

## NAGALAND POLLS: THE MURKY REALITIES

There has been a cry for clean elections to Nagaland's assembly in the run-up to polling on 23 February—for my money a decisive and positive mark in this land of many negatives. Alas, it has had to combat that other electoral cry: *Kiman poysha dibi?*

In Nagamese, the bazaar language that binds several Naga tribes: how much money will you give? And unsaid: is there liquor on the side?

That became evident when the vehicle in which Nagaland's home minister Imkong L. Imchen was travelling on 18 February drove into a search-and-seizure bust by personnel of Assam Rifles. Imchen, who has since resigned, was headed to his constituency in northwestern Mokokchung district.

The seizure of ₹1.10 crore in cash, several handguns and assault rifles and liquor from the car of this influential member of the incumbent Naga People's Front (NPF) pointed yet again to murky realities. Here, politics has for long walked hand-in-glove with misappropriation of public funds with a parallel lack of an income tax regime—this disables marking of corruption. Imchen was detained under the Arms Act, not law related to disproportionate assets or unaccounted funds. ₹1 crore in cash was recovered two days earlier from a helicopter used by an NPF candidate in southwestern northern Longleng district.

There is easy access of weapons on account of familiarity with several powerful Naga rebel groups that dip with smooth facility into both the Naga economy and politics. This de facto geography extends beyond Nagaland into Naga-inhabited regions in Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.

The twisted nature of politics in Nagaland became even more evident when NPF, instead of apologizing, opened a broadside against its key rival Congress—which has 18 seats to NPF's 35 in the 60-member outgoing assembly—accusing it of deliberate attack and favouritism. A formal party statement accused the Congress of applying "illegal force and the power of its high command to suppress the voice of the Nagas".

This bizarre offence-as-defence stemmed from the search-seizure performed by security forces on a Congress candidate from central Wokha district, Y. Sulanthung H. Lotha, on the same days as Imchen's bust. Lotha was found with ₹3.7 lakh in cash and a weapon. NPF's charge was that Lotha was quickly released on bail, unlike Imchen, who made bail on 20 February.

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For its part, the Congress lashed back, completely ignoring Lotha's faux pas, and exhorted voters to "wake up from their slumber and think rationally" to vote for a "better government and better Nagaland". Union home minister-Sushilkumar Shinde was also conveniently at hand to offer glib talk of the need to negate terror and corruption.

And so, conspiracy theories abound. To have a contingent of Assam Rifles detain the Nagaland home minister's car, goes one such, could not have happened without the active involvement of "New Delhi" and India's security apparatus. A Congress candidate was trapped, such theorists persist, only to present to the world an instance of equal opportunity; but in fact it was a deliberate sacrifice of a pawn to encircle the enemy's king: NPF leader and incumbent chief minister Neiphiu Rio. Another twist: it was also a signal to Naga rebel groups—which have lately adopted a holier-than-thou posture of publicly declaiming a distance from exerting electoral influence; a spin with negligible purchase—that "New Delhi" can play hardball as it works to convert lengthy ceasefires into formal peace.

(Such conspiracy theories have a logical hook here. For instance, tapping is routine in North-East India's conflict zones. An aside: an intelligence official recently told me that he first "met" me three years ago during a conversation between two officials of a major Naga rebel group; they were telephonically discussing my request to enter their heavily guarded headquarters and interviewing senior functionaries for my latest book, *Highway 39*. The army too tracks calls.)

But in the middle of such murkiness, it is difficult to discount a growing momentum of those with renewed hope, tired as they are of conflict and the cynical economy it spawns. In this they are driven by the younger, relatively less tainted generation that craves peace and prosperity as much as identity and dignity. Together this tag team of public opinion could reorient the future to work-in-progress.

The unprecedented turnout in excess of 90% during polling for assembly elections in Tripura on 14 February is perhaps a precursor. This trend could well be replicated in Meghalaya which alongside Nagaland goes to assembly polls this Saturday. In Nagaland, as in her "sister" states, the public mood is quite unforgiving.

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