

ELECTORAL DYNAMICS IN CHHATTISGARH AND MIZORAM AMIDST UPCOMING VIDHAN SABHA ELECTIONS

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



November will be one of the most decisive months for political parties in India as *Vidhan Sabha* elections in Chhattisgarh, Mizoram, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Telangana are scheduled. Chhattisgarh and Mizoram will be the first to go to polls on 7th November (elections in Chhattisgarh are to be held in two phases on 7 November for 20 seats and 17 November for the remaining 70 seats). Both the *Bhartiya Janata Party* (BJP) and *Indian National Congress* (INC) are engaged in arduous efforts to secure a majority. In the run up to the upcoming *Lok Sabha* elections in early 2024, INC is exerting all its energy to get support at the local level against the incumbent BJP governments.

Chhattisgarh

Chhattisgarh, the Central State that is known for BJP's stronghold, saw an unexpected shift in power structure when INC edged BJP out by securing 68 votes against the latter's 15. The table below shows how BJP has been in power since 2003, and the vote difference seen in 2018 reveals people's mistrust in the Raman Singh's government. It is noteworthy that people in India treat both *Vidhan Sabha* and *Lok Sabha* elections differently. At the state level, it is expected that people would be more concerned about the welfare schemes and the leadership characteristics contesting at the local level. They rarely vote for a local *Vidhan Sabha* candidate because of leadership sitting in the Center. For example, in the Rajasthan *Vidhan Sabha* elections in 2018, people chanted slogans against the BJP Chief Minister, "*Modi Tujh Sy Bair Nahe, Vasundra Teri Khair Nahi* (we don't have any enmity with

you Modi, but Vasundhra, we will not spare you).”¹ So was the case in Chhattisgarh against the Raman Singh government which caused people to vote for the Congress.

Chhattisgarh Vidhan Sabha Elections (Total Seats - 90)

Party	2003	2008	2013	2018
BJP	50	50	49	15
INC	37	38	39	68
BSP	2	2	1	2
NSP	1		1	

BJP, in its lately issued manifesto for Chhattisgarh promises of filing 1 lac vacant government posts, financial assistance to married women and landless agriculture laborer, and many other social welfare schemes. The manifesto, while walking on the ethnic fault lines also assured to take people to *Ram Temple* in Ayodhya if BJP comes into government.² Before formally launching its manifesto for the State, Congress had been basing its campaign on welfare schemes like direct cash transfer, loan waiver, regional identity cards, and *Chhattisgariyavaad*, highlighting BJP’s corruption cases and soft ‘Hindutva’.³ However, there is evidence that Congress has adopted a soft line towards Hindu nationalism as it cannot afford to lose Hindus support in upcoming polls. From *Godhan Nyay Yojana* to protect cows and promote organic farming, to the *Ram Van Gaman* Tourism Circuit that aims to develop all the sites where Ram and Sita had stayed during their exiles. Even CM of Chhattisgarh, Bhupesh Baghel’s father, Nand Kumar Baghel had criticized his son for developing these religious sites and promoting Hindu nationalism.⁴ The party manifesto also promises to conduct a caste-based census in the State.⁵

BJP has also accused INC of scams and corruption, alongside drawing communal lines for electoral support. When Raman Singh was asked about the main issue the BJP will be focusing on, he replied

¹ Sanjay Lodha and Nidhi Jain, “Decoding the Sweeping BJP victory in Rajasthan,” in *Electoral Dynamics in the States of India*, ed. Sandeep Shastri, Ashutosh Kumar and Yatindra Singh Sisodia (Routledge, 2022), 131.

² “BJP Manifesto Promises Visit to Ayodhya Ram Temple, Filing of One Lakh CVacant Govt Posts in 2 Years,” Mint, November 3, 2023, <https://www.livemint.com/elections/chhattisgarh-assembly-election-bjp-manifesto-promises-visit-to-ayodhya-ram-temple-filing-one-lakh-vacant-govt-posts-11699008945898.html>.

³ Jayprakash S Naidu, “BJP’s Chhattisgarh Challenge has a number: 10% vote lead for Cong in 2018,” *The Indian Express*, October 18, 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/political-pulse/bjp-chhattisgarh-challenge-10-percent-vote-lead-congress-2018-8988057/>; Chhattisgariyavaad is initiated by Baghel government to promote regional identity through promoting regional art, culture, sports, and festivals.

⁴ Ashutosh Sharma, “In Chhattisgarh, Baghel’s Congress Campaigns on Caste and Soft Hindutva,” *Frontline*, October 5, 2023, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/chhattisgarh-assembly-election-2023-congress-turns-right-in-response-to-bjp-69-point-charge-sheet-bhupesh-baghel-soft-hindutva-obc-politics/article67362929.ece>.

⁵ “Congress Manifesto Promises Caste Census, Farm Loan Waiver, Free Power up to 200 units,” Mint, November 5, 2023, <https://www.livemint.com/elections/chhattisgarh-polls-congress-manifesto-promises-caste-census-farm-loan-waiver-free-power-up-to-200-units-11699177405820.html>.

that corruption remains the biggest issue to be highlighted.⁶ Singh added that along with Wijay Baghel, the party will work on highlighting major corruption scams including the Public Distribution Scam, Free Grains Scheme, and Liquor Scam against Congress. However, the present situation does not favor BJP as the reports presented by the Enforcement Directorate are not much supported by the courts. Moreover, Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Prime Minister Modi are personally taking part in campaigns.⁷ Shah, in his campaign pitch, accused Congress of murder of a youth Bhuneshwar Sahu in communal violence on 8 April 2023. Later on, the BJP announced Bhuneshwar's father Ishwar Sahu as its candidate from the Saja constituency.⁸

Mizoram

Contrary to verbal assurances in Chhattisgarh, Congress had launched an official manifesto for 40 seats, poll-bound Mizoram *Vidhan Sabha*. Currently Mizoram National Front (MZF) is in power and an ally of the BJP-led North East Democratic Alliance (NEDA) in the region and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in the Center. However, the party works independently in the state. The chart below explains the power dynamics in Mizoram *Vidhan Sabha*, showing MNF in a very close competition with INC as both parties had been ruling in the state interchangeably.

Mizoram Vidhan Sabha Elections

Party	1978	1979	1984	1987	1989	1993	1998	2003	2008	2013	2018
INC		5	20	13	23	16	6	12	32	34	5
PPC	22	18		3	1						
IND	8	5	2	24	2	10	1				8
JNP		2									
MNF					14	14	21	21	3	5	26
MZPC							12	3		1	
ZNP								2	2		
MPC									2		
BJP											1

To counter this alliance, Ronald Sapa, Mizoram Pradesh Congress Committee's Chief spokesman, said that the "party will establish a government which is efficient, transparent and free from corruption. The Congress government will strengthen grassroots democracy by giving more power,

⁶ Sravasti Dasgupta, "Chhattisgarh Ex-CM Raman Singh Hails Collective Leadership as BJP Goes to Polls without CM Face," *The Wire*, October 14, 2023, <https://thewire.in/politics/interview-chhattisgarh-election-raman-singh-bjp-chief-minister-face>.

⁷ "BJP Steps up Campaign; Shah to Address two rallies today," *The Federal*, October 19, 2023, <https://thefederal.com/category/assembly-elections-2023/chhattisgarh-polls-bjp-steps-up-campaign-shah-to-address-2-rallies-today-98843?infinite-scroll=1>.

⁸ Shubhomoy Sikdar, "Amit Shah Digs Up Communal Incident at Chhattisgarh Campaign Meet," *The Hindu*, October 17, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/chhattisgarh-assembly/amit-shah-digs-up-communal-incident-at-chhattisgarh-campaign-meet/article67427798.ece>.

more responsibilities, and financial resources to the village councils and more local bodies.”⁹ The Manifesto promised an LPG cylinder at Rs 750, an old pension of Rs 2000 per month, and health and other welfare measures. Moreover, the Manifesto also covers welfare schemes for farmers, and families with no government employees, and pledges creation of one lac jobs for Mizoram youth.¹⁰

On the other side, the BJP looked lackluster in its campaign. Prime Minister Modi had canceled his visit to the state planned for 30th October and Amit Shah led the campaign afterwards.¹¹ Currently, the northeastern state is facing a refugee crisis due to a coup in Myanmar and ethnic violence driven by Manipur. BJP’s lack of interest in resolving the Manipur crisis has angered the Christian majority of Mizoram. That is the reason, the State’s CM Zoramthanga on October 23 said that he could not share the stage with PM Modi for his election campaign. Doing this will weaken his party’s standing in the state.¹² However, in party manifesto for the State, BJP promises 33% reservation for women in government jobs, free education to all girls students, financial assistance to girls, and LOTUS scheme that covers housing and health benefits.¹³ In his video message for the Mizoram people, Modi highlighted BJP’s national performance and promised social and infrastructural development for the state also.

In both States - Chhattisgarh and Mizoram - BJP appears to be in a weak position. Although MNF is an ally of the BJP in the region and the Centre, the party’s victory does not mean anything for the BJP. The same goes for Congress. Although the party outnumbered all other political factions in 2018, this time it has to be conscious of Janata Congress Chhattisgarh (JCC), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), and Aam Admi Party (AAP). Contrary to its sole focus on welfare schemes, INC seemed to consolidate the Hindu nationalist narrative in its campaign in Chhattisgarh which may benefit it.

⁹ “Congress releases Mizoram Manifesto: Promises LPG Cylinder at Rs 750,” Business Standard, October 24, 2023, https://www.business-standard.com/elections/mizoram-elections/congress-releases-mizoram-manifesto-promises-lpg-cylinders-at-rs-750-123102300984_1.html.

¹⁰ “In Mizoram Manifesto, Congress Balances Social Justice with Development,” NDTV, October 18, 2023, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/in-mizoram-manifesto-congress-balances-social-justice-with-development-4493003>.

¹¹ “PM Modi Cancels Campaign trip to Mizoram, Amit Shah will fill in,” The Hindu, October 29, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/mizoram-assembly/pm-cancels-campaign-trip-to-mizoram-shah-will-fill-in/article67470448.ece>.

¹² “Wont share stage with PM Modi when he comes to campaign: Mizoram CM,” The Hindu, October 23, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/mizoram-assembly/wont-share-stage-with-pm-modi-when-he-comes-to-campaign-mizoram-cm/article67452599.ece>.

¹³ Utpal Parashar, “BJP’s Mizoram Manifesto Vows 33% Reservation for Women in Govt Jobs,” *Hindustan Times*, October 28, 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/bjps-mizoram-manifesto-vows-33-reservation-for-women-in-govt-jobs-101698431909901.html>.