

Should India have simultaneous elections?

Photo for representational purpose. | Photo Credit: [AP](#)

Free and fair elections are integral to democracy. Continuity, consistency and governance are also integral to democracy. And democracy, to my mind, also implies good governance. To achieve this, elections are held. But if the means (elections) become the goal, this will not serve democracy well. Holding simultaneous elections will ensure consistency, continuity and governance, and elections then will only be the means to achieve this and not an end in themselves.

Implementing simultaneous polls would require a substantial shift from the status quo and would involve amendments to the Constitution and election-related laws. However, does that mean we stop this much-needed reform? Certainly not.

Strengthening democracy

Earlier, tax collections were separate for the Centre and the States. We introduced the Goods and Services Tax Council through a constitutional amendment and changed the pattern of taxation between the Centre and the States. If the purpose of amendments is to strengthen democracy and governance, they should be brought in. The Constitution has been amended in the past to achieve this goal.

Let us look at the stumbling blocks in the current system of holding elections. In terms of governance and implementation of development programmes, enforcing the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) is detrimental. If we are preoccupied with local body elections and Assembly elections throughout the year, where is the time for developmental work? A system must therefore be evolved to give a period of five years to the incumbent government to focus on governance. Five years mean five years of stable governance. If we are occupied with Vidhan Sabha elections, Zilla Parishad elections, Panchayat elections, and municipal elections throughout the year, where is the time for developmental work, with the MCC kicking in every time these elections are held?

Curbing corruption

Simultaneous elections can also be a means to curb corruption and build a more conducive socio-economic ecosystem. While the Election Commission's efforts to curb illicit finances are laudable, elections continue to be a conduit for black money and corruption. Frequent electoral cycles disrupt normal public life by impacting the delivery of essential services. They also provide opportunities to unscrupulous elements to create tears in the social fabric of society.

Then there is the administrative machinery to be taken into account and the expenses incurred. Frequent elections pose a huge burden on resources — both manpower and financial. Security personnel and government officials are effectively put on election duty for many months in a year. A case in point is the recurring engagement of teachers for election duty, as a result of which students suffer. The cost of elections runs into thousands of crores and has been rising steadily. The opportunity cost of these lost resources is too high to ignore as India is a resource-constrained developing economy. Simultaneous elections can bring the much-needed operational efficiency in this exercise.

Holding simultaneous elections is not merely about elections; it is about stable governance. Such a sensitive and far-reaching reform requires unanimous support from all political parties. Parliamentary Committee reports have proposed implementable roadmaps for simultaneous

elections.

As told to Anuradha Raman. Bhupender Yadav is a BJP member of the Rajya Sabha and national general secretary of the BJP

The so-called simultaneous elections to Parliament and State legislatures till 1967 were less by design and more due to the stable majorities thrown up by the electorate then. When that neatness was lost in the 1960s and later in the 1990s, it owed much to the dismantling of the dominant party system. Since then, coalition politics has brought stability, added to the vibrancy of democracy, and ensured an active role for State parties and greater power-sharing among parties. Of course, the electoral cycle became staggered and has remained so over the past 50 years. Then comes the proposal to convert elections into a disciplined affair with a grand idea of simultaneous elections.

The question of burden

Grand proposals are not necessarily welcome proposals. Democratic politics has a tendency to be chaotic, but there are limits to the corrective abilities of formal legal provisions. On paper, it looks like a nice idea to streamline the staggered electoral cycle where there is an average of more than five State elections every year. A specious argument is made that such an electoral cycle overburdens parties and the electoral machinery.

Even if elections were to take place simultaneously, parties contesting in only one State would anyway be similarly burdened. So, the complaint probably takes too much care of only 'national' parties. And as for the electoral machinery, why do we have a lengthy schedule? This is necessitated by the logistic requirement of movement of the requisite security forces. That constraint would remain even if simultaneous elections were held. So, what is the benefit of holding all elections simultaneously?

Then it is argued that a staggered cycle puts policymakers at a disadvantage because of the constraints of the code of conduct. This problem emerges mainly because parties and governments fail to arrive at a consensus on the scope of the code of conduct and the meaning of what constitutes policymaking and what constitutes distribution of patronage. So, where exactly are the serious disadvantages of staggered elections?

The power of the legislature

If we enforce the system of simultaneous elections, we would need to curtail the legislature's power to unseat a government. It would be mandatory to have a 'constructive vote of no-confidence'. This means that no opposition party would be able to table a no-confidence motion unless it has the capacity to also simultaneously form a new government. The fundamental instrument of the no-confidence motion would thus be effectively taken away. Instead, the life of the legislature would depend on the cycle of a fixed term.

Penalising States

Both the purpose and the procedure imply a disdain for the parliamentary system and the federal arrangement. Because, as is currently proposed, when everything else fails, democratic government would be sacrificed at the altar of simultaneous elections, and at the State level at least, the President would carry on the government for the remainder of the period or the new legislature shall have only a truncated term instead of the full five-year term. So, States would be penalised if the legislature is unable to produce a majority government.

Such far-reaching changes would bring back memories of the 42nd Amendment Act. And like that amendment, this one too would undoubtedly seek to tinker with many basic principles that the Constitution upholds. So, a grand design indeed, albeit with an uncertain outcome and dubious intent.

Suhas Palshikar is co-director of the Lokniti programme at Centre for the Study of Developing Societies and chief editor of Studies in Indian Politics

I have always maintained that this is certainly desirable but not feasible. For it to be feasible, we need a political consensus, which is not easy to achieve. There has to be a political willingness to discuss this issue before we talk of a consensus. It is good that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is talking about a consensus instead of forcibly pushing this plan through. His reasons for advocating simultaneous elections are exorbitant expenditure and the repeated dislocation of administrative machinery on election duty throughout the year. I'd like to add two more factors. One, elections have unfortunately become the root cause of corruption. When we are in constant election mode, we are also in permanent corruption mode. When crores are spent in elections, crores have to be collected by hook or by crook. The way out is to cut the role played by money in elections, and this can come about only through a ceiling on political party expenditure. The other aspect is the state funding of elections. Besides, elections have become too divisive. Communal riots and caste disturbances are deliberately created around election time to ensure polarisation of communities for electoral gains.

Spirit of federalism

Arguments against the holding of simultaneous elections are equally convincing: this goes against the spirit of the Constitution and against the spirit of federalism. Besides, there is a practical difficulty. Suppose simultaneous elections are held but the government loses its majority in the Lok Sabha, as Atal Bihari Vajpayee did within 13 days in power, will we then hold a new set of elections in all the 29 States too, even if they have an absolute majority? Why should the States suffer for the electoral decisions taken at the Centre? Also, national and local issues are different, and holding simultaneous elections is likely to blur judgment. The poor love elections because the vote is the only power they have. Otherwise, they don't get to see their legislators after the elections for the next five years. Repeated elections keep legislators on their toes and increases accountability.

But even if simultaneous elections are called for, the Constitution has provided for a five-year term. In order to bring about uniform elections, we have to increase or decrease the term of Parliament and State Assemblies. Who would want the term of the House to be reduced? The ruling dispensation would not like a reduction from five years and the Opposition would not like an extension beyond five years. That's why a consensus is an uphill task.

Casting simultaneous votes

As regards logistical and administrative feasibility, simultaneous elections would be most convenient for the Election Commission. Since voters, polling personnel, and polling booths are all the same, it does not matter if the voter is casting her vote for one election or two or three. I have seen voters casting seven votes at the same time in elections in Kenya for seven different posts.

Feasibility aside, there is apprehension that whenever there is a majoritarian government at the Centre, any anti-incumbency in the States is likely to get neutralised if simultaneous elections are held. The Election Commission has suggested ways to cut short the duration of polls by making available the Central Armed Police Forces — five times more than what is provided to the Commission now. All these factors have to be thought through before a consensus is worked out.

As told to Anuradha Raman. S.Y. Quraishi is a former Chief Election Commissioner

Marriage is a civil contract — adultery or divorce should have only civil consequences

END

Downloaded from crackIAS.com

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

crackIAS.com