Regional Consultation on Electoral and Political Reforms – Northern Region

Date and Venue: 17th August, 2017; IIC (Annexe), New Delhi

Background Note

Session: First Past the Post System - Is It Representative Enough?

The transparency and credibility of a democratic system can be deduced from the effective implementation of democratic principles in its electoral process. Thus, it will not be incongruent to say that electoral system lies at the heart of a democracy. India is one of the most celebrated democracies in the world. India, in comparison to its contemporary decolonised countries, has come across as the most successful state which did not succumb to the teething troubles of establishing a self-government. Therefore, it would be worth contemplating if the voting system on which Indian political structure has been built and thrived, is truly successful at being representative or not.

Since Independence, India has followed the 'First Past the Post' (FPTP) system which is a plurality voting system where the candidate who receives the maximum number of votes is declared the winner. This system functions on the doctrine of the 'winner takes it all'. So, any candidate can win the election, as long as he/ she manages to win more votes than the competitors even if he/ she has not won with a majority of votes. It is a simplistic voting system that ensures a higher chance of a stable government as compared to other alternatives. It gives rise to a single party government and a coherent opposition. However, the question remains -is it representative enough?

Over the years, FPTP system has faced several challenges, especially in regard to not being democratic enough. It leads to the formation of government on the basis of the choice of a relative majority, not necessarily an absolute majority. In the Lok Sabha Elections 2014, the vote share of all the winners combined was 43%. It implies that 43% of the voters voted for the winning candidates. However, it also implies that 57% voters voted for other candidates who eventually lost the elections. Thus, this system overrules the choice of 57% who did not vote for the winning candidates.

In FPTP system, there is a greater emphasis on the seat share rather than the vote share. In Punjab Assembly Elections 2017, Indian National Congress won 77 (66%) out of 117 seats with merely 38% of vote share. Moreover, out of these 77 INC winners, 59(76%) won with less than 50% of votes polled in their respective constituency. This scenario is not unique to Punjab. When Bharatiya Janata Party emerged victorious in the Uttar Pradesh Assembly Elections, 2017, it won 77% seats (312 out 403 seats) with just 39.6% of the total votes polled. Amongst the 312 winners, 250 winners won with less than 50% of votes polled in their respective constituency. This disparity in seat share and vote share was also seen in 2014 Lok Sabha Elections. The BJP won 282 (52%) seats with 31% of vote share. It indicates that the government, which is a choice of only 31% of voters can rule over 100% of the voters.

Is FPTP representative enough? Does FPTP system ensure that the government is the true representation of the will of the majority of people? Is there a need for reform within the FPTP system? Does India need an alternative voting system? Does it promote voter appeasement on the basis of caste, religion, ethnicity etc.? We hope the discussion will highlight the loopholes in the existing voting system i.e. FPTP and provide suggestions either for reforming FPTP or replacing it with a more democratic system which takes into considerations peculiarities and diversities of the Indian democracy.

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