

Assam Elections 2021

Understanding BJP's Return to Power

PARVIN SULTANA

Hyper-populism riding on welfare schemes along with a polarised campaign on religious lines paved the way for the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance's return to power in Assam. As the new government resumes office, it remains to be seen if it will continue its emphasis on polarising issues such as reverification of National Register of Citizens and ban or focus on larger issues like the COVID-19 pandemic, flood and erosion that continue to hamper the state's development.

The three-phase elections to the Assam legislative assembly returned the incumbent National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to power. The NDA comprising of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and a new partner—the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) formed by the ex-president of the All-Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) Pramod Bodo—won 75 seats and comfortably passed the majority number of 64 seats in the house consisting of 126 seats. The UPPL, which won six seats in the assembly elections, had succeeded in winning 12 out of 40 seats in the Bodo-land Territorial Council (BTC) elections held in December 2020 (*Sentinel Digital Desk* 2021).

In this election, the BJP faced challenges from two alliances. The first alliance—the *Mahajot* or Grand Alliance—was led by the Congress, along with the All-India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), Communist Party of India (CPI), Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI(ML)) and the newly formed regional front Anchalik Gana Morcha. The Bodo-land People's Front (BPF) joined this alliance only a month before the elections. The second alliance that entered the election fray consisted of two regional parties, the Asom Jatiya Parishad (AJP) formed by ex-All Assam Students' Union (AASU) leader Lurinjyoti Gogoi and the Rajbor Dal formed by jailed leader of the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS), Akhil Gogoi. Both these regional parties were formed against the backdrop of an anti-CAA (Citizenship [Amendment] Act) agitation that rocked the state in 2019–20. The regional parties claimed to provide a third front to the voters of Assam. The *Mahajot* could manage 50 seats while the newly formed parties' performance was dismal. Only Rajbor Dal President Akhil Gogoi could win from the Sivsagar constituency.

COMMENTARY

This election, like past elections in Assam, was fought on issues that have been constant in Assam politics—the identity question and citizenship concerns. Along with these, some other factors were at play, which are discussed in the article.

The Number Game

The 2021 assembly elections witnessed AIUDF allying with the Congress for the first time. It should be noted that AIUDF's very emergence was in opposition to the Congress. Against the backdrop of the scrapping of Illegal Migration (Determination by Tribunal) (IMDT) Act in 2005, the party under the leadership of perfume baron Badruddin Ajmal was formed to provide an alternative to the Muslims of Assam, who comprise almost 34% of the population (Nath 2019). Largely perceived of as a party enjoying the support of the Muslims of East Bengal origin or Miya Muslims, the party succeeded in wrenching a sizeable fraction of the Muslim electorate from the Congress in the past elections.

The Ajmal-led AIUDF emerged as the main opposition party in 2011. But, in 2016, the party's strength reduced from 18 to 13, as the Congress ended at a dismal 26 after three successive terms in government. Death and defection brought the Congress tally down to 20 (*Hindu* 2021). However, in 2021, the two parties decided to stitch an alliance with an aim to ensure that the anti-BJP and anti-CAA vote does not split.

In 2016, the BJP won 60 seats while ally AGP won 14 and BPF won 12. Together their vote share was a little more than 40%. On the other hand, the Congress won 26 seats with a vote share of 30% and AIUDF won 13 seats with a vote share of 13%. In as many as 19 constituencies, the BJP could win because of the division of votes between AIUDF and Congress. A quick look at some of the constituencies shows that the combined votes of AIUDF and Congress surpassed the BJP's tally. In Batadrava, BJP's Angoorlata Deka won with 46,343 votes while the combined votes of Congress and AIUDF were 73,480. Similarly, the combined votes of AIUDF and Congress in Barkhetry were 70,860, in Bilasipara East 97,323 and in

Parvin Sultana (parvin.jnu@gmail.com)
teaches at Pramathesh Baruah College, Assam.