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The Dynamics of the Solution before Election and Election for Solution in Nagaland Electoral Politics

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ABSTRACT

Elections are the ordinary machinery of democratic consent. In Nagaland, however, they have repeatedly been presented as an obstacle to something larger: a political settlement of the Indo-Naga conflict. The phrase "solution before election" has been used in this sense for more than two decades, and its rival, "election for solution", has been used just as often. The Naga Hills stood outside the electoral system at the beginning. The first general election of independent India, scheduled for 1952, was boycotted by the Nagas because the Naga area had been placed under the Assam Legislative Assembly, and the boycott became part of the larger movement for Naga independence. A decade of conflict and negotiation followed. It produced the Sixteen-Point Agreement of 1960, the passage of the State of Nagaland Act in Parliament in 1962, and the formation of the State of Nagaland on 1 December 1963. The first Legislative Assembly was elected in January 1964, with Shilu Ao leading the government as the first Chief Minister, and the state's democratic life began from that point however election becomes a sandwich in the process of Indo-Naga conflicts. The article examines the process of elections and how elections are used as an

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instrument of achieving the political ends by the stakeholders.

Introduction:

Statehood was the product of a negotiated arrangement between the Government of India and the Naga People's Convention, and it was resolved by 1960 that Nagaland would become a constituent state of the Union (IANS, 2025). The state was inaugurated on 1 December 1963 and a democratically elected government assumed office the following year. Shilu Ao had been appointed head of the interim arrangement and became the first Chief Minister after the elections to the 40-seat Assembly, in which 73 candidates were in the field (Morung Express News, 2018). The slogans of Solution before election were not invented in 2017. "Solution before Election" as the third iteration of a slogan was first said to be used in 1998, when the call was "Solution, Not Election". Was used by the Congress amid strong protest while the other parties backed out, producing a government with almost no opposition (Longkumer, T., 2017). In 1999, those who had boycotted in 1998 took part in the election under the opposite slogan, "Election for Solution". Also that in 2001 violent protests had followed merely, the extension of the ceasefire with the NSCN-IM to Manipur, which shows how readily a peace-process question can be turned into street politics in Nagaland. Two lessons from this earlier history matter for what follows. First, the claim that "election for solution" was a novel slogan invented by the BJP in 2018 is not accurate. It had been used in 1999 by people who had abandoned an earlier boycott, and the BJP's use of it in 2018 was a return to a familiar argument. Second, the boycott call has an uneven record. It has worked as a symbolic statement and as a bargaining device, but it has never held a full field of parties together until polling day. From March 2003 the state was governed by the Democratic Alliance of Nagaland (DAN), an NPF-led coalition in which the BJP was a junior partner for fifteen years. The alliance's own leaders insisted that it had given the highest priority to the Naga political issue from the day it took office ("CM Calls for One Vision," 2017). The BJP's partnership with the NPF lasted until the BJP announced in March 2018 that it was severing a 15-year alliance (IANS, 2018b). This history matters because, when the BJP later said that a new government would deliver a settlement, voters and commentators could reasonably ask why fifteen years of partnership in the state government had not done so. Either the alliance with the NPF was the obstacle, or a government formed under the BJP would carry the settlement through; the party's argument required the second reading, and its critics argued for the first.

The immediate background of the 2017–2018 slogan lies in the years after Narendra Modi became Prime Minister. On 1 December 2014 he attended the Hornbill Festival at Kisama, near Kohima. This was the fifteenth edition of the festival, which began in 2000, and the *Morung Express* noted that he received a

grand welcome ("Over the Decade," 2017). In his speech, the Prime Minister spoke of development and of Nagaland's place in India. *The Indian Express* observed that he avoided the words "peace" and "conflict" altogether (Kashyap, 2014). The speech did not mention the Naga political issue or a solution before elections, and its tone was developmental rather than political. Eight months later, on 3 August 2015, the Government of India and the NSCN-IM signed the Framework Agreement. It was widely welcomed as the most significant development in the Naga peace process since the Shillong Accord of 1975. Its text has never been published, and a reading of it that sets out what the Government of India has and has not conceded remains the subject of dispute (IANS, 2018c). It recognised the unique history and situation of the Nagas, while leaving the hardest questions, including the demands for a separate flag and constitution, unresolved ("Editorial: Fresh Hope," 2026). It then followed a pattern familiar from earlier agreements. Just as the nine-point agreement signed with Akbar Hydari in 1947 produced understanding of the same Agreement in different perspective and narrative among Nagas and the Government of India, the 2015 agreement was quickly drawn into controversy about what had actually been agreed, and thus the solution became a theme of electoral politics.

Unity, Factions and Resolution

Calls for unity were already common by 2016. At the inauguration of the NPF's new Wokha division office on 8 August 2016, the then Home Minister, Y. Patton, urged all Naga political workers to come under one umbrella, noting that there were eight such groups in the state and that people were suffering from taxation by different groups ("Patton Urges Unity," 2016). The number has since grown. In January 2024 the Deputy Chief Minister put the number of factions at roughly twenty-eight, and in January 2025 he repeated the point, saying that the Government of India was prepared to offer one solution, not twenty-eight (IANS, 2024; "No 28 Solns," 2025). A report on the ceasefire regime, in turn, noted that the Government of India had signed ceasefire agreements with only five Naga groups: the NSCN-IM in 1997, and the NSCN-U, NSCN-R, NSCN-K (Khango) and NSCN-Nikki in 2012, 2015, 2019 and 2021 respectively ("Peace? What Peace?" 2024). This fragmentation became both an argument for early settlement and an argument for caution. The year 2017 supplied the political raw material for the slogan. On 19 September, Governor P. B. Acharya said the Naga issue would be solved within one or two months ("Centre Committed," 2017). In November 2017 the Working Committee of the Naga National Political Groups (NNPGs) signed an Agreed Position with the Government of India, and from this point the government was negotiating on two tracks, with the NSCN-IM under the Framework Agreement and with the NNPGs under the Agreed Position. It is important to be exact about its status: the NNPG document was an agreed position, not a final agreement, and the final settlement remained to be reached.

The Chief Minister, T. R. Zeliang, supported these assurances. Speaking at the inauguration of St. Joseph University at Ikishe in November 2017, he said that Nagas had struggled for seventy years and that two years after the Framework Agreement the sides had not yet reached a meeting point. He suggested that, with an opposition-less government in the state, there was a golden opportunity to focus on an early solution and to forgo the coming election with the consent of civil society ("Zeliang Reiterates," 2017). This is the earliest explicit use by a sitting Chief Minister of what became the slogan of "solution before election". On 3 November 2017 Zeliang and members of the DAN cabinet, accompanied by the MP Neiphiu Rio, met the Union Home Minister, Rajnath Singh, and pressed for the settlement to be initiated before the elections. Rio expressed the hope that it might be concluded before Christmas 2017 ("Nagaland Chief Minister Met," 2017). Christmas passed without a settlement.

Rajnath Singh visited the Hornbill Festival at Kisama on 8 December 2017, the eighth day of the eighteenth Hornbill. He said that the central government, under Prime Minister Modi, was committed to doing its best to fulfil the aspirations of the Naga people for a brighter tomorrow with all the honour they richly deserved ("Home Minister Shri Rajnath Singh Attends," 2017). The same report noted that President Ram Nath Kovind had said days earlier that Nagaland stood at the threshold of making history. Taken together, these statements encouraged a strong expectation that a final agreement was near.

The demand moved from public speeches to formal institutions in December 2017. On 7 December the Nagaland Legislators' Forum, together with parliamentarians and former parliamentarians, met at Jotsoma and resolved to ask the Assembly to pass a separate resolution urging a solution before the next election. The forum also asked the Election Commission of India to hold the elections to the 13th Assembly only after an honourable and acceptable solution had been reached ("Legislators' Forum Urges Settlement," 2017). The Chief Minister told the meeting that the issue had dominated every political discourse since statehood and that the churches, civil society and NGOs deserved credit for their efforts ("CM Calls for One Vision," 2017). On 15 December 2017, during the 19th session of the 12th Nagaland Legislative Assembly, the House adopted the resolution. It urged the Government of India to take emergent and extraordinary steps to usher in an honourable and acceptable solution well before the elections to the 13th Assembly, then slated for early 2018. It urged the Election Commission of India not to announce the elections until such a solution had been reached, and it called on all political parties and independent candidates to carry the demand for "solution before election" into the field ("NLA Resolution," 2017). Press reports dated the opening of the two-day session to 14 December, which accounts for a discrepancy in some citations; the resolution itself bears the date of 15 December ("Nagaland Assembly Demands," 2017; "Nagaland Assembly Resolves,"

2017). The Chief Minister's decision to introduce the resolution was widely read as a sign that the DAN government itself had adopted the slogan.

The resolution's asked the Centre to settle, the Election Commission to wait and the parties to unite in the field. Only the third of these requests lay within the power of Nagaland's own politicians, and when the Election Commission announced the poll schedule in January 2018 it was the third request that came under test. On 10 January 2018 Zeliang met Rajnath Singh, briefed him on the "popular demand" and submitted both the Legislators' Forum resolution and the Assembly resolution; the Home Minister said that the government was serious about the issue and promised to convene a meeting (IANS, 2018a; "Solution Before Election," 2018). The elections were nevertheless announced, and the NNPG Working Committee later recorded its appreciation of the Assembly's resolution while protesting that the Election Commission had acted in disregard of the people's demand ("NNPGs WC Appreciates Legislators," 2018).

Civil society, Churches and Public opinion

The civil society side of the campaign was led by the Core Committee of Nagaland Tribal Hohos and Civil Organisations (CCNTHCO). On 28 January 2018 the Core Committee organised a meeting at a Dimapur hotel at which the NNPG Working Committee and the NSCN-IM, the two negotiating entities, signed a joint statement appealing to intending candidates to place the Indo-Naga political solution above electoral interest. A series of consultations preceded this. On 25 January, the Coordination Committee of Naga Civil Societies held a meeting at Hotel Japfu in Kohima with a large number of political parties, tribal hohos and student bodies. Speakers from several parties endorsed the call. A leader from the Nagaland Pradesh Congress Committee said there was unity in the slogan; a representative of the NDPP said that his party was committed to a settlement as the wish of the Naga people; and the Janata Dal (United) expressed solidarity while warning that apex bodies such as the Naga Hoho had lost the mandate of the people. The Nagaland Baptist Church Council's general secretary urged that wisdom should prevail over emotion ("Nagaland: Call for Solution," 2018). The meeting shows that, by late January, the slogan had already attracted a remarkably wide coalition. It also shows the limits of that coalition. The statements recorded were broad affirmations of the goal, and none of the parties present set out how a settlement would be reached or who would decide whether it was honourable and acceptable.

Before the election, *The Morung Express* asked its readers a simple question: did they support the call for an Indo-Naga solution before the state election? Respondents could answer yes, no or other. The answers are valuable as a record of opinion, though they cannot be treated as a representative survey ("Do You Support the Call," 2018). Those who supported the call gave several reasons. Some argued that once elections were

held the prospects of a settlement would recede. Others said that the moment was unusually favourable, that all parties should work together to find a reasonable solution, or that a new government elected in the usual way should resign en masse if an agreement were concluded. A few attached conditions: negotiators must listen to the people, and the Naga cause must not be sold for selfish ends.

The respondents who rejected the call raised objections that are, on reflection, more revealing. Some doubted the timing, asking why the demand was raised at the eleventh hour rather than a year earlier. Several said that they did not know what the "solution" actually was, since the contents of the Framework Agreement had not been disclosed, and one respondent remarked that Nagas were being asked to demand something they had not seen. Others feared that if elections were postponed, President's Rule would follow, with a Governor acting at the will of the Prime Minister who had appointed him, and some invoked the memory of the 1975 Shillong Accord as a warning against an agreement reached in haste. A further group expressed plain cynicism, observing that politicians and the public alike spoke of principle while money decided outcomes at the polls. Others noted that organisations calling for "solution, not election" had been quarrelling only weeks earlier. Reading these responses together, the evidence points to a public that wanted a settlement but trusted neither the Government of India nor the Naga negotiating groups to deliver it transparently. A section of the public suspected that some actors wanted an economic arrangement at the expense of the Naga struggle for self-determination, and others suspected that a hidden agreement would prove costly. This mistrust, rather than hostility to a settlement as such, is the key to understanding why a slogan so widely endorsed in January 2018 had so little staying power. A call that rests on a document the public has not seen is difficult to sustain when the first serious test of loyalty arrives.

The Joint Declaration of 29 January 2018

On 29 January 2018, at Hotel Japfu in Kohima and in the presence of apex tribal hohos and civil society organisations, representatives of eleven political parties signed a joint declaration. The signatories included the ruling Naga People's Front, the BJP, the Congress, the Nationalist Congress Party, the Janata Dal (United), the Lok Janshakti Party, the Aam Aadmi Party, the National People's Party, the Nagaland Congress, the United Naga Democratic Party and the NDPP. The parties pledged to stand in solidarity with the call for "Solution before Election", to defer the elections to the 13th Assembly and to give the negotiating groups space and time. Practically, they agreed not to issue party tickets or to file nominations ("All Political Parties," 2018; Choudhury, 2018). The party names appear with slight variations across press reports, particularly the NDPP, but the number, eleven, is consistent.

The declaration was the high-water mark of the campaign. Two features of it deserve emphasis. First, the signatories included the party that governed the state and the party that governed the country. A boycott that excluded the BJP could never have held, and the presence of its signature gave the declaration a weight that earlier calls had lacked. Second, the declaration did not say how the Government of India should be moved. It assumed that a collective refusal to nominate candidates would compel the Election Commission and the Centre to postpone the poll, an assumption that proved unfounded when the Centre announced that elections would be held on schedule. The NSCN-IM, for its part, had already made clear that elections imposed against the wishes of the Naga people were unacceptable. According to the organisation, the decision of the Government of India and the Election Commission to hold elections would undermine the progress of the talks and become a serious obstacle to an early political solution, and it described those who advocated the "imposed election" as not standing for the Naga people's interest. Two influential bodies, the Konyak Union and the Phom Peoples' Council, had also decided earlier to boycott the polls.

Resignation of Legislators

The most dramatic part of the campaign was the resignation of legislators from the Nagaland Legislative Assembly. The sequence needs to be set out carefully because the reports of the time give slightly different figures. On 30 January 2018, a day after the declaration, ten legislators submitted their resignations: Tokheho Yepthomi, Noke Wangnao, Dr Neikiesalie Nicky Kire, S. Pangnyu Phom, Zhaleo Rio, Deo Nukhu, C. M. Chang, Pohwang Konyak, Namri Nchang and Neiba Kronu. Speaker Imtiwapang Aier accepted the resignations, and the seats of Dimapur-III, Tapi, Kohima Town, Longleng, Ghaspani-II, Chizami, Noksen, Phomching, Tenning and Pfutsero were declared vacant ("10 Legislators Resign," 2018). Yepthomi, speaking for the group, said that they had resigned both as members of the Assembly and from the primary membership of the NPF in response to the public call for "solution before election", and the news agency report put the strength of the 60-member House at 46 (IANS, 2018d). The legislators' own statement linked their decision to three things: the Assembly's resolution of 15 December 2017, the people's desire for a settlement, and the agreement among civil society, tribal hohos and parties at Hotel Japfu on 29 January.

Further resignations followed. Two more legislators were reported to have resigned with effect from 31 January, and the Chief Electoral Officer's office reported on 1 February that no nominations had yet been filed ("Nagaland Election: No Nominations," 2018). On Monday 5 February, seven more legislators resigned: six independents, Levi Rengma, S. Chuba, Amenba Yaden, Y. M. Yollow, Toyang Changkong Chang and Picto Shohe, and G. Kaito Aye of the NPF; the Speaker accepted all of them and declared the

seats vacant ("Eight More Legislators," 2018). A cumulative figure published that week put the number of resignations at twenty-five, seventeen from the NPF and eight independents, reducing the effective strength of the House to thirty-four ("Seven More MLAs Resign," 2018). The arithmetic requires a brief explanation. Sixty members less twenty-five resignations gives thirty-five, but the same report noted that one seat had already fallen vacant after the death of a legislator in December 2017, which accounts for the figure of thirty-four.

How should these resignations be interpreted? They were certainly a costly signal in form. Legislators gave up seats, and some left their party. But the record of what happened next suggests that for several of them the resignation was a positional move rather than a withdrawal from electoral politics. When the new Rio ministry was sworn in on 8 March 2018, three of the ten who had resigned on 30 January appeared in the cabinet: S. Pangnyu Phom as a BJP minister, and Neiba Kronu and C. M. Chang for the NDPP (IANS, 2018b; "Nagaland CM Allocates Portfolios," 2018). They had therefore returned to the House within six weeks under a different label. The resignations signalled the depth of public feeling, but they did not keep the signatories out of the election once the BJP and its allies decided to contest.

Election for Solution: The BJP's Counter-Narrative

The slogan that confronted "solution before election" was "election for solution". Its main architect was the BJP's National General Secretary and North-East in-charge, Ram Madhav. His argument, repeated through January 2018, rested on a theory of implementation. The peace process between the Government of India and the NSCN-IM had progressed to a great extent, he said, and an agreement, once reached, would need to be implemented in the state, which could be done effectively only under a government in tune with the Centre and under the leadership of the present Prime Minister (Longkumer, A., 2018; "Naga Issue: 5 Years On," 2022). The Union Minister of State for Home Affairs and the party's election in-charge for Nagaland, Kiren Rijiju, added a constitutional argument: the Centre fully understood the sentiments behind the call, but an election boycott was not the solution, because the holding of timely elections was a constitutional process by which the government was bound. He also said that a peaceful election would facilitate the talks and strengthen the Centre's commitment, and urged Nagas to have faith in the Prime Minister (PTI, 2018a).

The two arguments were not identical, and it is useful to separate them. Madhav's argument was political. It said that a particular kind of government would speed a settlement. Rijiju's argument was legal. It said that, whatever the political merits, the Constitution required elections at the end of the Assembly's term. A postponement would have required either some extraordinary constitutional step or President's Rule, and the Centre pointed to the latter as the likely consequence if the term of the 12th Assembly expired without

elections (Hussain, 2018). Whether President's Rule would in fact have harmed the peace process was never tested, but the prospect of a Governor ruling in the name of the Union was precisely what several of the *Morung Express* respondents had feared. The logic of "election for solution" was also exposed to an obvious objection. The BJP had been a partner of the NPF in the state government since 2003, and the party in power at the Centre had also signed the Framework Agreement. If the alliance with the NPF had failed to deliver a settlement in fifteen years, then either the NPF was the obstacle, as the BJP implicitly claimed, or the claim that a change in the state government would speed the process was an assertion without evidence. Commentators in January 2018 raised the objection openly. The Aam Aadmi Party's Nagaland unit, for instance, accused the BJP of insincerity and said that Madhav's slogan showed a mindset that could not be trusted ("Nagaland AAP Ridicules BJP," 2018).

Within a day of the joint declaration the BJP's position collapsed. On 30 January the state unit backed out of the declaration, saying that its signatory had not been authorised to sign and that only the party's central leadership could decide on the boycott. It suspended Kheto Sema, a member of its state executive council, who had signed the declaration on its behalf, and its state president said that he had asked Sema to attend the meeting but had not authorised him to sign (PTI, 2018a). A second leader, Tsasepi Sangtam, was also reported to be suspended, though the state president questioned whether he should have been ("Signatory Not Authorised," 2018). The reversal followed a meeting on Monday 29 January between Rijiju, Madhav and the Chief Minister and NPF president in Kohima over a pre-poll alliance and seat sharing. On 1 February, three days after the declaration, the BJP announced that it would contest the elections "for the cause of solution" as scheduled ("BJP to Contest," 2018).

The Core Committee responded in strong terms. It said that the BJP could not speak with a forked tongue, that the party had suspended its own member for signing a declaration he was authorised to sign, and that this was a treacherous act which would not go unchallenged. It accused the party of playing a dirty game to grab power at the expense of Naga aspirations, which, it said, was exemplified by the slogan of "election for solution" (PTI, 2018b). It demanded that the suspension be revoked. The suspension of Sema and Sangtam was in fact quietly withdrawn in the second week of February, a point the state BJP restated when it was challenged on it in May 2018 ("State BJP Responds," 2018). A further point is that the other signatories had declared in advance what they would do if the BJP broke ranks. Several parties, including the NPF and the Congress, had cautioned that if the BJP contested, they would follow suit. This is exactly what happened. Once the party of government at the Centre joined the contest, the incentive to abstain disappeared for everyone else, and the boycott dissolved within days. The structure of the situation was that of a collective-action problem in which the most powerful actor had the strongest reason to defect. The Core Committee,

which had gathered civil society bodies and parties on the basis of moral commitment, had no sanction to enforce it.

Election and its Aftermath of 2018 General election

Polling was held on 27 February 2018, and the counting of votes took place on 3 March. The NPF emerged as the single largest party with twenty-six seats on the final count, though early reports gave it twenty-seven; the NDPP, the new party formed by Neiphiu Rio after he left the NPF, won eighteen; and the BJP won twelve, up from one in 2013 ("Nagaland Election Results," 2018; "Nagaland Goes for Elections," 2023). The NDPP-BJP alliance, which had contested forty and twenty seats respectively, formed the People's Democratic Alliance with the Janata Dal (United), the National People's Party and an independent, and Rio was sworn in as Chief Minister on 8 March 2018 with Y. Patton of the BJP as Deputy Chief Minister (IANS, 2018b). The BJP announced that it was ending its fifteen-year alliance with the NPF ("Nagaland CM Allocates Portfolios," 2018). It is tempting to say that the slogan "election for solution" was vindicated by the outcome, since the BJP's tally rose from one seat to twelve. A more cautious reading is that the electorate, unable to secure a settlement under the NPF and Congress governments that preceded, was willing to try a new combination. The *Deccan Herald*'s later retrospective made exactly this point, suggesting that the slogan may have prompted people to vote for the BJP. The slogan helped the BJP, but whether it was the cause of the BJP's gain, and whether the voters believed it, cannot be established from vote counts alone.

The record after the election is a record of waiting. In December 2018, almost a year after the Assembly resolution, the NPF legislature party, now in opposition, said that the silence over the settlement was deafening, and called on the Government of India to bring the issue to a conclusion before the 2019 Lok Sabha elections ("NPF Urges Govt," 2018). On the negotiating side, the Government of India's interlocutor, R. N. Ravi, declared in October 2019 that the NSCN-IM had adopted a procrastinating attitude, insisting on a separate flag and constitution, and the NNPGs, in turn, asked the legislators of Nagaland to clear their stand (PTI, 2019). In February 2021, in his address to the Assembly, the Governor announced that the political negotiations had concluded ("Negotiations Between Centre," 2021). No settlement followed. Later, a civil society memorandum would refer to "official negotiations being concluded in October, 2019" while pointing out that uncertainty still loomed large ("Naga Solution First," 2023).

Opposition-less Government as a form of the Slogan

Alongside the slogans themselves, a structural device has recurred: the opposition-less government. Its logic is that if all elected representatives sit together, electoral competition cannot be blamed for delaying the settlement, and Nagaland can present a united face to the Government of India. The idea has a long pedigree. In 2015, eight Congress legislators joined the NPF-led DAN government on the stated ground of strengthening the effort for a solution, only to be accused later by their former colleagues of using the Naga issue as an excuse; the political instability of that period, with legislators camped away from the capital, is still remembered ("KDCC Ridicules," 2021). In late 2017, as seen above, Zeliang pointed to an opposition-less government as the golden opportunity ("Zeliang Reiterates," 2017). The device returned in 2021. On 20 July 2021 the NPF, the only opposition party with elected members and then holding twenty-five seats, decided to join the NDPP-led PDA government in the name of the Naga political issue ("Nagaland to Have Opposition-Less," 2021). The Nagaland Congress called this an insult to the people and argued that an opposition-less government was an obstacle rather than a means to a solution, and that all sixty legislators should resign if they were sincere ("Forming Opposition-Less Govt," 2021). In August the parties signed a resolution creating a Nagaland United Government and appealed to all Naga political groups to work for unity and reconciliation ("Officially Opposition-Less," 2021). The arrangement was renamed the United Democratic Alliance by 18 September 2021, after some hesitation by the BJP over its share in the ministry ("Nagaland United Government," 2021; Rhakho, 2021). It is sometimes said that the NPF was left isolated ahead of the 2023 election; in fact the NPF had joined the government in 2021, and by 2022 most of its legislators had moved to the NDPP, leaving it with only four members in the House ("Alliance With BJP Stands," 2022). The NDPP and the BJP then forged a pre-poll alliance on a 40:20 seat-sharing basis for the 2023 election ("Nagaland Goes for Elections," 2023). The structure the 2021 pact had created therefore did not depend on a single party; it was a shared platform that carried the slogan from one election to the next. The device reached its logical end in October 2025, when the NDPP formally merged with the NPF. At its general convention on 18 October the NDPP resolved to merge, and the NPF's convention three days later endorsed the step, with Rio elected leader of the NPF legislature party and, on 21 October, president of the enlarged party ("What the NDPP-NPF Merger Means," 2025). The Nagaland Legislative Assembly notified the merger of thirty-one NDPP members with the NPF effective 18 October ("Nagaland Assembly Notifies," 2025). The NPF had already formally joined the PDA government on 14 October after weeks of overtures ("Political Re-alignment," 2025). One commentator described the result as a state with no opposition and warned that policy-making, deprived of debate, becomes the first casualty ("Old Wine, Old Bottle," 2025). The point is substantial. The opposition-less government answers the charge that electoral

competition delays a settlement, but it removes the institution that could ask why the settlement has still not come.

The 2023 Election: "Solution First, Not Assembly Election"

By the end of 2022 the slogans had lost much of their force. A year-end review in *The Sentinel* observed that five years after the BJP's campaign the call for "election for solution" still remained vague ("Naga Issue: 5 Years On," 2022). Pre-election reporting quoted Chief Minister Rio as saying that the state remained backward because of the unresolved political issue, and that even a final settlement would not bring real peace unless the Nagas could act as one people (Talukdar, 2023). The BJP's state president, speaking in August 2022, defended his party, saying that it could not be blamed if the settlement had not come and asking whether Nagas were inclusive enough to accept one ("BJP Can't Be Blamed," 2022).

Civil society returned to the older slogan. On 6 January 2023, when Union Home Minister Amit Shah visited Nagaland, the Nagaland People's Action Committee (NPAC) held a rally demanding "Naga solution first, not assembly election", and public organisations submitted a joint representation to the Home Minister. They said that twenty-six years of negotiations had taken an immense toll on the life and economy of the people and that uncertainty loomed even though the official negotiations had been concluded in October 2019. They asked the Government of India to decide whether the negotiations should be brought to a logical conclusion or declared a fiasco, since indecision benefited no party ("Naga Solution First," 2023). The representation was signed by leaders of the NPAC, the Nagaland GB Federation, ACAUT, the Central Nagaland Tribes Council, the Senior Citizens Association Nagaland, the Ex-Parliamentarians' Association, the Confederation of Nagaland Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Nagaland Tribes Council, among others. The organisations' choice to demonstrate on the airport road, with banners welcoming the Home Minister even as they demanded a solution, reflected the dual character of the exercise: it was a protest, but also an appeal.

Politicians, notably from opposition parties, took up the theme. A senior Congress leader, K. Therie, said that twenty-six years of negotiation were enough, that it was the Government of India that had initiated the talks and should therefore be able to close them, and that if the Government lacked the political will to deliver, it should call off the talks. His summary was that the solution must come before the election. A parallel demand, reported on 7 January 2023, was that the sixty legislators resign to clear the way for a final agreement; Therie argued that since the NNPGs had already signed the Agreed Position in 2017, the Centre should not wait for further negotiations (Karmakar, 2023). The Congress leader Shashi Tharoor said that a solution was long overdue and that Nagas deserved better than the deception and inefficiency that had

marked the handling of the matter since 2015 ("Naga Political Issue," 2023). A Janata Dal (United) Rajya Sabha member, Anil Hegde, argued that a solution should come early so that the polls could be held on schedule, and rejected the call by a regional party for President's Rule as inappropriate ("Naga Solution Should Come Fast," 2023). The Deputy Chief Minister was quoted as saying that the internal obstacle was the splintering of the Naga political movement, a point he would repeat in 2024 and 2025 (IANS, 2024).

One of the most striking features of the 2023 campaign was the position of the ruling alliance. The BJP's manifesto for the 2023 election made no promise about finding a solution to the Naga conflict, even though in 2018 it had adopted the slogan "election for solution". Congress leader Jairam Ramesh seized on this and said that, with no solution in five years, the only thing the Prime Minister could offer was a slogan of "elections for confusion" ("Nagaland Goes for Elections," 2023). The manifesto instead promised a special package for the eastern districts, where the Eastern Nagaland People's Organisation (ENPO) had called a boycott in support of its demand for a separate state; the boycott call was withdrawn after the Centre intervened.

Polling was held on 27 February 2023, in fifty-nine of the sixty seats. The NDPP and BJP, contesting on the 40:20 formula, won twenty-five and twelve seats respectively and returned to power for a second consecutive term ("NDPP-BJP Govt to Take Oath," 2023). Nagaland, once again, had a government with virtually no opposition. The sequence of 2018 was repeated in a different form: a campaign slogan for a settlement, a collective response from civil society, and an election in which the incumbent alliance retained power.

Analysis: Why the Slogans Return and What they Reveal

Why have the same two slogans returned in 1998, 1999, 2018 and 2023? The record set out above suggests four structural reasons. The first is that elections are the moment of maximum leverage. Between elections, the Government of India has little reason to hurry; at election time, the state's political class and civil society can appeal to the fact that a vote is coming, and parties at the Centre have an interest in a smooth outcome. The second is that a settlement is a public good that nobody owns. Everyone is for it, and so the slogan is cheap to adopt and no actor can easily be held to account for failing to deliver it. The third reason is the asymmetry between the actors. The Government of India decides whether elections are held, and it has a constitutional ground for holding them on time. The Nagas, by contrast, are divided across tribal bodies, churches, parties and a growing number of armed or formerly armed groups, and the Core Committee had moral authority but no sanction. The collapse of the 2018 boycott within days of its announcement is the clearest illustration. Once the BJP defected, others followed, exactly as they had said

they would. The fourth reason is that the two negotiating tracks, with the NSCN-IM under the Framework Agreement and with the NNPGs under the Agreed Position, have made it harder to say which agreement a "solution" would be based on. Each slogan could be read as supporting one track against the other, and a slogan that can be read in two ways is easy to adopt and easy to abandon.

Conclusion

The stakes are not only political. The Deputy Chief Minister has linked the fragmentation of the movement into some twenty-eight groups with fragmented governance, illegal taxation and extortion, which make it harder for the Naga people to pursue sustainable activity (IANS, 2024). The Chief Minister has asked publicly whether the state needs a ceasefire at all, questioning whether the groups had been mandated to impose punishments in matters of illegal taxation ("Peace? What Peace?" 2024). These remarks come from the government side and should be read as such, but they show that frustration with the stalemate is spilling into a debate about the legitimacy of the groups themselves. Naga history includes periods when internal rivalries turned violent, and the greatest risk of prolonged delay is that political frustration may harden into confrontation among Nagas themselves. A settlement that arrives late, after a further generation has waited, may find fewer people able to accept it. The 2018 demand depended on a negotiation in which one party could not be bound. The second is that the slogan constrains actors only if there is a mechanism of enforcement. The resignations of January 2018 were such a mechanism in form, but three of the ten who resigned on 30 January were back in the ministry within six weeks, which shows that the cost of the pledge had been low. The third is that transparency is not a luxury. A call for "solution" that cannot describe the solution will always be vulnerable to an alternative slogan that offers a plausible path, even if the path is no more than a promise. The history of "solution before election" and "election for solution" is a history of two promises that the political process has not kept. The first promise was that a united refusal to contest elections would persuade the Government of India to settle the Naga question. It gathered the Assembly, the churches, tribal hohos, civil society and eleven parties behind it, and it unravelled within a day of its most public expression. The second promise was that a fresh election and a government in step with the Centre would deliver the settlement faster. The government was formed, and the election was followed by waiting. By October 2026 it had been more than twenty-nine years since the ceasefire of 1997, more than eleven years since the Framework Agreement of 2015, and almost nine years since the Assembly resolution of December 2017.

Neither slogan was wrong in what it asked for, and neither was reliable as a method. Elections neither cause nor prevent a settlement. What decides the outcome are the choices made by the negotiating parties on the

issues that remain open, including the flag, the constitution and the integration of Naga-inhabited areas, and the willingness of the Government of India to make its commitments publicly. The agenda for the next phase is therefore clear, even if it is difficult. In Ezung's formulation, the Government of India has to show the political will to turn the understandings reached in the negotiations into a final settlement, and the new interlocutor and the proposed Union Ministers' role are a test of that will. Naga political organisations have to put the common interest above factional considerations. Civil society has to create space for dialogue without becoming an instrument of any faction. And the public has to demand accountability without allowing frustration to turn to hatred or violence (Ezung, 2026b). Above all, the process needs the kind of transparency that would allow the public to say whether a settlement is acceptable. The campaigns of 2018 and 2023 asked Nagas to rally behind a slogan about the timing of an election. The next generation, which has grown up under the ceasefire and is now setting deadlines of its own, is asking for something more substantial: a settlement that is honourable, inclusive and lasting, and a clear account of how it was reached.

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