

NEW CHALLENGES EMERGE FOR PARTIES

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Elections, Election Commission and the Electoral Reforms in India Incl. Political Parties

Thing of the past: Large rallies where different parties crossed paths are unlikely in the near future. File photo

As elections for five Assemblies start off with a ban on physical campaigning till January 15 in view of the COVID-19 pandemic, Election Commission officials said on Saturday the rules regarding the conduct and expenditure of conventional campaign would be applicable to virtual campaign events.

Announcing the poll schedule for Goa, Manipur, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, Chief Election Commissioner Sushil Chandra on Saturday also encouraged candidates to adopt the virtual mode of campaigning as much as possible. The EC banned physical rallies and roadshows till January 15, when it planned to review the situation before taking a call on the rest of the campaign period.

The revised guidelines for elections released by the EC put a complete ban on *nukkad* [street corner] *sabhas* or meetings on public roads, roundabouts, public streets and corners.

A top EC official said as candidates have to open an account and submit their expenditure details for physical events, they should do the same for online rallies or events. Similarly, the Model Code of Conduct, which bans certain kinds of speech and misuse of government machinery for electoral purposes, would be applicable.

The candidates would have to apply for clearance from the Media Certification and Monitoring Committees, which usually give pre-certification for advertisements, the official said. In fact, earlier this week, the EC announced that the expenditure limit for candidates had been increased from Rs. 28 lakh to Rs. 40 lakh. At the press conference, Mr. Chandra said one of the reasons for this was the increased expenditure on digital campaigning during the pandemic.

While the BJP had started digital rallies in the Bihar Assembly elections in 2020 during the pandemic, it remains to be seen how all political parties proceed under the new rules.

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