



## Development of Regional Parties in Mizoram: A Study on the MIZO National Front (MNF) Party

R. Vanlalmangaihsanga

Research Scholar

Department of Political Science

Mizoram University

**ABSTRACT:** After India gained independence, there was a lot of political transformation in various parts of the country. Many political parties were formed on the basis of regional movements. Mizoram witnessed the emergence of over 24 political parties, including various factions, within its political scene. All such political parties, with different ideologies, aim to mobilize the support of local people. However, of the many political parties, some withered away and some merged with bigger parties. Among the major political parties in Mizoram, the Mizo National Front (MNF) is the oldest regional party in the state. This study analyzed the emergence and function of the Mizo National Front (MNF) in the political evolution of Mizoram. It also examines its independent movement's fight against the Indian government and its re-formation into regional parties. The paper also studies the electoral performance of MNF in various State Legislative Assembly elections in Mizoram.

**KEYWORDS:** Mizoram, Election, Ideology, Policy

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### I. INTRODUCTION

After India got independence, the present Mizoram was given the status of Lushai Hills District Council under the state of Assam. In the first Lushai Hills District Council election in 1952, Mizo Union (MU), the first political party in the Mizo Hills, defeated United Mizo Freedom Organization (UMFO) and formed the government. The name of the Lushai Hills District was changed to Mizo District in 1954, and the second election of the Mizo District Council was held in January 1957. Once again, the MU party swept the polls. At this juncture, there was a movement in North-East India, led by the All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHLC), to establish separate Hill States. On top of that, in the Mizo Hills, there was agitation against the Assam government's strategy to handle the Mautam Famine. It can be assumed that this is the primary factor that instilled in the Mizo people a sense of insecurity toward the Assam government and Government of India, leading to the uprising of the Mizo National Front (MNF) party.

### II. EMERGENCE OF MIZO NATIONAL FRONT (MNF) PARTY

Two events are identified as proximate causes for the emergence of the Mizo National Front party: the Mautam famine in 1959 and the Assam Official Language Act, 1960. A veritable plague of rats descended on Jhum as the bamboo seeds were exhausted, decimating the crops. It resulted in an extensive famine known as the Mautam Famine. There were incidents of famine in several areas of the Mizo District as a result of the severe and widespread food scarcity. As famine ravaged, the Mizo Union led government's limited powers in Mizo District meant it was unable to tackle famine internally. Furthermore, it lacked the clout to elicit assistance from the Assam government. Even though, Mautam displayed obvious warning signs at an early stage, the inefficient governance model for the district made it difficult to secure aid and did not even provide any kind of comprehensive strategy to alleviate the most serious difficulties. Despite these facts, the district was unable to avoid the most severe consequences of the situation. On the other hand, the Assam Official Language Act was especially contentious since it was viewed as a threat to Mizo identity. This created an environment conducive to the separatist movement.

The widespread devastation caused by famine was the ultimate result of failed state-building practices. The destruction was a direct consequence of the inability to resolve supply, infrastructure, and development

concerns that had existed since independence. Likewise, the implementation of the Assam Official Language Act in 1960 exemplified the inability to address the tension between regional and national concepts of identity. Regional identity was not necessarily anti-state prior to the end of the 1950s. However, the enactment of the Assam Official Language Act was interpreted as an act of cultural aggression, posing a danger to the very essence of Mizo identity. So, the relationship between Mizo identity and broader forms of identity became hostile because the latter now seemed to threaten the former. Together, these two factors were seen as the personification of a failed state, which was favorable for insurgency. As a consequence, these events have reawakened the nationalist feelings of the Mizo people and prompted the formation of the Mizo National Front (MNF) by a group of radical nationalists.

Except for Vanlawma and Hermana, the six founders of the party stated that it was formed on 22<sup>nd</sup> October, 1961. While the other two founders claimed that it was established on 28<sup>th</sup> October, 1961. Nonetheless, the party formally acknowledged 28<sup>th</sup> October as its founding date in 1965.<sup>1</sup> The MNF was formed with the objectives of attaining sovereign independence for greater Mizoram and re-uniting all the Zo ethnic groups living in the contiguous territories of Mizoram. The MNF sought self-determination, which implies absolute sovereignty over Mizo tradition, culture, and Christianity. The tail end of the party's aim yelled out "Mizoram for Mizos." The following are the first elected office bearers of the party:<sup>2</sup>

President- Laldenga.

Vice-President- J. Manliana.

General Secretary- R. Vanlawma.

Asst. Secretary- Isaac Zoliana.

Treasurer- Rochhinga (Patea).

Finance Secretary- DENGHMINGTHANGA.

When the MNF was formed, it gained support from former members of the UMFO/EITU and the Congress party in Mizoram. In other words, it attracted those who had a strong aversion to the Mizo Union. The Mizo Union, on the other hand, was mostly unaffected and it was the only party that stood against the MNF movement. Due to this, it would have to be concluded that the Mizo Union was more pro-India and more Congress than the Mizoram Congress party itself. Regionalism may also take on several shapes, from the moderate Mizo Union to the radical MNF. The MNF movement was rapidly joined by individuals with no political affiliation but who were regionalists by temperament. Many ex-servicemen, educated people, students, and professionals joined the movement with a peculiar level of enthusiasm. In other words, the party's main strategy is to play on the sentiments of the vast majority of Mizo people.<sup>3</sup> The movement got the support of the public in the form of "Christians". The party also politicizes the religious spirit of the people to gain more mass support, which can unite the people and help the party in their struggle for freedom.

### **III. AIMS/IDEOLOGY OF THE MNF PARTY**

The original aims and objectives of MNF, according to a booklet published by the party were:<sup>4</sup>

- 1) Integration of all the Zo ethnic groups under one government possessing the highest degree of freedom.
- 2) Up gradation of the status, and the development of the economic conditions, of the Mizo people.
- 3) Safeguard of Christian religion.

The ideology of the MNF, therefore, was fundamentally based on ethnic, political, socio-economic and religious factors. When MNF formed constitution of Government of Mizoram in March, 1964, it clearly mentioned that they believed in secularism with liberty of life and justice in individuality.

The MNF party has two constitutions; the first one was drafted in April, 1964, when the party was established as a political party. After the Mizoram Peace Accord was signed, which changed the party into a regional political party, the second constitution of the party was drafted again. The first constitution was prepared for Sovereign Government of Mizoram for governance of the Mizo nation and it was copied from the American Declaration of Independence of 1776. The constitution envisaged presidential forms of government for the sovereign government of Mizoram. It contains details and write-ups about the administration, function, and organization of the Mizo nation. However, after the party settled its dispute with the Indian Government, the party constitution transforms into a pure regional party organization just like other regional parties.

### **IV. MNF FIGHT FOR INDEPENDENT MIZORAM/GREATER MIZORAM**

Despite contesting in the 1962 District Council elections, the MNF was unable to capture any seats. Even the president, Laldenga, was defeated. But the party comfortably won in two of the three Assembly bye-elections in the constituencies of Mizo District held in April 1963. J.F. Manliana and L.H. Mawia were elected from Aizawl West constituency and from Lunglei constituency respectively.<sup>5</sup> It also won 145 of the 411 Village Councils in the Aizawl sub-division election in the same year.<sup>6</sup> The rapid success of MNF in the election was due to the fact that the party advocated for separatist and communal aims; it received a great deal of popular

support and became a strong political force in Mizo District. However, the participation of MNF in democratic elections was merely a plank for achieving the political and extra-constitutional goals they had promised to the people.

The MNF initially fought for a sovereign independent state for the Mizo Hills and submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister Shastri in October, 1965 and to the Pataskar Commission in February, 1966.<sup>7</sup> They also guaranteed that the party would pursue its objective using non-violent means. Since then, nothing tangible has evolved from the discussion and meeting with the central leaders and the government of Assam, which resulted in the hardening of opinions on both sides. After failing to achieve independence through non-violent means, the leaders of the MNF resorted to violent tactics similar to those used by the Naga insurgents.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the perversity of a small section of the Mizo, along with their political aspirations, serves as the impetus for a tragic tale of war, misery, and turbulence. Throughout the years of 1964 and 1965, the MNF ran a covert campaign to enhance the recruitment of volunteers. Many volunteers crossed the border into East Pakistan to get specialized training in arms and guerrilla warfare. By the end of 1965, 8000 young volunteers from both rural and urban areas had signed up to join the MNF.<sup>9</sup>

On the mid-night of 28<sup>th</sup> February, 1966, the Mizo National Army (MNA), an MNF arms group, began fighting for independence against the Indian government. Large scale disturbances broke out at different places in Mizo District. They simultaneously attacked and raided government facilities at different places. On 1<sup>st</sup> March, 1966, the MNF declared "Independence" for Mizoram. The whole district was declared a "disturbed area" under the Assam Disturbed Areas Act, 1955, by the Government of Assam on 2<sup>nd</sup> March. This Act of 1955, along with the Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Powers Act, 1958, had also been in force in the area. The Government of India also declared the MNF as an unlawful organization and banned it.<sup>10</sup> Since then, there was full disruption in all aspects of normal life in the hill districts, including the closure of schools, chaos in the villages, and difficulties in agricultural activities. These events estranged the Mizo people from the Indian government and their relationship with the Indian Army was embittered. As time passed by, the MNF realized that they were no match for the Indian Army and further fighting would prolong the suffering of the people. After two decades of fighting for Independence of Mizoram, the MNF signed a historic peace agreement with the Indian government on 30<sup>th</sup> June, 1986. The agreement was designated as the "Memorandum of Settlement" or "Peace Accord". The signatories were Laldenga (MNF President), R. D. Pradhan (Home Secretary, GOI) and Lalkhama (Chief Secretary, Mizoram).<sup>11</sup>

In accordance with one of the terms of the agreement of the Peace Accord between the MNF and the Government of India, Lalthanhawla, the Chief Minister, resigned and took the role of Deputy Chief Minister. As specified in the agreement, Laldenga took over as Chief Minister in his stead. On the MNF side, Rualchhina, Tawnluia, and Zoramthanga became Ministers. Vaivenga, R. Thangliana, C.L. Ruala, and Sainghaka continued to serve as Ministers from the INC (I), whereas Rokamlova, Hiphei, and Liansuma sacrificed their Ministerial posts for the MNF. So, the interim government comprised of five INC Ministers and four MNF Ministers including and the Chief Minister. The interim government led by Laldenga took office on 21<sup>st</sup> August, 1986, and its tenure was limited to six months due to the fact that the MNF legislators were not elected by the electorate.<sup>12</sup> Over and above that, the MNF had to act quickly to change its articles of organization so that it could become a political party as required by the Indian Constitution and other laws.

In the aftermath of the Accord, the MNF has implemented a hierarchical constitutional framework that follows a pyramid-shaped structure. This structure begins at the grassroots level with the village unit and culminates at the apex, known as the headquarters, located in Aizawl. A General Headquarters comprises of the General/Special Assembly, the National Council, the National Executive Committee, Joint Secretary, National Frontal Organization such as Youth, Women and Senior Front. Office bearers of the party are comprised of a President, Senior Vice-President, two Vice-President, and Treasurer. Apart from that, in the party structure, there are Adviser, General Secretary, Secretary, Joint Secretary and Organizer.<sup>13</sup>

## **V. ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE OF MNF PARTY**

The Constitution Fifty-Third (Amendment) Bill, 1986 was passed on 14<sup>th</sup> August, 1986, granting Mizoram the status of a full-fledged state. The number of assembly constituency seats also increased from 30 to 40. The first election for the State Legislative Assembly took place on 16<sup>th</sup> February, 1987. The newly transformed MNF party swept the polls and captured 24 of the 40 seats in the House. It received 36.62 percent of valid votes. As the MNF was not yet a recognized party, all of its candidates were classified as independents. The INC secured 13 seats, while the P.C. won three.<sup>14</sup> India Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi inaugurated the State of Mizoram on 20<sup>th</sup> February, 1987 at Aizawl. The new MNF ministry, led by Laldenga, was formed on 27<sup>th</sup> February, 1987, with six Cabinet Ministers and five Ministers of State.<sup>15</sup> Dissension within the MNF party quickly led to the fall of the government, which lasted for roughly 18 months.

Nine of the MNF MLAs formed a new MNF Legislature Party and withdrew their support to Chief Minister Laldenga's ministry on 29<sup>th</sup> August, 1988. Among them was Deputy Speaker K. Thanfianga, who was

undergoing medical treatment in America and sent his resignation of support via fax machine. The new MNF Legislature Party, formed by the nine MLA and their accomplices, was named MNF Democratic and released a press conference stating that their action was a necessity and they had no other choice but to form a new Legislature party. On 30<sup>th</sup> August, 1988 the nine MNF (D) MLAs, along with 13 INC (I) MLAs, formed the United Legislature Party (ULP) and elected Lalthanhawla as their leader.<sup>16</sup> On the same day, ULP conveyed to Governor Saikia that they had 22 MLAs, which was enough to form a new government, and the same statement was made by Lalthanhawla to the Governor on the next day. However, the leader of the MNF party and Chief Minister Laldenga informed the Governor that the Speaker had announced the suspension of these eight rebellious MLAs who were staying in Aizawl. He also told the Governor that out of the 32 MLAs, he still has 17 MLAs on his side and has the greatest number of supporters, so there was no reason for them to resign. At the time of this debacle in Mizoram politics, on 4<sup>th</sup> September, 1988 the Union Home Ministry sent a chartered plane for the ten leaders of the United Legislature Party to discuss the problems in Mizoram politics with the central government in Delhi.<sup>17</sup>

On 6<sup>th</sup> September, 1988 Chief Minister Laldenga appealed to Governor Saikia to conduct an Emergency Session on 14<sup>th</sup> September and requested to convene a 'Trial of Strength' between the two groups competing to form a government in Mizoram. On the same day, the Governor made a statement that no further actions would be taken until he heard the justification of the eight MNF(D) MLA. Considering the political situation in Mizoram, Governor Saikia considered it best under the current circumstances and announced the imposition of Mizoram under President Rule on 7<sup>th</sup> September, 1988. At his subsequent meeting with the media at the Governor's Conference Hall, Governor Saikia made a statement that there was no purpose in conducting a "Trial of Strength" in an Emergency Session while it can be seen that the Assembly Speaker is clearly biased in suspending the eight MLA.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, he implied that he was anxious about the dispute between MNF(D) and Chief Minister Laldenga MNF, which further implicated the Ex-Mizo National Army and might result in bloodshed. He also stated that instead of prolonging the feud within Mizoram politics, it is preferable to impose Mizoram under President's Rule.<sup>19</sup>

There were several hypotheses regarding the disagreements within the Laldenga MNF ministry. Apart from his autocratic attitude, his style of appointment of Minister at the beginning of his government was considered one of the main reasons behind the conflict within his ministry, which furthermore resulted in the resignation of support from eight MLAs. Instead of appointing ministers from among the several pioneer MNF members, Laldenga chose many newbies for the position of Minister, which received much backlash from the senior MLAs. The most notable was Chawngzuala, who had been a loyal member of the MNF since the time of insurgency. He was appointed as MNF President even when Laldenga was absent and served as a Minister in the MNF underground government. After the MNF went overground, he was appointed as the Vice President of the party in March 1987. He also received the highest number of votes in the first Mizoram State Legislative Assembly election. It was believed that most of the conflict in the MNF ministry could have been avoided if Laldenga had appointed Chawngzuala as Minister.

Due to dissolution of the Mizoram Legislative Assembly, mid-term election was conducted on 21<sup>st</sup> January, 1989. For the first time in Mizoram's electoral history, a pre-poll alliance was formed by the INC and MNF (D), a split off faction of MNF. The INC won 23 seats, while its coalition partner, the MNF-D, got two seats. The MNF won fourteen seats. There was just one seat left which was won by PC.<sup>20</sup> The Congress-MNF 'D' coalition ministry headed by Lalthanhawla was sworn in on 24<sup>th</sup> January, 1989 and it completed its whole term. Following the demise of MNF President Laldenga on 7<sup>th</sup> July, 1990.<sup>21</sup> His associate, Zoramthanga, emerged as the next MNF party President. In the 1993 General Election for the State Legislative Assembly, he led his party in an effort to retain the majority of seats. As a consequence, after months of negotiations, the MNF and the Janata Dal (JD), an offshoot of PC, came to an agreement on a pre-poll alliance. However, disagreements over seat adjustments led to a crisis and JD withdrew from the alliance. Besides, a pre-poll agreement was made between the INC and JD. Since, the alliance of the two parties was not accepted by the centre JD leaders, it transformed itself into Mizoram Janata Dal (MJD) party. The INC secured 16 seats in the 1993 election, while its electoral partner, the MJD, won 8 seats. The MNF could only win 14 seats, but it received 40.41 percent of the valid votes polled, the highest among the parties.<sup>22</sup>

Remarkably, Zoramthanga's leadership was challenged by Lalduhawma in 1997. As a result, the internal strife over leadership spilt the party. Lalduhawma subsequently lost to Zoramthanga in the 1997 MNF party election for the post of President. Following the defeat, Lalduhawma and his supporters quit the MNF to form a new party. Election for the State Legislative Assembly was conducted the following year. The MNF and MPC formed a pre-poll alliance, which won the Assembly election with a majority of 33 seats in the 40-member assembly. The 1998 election in the state resulted in a coalition government. But the dispute between the two parties caused the coalition government to fall on 9<sup>th</sup> December, 1999, when the MNF placed pressure on MPC MLAs to resign. A desire to form a complete MNF ministry existed among the members of the party since the

MNF party alone won the maximum by securing 21 seats. A new ministry led by Zoramthanga was formed and completed its five-year term.<sup>23</sup>

Once again, the MNF emerged as the single largest party in the 2003 Mizoram State Legislative Assembly election, winning 21 seats with a total vote polled of 31.66 percent. The result of the 2003 election showed that the ruling MNF was still the most trusted and most popular party in the state.<sup>24</sup> The party president, Zoramthanga, won two seats, vacating the Kolasib seat and retaining Champhai. A bye-election was held and MNF candidate K. Lalrinliana was elected. The victory of the MNF could be seen as the public's approval of the MNF government's efforts to improve the development of the state over the last five years. But, in the 2008 State Legislative Assembly election, the party faced a tremendous fall and managed to secure only three seats.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the INC gained an absolute majority and formed the government. It is said that the public rejected the MNF party because of its poor performance in its second terms of office. The ministry was accused of corruption, favoritism, and incompetence in administration.

In the 2013 State Legislative Assembly election, the MNF still could not regain its strength and managed to capture only five seats. The INC returned to power for a second time with the help of its main economic program, the New Land Use Policy (NLUP). The INC, which had ruled for ten years (from 2008 to 2018), was humiliated in the 2018 State Assembly election, winning only five seats out of 40 seats. The MNF, which had been out of power since 2008, has returned to power with a majority of 26 seats and formed a government led by Zoramthanga as Chief Minister. With promises to implement its flagship program, Socio-economic Development Programme (SEDP), and total prohibition of liquor, the MNF once again won the hearts of the people and got wide support. The SEDP was a plan based policy which is expected to be an alternative to Congress New Land Used Policy (NLUP). The policy was launched after the formation of the new ministry.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Apart from its economic policy and programme, the MNF party needs to come up with strategies to influence voting patterns by taking into account the dynamics of its political ideology. From the previous performance while it formed the government in 1998 and 2003 respectively, it developed the state in many ways, but on the other hand, many cases of corruption, scandals, unfinished projects, etc. were found, which reduced public support, as shown clearly in the 2008 and 2013 State Assembly elections. Although the party gained a huge victory in the 2018 State Assembly elections, it really needs to transform within the party through its ideological beliefs and principles to encourage truth and honesty among the party leaders and members.

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