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ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION: CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM OR DEMOCRATIC CHALLENGE?

~Anisha Bharat Parkar

ABSTARCT

India is the world's largest democracy. We have over 96 crore registered voters. We speak hundreds of languages. We have 28 states, 8 union territories, and governments at three levels central, state, and local. Elections here are not just a process; they are a festival, a right, and a responsibility but here is something worth thinking about: between 2019 and 2024, India held elections in almost every major state at different points in time. That means somewhere in the country, there was almost always a state going through election mode. Campaigns. Rallies. The Model Code of Conduct. Government schemes on pause. Officials deployed for election duty. This is precisely the problem that One Nation, One Election (ONOE) is trying to solve by holding elections for the Lok Sabha and all state assemblies together, at the same time, in a single electoral cycle.

INTRODUCTION

A detailed look at India's most debated electoral idea: what it promises, what it risks, and why every Indian should care

First, A Little History

Before we debate what ONOE will do to India's future, it is worth knowing that India has actually done this before.

After the adoption of the Constitution, elections to the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies were conducted simultaneously in 1951–52, and this practice continued for three subsequent general elections in 1957, 1962, and 1967.¹

So simultaneous elections are not some untested foreign idea. India lived with them for nearly 16 years after Independence.

The cycle broke down gradually after 1967, when some state governments fell before completing their terms due to political instability, President's Rule, or no-confidence motions. Once the chain broke, it never came back together and for decades, elections have been scattered across the calendar.

What Is Actually Being Proposed?

This is not just a political slogan. There is actual legislation on the table.

The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill, 2024, was introduced to enable simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies.² Alongside it, The Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024 was also introduced to align the election timelines of Union Territories with legislative assemblies.³

On December 17, 2024, Union Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal moved the bills in Lok Sabha. In the voting, 269 MPs voted in favour of introduction and 198 voted against. Both bills were subsequently referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee for further review.

The bills propose changes to Articles 82, 83, and 327 of the Constitution, and introduce a new Article 82A.⁴ In simple terms, this new article would set a common election date and all state assembly terms would be aligned to end with the Lok Sabha term.⁵

The entire process is proposed to happen in two phases:

¹ Law Commission of India, 170th Report on Reform of the Electoral Laws 4.3 (1999).

² The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill, 2024, Bill No. 129 of 2024, Lok Sabha, India.

³ The Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024, Lok Sabha, India.

⁴ INDIA CONST. arts. 82, 83, 327.

⁵ The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill, 2024, Bill No. 129 of 2024, Lok Sabha, India.

Phase 1: Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assembly elections held simultaneously.

Phase 2: Panchayat and Municipality elections to be held within 100 days of the Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections, bringing the entire three-tier governance structure onto a single electoral calendar.

The Kovind Committee also recommended something very practical: a single electoral roll and a single Electoral Photo Identity Card (EPIC) for all three tiers of government, which would eliminate the current confusion of different voter lists maintained by different commissions.

As for the timeline, simultaneous elections may possibly begin around 2034, and municipal elections have not even been included in the current bills yet. So this is a long-term structural change not something happening overnight.

The Report Behind It All

The recent efforts to make ONOE a reality were neither random nor arbitrary. The High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections, led by former President Ram Nath Kovind, was appointed by the Government of India on 2nd September 2023.⁶ It was established to assess the feasibility of holding simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies.

The report, which ran into 18,626 pages, was compiled after detailed deliberations involving various stakeholders and through rigorous research spanning 191 days. This is perhaps the largest study of Indian electoral systems till date. The suggestions made in the report were adopted by the Union Cabinet on 18th September 2024.

The panel comprised top-ranking officials like Home Minister Amit Shah, former Chairman of Finance Commission N.K. Singh, and former Congress leader Ghulam Nabi Azad thus giving at least some semblance of bipartisanship, despite opposition parties having distanced themselves from the effort.

⁶ High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections, Report of the High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections (2024).

Why Supporters Say This Is Necessary

1. The Financial Cost Is Staggering

Elections in India are not cheap for anyone. The Centre for Media Studies, in its 2024 assessment, estimated that India's general elections that year involved total expenditure of approximately ₹1.35 lakh crore (USD 8 billion), making it the most expensive democratic exercise in recorded history.⁷

And that is just one election. State assembly elections add another ₹15,000–20,000 crore per cycle. Local body elections, covering about 2.5 lakh panchayats and nearly 4,000 municipalities, impose further costs. These figures include not just the Election Commission's expenditure, but also campaign spending, deployment costs, logistics, security arrangements, and the diversion of public staff with nearly 1 crore officials involved in a general election alone.

Holding all of this together even partly would mean enormous savings for the public exchequer money that could otherwise go into schools, hospitals, and infrastructure.

2. Governance Gets Stuck in Permanent Election Mode

This is the most important argument. India's major reform agenda is long-gestation. GST rationalisation, banking consolidation, renewable energy transition, skilling, land markets, labour rules, and urban reform all require sustained political attention they do not yield results in a single quarter.

The Model Code of Conduct is enforced from the announcement of the election schedule until the completion of the election process.⁸ During this period, development programmes, welfare schemes, and capital projects are largely suspended except for routine administrative activities.

When some part of India is always in election mode, the MCC is almost always active somewhere. Governments begin to work around the next election rather than the next reform

⁷ Centre for Media Studies, Poll Expenditure: The 2024 Indian General Elections (2024).

⁸ Election Commission of India, Model Code of Conduct Guidelines (2024).

milestone. The consequence is predictable: hard reforms are postponed, short-term measures are prioritised, and administrative risk-taking declines.

3. Less Burden on Security Forces and Officials

Running elections requires massive deployment. Paramilitary forces, police, civil servants, schoolteachers millions of people are pulled away from their regular duties every time an election is held.

Teachers, in particular, have to take leave from teaching duties for several weeks in order to function as election officers. This task of once in five years being reduced to once in every few months can have a very tangible effect on the human psyche.

Why Do Critics Claim That It Is Risky?

1. What If The Government Falls?

This is the core issue. India is a parliamentary democracy and its governments can fail midway whether through a vote of no confidence, hung parliament, or realignments.⁹ So what then?

Article 82A(2), which has been suggested, states that the term of office of elected state assemblies will coincide with that of the Lok Sabha.

If, therefore, the state government falls in year two of a five-year period, new elections could possibly take place during the remainder of the period resulting in governments enjoying short and truncated terms.

2. Indian Federalism - The Most Significant Aspect of India - Might Get Eroded

India is a nation that comprises a union of states.¹⁰ All states have their unique identities and language. They are governed separately and can decide the issues concerning themselves such as agricultural, fishing, educational policies according to their needs. Hence, a voter of Kerala can choose his representatives for the matters regarding agriculture and education, while an MP or MLA from Himachal Pradesh is concerned with apple cultivation, tourism etc.

⁹ Rameshwar Prasad v. Union of India, (2006) 2 S.C.C. 1.

¹⁰ INDIA CONST. art. 1.

It has been stated that simultaneous polls might affect the autonomy of states because national-level elections will have more importance compared to regional level politics.¹¹

Moreover, simultaneous polls mean that powers would get concentrated at the Centre which is likely to reduce the significance of state assemblies.¹²

When voting for MLAs and MPs simultaneously, people tend to go by the national narrative. Hence, the local candidate gets overshadowed either by positive or negative wave of the national party leader.

3. Regional parties can get severely disadvantaged

The democratic strength of India lies in its regional parties. The DMK from Tamil Nadu, the TMC from West Bengal, the Shiv Sena from Maharashtra, the TRS from Telangana, the Akali Dal from Punjab such regional parties come into being because the people need representation in matters relating to them specifically.¹³

As national parties have access to significantly larger funding than regional parties, the simultaneity of elections can tilt the ground against regional parties in their favor, leaving no room for them due to the dominance of national political campaign machinery.

A political party with national television channels and social media support along with large sums of money will invariably gain control in an election conducted simultaneously.

4. Constitutional Obstacle Looms Large

Congress, Samajwadi Party, NCP (SP), and CPI(M) rejected the bills in Parliament. Congress believes that these laws are contradictory to the basic principles of the constitution.

From a federal point of view, the fear is that this proposition might end up turning India's federalistic setup into a unitary setup, where state assemblies will function according to the pace of the Lok Sabha, which is definitely against democracy.

¹¹ S.R. Bommai v. Union of India, (1994) 3 S.C.C. 1.

¹² Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala, (1973) 4 S.C.C. 225.

¹³ NITI Aayog, Analysis of Simultaneous Elections: "One Nation, One Election" (2017).

According to the Punjab Finance Minister, Harpal Singh Cheema, the proposed amendment may leave the duration of state assemblies in the hands of the Union Government. This will clearly not work under the federal setup of the constitution. Also, the bill will lead to more abuse of Article 356 and Article 360.¹⁴

Voices from Between

There are some people who may not fall into any definite camp. There are definitely voices in favor and those against the idea. Some members of the public appreciate the proposal because of its potential to reduce disturbances due to the holding of elections at different times. Others fear that it would have implications for the future of democracy by ignoring the requirements of the states.

In the ranks of the ruling coalition, some NDA allies such as the Janata Dal (United) and Telugu Desam Party are supportive but wary of the proposal for fears regarding federalism. This is far from being a simple question of BJP versus opposition.

What Other Countries Do

Strangely enough, some other nations that practice democracy actually conduct their own nationwide as well as regional polls on the same date or on nearly similar dates, like Sweden¹⁵, South Africa¹⁶, and Belgium¹⁷. However, all these nations have a much less complex structure of federation and far smaller numbers of people to manage. It would be inappropriate to compare India with these countries considering their huge cultural diversity.¹⁸

Current Status of the Issue

The two bills have currently been sent to the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC).¹⁹ This committee is consulting various political parties, constitutional scholars, and state governments. According to the earliest estimates, implementation may take place by 2034.

¹⁴ INDIA CONST. arts. 356, 360.

¹⁵ Instrument of Government (Swed.) 1974.

¹⁶ Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996.

¹⁷ Constitution of the Kingdom of Belgium, 1994.

¹⁸ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), Electoral System Design Database (2024).

¹⁹ 269 Lok Sabha Debates, Dec. 17, 2024 (India).

However, there is enough time and room available for this issue to evolve and improve prior to any decisions being taken.

The JPC plays a very important role in the resolution of this issue. In case the committee really considers all interested parties, including opposition parties, state governments, and constitutional scholars, there is a possibility for the creation of a proposal which can address both issues of efficiency and federation. Otherwise, the controversy will continue.

So, What Should We Make of All This?

The proposition of One Nation, One Election is not merely a good idea being thwarted by self-centered politicians, nor is it a power grab by those with a vested interest in seeing things through. It is both and more.

It is true that there is a need for India to have elections at shorter intervals because of the high cost involved, governance challenges, and other issues related to prolonged elections.

At the same time, there are legitimate questions regarding federalism, regional democracy, and whether a local citizen will even matter once the voting process is subsumed into the greater national process of elections.

What India needs, in its 75-plus years of democratic life, is to ensure that any discussion that takes place in this matter is open, honest, transparent, and inclusive of all views. Constitutional changes on this scale should be done with the consensus of everyone involved, not majority math alone.²⁰

That is why the test of this proposal must not merely be the savings and efficiencies involved, but whether each and every Indian citizen can truly say their voice matters once this proposal is implemented.

That is the real test of any electoral reform.

²⁰ Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala, (1973) 4 S.C.C. 225.