

The Role of the Church in Mizoram Legislative Assembly Election, 1989

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The conglomerate of ten Church denominations, led by the Presbyterian Church in Mizoram, appear intent to gain a hearing from the electorate of its views amidst campaigning by contending parties of the January 21, 1989 Assembly elections in the State.¹ Those ten Churches were : Fundamental Baptist Church, Independent Church of Maraland, Isua Krista Kohhran (Bualpui Ng), Mizoram Presbyterian Church, Pawiram Baptist Kohhran, Roman Catholic Church, Seventh Day Adventist Church, United Pentecostal Church, Salvation Army and Zoram Baptist Church .

The Church issued two pamphlets providing "guidelines" to the electorates, political party leaders and the candidates as well.²

One of the pamphlets was issued exclusively by the Presbyterian Church, 'known for its self-assumed responsibility in guiding the State's politics and administration'³. Justifying its activities, the Presbyterian Church had quoted from the *Old Testament* "the most High ruled in the kingdom of man, and giveth it to whomsoever he will".⁴

The guidelines were read out regularly to the congregation under instructions issued to all pastors and church elders, and the copies were distributed to each family. The guidelines neither criticize nor favour political party directly. But in carefully drafted moralistic language it pinpoints alleged corrupt practices of politician and his party during the last elections and later on. 'In order that', the Joint Church Leaders appealed, "we may lead holy and godly living, let us forsake theft and corruption and fight against this evil". They further appealed to all political and Government leaders "to be free of these evils".

The Proesbyterian Church in its pamphlets advised the heads of the all political parties "to select candidates who are god fearing and who respect the Church".

The contradiction between the Church and Laldenga began to develop when the latter boycotted the "get-together with the

newly elected MLAs" organised by the Presbyterian Church Synod Executive Committee on 19.6.1987 at Synod Conference Hall, Aizawl. ⁵ When asked why he did not attend the Synod "Get-together" programme Laldenga had firmly stated that "no religious body or organization has a right to interfere in the state administration but must restrict themselves to spiritual matters alone".⁶ Observers discerned in this a subtle and clear indication of the Church's displeasure with Laldenga.

The rift sharpened in June '88 over the liquor controversy when the Presbyterian Church issued its second pamphlet against Liquor Permit. The pamphlet traced the attempts made by the Church leaders to win over the Government authorities to abolish the liquor permit within the state. "The Church leaders tried to have an interview with the Hon'ble Chief Minister (on liquor issue), but the latter refused to meet the Church leaders. The authorities gradually showed their disrespect to the voice of the Church".⁷

The Presbyterian Church now "feared that the Government will continue to give liquor permit in the state" and issued its third pamphlet. The third Pamphlet directed all Presbyterian Churches (656 in all) in Mizoram to hold a special mass prayer meeting on the 28th August 1988 evening in the Church premises against the drinking evils and for the end of liquor permit and also for the 'better living of the people in Mizoram'. In their message the "Church did not attack any particular Government".⁸ But Laldenga refused to clamp down on the lucrative Rs. 12-crore a year on liquor trade.

Over this issue, the Presbyterian Church which is believed to be the most powerful Church in Mizoram lined up against Laldenga's administration. On top of all this the MNF leader's own image had suffered a considerable slump during his short spell as Chief Minister. And on 29.8.88 (the following day of the special Mass Prayer meeting) nine of his own party's legislators broke away from the party causing a vertical split and bringing about President's Rule.⁹

The Mizoram PCC-I President, Lalthanhawla, stated that the end of the MNF Ministry and the proclamation of the President's Rule was the "answer of God to the prayer of His Holy Church"¹⁰ Whether the Congress - I had a hidden hand in engineering the split was their political secret and it was known to their top leaders only. The fact that the MNF rule disappointed the Mizos is no secret. When he was campaigning from London Laldenga was put on a pedestal and he was a hero par excellence. He was given a 'Father

of the Nation' title by his followers. His come back to Aizawl after 20 years of insurgency on 5th July 1986 was like the day Charles II entered London 126 years ago with a 'new promise, for civil liberties after 40 years of English people's struggle after the outbreak of Reformation. But the people who pinned high hopes on the MNF Government led by him were soon disappointed as it proved no better than the previous Congress-I Government. Their hero proved to be a man with feet of clay and the euphoria soon turned into disillusionment and disgust.¹¹

When Laldenga had been elected in 1987, there was tremendous goodwill for him. It was soon eroded by the dismal performance of his government. The Church, whose support had once ensured that negotiation to end his insurgency was kept alive and who claimed to bring him into the final negotiation for peace, now came out against him. In its message the Church had taken a dig at Laldenga but of course without mentioning his name. The message called upon all to fight social evils and said : "We are all aware of the fact that various social evils have been increasing in our land. These evils, we also feel, had mounted up as a result of lack of proper guidance at the family and community levels amongst ourselves during the long years of the disturbance"¹² This is, infact an indirect reference to the MNF insurgency.¹³

The message further indirectly criticised the killings in Mizoram during the years of trouble. "God's greatest and most precious creation, the life of man, belongs to God and not man. Therefore, the Bible says that God will take revenge on those who take the life of others on account of politics, jealousy, hatred or for any other reasons". Any teaching against the sanctity of life is 'enmity to God and His Church'.¹⁴

The Joint Church Committee states that "Let us, the public, try to abide by them (the guidelines) by all means". In the guidelines the Church asked all political parties to nominate people who stay "clear from sins" and appealed to the people not to elect any person who falls short of the Churches wishes and criteria, no matter whichever party he belonged to. The Church, however, warned against buying and selling of votes, holding public feasts for wooing the electorates and requested political parties to confine their campaign to "open public meeting" and to desist from "house to house" electioneering. In their struggle to wean away with the mutual acrimony among the party candidates and mutual mud-slinging between the parties, the Joint Church Committee appealed to all the parties and all the candidates to "conduct them-

selves properly befitting the manners of Christians". It also lamented the dissolution of the Ministry before it served a full term and prayed that it would not happen again.

The Congress-I, knowing the importance of the Church in the politics of Mizoram had taken the cue from the stand of the Church. The Mizoram Congress-I expressed its displeasure at the death of 12 Mizos in the hands of the Assam Riflemen⁵ following a drunken brawl by announcing that if voted to power it would implement total prohibition in the State. In fact, it was this very party which introduced liquor permit in Mizoram. In making the declaration, Lalthanhawla, the MPCC-I President, possibly thought it would help his party secure the Church's support which is considered vital for any party intending to do good in the polls.¹⁶

The MPCC-I election manifesto for the Assembly elections also stated its commitment "to establish a strong Christian Government to serve the people according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ which is corner stone for all of us".¹⁷ For the Congress-I the meaning of 'Secularism' varies according to its electoral needs and in Mizoram it is "Christian Secularism". Under the head 'Secularism' which is stated to be the number one pre-requisite in the Congress-I poll manifesto, it is written "as Christians it is our bounden responsibility to proclaim the gospel" and states as a matter of fact, "it is but reasonable that the Christian should lend support to the Congress-I".¹⁸

The second point in the manifesto is about the Congress-I pledge towards 'Socialism' but its contents are such that "it will make Karl Marx turn in his grave".¹⁹ According to Mizoram Pradesh Congress Committee-I 'Socialism' is again 'Christian Socialism'. Its manifesto states: "More than 80 percent of the Mizo people are living below the poverty line. If the gap between the haves and have-nots is not bridged, there will be social disintegration and the rich will not be safe either. The congress-I policy of socialism is based on biblical teachings as well as traditional ethos of the Mizos through which alone justice can be established".²⁰

The party also pledged that if voted to power it would "explore the ways and means of sending pilgrims to the Holy Land" and as its educational policy the Congress-I promised to 'revise the School Syllabus on the basis of Mizo culture and Christian principles'.²¹ At page 3 under the heading "Salvation of the Poor" it is stated in the manifesto that "to give due share is a righteous administration and this should be the duty of "Christian Govern-

ment'. When the poor get their due share we shall be able to open more new Christian missionary fields".

The two regional parties, the MNF and the People's Conference did not try to woo the electorates by talking about Christianity in their election manifestos. Regarding religion the MNF stated that it would steadfastly safeguard the terms mentioned in the "Mizoram Accord" signed between MNF party (Laldenga) and the Government of India and which were later granted constitutional sanction to the effect that "no Act of Parliament in respect of religious or social practices of the Mizos shall apply to the State of Mizoram unless the Legislative Assembly of Mizoram by a resolution decides".²² MNF manifesto stated that "by upholding the truth, fearing God and attaching importance of His laws, the MNF aimed at safeguarding Mizo social life and religion and its teachings from the clutches of various social evils".²³

The People's Conference party did not mention a word about religion in its election manifesto. It confined more in its two goals- Economic goal, a programme towards economical self sufficiency and, Political goal, to re-unify of Mizo ethnic groups living in Burma, Bangladesh and India in a single administrative unit within Indian Union.²⁴ The Peoples' Conference (PC) method of canvassing with its ZORO (Zo Re-Unification Organisation) movement had attracted large number of young boys and girls who sported blueishgrey uniforms and carried green flags. But the messages of the Churches were indirectly critical to it.

The Congress-I and the People's Conference parties equally welcomed the messages of the Churches and read out both the pamphlets published by the Joint Church Committee and the Presbyterian Church during their two-day general assemblies in October and December respectively.

Even the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, during his visit to Lunglei on January 5, 1989, indirectly affirmed that his State party unit (in Mizoram) would abide by the Church guidelines.²⁵

The Congress-I had won a majority on its own with 22 in an Assembly of 40 seats. Two more seats went to its electoral allies. When asked what made him so confident of winning the election, Lalthanhawla, the Congress chief and the new Chief Minister of Mizoram had said - "A victory was quite obvious. Laldenga had gone against Christian principles. He criticised the Church and challenged its leaders. This is not just our victory ; it is the victory of the Church too".²⁶

Lalthanhawla tried to show the importance of the Churches,

In his first day in the Chief Minister's Office, on 25th January, 1989 at 11:45 A.M. he had a meeting with the Church leaders. The church leaders present in this meeting were - Rev. Rokhuma, Senior Executive Secretary, Rev. R. Lianbuanga, Executive Secretary, Lalchhuanliana, Executive Secretary, all Presbyterian Church; Rev. Lawmsanga, Associate General Secretary and Thanghulha, Church Elder of Mizoram Baptist Church; Rev. Saihnuna, District Superintendent and Rev. Lalrinsanga of United Penticostal Church; Lt. Col. Sawichhunga, Regional Commander, Maj. Tulliana, Regional Secretary and Capt. Lalkiamlova, all Salvation Army; Rev. Lalsawma also came to represent the Joint Church Committee. All the 14 Congress-I MLAs and the Cabinet Ministers were also present. ²⁷

The Chief Minister expressed gratitude on the Church leaders' part in the service of the country and the people and the prayers offered on this regard. He stated that his Government will stand firmly on its election manifesto and that they will immediately stop the liquor permit. He invited the Church leaders to contribute their services in the different Government programmes.

Various church leaders also enthusiastically welcomed the new Ministry. Rev. Lalsawma, Chairman of the Joint Church Committee said: "We the Churches, offered prayers to God to give us His appointed leaders. On 15.1.1989 we organised a special mass prayer meeting for this. And therefore, we accepted the formation of the Congress-I government today as God's response to our prayers and we welcome it warmly". ²⁸ Capt. Lalkiamlova also expressed his joy for God had given them a new government and encouraged the new leaders to try to hold the state government not only for one full term but upto the extent of other terms. ²⁹

The new Congress-I Ministry in Mizoram headed by Lalthanhawla, claimed that their government was created by Almighty God as prayed by His Holy Churches and therefore it would show any possible favour to the Churches. ³⁰ For the first step towards this, they allotted the building of one of the Minister's Bungalows and its land of 9 bighas at McDonald Hill, Aizawl, to the Presbyterian Church free of cost in fulfilment to their commitment and promises to establish a strong "Christian Government" ³¹

Conclusion

The question whether the commitments and promises made by the MPCC-I to the electors violates the Constitutional provisions relating to liberty of thought, belief, faith and worship and

also whether it hits at the Constitutional provisions relating to equality of status and opportunity is to be answered by the Constitutional experts.

Notes & References

1. The Governor of Mizoram called upon all the Assembly Constituencies in the State of Mizoram vide Notification No. MEL 12011/88-89/CEO/16, the 17th December, 1988, to elect members in accordance with the provisions of Section 15(2) of the Representation of the Peoples Act, 1951 published in the Mizoram Gazette Extra Ordinary Vol. XVII, Aizawl, Saturday 17.12.88. By the same Gazette the Election Commission of India vide Notification No. 464/MIZ-LA/88(1) dated 17th December 1988, in pursuance to the provisions of Section 30 of the said Act, fixed the following programme in respect of the election to all the Assembly Constituencies in the State of Mizoram :

- (a) 24.12.88 (Saturday) as the last date for making nominations;
- (b) 28.12.88 (Wednesday) as the date for scrutiny of nominations;
- (c) 30.12.88 (Friday) as the last date for the withdrawal of candidates ;
- (d) 21.1.89 (Saturday) as the date on which a poll shall, if necessary, be taken, and
- (e) 27.1.89 (Friday) as the date before which the election shall be completed.

The poll actually took place on 21.1.89 (Saturday), and the counting of votes was started on 23.1.89, 8 a.m. (Monday) Not on January 22 (Sunday).

2. One is Election Message of the Presbyterian Church, 1988 (2.11.1988) the other one is A Message to the people of Mizoram by the Joint Church Committee.
3. The Sentinel, Guwahati 9,1989.
4. Daniel 4:32 (King James Version).
5. The Synod Executive Committee Minute 19.6.1987. The Presbyterian Church Synod Executive Committee as a traditional practice used to hold talks with every newly elected MLAs and asked God's blessings for them.
6. Mr. Laldenga's reaction reported in various Opposition papers and confirmed by him openly on 25.7.1989 at Vanapa Hall in the MNF Public Meeting, reproduced by MNF official organ *Zalenna Tlangau* Dated 26.7.89.

7. Church Leaders' Pamphlet No. 2 against Liquor Permit, Dated 25.6.1988.
8. Ibid and An interview with the Sr. Executive Secretary, Presbyterian Church Synod.
9. President's Rule declared with effect from 7th September, 1988.
10. An interview published in the local weekly paper *ZORAMTHAR*, Aizawl, October 11.-17,1988 page 6.
11. The Assam Tribune Editorial : *Pollin Mizoram*, January 6, 1989.
12. Appeal to the Peoples of Mizoram, 1988 by the Jt. Church Committee.
13. The Statesman, *Mizoram Poll Scene I*, page 7, January 16,
14. 1989. Appeal to the Peoples of Mizoram, 1988 by the Jt. Church Committee.
15. On 29.3.88 at about 7 p.m. the 22nd Assam Riflemen fired and killed 12 Mizo civilians in the heart of Aizawl town and wounded 30 people, according to the local daily paper, the *Mizo Arsi* dated 30.3.88. When some public leaders approached the Chief Minister to immediately interfere, the C. M. Laldenga bluntly replied that he and his Ministry will not interfere in such affairs. It therefore became a big election issue.
16. The Assam Tribune, op. cit.
17. MPCC-I Election Manifesto, 1989 p. 2
18. MPCC-I Election Manifesto, 1989 p. 2 under 'Secularism'.
19. The statesman, op. cit.
20. MPCC-I Election Manifesto, 1989, Head No. 2.
21. Ibid Head No. IV and MPCC-I Hand Bill.
22. Article 371-G of Indian Constitution (53rd Amendment) Act, 1986 (with effect from 20.2.1987).
23. MNF Election Manifesto, 1989 under the Head-*Religion*.
24. People's Conference Party Election Manifesto, 1989.
25. The Sentinel, op. cit.
26. India Today, February, 15. 1989 p. 33.
27. Govt. of Mizoram, Directorate of Information and Public Relations, *Press Release*, No. 22/89, Aizawl January 25, 1989.
28. Ibid
29. Ibid.
30. According to the Government Press Release No.26/89, Dt. 27.1.1989, the Hon'ble Minister for Revenue and Local Administration Department Mr. Zalawma called on all Officers under his Departments and all Church Elders of Dawrpui Presbyterian Church and Rev. Lalchhuanliana, Synod Executive Secretary in his official chamber on 27.1.89 and said this to them.
31. Land & House allotment No. LRR. 129/89/Pt//2, Dt. 24.1.1989.