

Is it “One Nation, One Election” or “Simultaneous Elections” that is proposed? It is not the same.

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Is the Indian Parliament having a secret (?) meeting next fortnight to discuss boarder issue with the Chinese? Or is it meeting to disqualify those several political leaders against whom series of criminal cases are long pending? No, Neither. Although an agenda of special Parliament session is not revealed even after a week. And a high level committee with a former President of the country is formed to recommend modalities for “one election” as if for consideration of the special Parliament session. The Government apparently is trying to secure the required majority for any “special amendments” needed, including for formalising the name of Bharat. This includes elections to “municipalities and panchayats”, not just the Parliament and State Assemblies. All this just on the eve of five Assembly polls now and as if the government wants to ensure the outcome of the 2024 national election. While the idea of “One Nation, One Election” implies more than that, the idea of “simultaneous elections” is specific. More than once Supreme Court had rejected earlier the idea of formalising “Bharat” in place of India.

Since the idea of simultaneous election is being talked about for a couple of years by the PM himself, one wonders why this session of Parliament without revealing the specific agenda and a hurried committee. The reasoning articulated in favour of the idea over these years boils down to three. These are genuine concerns that governments should have and do something about to address the roots. One is the expenditure that elections across the country is incurring. The second is the frequency of elections in the country coming in the way of governments take to development projects and their implementation. Third how the Model Code of Conduct of ECI comes in the way of initiatives and implementation of the governments. While these arguments for simultaneous polls were given fair coverage in public discourse and media, the “other side” arguments against the proposal were neither covered nor deliberated. As if those views do not deserve, irrespective of their relevant.

First and foremost is that to go for “one election” for the entire country, our Republic is not based on Presidential system. Even in presidential system “municipalities and panchayats” are not covered concurrently. What more evidence is needed to allege that the country is sliding on democracy if this idea is pursued. **Second**, the proposal amounts to a setback to the Constitutional democracy with many amendments piece meal that it requires to be passed

eroding the very fundamental of the constitution. **Third**, simultaneous polls threaten the “federal system” as relations between union and the states tend to get arrogated. **Forth**, by bringing “Municipalities and Panchayats” under simultaneous formula, “decentralised governance” that the country has adopted in 1957 with Balwant Rai Mehta Committee report and the Parliament’s initiatives since then gets side-lined. **Fifth**, the proposal patronages national parties as if local and regional parties are scuttled and local agenda and leaders are relegated. Which implies advantage to the party having “big kitty” and “deep pockets” of thousands of crores. **Sixth**, since ECI is already alleged to function at the mercy of the incumbent instead of as an independent constitutional body for assuring free and fair polls, going for “one election”. **Seventh**, a direct beneficiary of simultaneous polls is not voters but the corporates, interested in “one market” which means homogenising the nation and disappearance of regional cultures. **Eight**, that is how there would be “one agenda” denigrating local agenda and concerns. **Ninth**, 170th report of the Law Commission in 1999 on electoral laws had cautioned that implementation of simultaneous poll cannot be in overnight or hurry. The Law Commission, the Niti Aayog, and a Parliamentary standing committee have already studied the proposition and made their suggestions to the government more than a year ago although not all their deliberations are made public.

If the reasoning for simultaneous polls is the three concerns to do with expenditure, governance and development, then the government can do much more right away, much easily and effectively without any amendments setting good examples. I have detailed these initiatives that could be taken right away in my book ***“Next Big Game Changer in Elections in India”***. And those are all in the “National interest” and “desirability” and are feasible for upholding the country’s stature as a functional democracy. In fact, all these suggestions deepen democracy in the country and become fitting response to Indian critics. These much needed changes without tinkering with the Constitution include, tenure of candidates, their eligibility, rational ways of campaigning, etc. Have we even tried any of these initiatives?

Why the hurry and shortcuts now? Since the process of 2024 general election has already taken off, this “One Nation, One Election” should be an issue for that poll campaigns across the country.

Why a former President of the Republic be roped into this contentious issue as if to give the impression that the issue has been deliberated widely and conclusively? Except two or three, of the eight no other member of the committee could claim reflective character of the views on the topic. Also, there is none in the committee from the southern states. Nor is there any one from the civil society. It is apparent from the notification that the Committee is formed

not to explore the idea but to come up with implementation strategies. By having a former President and “known endorsers” of the proposal, we are addressing the symptoms more instead of the root causes that our electoral practices got bog down. But, this committee will dwell about a “single electoral roll” and “identity card” for voters valid for elections at national, state and local levels. This committee is also expected to decide whether the amendment for “one election” need ratification at all by half of the states as provided in the constitution.

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