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SYNCHRONIZING INDIAN ELECTIONS: LEGAL HURDLES & POLICY DEBATES

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INTRODUCTION

The idea of synchronizing elections for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies—popularly known as “One Nation, One Election”—has re-entered public debate with the introduction of the 129th Constitution (Amendment) Bill, 2024 in Parliament. While the concept was practiced in the early years after independence, it gradually broke down due to early dissolutions of governments. While the proposal promises administrative efficiency and cost savings, it also raises critical concerns about federal autonomy, democratic representation, and constitutional validity. This blog explores the key legal hurdles and policy debates surrounding one of India’s most ambitious electoral reform proposals.

UNPACKING THE CONSTITUTIONAL PUZZLE

Bringing elections for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies onto a common timeline is not merely a matter of political agreement; it calls for substantial changes to the Constitution. In the initial decades after independence, both levels of elections were held together—until 1967, when that pattern began to fragment. Articles 83(2) and 172(1) of the Constitution prescribe five-year terms for the Lok Sabha and the State Assemblies, respectively, unless dissolved earlier. However, early dissolutions—permitted under Articles 85 and 174—disrupt the alignment of electoral cycles.¹ Achieving synchronization now would require either the curtailment or extension of the terms of State Assemblies, raising concerns about the potential violation of the Constitution’s basic structure.²

¹ India Const. arts. 83(2), 85, 172(1), 174.

² See HLC Report on One Nation One Election, ch. 5, pp. 108–112 (2024).

In addition, events such as a government's fall due to a no-confidence motion or the formation of a hung assembly pose a recurring challenge for synchronized elections. For example, if a state government loses its majority in 2027, but the next synchronized elections are scheduled for 2029, holding separate elections for that state would disrupt the synchronization. Alternatively, placing the state under President's Rule until 2029 would violate constitutional norms, as President's Rule is intended to be temporary and not a mechanism to "wait for the next cycle."³ Extending it beyond a reasonable period would undermine federal democracy.

To address this issue, the High-Level Committee (HLC) headed by Ram Nath Kovind proposed the insertion of Article 82A, which would empower Parliament to fix the term of State Assemblies in alignment with that of the Lok Sabha.⁴ As part of this process, Parliament will prescribe an "Appointed Date"—a future date on which simultaneous elections across the country will come into effect. This appointed date will act as a starting point for alignment, meaning that all future elections for the Lok Sabha and the State Assemblies will be conducted on the same schedule, beginning from that date onward. This date would be chosen in consultation with the Election Commission and state governments.⁵ The HLC also recommends that once synchronization is achieved, if any Lok Sabha or Assembly is dissolved prematurely, the newly constituted House shall serve only the remainder of the original term, thereby maintaining the unified electoral cycle.⁶

However, curtailing or extending the term of a legislature directly affects the voter's right to elect their representatives, which is a part of free and fair elections—a basic feature of the Constitution as stated in *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala*, 1973.⁷ Such amendments could be challenged in court as violating the basic structure doctrine, especially the principle of federalism and democratic accountability.

EVALUATING POLICY MERITS AND RISKS

People often assume "One Nation, One Election" is just about saving money, but the debate runs deeper. Yes, holding elections together across the country could ease administrative strain, but there are big questions about what it might cost us politically and constitutionally.

³ India Const. art. 356.

⁴ Id. at ch. 6, p. 123.

⁵ Id.

⁶ Id. at p. 125.

⁷ *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala*, (1973) 4 SCC 225.

Let's start with the positives. According to the Election Commission, the 2019 Lok Sabha election alone cost around ₹8,000 crore.⁸ That's just one election — if you add state polls, the number shoots up. Former Chief Election Commissioner S.Y. Quraishi pointed out that repeated elections stretch both financial and human resources thin, and synchronization could ease that pressure. That's a fair point.⁹

Then there's the Model Code of Conduct. It kicks in every time an election happens — sometimes multiple times a year. This halts policymaking. The NITI Aayog suggested that a single election cycle would reduce this disruption and bring better policy continuity.¹⁰

Some also argue that voters would benefit. Prime Minister Modi has said several times that simultaneous elections would increase voter turnout and reduce fatigue.¹¹ It's true that voters are called to the polls too often, and for many, it's confusing.

But the risks? They're real. Justice Madan Lokur (Retd.) recently warned that trying to align all elections could hurt the federal structure.¹² And he's not alone. Critics worry that regional issues would get buried under national campaigns. A study by CSDS even showed that when elections are held together, voters often vote the same way for both Centre and state — even when local concerns differ.¹³

The High-Level Committee (HLC), led by former President Ram Nath Kovind, admitted that making all of this work would take major constitutional changes.¹⁴ It also accepted that forcing early elections or delaying them would be tricky. Voters have a right to choose their representatives on time — and any change to that can face legal hurdles. So, while the idea sounds efficient, it's complicated

CONCLUSION

The idea of holding elections together may seem practical and cost-effective, but it raises important legal and constitutional questions. Aligning terms across states and the Centre affects the federal structure and the voters' right to timely representation. While the proposed reforms aim to streamline the process, such a shift must be approached with caution. Any attempt to

⁸ Election Commission of India, *General Election to Lok Sabha 2019 – Expenditure Report* (2020).

⁹ S.Y. Quraishi, *The Hindu*, Nov. 22, 2018.

¹⁰ NITI Aayog, *Discussion Paper on Simultaneous Elections*, Jan. 2017.

¹¹ *Indian Express*, Apr. 15, 2023.

¹² *The Wire*, Oct. 2023.

¹³ CSDS-Lokniti, *Voting Behaviour Study*, 2019.

¹⁴ HLC Report, *supra* note 2, at p. 127.

change the current system should involve wide consultation, legal clarity, and strong safeguards to protect democratic values.