

# The 2016 Assam Assembly Elections: Political manoeuvres behind the spotlight

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*Ahead of Assam's Legislative Assembly Elections, **Pranav Gupta** assesses how recent political developments in the North Eastern state could affect the electoral fortunes of the key players. He writes the while the current trends indicate that the BJP will emerge as the single largest party in the state, things could easily change as the election draws closer.*



There is little doubt that the upcoming assembly election in Assam shall be incumbent Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi's toughest electoral test since taking power in 2001. The Congress party is likely to face a stiff challenge from the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) which seeks to form a government in the state for the first time. With most parties ruling out formal pre-poll alliances, the election could be a multi polar contest with the two national parties (including their allies), the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and the Badruddin Ajmal's AIUDF.

Until the 2014 Lok Sabha election, the BJP had been a marginal player in the state. It had contested many elections as a junior partner in an alliance with the AGP, and its best performance in Assam had come in the 2006 Assembly election when it had a vote share of 12 percent and won 10 assembly seats. The party only has 5 seats in the outgoing assembly. In the 2014 Lok Sabha Election, the BJP made significant gains in Assam, winning a vote share of 36.5 percent and half of the 14 Lok Sabha seats. Furthermore, it led on 69 out of the state's 126 segments. The incumbent Congress party which has more than 70 members in the current assembly received 29.6 percent of the votes and led on only 23 assembly segments.

**Table 1: 2014 Lok Sabha Election in Assam**

| Party    | Vote Share (In Percent) | Lok Sabha Seats | Assembly Segment Leads |
|----------|-------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| Congress | 29.6                    | 3               | 23                     |
| BJP      | 36.5                    | 7               | 69                     |
| AIUDF    | 14.8                    | 3               | 24                     |
| AGP      | 3.8                     | 0               | 0                      |
| BPF      | 2.2                     | 0               | 1                      |

Source: Election Commission of India

Over the last year, the BJP has also performed remarkably well in local elections in the state. Last year, it won as many as 38 out of the 74 municipal boards and town committees that had gone for polling. The AGP, once the principal regional force in the state, has now been reduced to a minor player. It got less than 4 percent votes in Lok Sabha election and did not lead in a single assembly segment. The AIUDF, on the other hand, improved on its 2011 performance and received just under 15 percent of the votes.

The Grand Alliance's [emphatic victory](#) over the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance in Bihar led to an attempt to deploy similar tactics in Assam. Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar himself was trying for a pre-poll arrangement between the non-BJP parties and a united front. But negotiations between the three parties – Congress, AIUDF and the AGP – soon fell apart. Speculation over a tie up between the AIUDF and the Congress ended as AIUDF president Ajmal ruled it out in a [recent interview to the Hindu](#). But even an informal arrangement between the two parties, which he claims is likely, could help to consolidate minority votes.

Over the last few years there have been four parallel developments in Assam politics which will influence the verdict of this election. First, the last year has seen an escalation of infighting in the Congress's Assam unit, to the extent that senior leader and former state minister Hemanta Biswa Sarma left the party. Sarma had previously been a strategist for Tarun Gogoi but turned against him and even tried to force a change of leadership. Last year, he approached the central leadership for replacing Gogoi and claimed to have support from more than 20 Congress MLAs. Before the conflict could be resolved, Sarma joined the BJP. Soon after this, [9 sitting MLAs of the Congress](#) considered to be close to him crossed over to the BJP. Their crossover has definitely impacted the organisational strength of the Congress party and hampered their chances on a few seats.

Second, the steady decline of the AGP seems to have directly benefitted the BJP and has contributed to its rise in the state. The BJP has attracted the AGP's core supporters (Assamese-speaking Hindus) and now sees itself as the primary alternative to the Congress in the state. For some years now, the party has been aggressively pushing the issue of illegal migration, the central focus of AGP's politics. Over the last two years [many former state ministers and prominent leaders from the AGP](#) like Padma Hazarika, Chandra Mohan Patowari, Atul Bora, Jagadish Bhuyan and Hirendra Nath Goswami have also crossed over to the BJP. In fact, the party's Chief Ministerial candidate Sarbananda Sonowal is a former AGP MP and has been the President of All Assam Students Union for close to seven years. This crossover of prominent leaders can be connected to the AGP's sharp electoral decline, which has been quite sudden given that even in the 2011 Assembly election it had a double digit vote share in the state. The party which ruled in the state until 2001 is currently not even among the top three parties in the state, as it is trailing more than more than 10 percentage points behind the third placed AIUDF.



23 April 2009: Two muslim women voters showing their marks on finger after voting at Samaguri in Nagaon district of Assam.  
Image credit: [Diganta Talukdar](#) CC BY 2.0

Third, the emergence of the AIUDF as a strong political force has altered the state's political playing field. There has been a sharp rise in support for the AIUDF in Assam over the course of less than a decade, although its support base is highly concentrated in districts like Hailakandi, Karimganj, Dhubri and Barpeta which have a high Muslim population. The AIUDF's increasing popularity could therefore be another factor behind the emergence of the BJP as Muslim votes are now divided: Assamese speaking Muslims tend to support the Congress while the AIUDF dominates among Bengali speakers. The BJP seems to be hopeful about a division of Muslim votes and a counter polarisation of Hindus on the immigration issue. However, in a [recent interview to the Hindu](#), Ajmal indicated that the party would not be contesting on many seats in the Upper Assam Valley. The strategy is to avoid a split in minority votes which could directly benefit the BJP. This arrangement would leave enough room for a possible post poll alliance between Congress and AIUDF.

**Table 2: Divergent trends in support for AGP and AIUDF in Assam**

|       | 2001<br>Vidhan<br>Sabha | 2004 Lok<br>Sabha | 2006<br>Vidhan<br>Sabha | 2009<br>Lok<br>Sabha | 2011<br>Vidhan<br>Sabha | 2014<br>Lok<br>Sabha |
|-------|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| AGP   | 20                      | 20                | 20.4                    | 14.6                 | 16.3                    | 3.8                  |
| AIUDF | -                       | -                 | 9                       | 16.1                 | 12.6                    | 14.8                 |

*Source: Election Commission of India*

Fourth, after the Lok Sabha election, the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) decided to break its 13 year old alliance with the Congress in favour of the BJP. The BPF continues to have considerable support among the Bodos as demonstrated by its emergence as the single largest party in the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) elections in early 2015. The BJP's prospects of getting a majority have been bolstered by its success in cementing a pre-poll alliance with the BPF, as the concentrated support base of the smaller party means that it is likely to be valuable in terms of seats (it won 12 seats in the 2011 Vidhan Sabha election).

As Tarun Gogoi faces a backlash against his 15 year incumbency, the BJP looks to enter Eastern India through Assam after a failed attempt in Bihar. Unlike Nitish Kumar, who was immensely popular, Gogoi's popularity has faded considerably over the years. The BJP has broken away from recent practice and has actually projected a CM candidate, giving supporters an individual to organise around. The party has also been focusing more on local and state specific issues rather than relying merely on national popularity, a tactic which failed in Bihar.

Overall, while the current trends indicate that the BJP could easily emerge as the single largest party in the state, things could change as the election draws closer. An emerging image of a confrontational government, constantly embroiled in disputes, might do more harm than good for the BJP especially as it tries to expand beyond its traditional territory.

*This post forms part of a series of posts on the 2016 Legislative Assembly Elections. Click [here](#) to read more.*

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

### **About the Author**

**Pranav Gupta** is currently pursuing MSc. in Political Science and Political Economy at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Previously he worked as a Research Assistant on the Lokniti Programme at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in New Delhi.

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