

Pros and Cons of Simultaneous Polls

Dr N Bhaskara Rao

Primepost, October 15, 2020

The fact that the Prime Minister has been endorsing the idea of simultaneous election for a couple of years, is clear that the Government is determined to push ahead. As a result today there is wide spread expectation that the country may go for simultaneous poll in 2022. Are we ready for such a dramatic shift? The idea of simultaneous elections has its pros and cons. On the face of it the idea is appealing. Particularly, because election codes of Election Commission curtail powers of the incumbent government, which in turn means under the present system government get restrained from some executive powers, which may result in deferring implementation of some on-going schemes.

In fact the arguments against simultaneous elections include that it amounts to adopting Presidential form without declaring so and that it facilitates one-person domination without country opting for such a system formally. This also meant diluting Federal system in favour of centralisation. This reflects homogenizing the country instead of bringing equity, sustaining plurality and promoting local and regional leadership.

We should not ignore completely that India is a country of many states under a Federal structure. How it could be 'one election,' unless it could be "one leader' as well for the country! How can any deny the fact that "one nation, one election, one leader" is not good either for the democracy or for the inclusive development of the nation. Similarly, it is not good for the Federal system and for assuring free and fair election.

The idea of simultaneous elections should not deprive the states of having a popularly elected government on their own. Or, deprive a majority government to wind up when and if the ruling party in New Delhi loses majority and goes for a midterm poll. That should not mean states to dissolve assembly and go for elections irrespective of its five-year tenure. Then the question of imposing President's rule on a new ground. Simultaneous election should not offer yet another opportunity to the Federal government to impose Presidents rule in States.

The core of argument for simultaneous elections is that a considerable expenditure is involved for conducting elections as at present. In addition it is also argued that Development process gets impeded because of model code of the Election Commission of India.

Dr N Bhaskara Rao is Chairman of CMS and for over 45 years is engaged in studies on development, governance, public opinion and electoral campaigns.

More specifically the reasons given for simultaneous polls are that frequent polls hurt the economy and slows the development. Yes, elections do cost but it has to be weighed against democratic system that we adopted. The ECI deserve praise for its superb job of conducting polls in India at least cost to the Government. What should bother the country is what the candidates and the parties spend and, even more, the kind of inducements they offer to the electorate every time and in a competitive way. This is what should worry the nation more. Also, it is important to remember that what is spent on polls in the country in all is much less than what the union government and the state governments spend on unproductive publicity and advertising yearly with all kind of claims and promises.

Regarding development. Yes, going by the poll code certain limits on the incumbent. But the cause to worry is the way the leaders and parties accuse each other and tend to vitiate the governance process. The model code by itself does not impede the development. Even assuming it does, it could be modified once the parties come to an understanding and also abide by it so that the essential and on-going public services and projects are not effected. It is the incumbent who has to demonstrate, not to succumb to vote getting compulsions.

So far, since the time of Republic, 108 times popularly elected government in states were removed to impose President's rule. Only a few times, it was due to fact that House could not elect a leader in the normal course. Most of the times President's rule was imposed at the discretion of the leaders of the Federal government or its agent in the state, the governor. Transparency in the process was missing and suo-motto announcements has become a practice. Instead of curbing such practice, the idea of simultaneous elections amount denting the very democratic roots and going against political plurality desirability for tackling social diversities.

Instead, the need of the time is to find alternate ways of conducting elections at all levels with least cost and in a free and fair way and a re-look into poll time codes. Second, find ways of curbing misuse of the government machinery by the incumbent party to its poll advantage. The question that we also need to debate is whether we go for one agenda and one leader driving the poll process which meant local concerns, issues and interests becoming secondary.

The distinction between elections at different levels get blurred when voters are required to vote simultaneously. These questions need to be looked into from both feasibilities under Constitution and desirability as well as to democracy and development. From both these criteria simulations election could be reasonably pursued if and when we formally adopt a Presidential system.

Prime Minister Modi is in 'cloud nine' situation today to afford a head on with real issues of political reforms which he did refer to in his several speeches. The debate for simultaneous elections should not push under carpet again now the more important and long pending poll reforms. There are many issues that need to be dealt. The first, is to consider proportional representation of elections in place of first-past-the post system that we had experienced nearly seven decades. A debate on this is more pertinent. Second, bring political parties under regulatory frame and into transparency regime by bring them under RTI.

Third, the Prime Minister and Chief Ministers should be elected similar way as the speakers of Parliament and Assembly. Fourth, the Whip system on the floor of legislatures should be limited to exceptional situations. Fifth, even more urgent, curb poll expenditure at all levels like by the government, by political parties, by candidates themselves and come up with compliance mechanisms as to ceiling on expenditure including by curtailing duration of poll process. Several Parliamentary Committees have gone into these aspects over the decades without being followed up. Simultaneous elections in India, 'one nation, one election' notion is antithesis to good governance, on ground.

"One election" idea undermines regional parties, local leaders and regional agenda. It promotes prospects of one leader, one party, and chances of misleading by pepping up passions and popularism. Charisma out of such emotions has threatening implications to the spirit of Federalism. Certain key persuasive instruments that are available today for consensus manufacturing country-wide were not there during 1952-67 when we started with simultaneous polls. Instead, India would be better-off if it pursues the political reforms first. Simultaneous election idea is easy to get adopted but it has doubtful and difficult implications. The basic poll reforms, on the other hand, are difficult to push through but has durable positive implications to parliamentary democracy and Federal system that we had adopted.

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