

Electoral Politics in BTAD: A Study of the 2016 Assam Legislative Assembly Elections

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ABSTRACT

The BTC is a territorial council of Assam which was set up under the Constitutional amendment of Sixth Schedule in 2003. Since its creation the BTAD area witnessed three Assembly elections, i.e. 2006, 2011, and 2016. In these elections many regional parties and a host of Independent candidates participated along with the National parties. However, the loggerheads amongst the various groups have challenged the free and fair elections in the territory. Moreover, the power struggle and fratricidal nature of Bodo politics encouraged factionalism in the electoral politics of Bodoland. The landslide victory for the BPF in BTAD area in subsequent elections has shown the lack of healthy competition from other political parties. Another important aspect of these elections is that the region is beyond the reach of national issues, as national parties have only been able to make inroads through alliances with the BPF. In the present study, an attempt has been made to study the electoral politics in BTAD. Moreover, this paper also tries to highlight the fratricidal clashes in the elections.

1. Introduction

The Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), a Territorial Council of Assam, came into being on 10 February, 2003 as a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) signed between the Government of India, the Government of Assam and the Bodoland Liberation Tigers (BLT). The main objectives of the formation of BTC within the state of Assam are to fulfill economic, educational and linguistic aspiration and prevention of land right, socio-cultural and ethnic identity of the Bodos; and to speed up infrastructural development in BTC area. Through the creation of the BTC under the sixth Schedule of the constitution of India explained mostly to fulfill the aspirations of the Bodos and other indigenous tribal people of the region.

The BTC is an autonomous administrative unit situated in the extreme north on the north bank of the Brahmaputra River, within the state of Assam, Northeast India, by the foothills of Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh. The area under its jurisdiction is officially called Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD), which comprises four districts of lower Assam namely Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri. It covers 12 Assembly constituencies out of 126 seats of the state Assembly. While Kokrajhar East, Kokrajhar West, Sidly, Barma, Chapaguri and Udalguri constituencies are reserved for Scheduled Tribe (ST), the general constituencies are Gossaigaon, Bijni, Tamulpur, Panery, Kalaigaon and Majbat.

The BTAD area has a mixed composition. The Bodos are the largest community when compared to other groups in terms of population, but the combination of all non Bodo groups, including Bengali speaking Muslims, Koch Rajbangshi, Bengali Hindus, Nepalis, caste Assamese, Sarania Kachari and Rabhas than it would be higher than the total population of Bodos in BTAD areas.

2. Objectives

The following are the objectives of the study:

1. To study the electoral politics in BTAD

2. To study the performance of the BPF and the fratricidal clashes during the elections

3. Methodology

The study is descriptive and analytical based on primary and secondary sources. While the primary sources are included Reports of the Election Commission of India, Assam Election Handbooks, press statements, election manifestos, party documents etc., the Secondary data is collected from books, journals, internet, thesis, articles in newspapers, magazines and other printed materials.

4. Background of Assembly Elections in BTAD

Since its formation in 2003, the BTAD experienced three Assembly elections held in 2006, 2011 and 2016. In these elections many regional political parties and Independent candidates participated along with the National parties. Remarkably, the participation of National parties like INC, BJP, and State parties like AGP, AIUDF in recent Council elections and state assembly elections within the BTAD ambit is a significant political event motivated by their urge to set a foothold in the region.

However, the high hopes of the Bodos following the formation of the BTC were quickly shattered when former BLT leaders fell out with the former leaders of the ABSU in their bid to control Bodo politics. The nascent Bodoland Peoples' Progressive Front (BPPF), formed at the behest of the ABSU in 2005, underwent a sudden split on the eve of the first Council elections of 2005. The divide in the BPPF came mainly as a result of Hagrama Mohilary's support to some former militant comrades who had contested Council elections as independent candidates against the official candidates of the BPPF.

The BTAD area witnessed first Assembly elections in 2006 since its formation in 2003. There were 8 political parties i.e. Congress, BJP, AGP, CPI (M), AGP (P), BPPF (R), BPPF (H) and AUDF for 12 Assembly seats in BTAD area. A large

number of Independent candidates were also in the fray. The Hagrama Mohilary faction of Bodoland People's Progressive Front (BPPF-H) with 11 seats could emerge as the kingmaker when Congress felt short of the magic number 64 in 126-members Assam Assembly. Maheswar Baro, an Independent candidate, could win lone Kalaigaon seat. The number of BPPF (H) MLA's went up to 12 after Maheswar Baro joined in the party. However, the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) backed Rabiram faction of BPPF's seat adjustment with the AGP failed to win a single seat in the polls as these parties are influential only in small pockets in the state. Hagrama Mohilary is perhaps the single biggest winner of this election, a remarkable achievement for a relatively newcomer to the electoral politics. Later the Hagrama faction of BPPF rechristened as Bodoland Peoples' Front (BPF).

In 2011, a large number of political parties and Independent candidates were contested the elections from 12 Assembly seats of BTAD. The parties contested in the elections were BPF, BPPF(R), Congress, BJP, AGP, CPM, All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, Janata Dal (United), All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) and Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI) and a host of Independents. Though the Congress and BPF was coalition partner, they fought the elections on their own. The AGP arrived an understanding with the BPPF and did not field any candidate in Kokrajhar East, Kokrajhar West, Bijni, Sidli, Udalguri, Paneri and Majbat LACs. However, they had friendly contest in other constituencies. The elections result reveals that BPF swept all the 12 seats in BTAD area with 25.16 percent of votes. Though it lost the opportunity to play the role of a kingmaker as the Congress had 14 seats more than the magic number, it formed government with the Congress. The final outcome, a decisive victory for the BPF, was widely seen as result of Hagrama Mohilary's personal popularity and its pro-people initiatives such constructions of roads, RCC bridges, hospitals etc.

The 14th Legislative Assembly election in Assam was significant in the sense that it saw the trouncing of the Congress government which ruled Assam for three consecutive terms since 2001. Unlike the earlier elections, it was peculiar as there were two major pre-poll alliances in BTAD area. The BPF which has ruled the BTAD areas of Assam for over a decade, desperately wanted to play the kingmaker's role again in 2016 Assembly elections. Consequently, in view of the ongoing Modi wave throughout the country, it joined hands with BJP-AGP alliance and formalized a poll alliance. As per the understanding the BJP-AGP alliance would not field any candidates and support the BPF in BTAD area. Another poll alliance between incumbent Congress and newly formed United Peoples Party (UPP) emerged in BTAD to counter the BPF, a BJP-AGP ally. As of understanding the Congress would not contest in four constituencies of BTAD i.e. Kokrajhar West, Kokrajhar East, Sidli and Chapaguri. However, in other constituencies they decided to have friendly contest. Apart from these alliances the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), which has large minority base in lower Assam and Sanmilita Janagosthiya Aikyamancha (SJA), a conglomeration of non-tribal groups which won the Kokrajhar Lok sabha seat in 2014 were also in the fray along with other regional parties and Independent candidates.

5. BPF's Landslide Victory

The pre-poll alliances of the BJP-AGP-BPF worked fine in overthrowing the Congress rule and reducing the party's strength to 26 from 78 seats of the previous election held in 2011. The BJP along with alliance partners emerged victorious by winning 86 seats i.e. BJP 60, AGP 14, BPF 12 seats. Interestingly, the BPF supported the Congress government till 2014, but severed the ties as it felt that adequate concern was not being shown to the issues of BTAD. The BPF had no alternative but to forge an alliance with the BJP, a national party, which was crucial in order to ensure that the voices of the Bodos are heard. The Congress which suffered from the malaise of dissidence, defection, and unchecked corruption during its rule heightened the anger of the electorate, especially the young generation, which resulted in the decisive mandate for a 'change'. Its ally UPP which was backed by influential ABSU and National Democratic Front of Boroland-Progressive (NDFB-P), a pro-talks insurgent group, lost both tribal and non-tribal votes of the BTAD as well. It is noteworthy to mention that most of the competition to BPF came from the UPP and non-Bodo candidates. While the UPP, with the support of ABSU and NDFB-P, fought the election battle on the issue of separate state Bodoland, the non-Bodo candidates contested the elections against the Bodo hegemony. However, the BPF, in its manifesto, promised social development alongside sympathetically referring to the demands of Koch-Rajbongshis and reservation for the Kalitas and Adivasis. All these factors led to the landslide victory of the BPF in BTAD area. In addition, the decisive mandate for the BPF could also be seen as a result of its alliance with the BJP and split of non-Bodos votes.

6. Fratricidal Clashes in the Elections

As stated above, a new political party Bodoland Peoples' Progressive Front (BPPF) underwent a sudden split into two camps on the eve of the first Council elections of 2005, one comprising former members of the ABSU and the other comprising those of the erstwhile BLT. This development led an uneasy situation in BTAD area during the elections. The war of attrition between former BLT cadres and ABSU has ensured that the objective of providing good governance to the Bodo people through the arrangements enshrined in the Sixth Schedule has again fallen prey to the political ambitions of factional leaders. The political rivalry of the BPPF (H), later renamed as Bodoland Peoples' Front (BPF), and BPPF (R) set the new political turf with moderate violence in the electoral politics of BTAD. This bitter rivalry of the two parties also manifested into the political rift among the supporters. Consequently, the first election to the Council elections was marred by widespread clashes between the two factions. The BTC elections held in 2005 and 2010 saw fights between the Hagrama-led BPF and the Rabiram-led BPPF, which the BPF won hands down. Violence became a regular feature during polls in BTAD area. The split between the BPF and the BPPF widened in the subsequent Assembly elections in 2006 and 2011 and in the Lok Sabha elections in 2009, in which around 200 people were killed in four BTAD districts. However, in the Assembly elections in 2016 the polls remained peaceful and there was no report of any untoward incident from anywhere in the four districts. Moreover, this election witnessed the highest voter turnout in the electoral history of BTAD.

7. Conclusion

The Bodoland Peoples' Front (BPF) led by Hagrama Mohilary once again proved the strength and popularity of the party with a landslide victory in the 14th Assembly elections, 2016. Despite the strong allegations of corruption and poor governance from oppositions including ABSU, the party made a strong comeback after its dismal performance in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls and managed to win 12 seats. In the last Assembly elections also, the BPF managed to win the same number seat from BTAD. The main opposition party UPP failed to win a single seat in the polls. The BPF, which is ruling

the Council since 2005, won the Assembly elections as a partner in the Congress-led state government since 2006 as well as a pre-poll alliance partner with BJP in 2016. The victory of BPF candidates was significant because of the involvement of ABSU, an influential student body, and NDFB-Progressive, an insurgent group, which campaigned for the UPP candidates in the 2016 Assembly elections. The national parties, the state parties as well as Independents completely lost their strength in BTAD area. It is pertinent to mention that the political consciousness of the people of the region is growing day by day since the formation of the BTC.

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