

A BETTER MODEL: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON A CATALOGUE OF ACTIONS BY THE ELECTION COMMISSION OF INDIA

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The Model Code of Conduct (MCC) that parties and governments are expected to follow during election campaigning is well-meaning, but not easy to enforce. The MCC is largely dependent on the cooperation of parties and governments and the vigilance of the Election Commission of India (ECI). Some of its clauses are declarations of intent, such as maintaining the “purity of the election process”. In recent days, the ECI has wielded the MCC against the [Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma](#) of the Bharatiya Janata Party, and its Delhi unit president; Congress leaders [Rahul Gandhi](#) and [Priyanka Gandhi](#); Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader and Delhi Chief Minister [Arvind Kejriwal](#), Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) supremo and Telangana Chief Minister [K. Chandrashekar Rao](#) and his son and cabinet colleague [K.T. Rama Rao](#) following alleged violations of various kinds. In a more consequential move, the [ECI has withdrawn its permission](#) for the Telangana government to credit cash to farmers under the Rythu Bandhu scheme ahead of voting on November 30. The ECI found statements made by State Finance Minister T. Harish Rao to be in violation of the MCC. But curiously, the Congress government in Karnataka has been served notice for issuing advertisements that might influence voters in Telangana. The Gandhis were served notices for using allegedly derogatory words against Prime Minister Narendra Modi based on the BJP complaints.

This catalogue of ECI actions might give an appearance of even-handedness, but issues that it did not address too require attention. Congress complaints against Mr. Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah, for charges comparable if not more serious than those against Opposition leaders, have been ignored. The ECI has not responded to a Congress complaint that the Enforcement Directorate tried to tilt the scale in Chhattisgarh by making a public accusation against Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel, in the midst of elections, that he had received kickbacks from a fugitive. The merits of this case apart, weaponisation of investigations by central or State agencies for political purposes during an election can be an unfair interference. It is doubtful that the ECI has proven itself up to the task and demonstrated its capacity to act fairly and objectively. In this context, a government move to legislate the supremacy of the executive in the appointment of the members of the ECI is worrisome. Under the proposed scheme, the ruling party at the Centre will solely control the composition of the ECI. That is not good news for free and fair elections in India.

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