

Women Lead Change in Mizoram from the Frontlines

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Summary

For the first time, three women candidates emerged victorious in the recently concluded Mizoram's state assembly elections. It marks a historic and euphoric moment for the state.

The results for Mizoram's state assembly elections, announced on 4 December 2023, saw Lalrinpuii and Baryl Vanneihsangi of the Zoram People's Movement (ZPM) winning from Lunglei East and Aizawl South-3 respectively. On the other hand, Pravo Chakma of the Mizo National Front (MNF) made her mark in West Tuipui. For a 40-member state assembly, there were 174 candidates, out of which 16 were women. Lalrinpuii won with 5,641 votes, defeating Indian National Congress' (INC) Joseph Lalhimpuii, who secured 3,995 votes, while Vanneihsangi emerged victorious with 9,370 votes, defeating the MNF's F Lalnunmawia, who secured 7,956 votes. Prova Chakma won West Tuipui by securing 7,167 votes against INC's Nihar Kanto Chakma who secured 6,456 votes. Of the three political leaders, 32-year-old Vanneihsangi, a radio jockey by profession and a social media influencer, is the youngest Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) of Mizoram.

Over the years, there have been few Mizo women politicians. Since Mizoram attained statehood in 1987, only three women ministers have been elected into office. In 2018, despite 17 women contesting the polls, none managed to make a breakthrough. Interestingly, the MNF, the party that returned to power after 10 years, did not allocate a single ticket to female candidates. In 2014, the Congress' Vanlalawmpuii Chawngthu was given a ticket to contest in a by-poll. Following her victory, she was appointed minister, marking the return of a woman minister to Mizoram after a 27-year gap.

While women voters have consistently outnumbered men during state or national elections, their political representation has historically remained significantly low. Nevertheless, with the recent increase in women representatives in the state assembly, there is greater potential for more female involvement in active politics. This shift is also likely to help usher in policy reforms that favour women in Mizoram.

There are several reasons why women are yet to actively participate in state politics. The obstacles and challenges that Mizo women faces are similar to those of the rest of the country. According to [Dr Lalneihzovi](#), a professor at Mizoram University, one of the primary reasons for this phenomenon is that "most communities in the Northeastern region are casteless, where there is no caste-based discrimination, especially in the tribal states. However, since they follow a patriarchal system of family, there is a sharp distinction between men and women in terms of their roles, position, and status".

Another significant barrier for women entering politics in India, as highlighted by [F R Jensenius](#), a political scientist, is the prevailing social expectation of women to exclusively shoulder

household duties. Moreover, the demanding and time-consuming nature of political activities often results in women hesitating in assuming such responsibilities. In some instances, the women may lack knowledge about politics due to their almost exclusive engagement in household chores and family responsibilities, leaving them with insufficient time to participate in political discussions. Another reason is that political parties marginalise women by not allotting an adequate or commensurate number of seats to female candidates during elections. However, the gradual increase of Mizo women candidates in past and present elections signifies the long-awaited acceptance of women in politics by Mizo society.

The 17th Lok Sabha (Lower House) has one of the highest numbers of representation of women in the Parliament, with 14 per cent in comparison to five per cent in the first Lok Sabha election. In the Rajya Sabha (Upper House), there are 13 per cent women members of parliament in total. Among the states, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal have the highest number of women members of parliament at 11. [There are seven out of 23 members of parliament from Odisha](#) in the Lok Sabha, which is equal to 33 per cent and it is the highest in the history of India. In the case of the northeastern states, there are three women members of parliament in Lok Sabha from the states of Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura. While there is a lower representation of women compared to other states in India, it can still be considered a positive breakthrough, given the gradual increase in the number of elected women members of parliament. Another exception was in April 2022, when Phangnon Konyak created history by becoming the first woman member from Nagaland to be nominated to the Rajya Sabha.

Mizoram, a small landlocked state in the northeastern region, boasts rich cultural diversity and stands out with one of the highest literacy rates in India. The government's flagship programme, the Socio-Economic Development Policy, holds the promise of ushering in a green economy soon. After India's independence in 1947, Mizoram, formerly known as the Lushai Hills, was one of the districts of Assam. In 1972, it became a Union Territory. Eventually, Mizoram was granted statehood on 20 February 1987, with 40 elected seats.

Breaking away from a political landscape dominated by traditional parties, the ZPM's success signifies a potential paradigm shift. The party, founded only in 2017 by Lalduhoma, a former Indian Police Services officer, captured an impressive 27 seats out of 40. All set to form the first non-MNF and non-Congress government after 35 years, the ZPM has emerged as a significant alternative political force. The party's campaign promises of participatory and inclusive governance also seem poised to redefine the political landscape of the state.

The ZPM has, in effect, emerged as a new voice, rekindling regional identity. The Mizo society is experiencing a historic moment of political change that holds the promise of ushering in hope for economic development and empowerment of women.

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