

Defying the logic of democracy: on simultaneous polls

Intent on creating a unified India through the adoption of one language, one dominant religion, one culture, one nation, one tax, and now one poll, the Bharatiya Janata Party seeks nothing less than the renegotiation of the basic terms of the political contract that inaugurated democracy in the country.

Inherent problems

A great deal has been written and said on the advantages and disadvantages of simultaneous elections ever since Prime Minister Narendra Modi began to speak of this practice as a good thing. Commentators charge the government with institutionalising managed democracy and with double-speak. Instead of scheduling simultaneous elections to the Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat Assemblies in late 2017, the Election Commission held the Gujarat polls a month later in December, for obvious reasons. The argument that simultaneous elections will prevent corruption, and improve administrative efficiency has been dismissed as flimsy.

There is another objection to the proposal that should be, perhaps, taken seriously. The implications of holding simultaneous elections to the Parliament and State Assemblies run contrary to the spirit of democracy, as well as that of federalism. Admittedly, Mr. Modi does not want to touch the relationship between the Central and State governments. What he wants is clear and undisturbed five years of rule between elections, so that his projects of governance can be consolidated.

In other countries we have seen the rhetoric of governance replace the logic of democracy. We have arrived at the same juncture. In fact, we are already there since the time this government took over in 2014. Arguments that juxtapose governance and democracy simply overlook the fact that governance is about administration, democracy is about popular sovereignty. We expect governments to give us good governance, but not at the cost of democracy. In contemporary history, populist leaders have rallied people around the banner of good governance, but forgotten the D of democracy. We might need to remember the basics of the system.

Democratic concepts

Democracy is a protean concept, justified for many reasons, and some of these reasons are purely instrumental. Democracy, for instance, enables a peaceful transfer of power from one political elite to another. It is, relatively speaking, more economical than authoritarian governments, which spend an inordinate amount of money in suppressing dissent. And above all, democracy provides legitimacy and enables accumulation of power in the name of 'the people'. The idea that democracy is valuable because it secures a designated good, however, poses a dilemma. If tomorrow a benevolent despot provides these goods, is democracy dispensable?

Democrats will have to find reasons why democracy is a good in itself and not because it leads to desired outcomes. Arguably, democracy is a good because it initiates, fosters and sustains a conversation between the rulers and the ruled. Elections constitute definitive moments in this conversation. They (a) enable the selection of candidates who will speak for and to the citizens; and (b) allow citizens to hold representatives responsible. That is, elections ensure a necessary correlation between the interests of the citizens and the accountability of the ruling class.

In between elections, citizens can hold the rulers responsible for all acts of omission and commission through participation in movements, campaigns and other modes of representation in civil society. Citizens and their representatives thus engage in permanent conversations. Elections

facilitate and develop the conversation between citizens and representatives. Elections are not equivalent to democracy; they are a definitive component of the democracy project.

Unlike direct democracy, modern democracies are based upon the principle of representation. All elected representatives 'stand in' for their constituents in legislatures, but the responsibility of the ruling party is much more. It has to represent the interests of even those citizens who did not vote for it. If it fails to do so, and if the Opposition can muster the numbers in the legislature, it can vote the government out and provide an alternative government. Alternatively, the country can go to the polls to elect a new government. Under the proposed scheme, if the government fails to heed the mandate given by citizens, but the Opposition cannot offer an alternative government, and elections cannot be held before the stipulated time, the government will continue to rule, but illegitimately. This is the conundrum of simultaneous elections.

Accessible governments

Representative democracies are based upon two crucial preconditions. One of these preconditions is that citizens must be well-informed on affairs of the state, the region, the local, and the global, before they make choices that are reasonably intelligent. In large and unwieldy societies like India, citizens should be able to distinguish between national issues, for example foreign policy and defence, and local issues that affect their quotidian lives, lack of education and health, the pathetic state of roads and water bodies, provision of infrastructure, and ease of living one's life in relative autonomy from political intervention. The case for a federal form of government is constructed precisely on the need for decentralised power, decentralised finances, and accessible governments. Across the world the trend is towards regional autonomy. In India where this demand has acquired serious proportions in many parts of the country, any push towards the standardisation of elections will exacerbate the problem.

Two, citizenship lies at the heart of electoral democracy. Citizens are stake-holders in the political system — therefore, they have the right to participate in processes of decision-making that affect them individually and collectively. Participation in national and State elections expands the spaces of citizenship. Imagine the dismal political scenario if the timing of all elections is controlled. No periodic elections, no sound, no fury, no old and tired political agendas we attack, no new faces in politics, no stand-offs, no colour, no band, *baaja* and *baraat*. Indians will be deprived of the very things they love about elections: intense political theatre. When the curtain drops we the, otherwise, disempowered decide the fate of those very politicians who disregard us most of the time. This is the time to choose who we want to enter into a conversation with.

If citizens have a right to exercise control on the representative, or the political party of which she is a part, they should be given an opportunity to do so through frequent elections. There is nothing like the electoral arena to expose politicians and party agendas to popular judgment. This keeps the conversation on democracy going. It keeps up the pressure on the representative to deliver on promises. A fixed system of elections provides representative with a god-given chance to ignore the constituency for five years and come back only during the silly season.

Polls a good force

Finally, many and repeated elections are good for democracy for another reason. Democracy is not based upon faith in representatives, it is based on suspicion. That is why we feel the need to stalk and monitor our representatives. Suspicion, as Demosthenes, the Athenian statesman and orator (384-322 BCE) wrote, is the best protection against despots. We should have the opportunity of dismissing the very candidate we voted for in the previous election. We should be provided with the chance of vesting our confidence, provisionally, in another set of candidates. Political sociologists call this phenomenon the circulation of elites. We don't trust our

representatives. We subject them to reasoned scepticism. This is the best protection against managed democracy.

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