

AN IDEA WHOSE TIME MAY NOT HAVE COME

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

Not even a month after the world's largest elections in history were over, the debate around "one nation, one election" has been resurrected. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who had continued to flag the issue for the last five years, has now called for a meeting on the subject with leaders of other political parties.

The 2014 manifesto of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) read: "The BJP will seek, through consultation with other parties, to evolve a method of holding Assembly and Lok Sabha elections simultaneously. Apart from reducing election expenses for both political parties and Government, this will ensure certain stability for State Governments."

In an interview with a news channel in January 2018, the Prime Minister had rightly highlighted the demerits of the country being in constant election mode. "One election finishes, the second starts," he said. He argued that having simultaneous Parliament, Assembly, civic and Panchayat polls once every five years and completed within a month or so would save money, resources and manpower. This, he pointed out, happened on account of a large section of the security forces, bureaucracy and political machinery having to be mobilised for up to 200 days a year on account of electioneering.

The BJP's 2019 manifesto also mentions that simultaneous elections for Parliament, State Assemblies and local bodies to "ensure efficient utilisation of government resources and security forces and... effective policy planning". It goes on to say that the party "will try to build consensus on this issue with all parties". It is in this spirit of reform and consensus building that the Prime Minister has revived this debate, calling an all-party meeting for discussions on June 19.

The re-elected Chief Minister of Odisha, Naveen Patnaik, has already welcomed the idea, saying, on June 15, that frequent elections affect the development climate, and hence it is better to have simultaneous elections in the country.

The Law Commission had recommended simultaneous elections to Lok Sabha, Vidhan Sabha and the local bodies as far back as in 1999. The BJP's L.K. Advani also supported the idea back in 2010 in an eloquent blog post. The matter was examined by a Parliamentary Standing Committee in December 2015, and was also referred to the Election Commission of India (EC). Both supported it in principle.

The concerns raised are indeed genuine, and the idea is worth debating. First, it is becoming more and more difficult to contest elections. The 2019 general election was the most expensive on record; a whopping 60,000 crore was reportedly spent on the whole exercise. Given that there is no cap on the expenditure incurred by political parties, they spend obscene amounts of money in every election. It is argued that simultaneous elections would help reduce this cost.

Second, frequent elections hamper the normal functioning of the government and disrupt civic life. This happens because the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) comes into operation as soon as the EC announces the election dates. This means that the government cannot announce any new schemes during this period. This results in what is often referred to as a policy paralysis. The government cannot make any new appointments or transfer/ appoint officials. The entire government manpower is involved in the conduct of elections.

I would also like to add that elections are the time when communalism, casteism and corruption are at their peak. Frequent elections mean that there is no respite from these evils at all. This has directly resulted in the souring of the political discourse, something that was on full display during the 2019 general election.

From the point of view of EC, simultaneous elections make perfect sense because the voters for all three tiers are the same, polling booths are the same and staff/security is the same — the suggestion of “one nation, one election” seems logical.

The idea, however, has some hurdles. First, how will “one nation, one election” work in case of premature dissolution of the Lok Sabha, for instance, as happened in late 1990s when the House was dissolved long before its term of five years was over? In such an eventuality, would we also dissolve all State Assemblies? Similarly, what happens when one of the State Assemblies is dissolved? Will the entire country go to polls again? This sounds unworkable both in theory and in the practice of democracy.

Second, as for the implementation of schemes of the government during the MCC period, only the new schemes are stopped as these could be tantamount to enticing/bribing voters on the eve of elections. All ongoing programmes are unhindered. Even new announcements that are in urgent public interest can be made with the prior approval of the EC.

Additionally, frequent elections are not so bad for accountability after all. They ensure that the politicians have to show their faces to voters regularly. Creation of work opportunities at the grass-root level is another big upside. The most important consideration is undoubtedly the federal spirit, which, inter alia, requires that local and national issues are not mixed up.

Now, as the debate has been rekindled, wider deliberation on the need for a range of reforms must be considered. Till the idea achieves political consensus, there are two alternative suggestions to deal with the problems that arise due to frequent elections.

First, the problem of uncontrolled campaign expenditure can be remedied by introducing a cap on expenditure by political parties. State funding of political parties based on their poll performance also is a suggestion worth considering. Private and corporate fund collection may be banned.

Second, as I have suggested elsewhere, the poll duration can be reduced from two-three months to about 33 to 35 days if more Central armed police forces can be provided. The problems associated with a multi-phased election have been getting compounded, with more issues being added to the list with every election. Violence, social media-related transgressions and issues related to the enforcement of the MCC which are unavoidable in a staggered election will vanish if the election is conducted in a single day. All that needs to be done is to raise more battalions. This will also help in job creation.

To conclude, it is undeniable that simultaneous elections would be a far-reaching electoral reform. If it is to be implemented, there needs to be a solid political consensus, and an agenda of comprehensive electoral reforms should supplement it. The pros and cons need to be appropriately assessed and practical alternatives sincerely considered. It is good that the government continues to encourage a debate on the subject rather than forcibly pushing it through.

S.Y. Quraishi is a former Chief Election Commissioner of India and the author of ‘An Undocumented Wonder — the Making of the Great Indian Election’

Please enter a valid email address.

Join our online subscriber community

Experience an advertisement-free site with article recommendations tailored for you

Already a user? [Sign In](#)

To know more about Ad free news reading experience and subscription [Click Here](#)

or Please whitelist our website on your Adblocker

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

CrackIAS.com