

THE BALL IS BACK IN PARLIAMENT'S COURT ON CLEANING UP POLITICS

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The Supreme Court has stuck to the letter of the law in putting the onus on Parliament to frame a law to prevent people with criminal charges against them from contesting elections and entering the house, even as it has made it clear that political parties need to do a lot more to clean up politics.

It has issued five broad guidelines related to better labelling and disclosure of such charges. These are to make sure that a candidate for political office declares his or her criminal antecedents, that these be put on the party website, that Parliament take measures to keep tainted individuals out, that Election Commission forms record criminal records of candidates in bold letters, and that political parties publicise as widely as possible the criminal history of their candidates.

Making these details public will work in two ways. One, of course, is to ensure that people aren't voting for someone without knowing the facts. The other is deterrence -- because these charges will now be well-known, perhaps politicians will be more careful.

Skeptics say politicians will not get together and pass a law against their own. They also say winnability will triumph over a clean record. But with the disclosure that the SC has asked for, it will become that much more difficult for political parties to disregard the criminal antecedents of those they chose to stand for elections.

The apex court has been consistently pushing the political class to clean up its act. On its recommendation, 12 special courts have been set up in 11 states to fast track criminal cases against politicians within a prescribed time frame of one year. This is a little optimistic given that at last count there were 2,466 cases pending. But it is a positive start. While political parties may quail at strong measures against candidates, in the long run a clean record could be a vote catcher for them. And winnability is a factor that depends largely on how much weight the party throws behind a candidate.

With the SC order, political parties will now find it difficult to make excuses for choosing tainted candidates. To be sure, law enforcement and legal systems will have to become more effective and efficient to ensure that they weed out politically-motivated charges from actual criminal ones. The move will not clean up politics overnight, but it does add ammunition to the battle for probity in political office.

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