

Regional Consultation on Electoral and Political Reforms – Western Region

Date and Venue: Ahmedabad Management Association (AMA), 17th September, 2018

Background Note

Session: “Simultaneous Elections – Possibilities and Challenges”

The issue of holding simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies in India has been debated periodically in our country. With recently concluded elections to the Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Goa, Uttarakhand and Manipur Assemblies, the debate has resurfaced again about its feasibility. The issue gained traction when the Parliamentary Standing Committee in December, 2015 submitted a report on holding simultaneous elections to Lok Sabha and State assemblies.

Frequent elections, according to some experts, hamper long-term policymaking because every decision is seen as bait for votes. Hence, to end this vicious cycle of elections, PM Narendra Modi had recommended holding of simultaneous Lok Sabha and Assembly elections all over the country. Chief Election Commissioner Shri O.P.Rawat had expressed his preparedness to hold simultaneous elections provided there is consensus among political parties.

The concept of simultaneous polls isn't new to the country. The first general elections to the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies were held together in 1951-52. However, with the premature dissolution of some State Assemblies in 1968 and 1969, this cycle was disrupted. In 1970, the Lok Sabha itself was dissolved early and fresh elections were held in 1971. As a result, for the last 48 years, there have been separate polls for electing the central and state governments.

The simultaneous conduct of polls have been justified on several grounds. Observations of the Standing Committee on the feasibility concluded that it would:

- reduce the massive expenditure that is currently incurred for the conduct of separate elections;
- reduce the policy paralysis that results from the imposition of the Model Code of Conduct during election time;
- reduce the impact on delivery of essential services, and
- reduce the burden on crucial manpower that is deployed during election time.

However, there are many hurdles in implementation of simultaneous elections such as:

- the proposal could be motivated by political considerations, as voters tend to vote for the same party at the central and the state level during simultaneous elections;
- the Constitution might be misused if Parliament/ Assembly is prematurely dissolved for political gains as Articles 83(2) and 172 (1) of the Constitution provides for a set term to the Lok Sabha and the Assemblies;
- possibility of its implementation every time might not be a reality as the state assemblies can be dissolved at any time without completing the fixed term;
- administrative and security concerns associated with simultaneous elections should be addressed at length before implementation.

All this presupposes that the Lok Sabha and Legislative polls will result in stable governments that last their entire tenures and so do regimes in the states. Only in the last 15 years have all three Lok Sabhas lasted their full five-year terms. Anti-defection law and Supreme Court judgement in SR Bommai vs. Union of India [1994] also ensure stability and continuity of legislative bodies to complete their full terms.

Holding simultaneous elections is an interesting concept, however, whether it will decrease the evils that the government wants to get rid of needs to be debated thoroughly. To be certain, there are multiple issues that will need to be addressed if the country intends to move in this direction. The concerns and suggestions of different stakeholders will have to be debated in order to build political consensus around the idea.