

# Naga media, the elections and ‘solutions’

BY VIKAS KUMAR | IN REGIONAL MEDIA |

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**Naga newspapers’ unwillingness to engage with the real issues plaguing the state was on display in the recent elections.**

VIKAS KUMAR dissects the coverage



Assembly elections were held this February in three states of the North East, including Nagaland. It was feared that the elections would be boycotted in Nagaland because of the ‘**Solution before Election**’ campaign in which civil society appealed to the government to conclude the two decade old peace process *before* holding elections.

The BJP tried to counter the campaign with its slogan ‘Election for Solution.’ Civil society launched a ‘Core Committee of Nagaland Tribal Hohos and Civil Organisations’ (CCNTHCO) on January 25 to spearhead the campaign.

# THE MORNING EXPRESS

What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.

## 2008 Gujarat blasts masterminded in Delhi

**Party's electoral trust gets huge boost as more leaders join**

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Delhi, January 22: A group of 15 prominent leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) met in Delhi on Wednesday to discuss the party's strategy for the upcoming 2019 Lok Sabha elections. The meeting was held in the presence of party leaders and officials. The group discussed the party's performance in the 2014 elections and the challenges it faces in the 2019 elections. The group also discussed the party's strategy for the 2019 elections and the role of the party in the government.

## Naga political issue, a perfect alibi for defectors: NPCC fires back at Chishi

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Disrupting the peace process in Nagaland, the Congress party and its allies have been accused of using the Naga political issue as a perfect alibi for defectors. The National People's Congress (NPC) has accused the Congress party of using the Naga issue to attract defectors from the party. The NPC has also accused the Congress party of using the Naga issue to distract attention from its own policies and actions.

## CEO to meet pol parties on election expenditure

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New Delhi, January 22: The Election Commission (EC) is set to meet with the leaders of various political parties to discuss the issue of election expenditure. The meeting is expected to be held in the coming days. The EC is concerned about the increasing expenditure on elections and the need to regulate it. The meeting will discuss the various measures that can be taken to reduce election expenditure and ensure a fair and free election process.

## 'Richest 1% in India got 73% of wealth generated in 2017'

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New Delhi, January 22: A report released by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) shows that the richest 1% of households in India captured 73% of the wealth generated in the country in 2017. The report also shows that the top 10% of households captured 88% of the wealth. The report highlights the growing inequality in India and the need to address it. The RBI has also suggested various measures to reduce inequality and promote inclusive growth.

## Realise sanctity of election and reject money, muscle power: SC Jamir

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## SOLUTION BEFORE ELECTION: Naga CSOs form Coordination Committee

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Within a week of its launch, the CCNTHCO rallied the most insurgent factions and all political parties, including the BJP, in support of the pro-solution campaign and called for a bandh. However, three influential tribal bodies refused to enforce the February 1 bandh in their strongholds covering more than half of Nagaland and on the same day the BJP made public its decision to contest the election.

The CCNTHCO was dissolved on February 6 after all parties announced their candidates and only one "intending" candidate withdrew his candidature. Its failure notwithstanding, civil society's 'Solution before Election' campaign, along with the Church's 'Clean Election Campaign' and the Church's appeal to the laity to protect the faith, was among the defining features of this year's election.

The coverage of civil groups' pre-electoral intervention in Nagaland's newspapers provides an insight into the changing nature of Naga society. It also exposes a key weakness of these newspapers, namely, the unwillingness to investigate sensitive issues.

The following discussion is based on the coverage of the 'Solution before Election' campaign and related events in three English dailies of Nagaland – *The Morung Express* (henceforth, *Morung*), *Nagaland Post* (henceforth, *Post*), and *Eastern Mirror* (henceforth, *Mirror*).

## Vox populi

After the pro-solution campaign unraveled, a *Morung* poll revealed that 62% of respondents believed that tribal and civil society organisations did not represent the “will of the public” (Feb 12) and 79% thought that the legislators should have “resigned by now” if they were serious about “Solution, not Election” (Feb 5).

Some of the respondents, who also submitted comments while voting, saw civil society organisations as unelected bodies controlled by political parties and insurgent groups.

A series of polls in the *Post* revealed a similar disconnect between civil society and the people. About 92% of respondents believed that the solution to the Naga political problem cannot be achieved within six months (Jan 28) and 84% believed that the solution cannot be reached in 2018 (Feb 17).

So, while 76% of respondents believed that the government was not serious about a solution (Feb 1), 70% felt that the demand for a solution should not be linked with elections (Feb 4).

In other words, the people are tired of waiting for a solution, but they still thought that a 'Solution before Election' was unreasonable. While the number of respondents who participated in these polls is not known, the agreement between the outcomes of related polls conducted by *Morung* and *Post* is reassuring. Also, noteworthy is the fact that the two leading newspapers of

Nagaland, which otherwise differed on the issue of an election boycott, published these polls.

## REFLECTIONS

By Sandemo Ngullie



**Solution first, sir, otherwise we'll be compelled to impose economic blockade on India.**

Morung, January 30

## REFLECTIONS

By Sandemo Ngullie



**The bandh was successful, but you didn't get the 'solution', anyway don't feel discouraged, at least it answered a lot of your questions. Yea?**

Morung, February 2

# REFLECTIONS

By Sandemo Ngullie



**"Sssssh... Chup chap jai kena nomination file kori rakhi bi, if they screw up again, you'll get elected unopposed- lo etu auto phara"**

Morung, January 29

## This is it!



**"He tried his best to be popular by backing Clean Election, then No Election. Now he has to face the reality of Election."**

Post, February 6

## Mirror Takes



*~ Arsen*  
**No no not scholarship, ... I said come for Solution Not Election protest... eshhhhh.**

Mirror, January 22

## Mirror Takes



*~ Arsen*  
**Please organise more bandh... We want to spend more family time together... jo moram para...**

Mirror, February 2

## Mirror Takes



Mirror, January 30

## For whom does civil society toil?

Several op-ed contributors argued that the pro-solution civil society organisations did not represent the people. The pro-solution campaign was described as “a wag-on of the tail of a dog than... a realistic mass movement of a people” (“**Do the NGO & political parties in Nagaland really reflect the mind of the people?**” *Mirror*, Feb 2).

An op-ed written on behalf of “We, the silent public” claimed that “All the news items about civil societies against elections do not express the desire and opinion of the general public... [We] want to have fair and free and clean elections... We are sick and fed up... But we the silent majority are afraid” (**We must have elections!** *Morung*, Jan 29).

*Morung*, whose front page headlines were sympathetic to the pro-solution campaign, agreed that “those who claim to represent the people ignored the “general will” of the people” (“**Representation ‘for’ or ‘of the People,**” Editorial, Feb 7).

Another op-ed reminded civil society groups that people no longer wanted to be dictated to: “While it might be disheartening for those civil societies which had championed the boycott movement, it also explains the changing world

we live in where dictation by Tribal Hohos need not necessarily hold sway and individual opinion and space... has become increasingly valued” (“**On election, BJP and KK Sema!**” Feb 22).

It was also pointed out that the pro-solution campaign overlooked the real problems facing the people such as corruption (**Arise for change**, Post, 22 Jan). ‘Solution’ was described as the Naga “El Dorado” (**The Letters of the Alphabet in Nagaland**, *Morung*, Jan 29).

Yet others complained that the pro-solution campaign created more problems than it hoped to solve. It was held responsible for pre-poll violence in so far as it curtailed normal campaigning to just three weeks, leaving the candidates with no time to rationally persuade voters (“What did you expect?” *Post*, Feb 13). It was also blamed for derailing the Clean Election Campaign (**Test of self-trust**, Editorial, Feb 24).

More importantly, it was argued that not only was civil society not interested in the immediate problems facing the people, it had also not done its homework for the pro-solution campaign. It failed to clarify what constitutes an acceptable solution and was trying to rush the peace process, overlooking the difficulty of engaging the second largest insurgent group in the peace process.

A *Morung* editorial summed up the concern: “In all probability, Nagas are not against a ‘solution’ and nor is it a question of preferring ‘election’ over ‘solution’ but it is a question of what is the ‘solution’ and the process involved that is contentious” (“**Interesting times ahead**,” Jan 31).

It noted that the “silent majority” was “fed-up of this bandh culture.” It added that “in the current context, also reflecting on the bandh imposed during the proposed ULB elections... negative repercussions may outweigh the positives, if at all” and asked, “Is there no other means than bandh?”

Readers’ polls and critical op-ed contributions raised a question not explored by the newspapers: If so many people believe that tribal organisations and civil society groups do not enjoy popular support and overlook the problems facing the common man, whose interests are served by according importance to these organisations that insist that their consent is essential for practically everything in Nagaland including conducting elections?

## Storms in a tea cup?

A few op-ed contributors pointed out that lofty slogans and campaigns were just a façade for the power struggle within civil society. Others lampooned the ever changing arrangements within the various organizations.

“The proponents of the cry for, “Solution before Election” and, “Solution not Election” are in danger of fast using up the letters of the English Alphabet, in all its various permutations and combinations...” ([The Letters of the Alphabet in Nagaland](#), *Morung*, Jan 29). Both the *Post* ([Money chasers](#), Feb 20) and *Morung* ([‘Politicised’ Trajectories](#), Jan 24) agreed that vested interests use the “the Naga political issue” as “a “perfect alibi” either for ‘political leverage’ or ‘gaining mileage.’”

Very few [appreciated](#) the fact that the CCNTHCO, at least, showed that it is not impossible to bring together Nagaland’s fragmented civil society, insurgency, and political parties. The dramatic rise and fall of the CCNTHCO reminds of the fate of the Joint Coordination Committee and the Nagaland Tribes Action Committee launched during last year’s anti-women’s reservation protests, only to be forgotten in a matter of a few weeks.

In light of this newspapers should have asked a question: What explains the periodic meteoric rise and fall of civil society *conglomerates* in Nagaland in recent years? Only two op-eds commented on this.

One of them suggested that ad hoc civil society conglomerates are floated to deal with problems because of the decline of the Naga Hoho, the hitherto dominant pan-Naga civil society organisation (“[Revamping the Naga House](#),” Feb 6).

The other suggested that the ad hoc conglomerates fall apart because they cannot make their constituents implement joint resolutions (“[What is the solution, what is the problem?](#)” Feb 1).

The identity of particular tribes and civil society organizations responsible for the breakdown of consensus was noted in newspapers but not examined, i.e.,



the motives behind their decision to violate joint resolutions were left unexplained.

Since these issues are brushed under the carpet, Nagaland is condemned to suffer periodic upheavals that create more problems than they solve. The lynching incident rocked the state in 2015. Two years later the state relived the horrors during the anti-women's reservation protests.

This year the state barely escaped a violent showdown on the scheduling of elections. The intense turf wars between old and new groups formed over the past five years and within new generation groups explain most of these upheavals.

## Contradictory headlines?

The choice of front page headlines is where the newspapers diverge sharply despite the broad agreement noted above. *Morung's* front page headlines suggested that the "Solution before Election" campaign enjoyed widespread support, while the *Post* and *Mirror* suggested the contrary.

On January 19, the sub-heading of the main news item on the front page of *Morung* pointed out that "ECI announcement [was] made despite calls for 'Solution before Election'." *Post* noted the displeasure of the Nagaland-based insurgent factions at the announcement, but also highlighted the government interlocutor's assurance that the peace process will resume after elections ("Ravi expects talks to resume after election"). *Mirror's* front page did not refer to the opposition to elections.

On January 28, *Morung* suggested broad political support for 'Solution before Election' ("**Parties seek solution to Naga issue before Assembly polls**"). The *Post* ("Lobby for deferment of Assembly Polls: **Pol parties want guarantee for not filing nominations**") and *Mirror* ("**Civil orgs. meet with NPF, NPP and AAP; BJP skips meeting again**") suggested that the parties were divided and those ostensibly supporting the pro-solution campaign were jittery that the BJP might go ahead and file nominations.

On February 1, *Morung* ("**Bandhs in Dimapur, Mokokchung, Peren, Tseminyu and Zunheboto**") simply identified the districts covered by the bandh. On the

other hand, the *Post* (“**CCNTCHO to go ahead with bandh; some tribal groups refrain**”) and *Mirror* (“**Will-not and the for: Tribal apexes decide state-wide strike**”) made it clear that the civil society was divided.

The *Mirror*’s sub-heading identified the tribal bodies opposed to the bandh. The *Post* also carried an item “**1st death anniversary of Jan 31 martyrs observed**” on the front page to possibly remind readers of those who sacrificed their lives in the 2017 anti-women’s reservation protests.

The divergence between the newspapers was perhaps widest on February 2. *Morning* (“**Feb 1 bandh call passes off amidst uncertainty**”) devoted the first half of the front page to the bandh, but its headline did not identify the lack of consensus.

The *Post* (“**CCNTHCO bandh evokes mixed response**”) and *Mirror* (“**Bandh farce: CCNTHCO maintains brave front**”) placed the news at the bottom of the front page and made clear that the bandh had failed. They gave prominence to poll preparations of parties, while **Morning** placed this news at the bottom.

It is difficult to reconcile the broad agreement between newspapers in readers’ polls, cartoons, and op-eds with the contradiction between their front pages.

## **Concluding remarks**

Nagaland’s newspapers, which are driven by op-ed contributions, can perhaps do only so much in the absence of a culture of serious public debate. Their unwillingness to investigate “sensitive” issues, though, makes matters worse. They discuss problems in the abstract or present problems as collections of unexamined proper nouns and dates.

In fact, they do not even put together a background note compiling all the names and dates, which would facilitate further debate and help uncover the underlying processes. As a result, the factors that facilitated, for instance, the rapid making and unmaking of civil society conglomerates around anti-women’s reservation (2017) and pro-solution (2018) campaigns will remain a mystery to Nagaland’s newspaper reader.

Likewise the people responsible for the 2015 lynching will forever remain

anonymous. The investigative silence helps vested interests to avoid public scrutiny. However, there is growing restlessness among people, some of which was reflected in the op-eds published in the run-up to the election.

They are asking uncomfortable questions and challenging orthodoxies and vested interests that have dominated the state for long. It remains to be seen if and how Nagaland's newspapers engage with these questions.

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