

NGO in Electoral Reforms of Mizoram: A Challenge

H. S. Lalbiakengi

PhD Full Time Research Scholar, Department of Public Administration,
Presidency College (Autonomous), Chepauk, Chennai 600005, India

Abstract: *This article highlights electoral reforms in Mizoram, broadly carried out by an NGO, Mizoram People's Forum (MPF). Mizoram is the 23rd state of the Indian Union since 1987. The state is situated in the southernmost of the north eastern border of India. The present article gives introduction, meaning, need, problems and history of electoral reform in the first part. The second part deals with electoral reforms in Mizoram; formation and members of MPF, its goals and objectives, vision and organisational structure. As a result of the dismal incidents in the 2003 election, Mizoram People's Forum was formed in 2006 initiated by Mizoram Synod. It should be noted that Churches play important role in Mizoram in all facets of life and society as Christianity is the main religion of Mizos (people of Mizoram). The third part of the article throws light on the actions and steps taken by MPF and its achievements to keep Mizoram elections under peaceful environment. The fourth part emphasized voices in honour of MPF and its criticisms. The article ends with proposition for future scope of the study and conclusion.*

Keywords: election, electoral reforms, Mizoram Peoples Forum(MPF), voters, candidate, peaceful

1. Introduction

India is a democratic country where the representatives of the people are elected every five years by all the sane adult citizens since 1951. The vigour of democratic systems depends in the fairness of election. Democracy cannot survive without free and fair elections. But the present elections in India are not hold in ideal conditions because of enormous amount of money and large muscle powers are involved. The Indian electoral system was free from any substantial drawback till the fourth general election in 1967. The distortion in its working appeared for the first time in the fifth general elections in 1971 and multiplied in the successive elections till date.

Since the beginning of electoral politics in the fifties and particularly in the last two decades electoral reform has been quite a topic of debate. The recent growth in electoral malpractices and the fact that none of the serious proposals for electoral reforms have ever got implemented have kept the issue alive.

1.1 Meaning of Electoral Reform

Electoral reform is change in electoral systems to improve how public desires are expressed in election results. That can include reforms of Voting systems, Vote-counting procedures, rules about political parties, eligibility to vote, nomination rules, safety of voters and election workers, measures against different forms of corruption, financing of candidates and referendum campaigns, factors that affect the rate of voter participation.

1.2 Need for Electoral Reform

It will not be so wrong to say that almost every election in India today is carried out with different kinds of malpractices. As such, the faith of the citizens decreases in the electoral process and the manner of conducting election. There is widespread feeling that the electoral system and

various processes of the law associated with it must be revised so as to make them compatible with the free and fair representation. LP Singh has written as early as in 1986 as "The need for electoral reforms is recognised throughout the country. It is also clear from a sample survey undertaken by the Indian Institute of opinion that this need is shared by Members of Parliament and State Assemblies, both Congress and Opposition".

1.3 Problems of Indian Electoral systems:

The major problems of Indian electoral systems are; money power, muscle power, misuse of government machinery, criminalisation of politics, absence of inner party democracy, impersonation, delimitation of constituencies, non-serious candidates, heavy election expenditure, poll violence, casteism, communalism, etc. All these pose serious threat to free and fair election and further the harmony of democracy.

1.4 Brief History of Electoral Reforms:

The first step towards election reform came from the Election Commission; some of the suggestions have been made into law; while some other proposals were referred to the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Amendment to the Election Law that submitted its report in 1972. The other major reforms initiatives were- the Committee on Electoral Reforms headed by V.M. Tarkunde on behalf of an independent organisation in 1974, the Committee on Electoral reforms of the Government of India 1990.

2. Electoral Reforms in Mizoram

Mizoram is the 23rd state of the Indian Union since 1987. Till 1972, it was one of the districts of Assam and known as Lushai Hills. On 21st January 1972, it became a Union Territory as a part of the major organization of the state of Assam under the North Eastern Reorganization Act 1971. The first general election in the state was held in 1987. As

of the latest election in November 2013, there are 40 constituencies, two Member of Parliament; one member each in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha.

The involvement of civil society in the electoral process was acknowledged since the days of Union Territory election in 1972 in the form of the church issuing an appeal urging the politicians, candidates and voters for a clean, free and fair election. In the first state legislative assembly election in 1987, the Central Young Mizo Association joined the earlier movement by the church. In the subsequent elections, they involve themselves more and more by taking proactive role in the voters' education and electoral participation. The first State Level Coordination Committee on Elections was formed in 1993.

The more active and well organized NGO for Election was witnessed in the formation of Mizoram Peoples Forum (MPF). This article focused on this NGO which is the largest NGO working in pursuance of electoral reform in Mizoram. Mizo People's Forum (MPF) is an organization formed by the churches and major NGOs to reform politics and elections in the state in order to have a transparent, accountable and reliable government and establish good governance in Mizoram.

2.1 Formation of MPF

Elections in the state were clean and fair till the 4th elections, but somehow, malpractices creeps slowly into the system. The events and incidents like numerous allegations of the use of insurgent groups from across the border and money power during the state assembly polls, fake abduction of three candidates of Suangpuilawn constituency on the Mizoram-Manipur border, allegedly due to the intervention of armed insurgent group from Manipur etc, reported during the elections to the 5th Mizoram Legislative Assembly in 2003 shocked the leaders of the Presbyterian Church Synod and encouraged them to take into actions and look for remedies to these turmoil.

As a result of the dismal incidents in the 2003 election, the Mizoram Synod in 2004 resolved to take necessary actions to reform politics of the state. After a series of consultation and negotiations, all the major churches and prominent NGOs of the state formed a common platform to reform politics and elections in the state on June 21, 2006. It was formed by representatives of the group of churches and major NGOs like the Young Mizo Association (YMA), the Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl (MHIP) or women's federation and Mizoram Upa Pawl (MUP) or elders' association to work for political and electoral reforms.

2.2 Members of MPF

The members of MPF included different churches in Mizoram, and all the major NGOs in the state which are established in respect to age group and sex wise, which are one of the basic factors as to membership. Young Mizo Association is the association of youth, where all Mizo youths all over the world from 18yrs of age (one can be a member as long as he likes) are member. There are over 789 branches, 40 Groups, 5 headquarters, more than 3, 88,146 members. Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl,

Mizo women group; any Mizo women from 14yrs of age can become a member, mostly the members are married women. There are 720 Branch, 7 sub headquarters, Mizoram Upa Pawl, Mizosenior citizens group, all Mizos aged above 60 can become members. The Mizoram Upa Pawl has 511 units across the states, with more than 60,000 members. As such one can imagine the size and effectiveness of the MPF in the state.

2.3 Goals and Objectives of MPF

1. To work towards establishing democratic government through free and fair election
2. To reform the electoral process and do away with the corrupt and malpractices in the electoral system in the state
3. To put in place a transparent, accountable and responsible government
4. To educate the people on the governance issue and make them to be a responsible citizen
5. To guide and advice the government on developmental issues
6. To conduct the social audit for social reforms
7. To counter any form of violence, use of arms and terrorism

2.4 Vision of MPF

The vision and mission of the Mizoram People Forum is establishment good governance, peace and harmony in the state for the progressive, just and sustainable socio-economic development and freedom of the people. This is hoped to be achieved by changing the value system and perception of the people and by electoral reforms. The thematic focal areas of the organization are electoral reforms, political education, good governance, advocacy and awareness.

2.5 Organisational Structure

The structure of MPF is that of decentralized one where power is filtered down to the local level. The basic unit of the organization, called the Local forum, formed at the village level that have full power under its jurisdiction within the ambit of the broad guidelines, framed by the Central Forum. The main work force and the backbone of the organization is the MPF Local forum, set up in each and every village or locality -usually one forum in each village council area. The bulk of the activities and works are taken up by the MPF workers or volunteers at this level. Then comes the Constituency Forum of MPF, constituted in line with the Assembly constituency, to look after and co-ordinate the activities of the organization within its area. There are MPF District Forum in each and every district of the state - except Aizawl. The Central Forum also collaborates with the Election Department of the State, State Election Commission, other allied Departments of the state Government.

3. MPF in Action in Elections

One of the major roles played by the MPF was the issue of the 'Election Guidelines' to be followed in the 2008

Mizoram Legislative Assembly General Election. This 'Election Guidelines' is prepared; keeping in mind the 'Election Model code of Conduct' issued by the election commission of India, the legal, social and moral aspects, as well as the sentiments of the general public of the state. This guideline is circulated throughout the state by the volunteers and party volunteers as well. The main idea behind formulating the 'Election Guidelines' is to have a free and fair election and to enable the law-abiding citizens to exercise their franchise without fear or favour and to prove that elections in India are not about money and muscles power alone.

Distribution of the party leaflets, manifesto, candidate's bio-data and all the other literature are done by the MPF volunteers. A number of flags and posters/banners to be put up in a certain locality are jointly decided by the representatives of the political parties in the presence of the MPF leaders. For the candidates to reach out to the electorate, the MPF offers a common platform in each locality of a constituency, which is repeatedly shown in the local cable TV. In this kind of programmes, each candidate is slotted time to air his agenda and manifesto, defend the charges against them or their party in front of the electorates of the locality. The electorates are also provided a chance and opportunity to put forth their queries to the candidates.

3.1 Other steps taken by the MPF

Banning house to house campaigns: the idea of this is to prevent corrupting the voters by giving gifts and money. Banning campaigns in public meetings: campaign by organising public meetings with concert followed by big feasts is a common feature in the state. Popular singers and other entertainers are invited to perform in these public meetings to attract more people in attending the meetings. This cause public nuisance and more importantly, it involves extravagant use of money in election. Organizing a common platform for all the candidates where every candidate of different parties presented their speech. These two acts were done to cut down unnecessary election expense.

3.2 Achievements of MPF

The MPF has been considered as the only genuine election watchdog in Mizoram by the people, true to that, Mizoram Legislative Assembly General Election 2008, MP Election 2009, Village Council Election 2009 & 2012, Aizawl Local Council Election 2012, Aizawl Municipal Council Election 2010 and Autonomous District Council Elections were accomplished under peaceful environment with the massive help of MPF.

On the day of elections, to lessen the burden of the voters, members of the Young Mizo Association - which is the constituent member of MPF, are presented in every polling station across the state. They even arranged benches at the polling booths for the voters to sit down and relax while waiting for their turn to cast their votes. In many places, volunteers of the MPF even serve tea to the voters. The voters exercised their franchise under the watchful eyes of the Mizoram People Forum.

3.3 Strategy for November 2013 Elections

MPF has been deeply concerned about it as election time means wild parties, violence, money power displays, feasting and other activities which are hard to be accepted by a decent society. Mizoram Peoples' Forum (MPF), had signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with major political parties in Mizoram so that free and fair elections could be held. As many as 27 points have been made today for the political parties to abide. Among the 27 points, one is that the political parties should only make an election manifesto which they can implement. The parties which signed the MoU with the state election watchdog are Mizoram Pradesh Congress Committee (MPCC), Mizo Peoples Convention (MPC), Zoram National Party (ZNP), Mizo National Front (MNF) and the BJP. These parties are the most prominent ones in the state.

If any political party violates any one of the 27 points, the MPF will "invalidate" that party. Some of the rules are that every party will try their best to have free and fair election; only the citizens of India should cast their votes; no political party should drop the voters to their polling stations by means of a vehicle; the MPF will check whether any one indulges in demanding money to the candidates and to the political parties; house to house campaign is allowed till 10 days before the election; "selling and buying" of votes are strictly prohibited and no candidate should distribute some material like silpaulin, Jersey, football, mobile handset, government schemes etc.; no protest rally should be organised 10 days before the election; a fixed number of banners, flags, posters are to be used by the parties.

4. Voices in honour of MPF

After working hard to successfully bring peaceful elections in Mizoram, MPF is being praised from all over the country even from the Election Commission itself.

Chief election commissioner (CEC) S Y Quraishi said "This is a wonderful idea. Electoral corruption creeps in from door-to-door campaigning. So, banning such campaigning is one of the most effective ways of stopping corruption in the poll process. We will propose the banning of door-to-door campaigning in the electoral reform exercise."

The Times of India writes: "A day after, Mizoram salutes the 'real winner'. Parties and people hail Mizoram People Forum, a social group, for ensuring a peaceful election".

The Indian Express, "Poll with a difference: The Church's code of conduct is more stringent than the EC's. And it is followed".

4.1 Criticism

It is experienced that MPF has done many great jobs as far as elections are concerned, on the other hand, true to a well accepted saying that "No one is perfect", the NGO is not free from criticism. The recent one of such is rendered by the Chalfil Constituency Joint Students' Union (CCJSU): The CCJSU, in a press statement, said the Election Commission and the returning officer of the by poll

accepted the candidatures of DK Thanga of Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) and independent candidate R Lalrohlua, but the MPF refused to invite them to share the joint platform organized by the church-sponsored watchdog in three villages. Describing the decision of the MPF as undemocratic, the students' body said the decision was unbecoming of the church and its doctrine.

An editorial in the local Dingdi daily and posts on social networking site Facebook slammed the MPF for giving minimum freedom to the candidates during the campaign as candidates were only allowed to speak on a few issues.

Muanpuia Punte, one of the advisors of the North East Students Organisation (NESO) criticised the MPF's codes particularly the clauses which want politicians to refrain from making personal references to individual lives of rivals and stick to policy and programmes. The MPF also warns against what it calls 'false propaganda, unproven truth and scandalous issues,' which are the source of democratic debates. He said, "If people are not allowed to freely speak their mind, views and experiences about the candidates, how will we ever be able to assess them at all, all these do's and don'ts will not help the people because public have to know the truth about their politicians,".

The invalidation of the party on failure to abide by all the 27 points is a matter big apprehension and quite questionable. How far is this practicable? The author opines that no party anywhere in the world could abide by all the 27 points without failure to break any point.

5. Conclusion

Withstanding the memorandum signed between the political parties and MPF might be an issue of debate; however it poses as preventative measure for the parties. The MPF is very influential and the people in the state have high regard for the Forum for its impartiality. No matter how much the organization is criticized; its achievements in bringing peaceful elections remains. When November 2013 Assembly Election was coming everyone awaits in anticipation; how MPF will prove its strength again. Needless to worry it proved to be worthy of its efforts, Zeenews wrote that "Christian- and tribal-dominated Mizoram witnessed peaceful campaigning under the close watch of the powerful church-controlled Mizoram People's Forum (MPF), a non-government election watchdog".

DGP Amulya Patnaik in Aizawl stated that for the last several years, elections in Mizoram have always been more or less peaceful. This year during campaign not a single incident of violence has been reported. He said one of the main reasons behind the violence free poll campaign is the strict watch kept by the powerful Presbyterian Church controlled Mizoram People's Forum. The atmosphere in front of the polling stations was low-key and less festive due to strict diktats of the Mizoram People's Forum (MPF).

Such NGO, that covers widely the whole state; working hard and truly for Election is not found anywhere else in India. Thanks to the MPF, the Chief Election Commissioner of India also stated that Mizoram is the easiest state to

conduct elections. It is desirable that other states take up in the same path so as to foster free and fair elections all over the country. The MPF with its various endeavours poses a challenge to other NGOs in electoral reforms and practices in India.

6. Scope for Future Study

Many elections in India experienced malpractice of various forms. There is a need to make the citizens aware of this problem, and the fact that they have an important role to fight against the evils of election. It will be useful if a study could be carried out on: a thorough research on the impacts of MPF with the help of statistics to find the facts and data, how an NGO could be establish in other states covering wide sections of the society using MPF as an example; how to increase Peoples' participation in elections with the help of an NGO that will give them awareness on electoral problems and the way they could help to have a better election environment.

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Author Profile



Ms. HS Lalbiakengi, from Mizoram, registered as Full Time PhD Research Scholar in the Department of Public Administration, Presidency College, Chepauk, Chennai 600005, Tamil Nadu. Broad Area of Research: Rural Development.

Dr. S. Kanchana Ratnam, Assistant Professor, Department of Public Administration, Presidency College, Chepauk, Chennai 600005, Tamil Nadu, India. She is research Supervisor of Ms. HS Lalbiakengi.