

Where Modi's win isn't what it seems

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NEW DELHI With Narendra Modi re-elected as India's prime minister with an intimidating majority, the fact that his Bharatiya Janata Party also triumphed in the far-flung northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, by the border with China, may seem incidental, like a foregone conclusion. It's not. And while liberals and secularists throughout India despair that Hindu nationalism and fear-mongering have prevailed again, the B.J.P.'s victory in this distant corner of the country doesn't mean what it seems.

Arunachal Pradesh's name translates, officially, as the "land of the dawnlit mountains." Ever since the country took its present shape in 1947, the first light of each Indian day has fallen on an Arunachali mountain hamlet called Dong. This is the kind of sentimental factoid that appeals to bureaucrats in New Delhi, where the sun rises a good hour and 20 minutes later. And that's probably why the six-week process of India's 17th general elections, which concluded last week, began in a quixotic paramilitary outpost of Arunachal Pradesh: at the Animal Training School of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police Force, where a company of horsemen from across the country cast the very first ballots.

Although the state has only two seats out of 543 in the national Parliament's lower house, the Lok Sabha, elections here are a reliable source of journalistic tchotchkes: the arrival of an electronic voting machine, in the snow, at the "highest polling station" in Luguthang village or the somewhat overcooked tale of intrepid election officials braving jungles and trekking "six kilometers over uneven terrain" to set up a polling booth for a single desultory voter.

It's difficult not to exoticize Arunachali politics. Ten years, or two elections, ago, I was in the small mountain town of Hawai (not too far from Dong), walking up the serpentine driveway of Kalikho Pul, a member of the state's Legislative Assembly. The cemented driveway was long and steep, and every 20 feet, on either side, stood a wooden pole topped with the blackened skull of a massive "mithun," or bison (*bos frontalis*). I must have passed dozens of skulls before I got to the house on the hill.

My meeting with Mr. Pul was uneventful, but the macabre approach to his home said a lot about the colorfully odd marriage of convenience between the tribal cultures of this mountainous frontier and the political economy of the Indian republic. As totems of wealth and power, Mr. Pul's installation had all the showiness of a typical Indian politician. But the skulls were also an intimidating assertion of local identity. Public displays of bovine sacrifice would be unthinkable — even life-threatening — in much of this country: Mobs of Hindus known as "cow vigilantes" have murdered Muslims in recent years, accusing them of slaughtering sacred cattle. Yet here Mr. Pul's trophies represented



STR/EPA, VIA SHUTTERSTOCK

Photographs from a rally for Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the town of Along, in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, India, in March.

respect for old gods and old ways of sharing the fat of the land.

Arunachal Pradesh's exceptionalism reflects this archaic plenitude, an almost unsettling natural abundance of land and water and forests. The state has the lowest population density of any in India: 17 people per square kilometer compared with some 1,100 per square kilometer for Bihar, the country's densest state. And a majority of its 1.4 million inhabitants are recorded as members of "scheduled tribes" who enjoy certain inalienable and exclusive privileges.

Indian citizens who are not native tribals cannot own land in Arunachal Pradesh or be elected to the local legislature — except to the one seat out of 60 that is kept "unreserved." Arunachal Pradesh is also a "Special Category State," and as such receives major financial grants and subsidies from the central government. That largess has intermittently fueled the highest economic growth rates in the country: The gross state domestic product grew at 16.5 percent in 2015-6. This despite an overwhelmingly rural economy where distinctly pre-capitalist practices, such as nomadic slash-and-burn agriculture, are still widespread. Not to mention ceremonial mithun sacrifice.

But Arunachal Pradesh has been cosseted by the Indian government mostly for an entirely modern reason: fear of China. The People's Liberation Army briefly occupied the area during a humiliating border war in 1962, and China still maintains a threatening claim to what it likes to call "Southern Tibet." The Indian government's fear is probably compounded by some guilt since it took the Chinese threat for the Indian state to really make its administrative presence felt here. It wasn't until

1977 — when the rest of the country was voting in the sixth national elections — that Arunachalis first got to choose their own representatives, for both the state and national parliaments.

They have been making up for that late start: Arunachal Pradesh's electoral politics are flamboyant even by India's carnivalesque standards. During the last, five-year, electoral term, the state has had seven administrations.

The former governor Jyoti Prasad Rajkhowa, who oversaw much of this political churn, earned his own place in local ignominy by describing a mithun sacrifice at the gates of his residence as "cow slaughter" and evidence of a "breakdown of law and order," bringing about the dismissal of a first chief minister, Nabam Tuki. With that, though, Mr. Rajkhowa turned out to only be clearing the way to the state's top post for Mr. Pul — the politician whose mithun-festooned driveway I had visited in 2009. But the farce ended in tragedy after Mr. Pul (then with the People's Party of Arunachal) was removed from office by the Supreme Court, which reinstated Mr. Tuki (of the Congress). Apparently bankrupt and facing eviction, Mr. Pul hanged himself in his official residence in August 2016, leaving a 60-page suicide note titled "My Thoughts."

The current chief minister, Pema Khandu, has been in power since July 2016 and in that time has belonged to three different parties. He "migrated," as journalists in Arunachal Pradesh put it, from the Congress to the People's Party of Arunachal to the B.J.P., his current home. Forty-one of the 42 representatives elected on the Congress party's ticket in 2014 also eventually defected to the B.J.P. — after a stop first at the P.P.A. "Party hardly matters!" my Arunachali friends explain cheerfully.

For a North Indian like me, accustomed to the blood feud between the Congress and the B.J.P., and the polemics of secularism versus Hindu supremacy, the Arunachali politician's ability to change allegiance so lightly and so frequently seems both disconcerting and comforting.

On a brief visit to the state in April, during election season, I encountered the customary atmosphere of party-hopping and pelf. There were entertaining scandals ranging from a widely circulated sex tape allegedly featuring Tapir Gao, the B.J.P.'s local party presi-

entourage. But the tale of the moment, for me, was about the three Gamlin siblings. (A fourth, Jarbom, who had briefly been a Congress chief minister, passed away in 2014.)

Until recently, the Gamlin sister, Jarjum, served the Congress party as its state general secretary, while her brother Jarpum was the B.J.P.'s state general secretary. Their brother Jarkar was minister of tourism in Mr. Khandu's (B.J.P.) government. But after being disappointed by their respective parties' allocation of constituencies for the elections this year, Jarjum decided to run for the Lok Sabha with the Janata Dal (Secular) party, a local rival but national ally of the Congress, and Jarpum, for a State Assembly seat with the National People's Party, a local rival but national ally of the B.J.P. Jarkar was selected as an N.P.P. candidate but soon retired from the fray.

No one other than me seemed to find this remarkable, an insouciance that brought to mind the philosopher Slavoj Žižek: "The ruling ideology is not meant to be taken seriously or literally." I wondered whether the combination of irony, humor and sentimentality that colors Arunachali politics was cynically post-ideological or tribally pre-ideological. Or both. As the outcome of the election neared, the local political drama intensified and darkened.

On May 20, some 500 masked men intercepted a team of election officials in Kurung Kumey district and absconded with their electronic voting machines. The officials had come to oversee a make-up election: A previous effort had been derailed when a hanging bridge was "deliberately snapped by miscreants," according to one regional news outlet, stranding the election officer.

On May 21, two days before results were announced, the State Assembly representative Tirong Aboh and 10 other people were killed in an ambush by, it is believed, local insurgents.

In the end, the B.J.P. secured both of Arunachal Pradesh's seats in the Lok Sabha as well as, provisional results suggest, a comfortable majority in the State Assembly. Both Jarpum and Jarjum lost their races. Kiren Rijiju, a sitting member of Parliament, has held on to his seat. The minister of state for home affairs in Mr. Modi's cabinet, Mr. Rijiju is perhaps best known for telling off a colleague who said beefeaters should go to Pakistan: "I eat beef. I'm from Arunachal. Can somebody stop me?" Not exactly standard talk for a B.J.P. man. Then again, he used to be with Congress. Party, as they say, hardly matters.

