

Results ring alarm bells for Opposition alliance plans

What do the assembly election results of the three northeastern states — Nagaland, Tripura and Meghalaya — mean for larger national politics? Since these states account for only five seats in Parliament, it is unsurprising that the poll process received far less attention than it deserves. But the results merit deeper scrutiny because the socio-demographic fault lines of these states differ sharply, and they have different political trajectories, including armed insurgency. Thus, except that incumbent governments are likely to return to power in all three states, a single factor as an explanation will not suffice.

Much like the rest of India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) continues to expand its presence, and the Congress cannot arrest its decline. The BJP had a negligible presence in these states before the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. Since then, it has used several strategies — accommodating social and political elites, alliances with regional parties, and massive outreach programmes — to gain ground. As a result, the BJP and its allies have returned to power in Tripura, albeit with a reduced margin and will be part of the next government in Nagaland and Meghalaya.

For the Opposition, though, the results hold more significant takeaways — and not all are pleasant. The Congress has shrunk further, and new players have emerged in these states. Despite the positive bump in the popularity of Rahul Gandhi, there has been no drastic improvement in the Congress's ability to win elections.

It is true that the Congress was in Opposition in Tripura since 1993, but its vote share hovered between 33% and 38%, and the party always won seats in double-digit in the 60-member House. However, the party's vote share came down to 7% with no seats in the 2018 assembly elections. The party contested in alliance with the Left Front this year, but there appears to have been no significant improvement. Former Congress state president Pradyot Bikram Manikya Deb Barma's Tipra Motha Party, on the other hand, managed a strong showing, proving once again how the perceived indifference of the national leadership may be hurting the party in key states, sapping it of already depleted energy.

A similar high-level defection in Meghalaya weakened the Congress. Meghalaya's politics has been unstable compared to the other northeastern states. This is because no party has gained a hold over three distinct parts of the state: Garo, Khasi and Jaintia. Despite the fracture produced in the Congress's social coalition in 1998 by the parting of former Lok Sabha speaker Purno Sangma, the Congress ruled the state for a majority of the years between 1998 and 2018. Mukul Sangma, the chief minister from April 2010 to March 2018, joined the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in 2021, with no apparent attempt from the Congress to keep in the party. The result is there for everyone to see. The TMC has risen in state politics from nowhere, and the Congress may get pushed to the fifth spot.

In Nagaland, the Congress, which ruled the state between 1993 and 2003, has again been reduced to the margins. In the 2003

and 2008 assembly elections, it won approximately 36% votes, which was reduced to 25% in 2013. After that, there was a bigger drop in the party's seat share from 21 in the 60-member House to eight seats. By 2018, the Congress was on the ropes. It contested only 18 seats and won 2% of the popular vote. Other parties now have taken over the Congress space in Nagaland politics — the two Naga People Front's factions have become opposing poles, with the BJP emerging as an important player in its own right.

These developments indicate that the prospect of any oppositional coalition at the national level with the Congress as the nucleus is likely to face significant hurdles. There is a variation in nature and incentives for these state-level formations to join an Opposition front. Some regional parties

have no problem with the Congress — such as the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu. In both these states, the Congress remains the junior ally in the government. The Nationalist Congress Party and Uddhav Thackeray's party in Maharashtra can also be counted among such outfits. Then there are parties, such as the Janata Dal (United) and Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar, willing to join the Congress coalition, but with

some conditions. And, of course, there are hostile parties such as the Aam Aadmi Party or the Trinamool Congress that remain opposed to the Congress taking the leadership role in any such formation. Moreover, the Biju Janata Dal in Odisha, Bharat Rashtra Samithi in Telangana and YSR Congress in Andhra Pradesh remain lukewarm, and don't want a resurgent Congress on their turf.

But the bigger question is — does the Congress coalition experiment result in significant gains? In Bengal, with the Left, it did not. In Tripura, again with the Left, it did not. In Karnataka, with the Janata Dal (Secular), it did not. In Uttar Pradesh, with the Samajwadi Party, it did not. Mere days after the party pitched a 2004-like strategy of stitching together broader coalitions as a key prong of its national revival strategy at its recent plenary in Raipur, this must ignite introspection.

The fragmentation of the Opposition space is a systemic feature of dominant party systems and it requires immense energy and existential factors to bring diverse parties under one umbrella. As of today, the possibility of an all-India coalition in 2024 with the Congress as the fulcrum looks like a pipe dream.

This is a classic negative loop situation. As the Congress recedes from one state after another, other parties become suspicious of its ability to add electoral heft. But the absence of alliances, the party feels, stalls its recovery strategy. Ultimately, the Congress's shrinking position is debilitating its strategy options. Can the party reverse the trend in forthcoming elections in Karnataka, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan? It's an uphill road ahead.



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