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UNIFIED ELECTORAL FRAMEWORK: INDIA'S QUEST FOR SIMULTANEOUS POLLS

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1. INTRODUCTION:

The proposal for simultaneous nationwide elections and the endorsement of the report submitted by a high-level committee headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind has given the idea of "One Nation, One Election" (ONOE) groundswell and has regained popularity in Indian political circles. Proponents of the approach argue that it could improve governance by reducing frequent disruptions due to electoral delays and allowing the government to focus on long-term policy implementation rather than short-term electoral strategies. Moreover, reducing the costs associated with holding multiple elections and streamlining the electoral process could promote a sense of stability and predictability in governance.²²¹



²²¹ "Simultaneous Elections Were the Norm...": Ram Nath Kovind Defends 'One Nation, One Election,' *The Times of India*, October 6, 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/simultaneous-elections-were-the-norm-ram-nath-kovind-defends-one-nation-one-election/articleshow/113981126.cms>.

However, the proposal has also generated significant debate and raised serious concerns about its impact on federalism and political representation. Critics warn that simultaneous elections could overshadow local issues and marginalize regional parties, thereby favoring national parties and reducing political diversity. Additionally, the logistical challenges and the need for fair representation across diverse demographics must be carefully considered as India explores this significant change.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

2.1. PRE-INDEPENDENCE (1919-1947):

The period leading up to independence in India, from 1919 to 1947, was marked by significant electoral reforms. The Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 were a major milestone, introducing electoral reforms and expanding representative self-government in India. The reforms were aimed at giving privileges to the politically moderate Indian elite, thereby creating a roadmap for Indians to eventually be able to govern themselves under British supervision.

Key features of the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms:

- Expanded voting rights: More Indians, including landowners, businessmen, lawyers, and professionals, were now eligible to vote.
- Dual power: dual or divided government where the central and local governments held power through elections.
- Decentralization: local governments were in charge of education, health, public works and agriculture. However, these reforms were limited to the supervision of the British executive, and the Governor-General had the power to veto or approve any bill.

The Government of India Act of 1935 took these reforms further by providing for simultaneous elections to provincial and central legislatures. While the exact details of the simultaneous elections of this period

are unclear, it is clear that these reforms laid the foundations for India's future electoral system.²²²

2.2. POST-INDEPENDENCE (1947-1967):

The era of Indian independence was marked by significant electoral reforms. The Indian Constitution, adopted in 1950, laid the foundation for simultaneous elections through Article

324. This provision led to the first general elections in 1952, when elections for the Lok Sabha and state assemblies were held simultaneously.²²³

Key Choices:

- First General Election (1952): Elections for the Lok Sabha and state assemblies were held simultaneously, setting a trend for the electoral process in India.
- Second general elections (1957): Simultaneous elections continued, reinforcing the practice established in 1952.
- Third general elections (1962): Simultaneous elections were retained, demonstrating the country's commitment to this electoral approach.

However, this cycle of simultaneous elections was interrupted by the premature dissolution of several state assemblies in 1968 and 1969, followed by the dissolution of the House of Representatives in 1970. Nevertheless, the idea of simultaneous elections continues to be debated and considered, with proponents arguing that simultaneous elections would reduce electoral costs, minimize disruption, and promote stability in governance.²²⁴

²²² Durba Ghosh, ed., "The Reforms of 1919: Montagu-Chelmsford, the Rowlatt Act, Jails Commission, and the Royal Amnesty," in *Gentlemanly Terrorists: Political Violence and the Colonial State in India, 1919-1947*, Critical Perspectives on Empire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 27-59, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316890806.003>.

²²³ "Simultaneous_election_to_Lok_Sabha_and_State_Legislative_Assemblies.Pdf," accessed October 7, 2024, https://loksabhadocs.nic.in/Refinput/New_Reference_Notes/English/Simultaneous_election_to_Lok_Sabha_and_State_Legislative_Assemblies.pdf.

²²⁴ "Simultaneous Elections: Will This Be Good for India? - Clear IAS," March 2, 2017, <https://www.clearias.com/simultaneous-elections-india/>.

2.3. DISRUPTION OF SIMULTANEOUS ELECTIONS (1967-1971)

The failure of simultaneous elections in India between 1967 and 1971 marked a turning point in the electoral history of the country.

Dissolution of State Assemblies (1967-1969): The Indian National Congress was defeated in seven states in the 1967 elections, including Gujarat, Madras, Orissa, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Kerala and Delhi. This led to political instability, leading to the dissolution of several state assemblies between 1967 and 1969.²²⁵

Loss of majority by ruling parties (1969-1971)

The loss of majority by ruling parties from 1969 to 1971 further disrupted the simultaneous electoral cycle. The 1967 elections reduced the Indian National Congress' majority, weakening the party's power base and ultimately leading to mid-term elections.

The 1967 elections were the last to see simultaneous elections to both the Lok Sabha and state assemblies. Since then, elections have been surprised, and different states have been investigating public polls at various times.

3. ONE NATION ONE ELECTION:

Definition- One nation one election refers to the idea of holding simultaneous polls for State Assemblies and the Lok Sabha instead of separate and continuous elections.

3.1. RECOMMENDATION GIVEN BY RAM NATH KOVIND COMMITTEE:

Former President Ram Nath Kovind on Saturday said simultaneous elections under the "one nation, one election" policy was a forefathered vision of the Indian Constitution and the practice was standard in the early days of the Republic. Speaking about "simultaneous elections" at the 30th Lal

Bahadur Shastri Memorial Conference held on Saturday, Kovind noted that in the country's first four election cycles, Lok Sabha and Assembly elections were "synchronised", but this practice was later broken in 1968. Kovind, who served as chairman of the high-level "One Nation, One Election" committee, pointed out the irony over the cause of the glitch in the electoral cycle, especially as a section of society considers simultaneous elections undemocratic and unconstitutional.

"In the early days of the republic, simultaneous elections were the norm. Elections to Parliament and state assemblies were held synchronously for the first four election cycles. This cycle of simultaneous elections was interrupted in 1968 when several state assemblies were prematurely dissolved by the then Union government in exercise of powers under Article 356," Kovind said. "Some in society argue that simultaneous elections are undemocratic and unconstitutional. When we consider the origins of this disruption in the electoral cycle, it is hard not to sense the irony. "Simultaneous elections were the vision of our constitutional forefathers," he added.

Kovind also mentioned that during the policy consultation process, 15 parties did not support the idea, many of which had earlier supported the concept of simultaneous elections. "During our consultation process, 47 political parties presented their views to the committee. Of these, 32 supported the idea of simultaneous elections and only 15 did not. Many of these 15 parties have supported the concept of simultaneous elections in the past. The Union Cabinet on September 18 approved the government's "one nation, one election" proposal to hold simultaneous assembly and parliamentary elections and urban body and panchayat elections within a 100-day time frame. The recommendation was made in the report of a high-level committee headed by former

²²⁵ "1967 Indian General Election," in *Wikipedia*, August 25, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=1967_Indian_general_election&ol did=1242270757.

president Ram Nath Kovind.²²⁶

3.2. ARGUMENT IN FAVOUR OF SIMULTANEOUS ELECTIONS:

The NITI Aayog article states that the country holds at least one election per year. In fact, every state holds elections every year. In the article, NITI Aayog argues that multiple elections have many direct and indirect disadvantages.

The economic cost of elections is immense. The direct financial cost of a state the size of Bihar is around Rs 30 lakh crore. But there are other economic costs, some immeasurable: Every time an election is held, government agencies are unable to carry out their regular functions because of election and related business. The cost of millions of man-hours spent is not part of the election budget.

Policy paralysis: The Model Code of Conduct (MCC) also impacts government officials as new important policies cannot be announced and implemented once elections are declared. Administrative costs: The repeated deployment and transportation of security forces also comes at huge visible costs.²²⁷ Countries bear larger invisible costs in terms of the diversion of these forces from sensitive areas and the fatigue and illness caused by their repeated deployment across the country.

3.4. ARGUMENT AGAINST THE ONE NATION ONE ELECTION:

Federal Issue: Holding simultaneous elections is virtually impossible as it would mean arbitrarily shortening or extending the terms of existing parliaments to make the election date coincident with that of the rest of the country. Such a measure would undermine democracy and federalism.

Against the spirit of democracy: Critics also argue that forcing simultaneous elections is undemocratic, as trying to force an artificial election cycle and limit voters' choices is wrong.²²⁸ Regional parties are disadvantaged: Regional parties should be disadvantaged since in simultaneous elections, voters are likely to vote overwhelmingly one way, giving an advantage to the dominant party in the center. Reduced accountability: Having to meet with voters at least once every five years increases the accountability of politicians and requires them to be constantly on their toes.

²²⁶ "Simultaneous Elections Were the Norm: Ram Nath Kovind Defends 'One Nation, One Election,'" accessed October 7, 2024, <https://ddnews.gov.in/en/simultaneous-elections-were-the-norm-ram-nath-kovind-defends-one-nation-one-election/>.

²²⁷ "Drishti IAS Coaching in Delhi, Online IAS Test Series & Study Material," accessed October 7, 2024, <https://www.drishtias.com/printpdf/one-nation-one-election-2>.

²²⁸ "Drishti IAS Coaching in Delhi, Online IAS Test Series & Study Material."

4. COMPARITIVE STUDY IN INDIA WITH MAURITIUS AND SOUTH AFRICA:

ASPECT	INDIA ²²⁹	MAURITIUS ²³⁰	SOUTH AFRICA ²³¹
TYPE OF GOVERNMENT	Federal parliamentary democracy	Parliamentary republic	Parliamentary republic
ELECTION CYCLE	Lok Sabha elections every 5 years; State Assemblies also every 5 years, often staggered	National Assembly elections every 5 years; local elections also conducted separately	National Assembly elections every 5 years; provincial elections also every 5 years
CONSTITUTIONAL BASIS	Constitution of India, enacted in 1950	Constitution of Mauritius, enacted in 1968	Constitution of South Africa, enacted in 1996
VOTING SYSTEM	First-past-the-post for Lok Sabha and State Assemblies	First-past-the-post for national and local elections	Proportional representation in national and provincial elections
VOTER REGISTRATION	Mandatory registration; diverse voter base	Registration is easy, but voter turnout can vary	Mandatory voter registration; efforts to increase turnout
ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT BODY	Election Commission of India (ECI)	Election Commission of Mauritius	Election Commission of South Africa (IEC)

²²⁹ PMF IAS CA Team, “One Nation One Election,” *PMFIAS* (blog), September 16, 2024, <https://www.pmfias.com/one-nation-one-election/>.

²³⁰ “Mauritius to Go to Polls on November 10,” *The Indian Express* (blog), October 4, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/mauritius-general-election-9603852/>.

²³¹ Business Standard, “South Africans Begin Voting in Most Competitive Election since Apartheid,” May 29, 2024, https://www.business-standard.com/world-news/south-africans-begin-voting-in-most-competitive-election-since-apartheid-124052900863_1.html.

POLITICAL PARTIES	Multi-party system with significant regional parties	Dominated by two major parties (Labour Party and MSM)	Multi-party system with a significant focus on the African National Congress (ANC)
ELECTORAL CHALLENGES	Electoral fraud, violence, and voter apathy	Lower voter turnout, influence of political elites	Corruption, service delivery protest and political fragmentation

5. CONCLUSION & SUGGESTION:

Abraham Lincoln's idea and philosophy of democracy. Democracy is government of the people, by the people, and for the people, and can only be achieved through voting. And election reforms are required to create healthy democracy and responsible governments. But at the same time, you need to understand that simple regular costumes in the election are not enough. If the public expectations for Indian democracy are implemented, the main democracy should be strengthened by the reform of the Indian political system.

- 1. Gradual Implementation:** Consider piloting simultaneous elections in select states to assess the impact before nationwide implementation.
- 2. Constitutional Amendments:** Review legislative frameworks and make necessary amendments to facilitate ONOE, ensuring respect for federal principles.
- 3. Public Awareness Campaign:** Conduct robust public engagement strategies to raise awareness about the benefits and implications of ONOE.
- 4. Independent Commission:** Establish a body to oversee the logistics and

fairness of the simultaneous elections, taking insights from Mauritius and South Africa.

- 5. Technology Utilization:** Leverage technology to ensure secure and efficient election management, akin to practices in Mauritius' streamlined electoral process.