. The party also highlighted the importance of proper financial management like grass root level planning, socio- economic census, decentralization in planning, viability gap funding and austerity measures. Lastly, the party's administrative policy of SMART GOVERNANCE- Simple, Mature, Accountable, Responsible and Transparent Governance²⁰ are worth mentioning.

The Eighth State Legislative Assembly Elections of 2018

The Eighth State Legislative Assembly Election was held on 28th November 2018. The BJP, the Congress, the Mizo National Front (MNF), NPP, NCP, PRISM, Zoram Peoples Movement (Independent), Zoram Thar and some independent candidates contested the election. There are 40 seats with 209 candidates out of which 191 are males and 12 are females²¹. The verdict of the result was that MNF has swept majority by securing 26 seats, the ruling Congress party managed to get only 5 seats, newly formed ZPM group secured 8 seats and for the first time, nationalist party i.e. the BJP managed to mark its entry into Mizoram politics by securing one seat.

The main theme of the MNF's economic policy was in the form of Socio- Economic Development Policy (SEDP)²² in which cash distribution of rupees 3 lakhs will be given to those economically lower section families to boost their economy in the field of agriculture, sericulture, animal husbandry, handloom & handicraft, carpentry and petty trading. Hardly changes in the economic policy was seen from the previous election manifestos from the MNF party.

The Congress Party just stressed on New Land Use Policy (NLUP) alone as its economic policy, saying there will be continuation of distribution of NLUP and guidelines of the policy would be revised²³.

The BJP did not clearly mention the economic policy alone but the promise of Agricultural Land Reform, promoting private set-up industries by providing loans.

PRISM party stressed on taking advantage of "Look West Policy" by setting up Tlabung Border Trade Centre so that maximum economic benefits could be gained by India. "Regulated Market System" would be introduced to solve the problem of selling the agricultural products by the farmers. To fulfil and implement UNO's 2030 target of 17 Sustainable Development Goals for removal of poverty and self-sufficiency in food consumptions²⁴.

ZPM has framed its economic policy based on 'six basic needs' introduced by Brig. T. Sailo, the then president of PC Party. Introduction of 'hand-holding policy' meaning responsibility lies on the government in guiding the people. Unlike the Congress and the MNF, the ZPM did not promise the voters any cash-distribution policy but promised the cultivators to help out in terms of distribution of harvested goods. Proper implementation of industrial policy was laid out in the party manifesto and the party promised to help "anybody who can do it" for their economic sustenance²⁵.

II. CONCLUSION

After analyzing the policy and programmes of the political parties, one can make a conclusion that none of the parties are committed in fulfilling their goals for socio- economic development; neither the voters care nor conscious about the promised made by the political parties. One can see that the Congress party policy of NLUP and the MNF's Peace Bonus and SEDP are the only 'selling' policies to the voters. Regional imbalances and development between urban and rural areas are very relevant in the political process. None of the political parties made the necessary of structural transformation in the economic system as the basis for electoral appeal. At best, some parties are committed to agricultural self- sufficiency within a stipulated period of time without indicating the policy package. It is thus, clearly necessary that political parties in Mizoram must retrieve their programmes from abstract idealism to concrete items of socio- economic change for development of the state.

²⁰ZNP Policy: Kalphung Thar 2013, published by ZNP General Headquarters, Aizawl.

²¹"Mizoram a Assembly InthlanChanchin" *The Frontier Despatch*, (10 December 2018).

²² Mizo National Front, "Election Manifesto 2018", p.3.

²³Mizoram Pradesh Congress Committee, "Election Manifesto: 2018 MLA General Election", p.2.

²⁴PRISM, "MLA Election Manifesto, 2018", p.7.

²⁵Zoram People's Movement (ZPM), "Tobul, RuangamlehHlenchhuah a Tumte", p.17.

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