

# The Role of Political Parties in Shaping Democratic Governance in Arunachal Pradesh

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## Abstract:

Party-based governance forms the core of parliamentary democracy, and the political development of Arunachal Pradesh reflects this transition. Since independence, the state has evolved from clan- and tribe-oriented political loyalties to a system centred on organized political parties. Although party politics has fostered broader integration beyond tribal identities, local affiliations and kinship ties continue to shape political behaviour. Following its transition from a Union Territory to statehood, political parties became central to electoral participation and governance in the region.

The state's political landscape has been characterized by prolonged dominance of certain parties, frequent defections, and shifting alliances, often resulting in weak opposition. National parties such as the Indian National Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party, along with regional formations like the People's Party of Arunachal and the Arunachal Congress, have played key roles in shaping governance. Leadership dynamics and pragmatic alignments have often outweighed ideological commitments in determining political loyalties.

Overall, the evolution of party politics in Arunachal Pradesh highlights the interaction between national and regional forces, the persistence of social influences, and the importance of political parties in structuring democratic processes in the state.

**Keywords:** Party politics; Parliamentary democracy; Political transformation; Tribal affiliations; Indian National Congress; Bharatiya Janata Party; Regional political parties; Electoral behaviour; Democratic governance.

## INTRODUCTION

Political history reflects the evolution of various governing institutions formed by human societies across time. From ancient periods to the present, systems of political organization have transformed significantly—moving from simple self-governing communities and monarchies to more sophisticated structures such as democratic and authoritarian regimes.

Party politics refers to political behaviour driven primarily by loyalty to a political party rather than by concern for the broader public interest. It involves actions and decisions shaped by the goals and advantages of a particular party or its members. Despite this narrower meaning, political parties are essential to democratic functioning. They constitute a central element of democratic processes by representing citizens' preferences and organizing political participation. In countries with multi-party systems such as India, parties promote different programmes and ideologies, making representative government possible. They gather and articulate public opinion, connect the population with governing institutions, and influence policy according to their ideological commitments. Although their methods differ, all parties claim to work toward national welfare. Based on their scope and objectives, political parties are generally classified as national or regional organizations.

The nature of India's party system has been shaped by its cultural diversity and social complexity, including variations in caste, ethnicity, religion, and regional identity. Historical legacies of the nationalist movement, differences in leadership styles, and ideological disagreements have also contributed to the development of a vibrant and pluralistic party structure.

The roots of political organization resembling parties can be traced to ancient Athens, where citizens with shared interests formed associations. Modern political parties, however, began to take shape during the early expansion of democratic governance, particularly in the United States and during the French Revolution, where factions such as the Montagnards, Royalists, and Girondins emerged. Initially functioning as exclusive groups, these formations gradually evolved into mass-based organizations seeking state power, often broadening their appeal beyond rigid ideological boundaries.

In India, party politics originated in the context of the struggle against colonial rule. The establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885 provided a platform for political mobilization and became the focal point of nationalist activity. Over time, it transformed into a broad-based organization representing diverse sections of society and encouraging debate on social and political issues. From the early twentieth century onward, numerous additional parties appeared, including ideological and regionally oriented organizations. The expansion of both national and regional parties in contemporary India has contributed to strengthening democratic participation and representation by accommodating diverse political viewpoints.

### **POLITICAL PARTIES AND TRIBAL DYNAMICS**

Parliamentary government is essentially party-based governance in which political parties form the very foundation of the system. In Arunachal Pradesh, where political life was once shaped largely by clan or tribal loyalties, significant transformation has occurred since independence. The state has gradually moved from ethnic and tribal politics to area-based politics and eventually toward party-centred politics. Although party politics has helped integrate people emotionally and psychologically beyond tribal boundaries, loyalties often continue to remain closely tied to local areas, kinship groups, and community affiliations.

Following the region's political transition from a Union Territory to full statehood, Arunachal Pradesh has sought to align itself more closely with the broader democratic party system of the country. Political parties have emerged as central actors in the state's political landscape. Voters typically make electoral choices based on their own perceptions and preferences, regardless of the promises outlined in party manifestos.

For a long time, electoral politics in the state was marked by the dominance of a single party. Frequent shifts of allegiance by opposition members toward the ruling party have resulted in weak opposition, limiting scrutiny and accountability in governance. Over time, both national and regional parties have participated in the state's politics. National parties such as **Indian National Congress**, **All India Trinamool Congress**, **Bharatiya Janata Party**, and **Nationalist Congress Party** have been present, alongside regional parties like **People's Party of Arunachal** and **Arunachal Congress**. However, parties grounded in leftist ideology have had little or no presence in the state's political arena.

The major political parties that have been active in the politics of **Arunachal Pradesh** include **Indian National Congress**, **Bharatiya Janata Party**, **All India Trinamool Congress**, **Nationalist Congress Party**, **Arunachal Congress**, and **People's Party of Arunachal**.

## INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS

The entry of the Nationalist Congress Party and the Trinamool Congress into the political landscape of the state was relatively abrupt. Many leaders who were denied candidature by the Congress chose to contest elections under the banners of these parties as an alternative means of remaining within the broader Congress political fold, since both parties were allied with Congress at that time.

NEFA Sangam was the first political association of its kind, established in 1959 by Daying Ering along with Choukhamain Gohain. Choukhamain Gohain served as President, Kebang Borang as Secretary, and Ering as Advisor. Members of NEFA Sangam regarded the organisation, in its internal character, as the first informal political party in Arunachal Pradesh. On the recommendation of the Sangam, Daying Ering was nominated as a Member of Parliament from NEFA in 1961 and later became Union Deputy Minister for Food and Agriculture. He was also the first person from NEFA to formally join a political party when he became associated with the Indian National Congress. Following his death in 1970, the NEFA Sangam also withered...

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A consultative body similar to a panchayat was constituted for the territory in 1969, known as the NEFA Council. When NEFA was reorganised into the Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh in 1972, this body was renamed the Pradesh Council. Its members collectively aligned themselves with the Indian National Congress, with Chauchandret Gohain becoming its first president. The Congress organisation was formally established in the Union Territory in October 1972.

The Congress party went on to dominate state politics for about three decades and produced several Chief Ministers, including Prem Khandu Thungan, Gegong Apang, Mukut Mithi, Dorjee Khandu, Jarbom Gamlin, Nabam Tuki and Pema Khandu. Thungan served as the first Congress Chief Minister from 1975 to 1979, followed by Apang, who governed for about sixteen years between 1980 and 1999 as a Congress leader and later between 1996 and 1999 as head of the regional Arunachal Congress, which he founded.

Political realignments continued in subsequent years. Mithi split from Arunachal Congress in 1998 to establish the Arunachal Congress (Mithi), though he later reunited with Apang's faction and contested the 2004 Lok Sabha and Assembly elections in association with the Congress. In 2003, a revolt led by Kameng Dolo resulted in the formation of another faction known as Congress (Dolo). Apang subsequently returned as Chief Minister under the Congress banner. Mithi later served as a Rajya Sabha Member of Parliament and was appointed Lieutenant Governor of Puducherry.

During Apang's tenure, Dorjee Khandu rebelled and assumed office as Chief Minister, serving from April 2007 until April 2011. After his untimely death, Jarbom Gamlin held the office briefly, from May 2011 to November 2011.

assumed office after Jarbom Gamlin and served as Chief Minister from 1 November 2011 to 26 January 2016, with a brief return to office between 13 July and 17 July 2016. He was succeeded by Pema Khandu, who led the government from 17 July 2016 to 16 September 2016. During this phase, Khandu altered his political affiliation twice—first shifting from the Indian National Congress to the People's Party of Arunachal in September, and later joining the Bharatiya Janata Party in December.

The Indian National Congress has historically played a central role not only in India's independence movement but also in the broader development of Arunachal Pradesh, particularly in shaping its political, administrative, and economic institutions. The state's political evolution has remained closely intertwined with the Congress party. Following independence in 1947, Congress dominated national governance for several decades, except for a short period when the Janata Party ruled between March 1977 and July 1979. This extended national influence contributed to the consolidation of Congress within Arunachal Pradesh. Within many tribal communities, the legacy of Congress leadership continues to carry symbolic significance. The contributions of Mahatma Gandhi are widely acknowledged, while Jawaharlal Nehru is remembered for advancing the "Panchsheel philosophy for NEFA" in 1955, reflecting the region's distinctive socio-cultural and geographical realities. Similarly, Indira Gandhi is associated with transforming NEFA into a Union Territory under the name Arunachal Pradesh in 1972, and Rajiv Gandhi is credited with granting it full statehood in 1987. Despite its prominence, factional divisions have frequently marked the state unit of the Congress. Internal rivalries and defections—both collective and individual—have been recurrent features of its political organisation. Criticism from the People's Party of Arunachal has also highlighted allegations that Congress repeatedly shifted its political position over time.

It is difficult to determine whether political alignments in Arunachal Pradesh are driven primarily by ideology or by leadership considerations. The Congress party in the state has often been described as a "satellite of the Centre," reflecting the perception that its position in Itanagar tended to mirror its status in New Delhi. In this sense, it has sometimes been characterised as a seasonal party—if Congress governed at the Centre, it was also dominant in the state capital. However, similar patterns can be observed with other ruling formations, whether during the period of Janata Party influence in the past or the more recent dominance of the Bharatiya Janata Party in Arunachal Pradesh. In practice, political leadership across these parties has often emerged from the same pool of politicians, and state legislators have shown a tendency to align themselves with whichever party holds power at the state or national level, sometimes irrespective of earlier loyalties.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the Indian National Congress has functioned as a broad-based and plural political platform within the state. Its 1984 manifesto claimed that the party symbolised representation of all sections of Arunachal society. The close association between leaders of the Nehru family and several tribal figures also strengthened the party's standing. Moreover, Congress's long experience in governing stable administrations contributed to its legitimacy on issues of common public concern.

Prem Khandu Thungan laid the organisational foundation of the party in the state during its formative phase. Subsequently, the assertive leadership of Gegong Apang proved highly significant, as he projected himself as a prominent representative of Arunachal Congress politics at the national level. While Thungan established the initial base, Apang provided a dynamic and enduring leadership that shaped the party's trajectory for many years.

Indeed, it can be argued that much of the political landscape of Arunachal Pradesh—whether involving national or regional parties—has been directly or indirectly connected to Congress. Many parties have

emerged from splits within it, and numerous political leaders have, at some stage of their careers, maintained association with the Congress organisation.

### **BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY (BJP)**

The Bharatiya Janata Party began its organisational activities in the Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh with the appointment of Lijum Ronya and M. R. Dodum as Joint Conveners on 28 April 1982, during the period when Atal Bihari Vajpayee served as the party's national president.

In its early electoral participation, the BJP secured only one seat while contesting six in the 1984 elections. Subsequently, a BJP-led government under the United Democratic Front was formed between 3 August 2003 and July 2004 following the merger of 38 MLAs belonging to the Congress (Dolo) faction. The party later achieved greater electoral success, winning both Lok Sabha seats from the state in 2004 and securing nine seats in the Legislative Assembly elections held in October the same year.

Although the BJP formally emerged in the state in 1982, its ideological predecessor, the Janata Party, had already been in power in Arunachal Pradesh between August 1975 and September 1979 under the chief ministership of Prem Khandu Thungan. In this sense, the BJP's presence may be traced back to that earlier political lineage.

Arunachal Pradesh became the first state in Northeast India to experience BJP rule when Gegong Apang assumed office as Chief Minister on 30 August 2003, although this tenure lasted only forty-four days. A more sustained phase of BJP governance began when Pema Khandu aligned with the party in October 2016 and continued as Chief Minister from 31 December 2016 onward, making Arunachal Pradesh the fourteenth state in India to come under BJP rule.

From its inception, the BJP faced challenges in gaining acceptance in the region, as its association with a distinct Hindutva-oriented ideological image was perceived as less compatible with the multicultural and diverse social composition of the Northeast, including Arunachal Pradesh.

### **PEOPLE'S PARTY OF ARUNACHAL (PPA)**

The People's Party of Arunachal (PPA) is recognised as the first regional political party of Arunachal Pradesh. Its formation followed the first parliamentary elections held in the territory in 1975, when Bakin Pertin convened a meeting at Pasighat in April 1977. The party was established by Pertin along with Tomo Riba. Although Pertin initially maintained an "associated" relationship with the Janata Party, which was then in power at the Centre, he later severed this connection.

Pertin had promised during his parliamentary campaign to establish a regional political organisation if elected. Fulfilling this pledge, he formally launched the PPA at a convention held at Reying Gumin Hall, Pasighat, on 10 April 1977, adopting the mithun as its symbol and assuming the presidency. Nearly one thousand participants representing eleven districts attended the gathering, during which the party constitution was adopted. Wanglet Lowangcha was elected Secretary and Tomo Riba Vice-President. Notably, Riba resigned from the Indian National Congress to join the PPA while still serving as Agriculture Minister in the cabinet of Prem Khandu Thungan, arguing that his ministerial position derived from his status as a councillor of the Pradesh Council. He was subsequently removed from the cabinet and replaced by Gegong Apang, a decision later endorsed by the Pradesh Congress Committee.

The PPA was officially registered as a regional party before the 1978 Assembly elections, pledging to advance the welfare and interests of the people of Arunachal Pradesh. Conceived largely through Pertin's political initiative—shaped during his student years in Delhi in association with Daying Ering—

the party soon emerged as a significant political force. After the Janata Party came to power at the Centre in 1977, Pertin himself joined it, possibly anticipating a ministerial role. At a meeting in Dibrugarh in June 1977, PPA leaders sought recognition as the authentic Janata representative unit in Arunachal and opposed the wholesale merger of the state Congress into Janata. They also demanded dissolution of the ad hoc Assembly and imposition of President's Rule, asserting consultation with Prime Minister Morarji Desai.

The 1977 general election to the Lok Sabha marked the first direct electoral participation of Arunachal's electorate, divided into two constituencies. This experience introduced competitive politics within tribal communities, often placing members of the same tribe in electoral opposition. In 1979, Tomo Riba became PPA president and briefly served as Chief Minister from September to November of that year. However, the party's subsequent influence declined, and between roughly 1990 and 2008 it neither contested elections nor held legislative representation. A short-lived alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party and Janata elements formed the North-East Frontier Alliance in 1984, but it achieved little lasting significance.

Political relevance returned decades later. In December 2015, dissident Congress legislators led by Kalikho Pul joined the PPA and formed a government with BJP support from February to July 2016. Subsequently, in September 2016, forty-three legislators under Chief Minister Pema Khandu shifted from Congress to the PPA, aligning with the BJP before later transitioning again to the BJP. Over time, the PPA became associated with wider regional political alignments such as the North-East Democratic Alliance, coordinated by Himanta Biswa Sarma, and the North-East Regional Political Front supporting the National Democratic Alliance framework.

Historically, PPA governments were formed only briefly: under Tomo Riba in 1979, under Kalikho Pul in 2016, and during the transitional phase under Pema Khandu later that year. In its early years, the party faced criticism of being perceived as an "Adi-based" organisation that did not command confidence across all tribal groups. Concerns were also expressed about the possibility of its advocacy of a "sons-of-the-soil" orientation. Additionally, the party encountered allegations of partiality toward Christianity due to Pertin's opposition to legislation promoting indigenous faith traditions. Nevertheless, there is no clear evidence that the party officially endorsed any religious preference.

### **ARUNACHAL CONGRESS (AC)**

The Arunachal Congress emerged in September 1996 as a regional political party following a split from the Indian National Congress. The break occurred when the state Congress leader and Chief Minister, Gegong Apang, rebelled against the national leadership headed by P. V. Narasimha Rao. Apang carried with him 54 of the 60 members of the Arunachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly into the newly formed party.

In the 1998 Lok Sabha elections, the party secured both parliamentary seats from Arunachal Pradesh and aligned itself with the Bharatiya Janata Party, becoming a founding partner of the National Democratic Alliance. Apang's son, Omak Apang, elected from Arunachal West, was inducted as a minister in the Union government. This appointment led to allegations of nepotism from Wangcha Rajkumar, the Lok Sabha member from Arunachal East. When five state ministers supported Rajkumar's position, they were dismissed, triggering internal dissent. One of the dismissed ministers, Mukut Mithi, subsequently broke away to form the Arunachal Congress (Mithi), gathering the support of forty legislators and establishing a government.

Initially, both the original party and the splinter faction supported the BJP-led government at the Centre under Atal Bihari Vajpayee. However, dissatisfaction over ministerial representation led Arunachal Congress (Mithi) to merge with the Congress ahead of the 1999 elections. In the subsequent parliamentary contests, Omak Apang contested from Arunachal West as an AC candidate allied with the BJP but was defeated, while Rajkumar won Arunachal East as a Congress nominee. In later Assembly elections, the influence of the party declined significantly; for instance, out of numerous candidates contesting in alliance with the BJP, only Gegong Apang secured victory.

Political realignments continued in the early 2000s. In July 2003, another split in Congress resulted in the formation of Congress (Dolo). Apang assembled a coalition named the United Democratic Front, bringing together his faction, Congress (D), and independent legislators, securing the backing of forty-one MLAs. He was sworn in again as Chief Minister on 3 August 2003 and later joined the BJP with his supporters, marking the first time a BJP-backed government held power in a northeastern state.

Although the Arunachal Congress continued to exist formally even after Apang's shift to the BJP—at times aligning with Congress—its relevance gradually diminished. Over time, the party ceased to play any significant role in the contemporary politics of Arunachal Pradesh.

### **CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Party politics in Arunachal Pradesh faces several structural and behavioural challenges that limit the development of a robust democratic environment. One major issue is the persistent weakness of regional political parties. Their limited financial and organisational resources, combined with the state's dependence on central assistance, often push leaders to align with national parties. This reduces ideological diversity and restricts the growth of independent regional political alternatives.

Another challenge is the lack of competitive party politics. The historical dominance of a single party and the absence of a strong opposition have constrained accountability and policy scrutiny. Frequent defections and shifting alliances further weaken institutional stability, as political loyalty tends to be driven by access to power rather than ideological commitment. Such practices undermine public confidence in party systems and reduce the credibility of democratic representation.

Electoral behaviour also presents difficulties. Voting patterns influenced by clan, kinship, and local affiliations limit issue-based or policy-oriented political engagement. The role of money power, patronage networks, and material inducements during elections raises concerns about electoral fairness and transparency. In some cases, coercive or confrontational political practices have intensified instability and affected governance outcomes.

Finally, the limited emphasis on ideology and policy-based leadership development creates a gap in long-term political vision. Political actors often prioritise immediate electoral opportunities over sustained institutional or programmatic development, hindering the maturation of democratic norms and practices.

Addressing these challenges requires strengthening institutional and civic foundations of party politics in the state. Encouraging transparent political financing and regulatory oversight could reduce excessive reliance on monetary influence and enhance fairness in electoral competition. Capacity-building initiatives for regional parties may help diversify political representation and allow local interests to be articulated more effectively.

Promoting political awareness among voters is equally important. Civic education and issue-based public discourse can gradually shift electoral choices from kinship or patronage considerations toward policy evaluation and governance performance. Strengthening internal democracy within parties may also foster accountable leadership and ideological clarity.

In addition, measures to discourage opportunistic defections and reinforce party discipline would contribute to greater political stability. Developing a more constructive opposition culture could enhance legislative debate and improve checks and balances within governance structures.

Overall, the future of party politics in Arunachal Pradesh depends on balancing local social realities with institutional reforms that encourage transparency, ideological engagement, and competitive participation. Such developments would strengthen democratic practices and contribute to more responsive governance in the state.

## CONCLUSION

An examination of party politics in Arunachal Pradesh reveals the complex interaction between democratic institutions and local socio-cultural realities. Over time, the state has moved from a political environment rooted in clan and tribal affiliations toward one structured around organized political parties within India's parliamentary system. This shift has strengthened political integration with the national framework while still reflecting enduring local influences on leadership choices and voting behaviour.

The trajectory of party politics in the state has been shaped by prolonged dominance of national parties, the limited sustainability of regional political organisations, and frequent political realignments. Ideological commitment has often been secondary to strategic considerations linked to access to resources and power. Kinship ties, financial dependence on the central government, and patronage networks have influenced both political actors and voters, contributing to weak opposition structures and recurrent defections.

Nevertheless, party-based politics has contributed to administrative consolidation, representation, and democratic participation in the region. The presence of multiple political actors and growing awareness among citizens indicates scope for more competitive and policy-oriented engagement in the future. Efforts aimed at enhancing institutional accountability, strengthening ideological clarity, and encouraging informed public participation will be crucial for deepening democratic governance.

Overall, the case of Arunachal Pradesh demonstrates that while parliamentary democracy can adapt to diverse regional contexts, its effectiveness depends on balancing institutional norms with social realities. Continued attention to transparency, stability, and inclusiveness will be essential for fostering a more mature and responsive political system in the state.

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