

BJP's short term score in Manipur

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The electoral battle is now concluded in Manipur, and the BJP's victory is nearly definite, pending a floor test. Even if it has scored convincingly in the short run, there is no guarantee that the new government's problems are over. It will have to keep its own MLAs happy when a majority of the cabinet ministers are from the smaller parties that are supporting it. There is also the manifesto of one of these parties promising the division of Manipur to form Greater Nagaland, a contentious issue.

It was a case of virtual hijack of victory out of what seemed to be certain defeat for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Manipur. In the two phase assembly elections on 4 and 8 March, the party won just 21 seats to come a distant second to the Congress which won 28 seats in a house of 60 seats. However, as the incumbent party it used its superior clout and manipulated a thin majority to get an invitation to form the next government by the state governor Najma Heptulla. It is a point of dispute whether not inviting the single largest party first to form the government in a hung assembly amounts to breaking a constitutional norm. Eminent jurist Fali S Nariman definitely thinks so.

Belying all exit polls most of which predicted a clear BJP victory in Manipur, the Congress returned in 28 seats to become the single largest party while the BJP trailed with 21 seats. The remaining 11 seats were lapped up by the smaller parties like the Meghalaya based National People's Party (NPP) founded by former Lok Sabha Speaker Purno S Sangma and now run by his son Conrad Sangma. The NPP won four seats, the Nagaland based Naga Peoples' Front (NPF) won four seats, Ram Vilas Paswan's Lok Janshakti Party (LJP), Mamata Banerjee's All India Trinamool Congress and an independent candidate all won one seat each.

On the day the results were declared (11 March), the BJP claimed the support of all the 11 smaller party MLAs, plus that of a lone Congress MLA, and was prompt in sending its representatives to the state governor to stake its claim. The Congress was a little late off the block, perhaps complacent because it had emerged as the single largest party and the NPP had promised its support but it too staked its claim to form the government. The governor

was surprisingly quick to conclude that it was the BJP which had the majority support. She also told the press that when the Congress leader and then Chief Minister Okram Ibobi met her, she told him to resign first so that the government formation process can begin, implying that the outgoing chief minister was refusing to vacate his post. A large section of the media seized on this part of her statement and publicised it prominently. Ibobi clarified the next day he was well aware of the rules and would resign ahead of the Election Commission's formal notification of the list of winning candidates, and he did.

The Congress needed the support of just three more MLAs to reach the majority mark of 31 while the BJP needed the support of 10. Since it was unlikely the NPF would extend support to the Congress as the latter was vehemently opposed to its main election plank of facilitating the severance of Naga dominated areas of Manipur to be part of a Greater Nagaland being pursued by the Naga militant organisation, the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah), the Congress' only hope was to enlist the support of the four NPP legislators. The Congress could have courted the support of two other MLAs, one of the Trinamool Congress and the other an Independent but even that would not have helped it to reach the magic number of 31.

The NPP's crucial position in the equation became evident in the distribution of cabinet berths when the new BJP government was sworn in on the afternoon of 15 March. It made sure of the NPP's support by not only giving all four NPP legislators cabinet berths but also giving the post of deputy chief minister to the party leader. The BJP also inducted one MLA of the NPF and the lone LJP MLA. Intriguingly, one Congress defector also made it to the cabinet list. Other than these seven cabinet berths, the Chief Minister N Biren Singh and another BJP leader and a contender for the chief minister's post T Biswajit Singh were also sworn in, bringing the BJP's presence in the cabinet to just two members. With many of its own legislators to please, the BJP leadership will have to walk a tight rope indeed.

The lone Congress defector T Shyamkumar was given a cabinet berth despite the foregone conclusion that he would have to face disqualification when the floor test is conducted and he votes against his original party's whip. Perhaps the BJP's strategy is to buy out Congress MLAs and then get them disqualified. This will not only deplete the Congress ranks but also lower its majority in the House. After disqualification, Shyamkumar will continue to be a minister for the next six months before a by-election is held in his constituency from where he will seek re-election from the commanding position of a minister.

When the BJP entered the election fray it was unable to announce a chief ministerial candidate. There were several likely candidates for the post who fought the elections. However, only the two mentioned earlier - N Biren Singh, who is now the Chief Minister, and TBiswajit Singh actually remained. The latter was one of two sitting BJP MLAs in the last assembly who had won their seats in a mid-term by-election. The former was once a

Congress minister who left the party after falling out with the then Chief Minister Okram Ibobi Singh over his exclusion from the cabinet after a reshuffle. Sources say that the BJP legislature party's vote for a CM candidate went to Biswajit. The BJP overseers from Delhi and Assam, led by Ram Madhav and Himanta Biswa Sarma, however prevailed upon Biswajit to concede to Biren who is the older and more experienced politician, but more than that, is also an important Congress turncoat.

A Clever Ruse

The Election Commission of India had issued a notification saying that on the eve of the polling and the actual polling day (3 and 4 March) no election advertisements would be allowed to be published in the media unless the advertisement had prior certification of the state election office's Media Certification and Monitoring Committee (MCMC). The BJP went ahead and had two full page colour advertisements certified by the MCMC for these two days. The party then sent them to all the major newspapers published from Imphal, each to be published on 3 and 4 March. These advertisements were sent to the newspapers along with certificates issued by the MCMC. However, to the dismay of the editors of eight newspapers, it was discovered that the contents of the certified advertisements meant to be published on 3 March had been swapped with one which the MCMC had not vetted. The uncertified advertisement, titled "15 years of Loot", castigated the Congress for its alleged misrule and plunder of public property during three terms in power. The Election Office has now lodged FIRs against the editors of these eight newspapers although the MCMC did not specify what it had certified or withheld. Obviously, only winning matters.

The electoral battle is now concluded, and the BJP's victory is nearly definite, pending a floor test. Unless the NPP changes its mind and decides it is not happy with the compensations the BJP conceded for the loyalty of its four MLAs, the Congress cannot hope to reverse the situation. Even if in the short run the BJP has scored convincingly, there is no guarantee that the new government's problems are over. It will have to keep its own MLAs happy when a majority of the cabinet ministers are members of the smaller parties. There is also the NPF and its manifesto promising the division of Manipur to form Greater Nagaland. The negotiation of the Framework Agreement signed in August 2015 between the Union government and the NSCN (IM) also hinges on the question of Greater Nagaland again. The BJP's strategy hence would be to try and induce more Congress MLAs to defect so that it is not forced to be at the mercy of the NPF.