

Analysis of Electoral Phases in Manipur: Fragmentation, Coalition and Reconfigured Political Landscape (1948-2022)

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ABSTRACT

The article traces the evolution of the party system in Manipur from the pre-integration and post-integration period to the contemporary era. It analyses the electoral outcomes from 1948 to 2022 to map the changing dynamics of power, the persistence of coalition politics, and the recent move towards a bipolar contest dominated by national parties in the state. From the first assembly polls in 1972 onwards—the article constructs a detailed narrative of political change, continuity, and fragmentation. The article also focuses on the state-based parties, like the Manipur People's Party (MPP) serving as a quintessential example of the promises and perils of regional politics in the state. The electoral history of Manipur reveals a political landscape in constant evolution, yet underpinned by the structural need for coalitions. The journey from a multi-party fragmented system to Congress dominance, and now to BJP pre-eminence, reflects both local political dynamics and the broader integration of the region into national political currents. This recent phase underscores the successful expansion of the BJP's national project into the Northeast and the relative decline, though not elimination, of the Congress and older regional parties like the MPP. Understanding this evolution is crucial for comprehending the intersection of regional identity, national politics, and governance in India's periphery.

Key words: electoral politics, political parties, regional identity, democracy, Manipur.

Introduction

The paper focuses on the theoretical frameworks of state formation, ethnic politics, and competitive electoral democracy. It traces the evolution of the party system in Manipur from the pre-integration and post-integration period to the contemporary era. The objectives of the paper is to examine the electoral performance from 1948 to 2022 to map the changing dynamics of power. It also attempts to identify new trends and patterns in Indian politics, including the rise of regional parties and coalition politics and the recent move towards a bipolar contest dominated by national parties in the state.

Literature Review

Duverger in his seminal work, *Political Parties: Their Organisation and Activity in the Modern*

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State (1951), provided a detailed explanation of how political parties and party systems originate and evolve in societies. Sartori's work, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (1976), is relevant in understanding the Indian party system. In a conflict-prone state like Manipur, the party system is characterised by fragmentation due to ethnic and ideological polarisation and difficulty in achieving a stable coalition, reflecting aspects of polarized pluralism. In *Electoral Politics in Northeast India*, S. Chaube (1985) examines the political landscape of the northeastern states of India, focusing on how elections are conducted and how regional, ethnic, cultural, and political factors shape the political environment in this area. In *Party System and Election Studies*, Kothari (1981) focuses on the dominance of the Congress Party at the time and how it impacted the political landscape of post-independence India. In the context of a state like Manipur, the political party system to some extent mirrors the overall Indian sub-continental experience in the British colonial phase of history. N. Lokendra's *The Unquiet Valley: Society, Economy, and Politics of Manipur (1891-1950)* (1998) traces the transition from a sovereign kingdom to a region grappling with colonial and post-colonial integration. A. P Singh's *Election Political dynamics in Manipur* (2009) offers a critical and detailed examination of the electoral landscape in Manipur. The book's primary focus lies in the landmark 1948 election for the first Manipur State Assembly—a pivotal event that established a representative democratic government before the contentious merger with India—and the subsequent parliamentary and assembly elections in the post-merger period. By analysing this transition, Singh provides an invaluable comparative framework, contrasting the nascent, hopeful democracy of the pre-merger era with the complex and often turbulent electoral politics that followed integration. Shyamkishor's *Party System in Manipur* (2012) provides a detailed study of the evolution of party system, electoral performance and government formations and political dynamics in post-merger period in Manipur.

Methodology

The study adopts both qualitative and quantitative, explanatory research design to identify trends and patterns in electoral performance in Manipur. Official reports and statistical data published by the Election Commission of India are used for this study. Elections held from 1948 to 2022 were studied in this paper to assess party performance and government formation in the respective Territorial and Assembly elections of Manipur. Qualitative analysis of academic journals, government reports, and books has been done to contextualize party dynamics in the state.

Electoral Phases in Manipur (1948-2022)

The first State Assembly election held in Manipur in 1948 occupies a singular place in the political history of Northeast India. Conducted under universal adult franchise and guided by a written constitution, the election represented one of the earliest experiments with representative democracy in postcolonial South Asia, preceding India's first general elections of 1951–1952. This democratic moment unfolded within a fragile constitutional framework and culminated in a short-lived coalition government that was dissolved following Manipur's merger with the Indian Union in 1949. The Manipur State Constitution Act, 1947 provided for a 53-member Legislative Assembly, elected through adult franchise. Representation was distributed as follows: 30 seats from the Imphal Valley, 18 from the hill areas, three from the

Meitei Pangal (Muslim) community, and two special constituencies representing education and commerce. This structure reflected an attempt to balance regional, ethnic, and occupational representation within the state (Kabui, 1991, pp. 221–223).

Table 1: Participating Parties and Party Positions in the Assembly Elections, 1948–1974

ASSEMBLY NAME	PARTY POSITIONS	OUTCOMES/GOVT FORMATION	PERIOD
Election under MSCA, 1947	HU (18), MSC (14), MKS (5) MPS (12) SP (3)	Praja Shanti led Coalition Govt CM: MK Priyobrata Singh	18 th Oct 1948- 15 th Oct 1949
Territorial Assembly		Congress Ministry CM: M. Koireng Singh	22 nd July 1963- 20 th March 1967
First elected Territorial Assembly	CPI (1), CPM (0), INC (16), PSP (0), SSP (4), IND (9)	a. Congress Ministry CM: M. Koireng Singh b. ULP Ministry CM: L Thamou Singh <i>President Rule</i> c. Congress Ministry CM: M Koireng Singh <i>President Rule</i>	20 th March 1967- 13 th Oct 1967 13 th Oct 1967- 25 th Oct 1967 25 th Oct 1967- 19 th Feb 1968 19 th Feb 1968- 16 th Oct 1969 16 th Oct 1969- 20 th March 1972
1st Legislative Assembly Election	BJS(0), CPI(5), CPM(0), INC(17),NCO(1),S OP(3), MPP(15), IND(19)	a. MPP led ULP ministry CM: Md. Alimuddin <i>President Rule</i>	20 th Mar, 1972 - 28 th March 1973 28 th March 1973 – 4 th March 1974

The inaugural 1948 election immediately established coalition governance as a norm, with the Hill Union, Manipur State Congress, and others forming Manipur's first government. No single party could secure a majority, reflecting the nascent and fragmented party system. This pattern continued in the 1972 and 1974 elections. The rise of the Manipur People's Party (MPP), a significant regional force, marked this era. It first led a coalition in 1972 and then secured a single-party majority in 1974—a rare feat in this phase—demonstrating the potential strength of regionalism (Laithangbam, 2011). This period was characterized by the prominence of local parties and socialist groups, with the national INC being one player among many.

Table 2: Participating Parties and Party Positions in the Assembly Elections, 1974 - 1984

ASSEMBLY NAME	PARTY POSITIONS	OUTCOMES/GOVT FORMATION	PERIOD
2nd Legislative Assembly Election	CPI (6), CPM (0), INC (13), NCO (0), SOP (2), MPP (20), KNA (2), MHU (12), IND (5)	a. MPP led ULP ministry CM: Md. Alimuddin	4 th March 1974 - 10 th July 1974
		b. PDF Ministry CM: Yangmaso Shaiza	10 th July 1974 - 6 th Dec 1974
		c. DLP Ministry CM: RK Dorendra Singh	6 th Dec 1974 – 23 rd July 1975
		d. Congress CPI Ministry CM: RK Dorendra Singh	23 rd July 1975 – 15 th May 1977
		<i>President Rule</i>	15 th May 1977 – 29 th June 1977
		Janata Party Ministry	29 th June 1977 – 14 th Nov 1979
		<i>President Rule</i>	14 th Nov 1979 – 14 th Jan 1980
3rd Legislative Assembly Election	CPI (5), CPM (1), INC (I) (13), INC (U) (6), JNP (10), JNP (JP) (0), JNP (S) (0), MPP (4), KNA (2), IND (19)	a. Congress – MPP Ministry CM: RK Dorendra Singh	14 th Jan 1980 – 27 th Nov 1980
		b. Congress Ministry CM: Rishang Keishing	27 th Nov 1980 – 28 th Feb 1981
		<i>President Rule</i>	28 th Feb 1981 – 19 th June 1981
		c. Congress Ministry CM: Rishang Keishing	19 th June 1981 – Dec 1984

Table 3: Participating Parties and Party Positions in the Assembly Elections, 1985 - 2000

ASSEMBLY NAME	PARTY POSITIONS	OUTCOMES/GOVT FORMATION	PERIOD
4th Legislative Assembly Election	BJP (0), CPI (1), CPM (0), INC (30), JNP (4), LKD (0), MPP (3), KNA (1), IND (21)	a. Congress Ministry CM: Rishang Keishing b. Congress Ministry CM: RK Jaichandra Singh	4 th Jan 1985 – 4 th March 1988 4 th March 1988 – Feb 1990
5th Legislative Assembly Election	BJP (0), CPI (3), ICS (SCS) (4), INC (24), JD (11), KNA (2), MPP (9), MHPC (0), NPP (1), IND (0)	a. MPP led ULF Ministry CM: RK Ranbir Singh <i>President Rule</i> b. Congress – MPP Ministry CM: RK Dorendro Singh <i>President Rule</i> c. Congress Ministry CM: Rishang Keishing	23 rd Feb 1990 – 7 th Jan 1992 7 th Jan 1992 – 8 th April 1992 8 th April 1992 – 31 st Dec 1993 31 st Dec 1993 – 12 Dec 1994 13 th Dec 1994 - Feb 1995
6 th Legislative Assembly Election	BJP (1), CPI (2), CPM (0), INC (22), JD (7), JP (0), SAP (2), ICS (1), KNA (0), MPP (18), FPM (2), MHPC (0), NPP (2), SJP(R) (0), IND (3)	a. Congress led JLP Ministry CM: Rishang Keishing b. Congress led UF Ministry CM: W. Nipamacha Singh	24 th Feb 1995 – 15 th Dec 1997 16 th Dev 1997 – Feb 2000

Table 4: Government formation in the Assembly Elections, 2000 - 2022

ASSEMBLY NAME	OUTCOMES/GOVT FORMATION	PERIOD
7 th Legislative Assembly Election	a. MSCP led UF Ministry CM: W. Nipamacha Singh b. Samata Party led People's Front Ministry CM: Radhabinod Koijam <i>President Rule</i>	2 nd March 2000- 12 th Feb 2001 15 th Feb 2001- 21 st May 2001 3 rd June 2001- Feb 2002
8 th Legislative Assembly Election	Congress led SPF Ministry CM: O. Ibobi Singh	8 th March 2002- March 2007
9 th Legislative Assembly Election	Congress led SPF Ministry CM: O. Ibobi Singh	1 st March 2007- March 2012
10 th Legislative Assembly Election	Congress Ministry CM: O. Ibobi Singh	14 th March 2012- March 2017
11 th Legislative Assembly Election	BJP led coalition CM: N Biren Singh	15 th March 2017- March 2022
12 th Legislative Assembly Election	BJP government CM: N Biren Singh	21 st March 2022-

From 1980 onward, the INC established a prolonged period of dominance, forming single-party governments in 1980, 1984, and 2007, and achieving its highest seat count (42) in 2012. This era under Chief Ministers Rishang Keishing and Okram Ibobi Singh saw the INC leveraging its national presence and incumbency advantages. However, its rule was not unchallenged. Coalition governments were still necessary in 1990 and 1995, and a significant shift occurred in 2000 when the Manipur State Congress Party (MSCP)-led coalition, under W. Nipamacha Singh, briefly interrupted INC's rule. The 2002 election returned to an INC-led coalition, indicating that while the INC was the dominant pole, it often relied on allies,

including regional parties like the Federal Party of Manipur (FPM) and the Manipur People's Party (MPP), to govern effectively. This phase illustrates a "dominant party system" where the INC was central, but coalition bargaining remained essential (Election Commission of India, 2002).

The 2017 election marked a pivotal realignment. The BJP, which had minimal presence for decades (winning 0-6 seats), dramatically rose to 21 seats, leading a coalition government under N. Biren Singh. This signalled the emergence of a competitive bipolar system between the BJP and the INC.

The 2022 election consolidated this shift decisively. The BJP nearly secured a majority on its own (32 seats), forming a stable government, while the INC was reduced to a mere 5 seats. Meanwhile, regional and state-specific parties like the National People's Party (NPP) and Naga People's Front (NPF) maintained a strategic presence, becoming crucial alliance partners.

Discussions

Most governments, including the current BJP administration, rely on support from smaller parties representing specific communities or regions. A clear evolution from regional fragmentation to national party dominance is also evident. The early decades were dominated by state parties. The Congress era represented the first wave of national integration. Since 2017, the phase, led by the BJP, marks a more consolidated second wave, where a national party has established clear primacy. However, this dominance is still negotiated through coalitions with smaller regional parties, indicating a hybrid model.

The electoral history of Manipur from 1948 to 2022 reveals a political landscape in constant evolution, yet underpinned by the structural need for coalitions. The journey from a multi-party fragmented system to Congress dominance, and now to BJP pre-eminence, reflects both local political dynamics and the broader integration of the region into national political currents. While the BJP's recent majoritarian trend suggests a move away from precarious coalition politics, the continued relevance of parties like the National People's Party (NPP) and Naga People's Front (NPF) ensures that alliance politics remains a key feature. Future political stability in Manipur will likely depend on the ability of the dominant national party to manage relationships within this enduring coalition framework, balancing central authority with regional and ethnic aspirations.

Manipur People's Party and the Politics of Regional Identity:

The formation and trajectory of the Manipur People's Party (MPP), established on December 26, 1968, represent a critical case study in the complex interplay between regional identity, democratic integration, and party politics within India's federal and pluralist democracy. As illuminated by the scholarly works by Kashyap, Kothari, Hasan—political parties in India often emerge as vehicles for articulating subnational aspirations, managing social cleavages, and negotiating with the central state. The MPP's evolution, from a movement demanding full statehood to a party governing a constituent state of the Indian Union, encapsulates several enduring themes in Indian political science: the tension between regional autonomy and national integration, the role of parties in democratic institution-building, and the

challenges of representing diverse ethnic interests within a democratic framework. The demand for statehood, spearheaded by the MPP, is a classic political response to regional aspirations within a federal democracy. The MPP-led agitation, which included mass protests, incarceration of leaders, and high-level political lobbying, successfully culminated in Manipur attaining full statehood in 1972. This achievement aligns with Kashyap's analysis of how electoral and political reforms, including the reorganisation of states, have been used to manage India's immense diversity and enhance representativeness (Kashyap, 1965). The increase of legislative seats from 30 to 60, with a specific hill-valley allocation (20 hill, 40 valley), was a consequential reform aimed at ensuring more equitable political representation for Manipur's geographically and ethnically distinct communities.

The brief tenure of the MPP-led coalition government (January 1972 – March 1973) under Chief Minister Md. Alimuddin offers a rich narrative of democratic institution-building at the state level. The party's ambitious legislative and administrative agenda moved beyond symbolic politics to concrete statecraft. The establishment of foundational institutions like the Manipur Public Service Commission (1972), the Board of Secondary Education (1972), and the Regional Medical College was critical for constructing a modern state apparatus. Furthermore, the inclusion of the Manipuri language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 1992, achieved during a later MPP government, stands as a landmark achievement in constitutional recognition of linguistic diversity, a perennial issue in Indian federalism. The MPP's vision of "hill-valley unity" and its objective to safeguard the interests of Scheduled Tribes and other minorities directly confront the complex social cleavages that Kothari identifies as central to Indian party politics. The MPP's platform, rooted in socialism, secularism, and democracy, represented an attempt to forge a Manipuri political identity that could transcend internal ethnic divisions while negotiating a place within the Indian Union—a delicate balance between subnationalism and national integration.

Assembly and Parliamentary Election Dynamics:

The electoral landscape of Manipur is uniquely shaped by its geographic and demographic composition, which is directly mirrored in its parliamentary constituencies. The state's two Lok Sabha seats—Inner Manipur and Outer Manipur—are not merely administrative divisions but political arenas reflecting the core ethnic cleavage. Inner Manipur constituency, encompassing the Imphal Valley districts, is predominantly populated by the Meitei community (both Hindu and Meitei Pangals, or Manipuri Muslims). In contrast, the Outer Manipur constituency covers the hill districts and is reserved for the Scheduled Tribes, representing the diverse Naga and Kuki-Zo communities (Election Commission of India). This constitutional design ensures that ethnic identity is the foundational, though not sole, variable in parliamentary elections, often leading to divergent political agendas and voting patterns between the valley and the hills.

Analysing voter turnout trends reveals significant insights into political engagement and alienation. The 1972 Manipur Legislative Assembly election, the first conducted after the state attained full statehood, produced a markedly fragmented mandate. The Indian National Congress emerged as the single largest party with 17 seats, yet it fell well short of a majority

in the 60-member Assembly. The Manipur People's Party, a regionally rooted political formation, secured 15 seats, underscoring the strength of regional political consciousness in the immediate post-statehood period. Independent candidates collectively won 19 seats, particularly dominating hill constituencies, revealing the limited penetration of national and state parties in tribal regions and the continued salience of local leadership. Left-oriented parties such as the Communist Party of India obtained a modest presence with five seats, while socialist forces secured three seats. Overall, the electoral outcome reflected Manipur's socio-political diversity and necessitated coalition politics, setting the tone for governance in the state's formative years within the Indian Union (Election Commission of India, 1972).

Over time, Manipur has often recorded high voter turnout rates, frequently surpassing the national average. For instance, in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the turnout was 81.16% in Outer Manipur and 78.2% in Inner Manipur (Election Commission of India, 2019). However, high aggregate turnout can mask underlying patterns of boycott, protest, and coercion, particularly in conflict-affected hill areas. Electoral participation is thus a complex phenomenon, driven not only by democratic enthusiasm but also by ethnic solidarity, directives from insurgent groups or village authorities, and the tactical calculation of using the ballot to secure specific community-based benefits (Kham Khan Suan, 2011).

The relationship between Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections demonstrates a pattern of "differential voting." Voters in Manipur have historically shown a propensity to elect different parties at the state and central levels—a phenomenon often interpreted as a strategic balancing act. A voter might support a regional or Congress candidate for the state assembly to address local governance issues, while simultaneously backing a different national party (like the BJP) for the Lok Sabha to secure favour with the central government, which controls crucial finances and security policy (Kumar, 2015). This bifurcated voting behaviour underscores the voter's acute awareness of the layered structure of power and the distinct responsibilities and leverage of the state and union governments.

The trajectory of the Manipur Legislative Assembly since its first full-fledged election in 1972 tells a story of increasing fragmentation and the turbulent rise and fall of political formations. The initial decades were marked by a volatile multi-party system with frequent impositions of President's Rule, indicating chronic political instability. The Indian National Congress, leveraging its legacy as the national movement party and its control over the central government, emerged as a central pole but was far from hegemonic.

A detailed analysis of seat-share and vote-share data reveals critical shifts. For example, the 1995 assembly election was a watershed moment, where a Congress wave secured them 43.98% of the vote and 22 seats, while the MPP's vote share plummeted to 10.69% (Singh, 2015). The 2002 election saw the rise of the regionalist Democratic Revolutionary People's Party (DRPP) and others, fracturing the vote further. However, the most transformative phase began around 2014, coinciding with the BJP's national ascendancy under Narendra Modi.

The electoral history of Manipur is a compelling microcosm of the profound transformations within India's federal party system. It reveals a narrative that moves from the dominance of a national party, through a period of fragmented regionalism, and into a new era defined by the

strategic penetration of a resurgent national party. Manipur's elections since the 1990s demonstrate three critical phases: the reassertion of Congress dominance, the fragmentation of the regional vote, and the recent, calculated expansion of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has fundamentally reconfigured the state's political logic.

Conclusion

The INC and BJP possess vastly superior financial resources, organizational networks, and media reach. They can offer candidates the promise of access to central funds and ministerial berths, which a small regional party cannot match. National parties, particularly the BJP in recent years, have become adept at co-opting the MPP's core issues. Promises to protect territorial integrity, promote Meitei Mayek, and review AFSPA have been incorporated into the BJP's state election manifestos, effectively hollowing out the MPP's unique selling proposition (Bharatiya Janata Party, Manipur Pradesh, 2022).

The MPP's roots in Meitei nationalism made it a hard sell in the hill districts. Its inability to craft a compelling, inclusive "Manipuri" identity that resonated with both valley and hill communities limited its geographic and electoral reach. Today, the MPP exists largely on the margins, not even winning a seat. Its trajectory underscores a harsh reality: in Manipur's political economy, where the centre holds the purse strings and sets the security paradigm, a purely regionalist platform, unless backed by overwhelming mass mobilization or a solid cross-ethnic base, is extremely difficult to sustain electorally.

For decades, the INC dominated Manipur's politics through a combination of a broad, if shaky, social coalition and patronage networks. Its support base was a patchwork of loyalists in the valley (including sections of the Meitei elite and the Muslim community) and significant segments in the hills, where its candidates often hailed from influential tribal families. Congress governments, particularly the long tenure of Okram Ibobi Singh (2002-2017), were characterised by a complex replantation with New Delhi—lobbying for funds while occasionally leveraging regional sentiment—and a delicate, often fraught, management of hill-valley relations through mechanisms like the Hill Areas Committee (HAC) (Kham Khan Suan, 2011). However, anti-incumbency, allegations of corruption, and a failure to resolve the AFSPA issue ultimately eroded its base.

The BJP's dramatic rise since 2014 represents a new model of national party dominance. It succeeded through a multi-pronged strategy. Leveraging the popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and coupling it with a strong "Double Engine Sarkar" (same party ruling at state and centre) promise of accelerated development. Unlike the Congress, which traditionally preferred to go it alone or with very small partners, the BJP proactively built a coalition of regional and ethnic parties (NPF, NPP, etc.) to secure a majority, demonstrating tactical flexibility. The BJP's state unit effectively adopted core regionalist concerns, promising to defend Manipur's border during the Naga peace talks and promoting Meitei cultural symbols, thus neutralizing the MPP's agenda. The clear signal that the BJP was the party of the central government attracted defectors, aspirant candidates, and voters who saw alignment with the centre as the most pragmatic path to resources and stability. This BJP model does not signify the end of identity politics but rather its sophisticated integration into a national political

project. The party's success lies in presenting itself as a more effective and powerful vehicle for achieving both development and protected identity than the frail regional parties.

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