



## EDITORIAL: THE HINDU

**GENERAL STUDIES 2: POLITY**

**TOPIC: LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

**DATE: 13.12.2024**

### Urban Local Governments and the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act

#### Role and Importance of ULGs

Urban Local Governments (ULGs) are essential decentralized governance units responsible for managing civic services, urban planning, and improving the quality of urban life. They act as the closest democratic institutions for citizens in urban areas, ensuring participatory governance and fostering community-driven development. ULGs serve a growing urban population, which currently accounts for nearly 40% of India's total population and is expected to exceed 50% by 2050. With cities contributing over 60% to India's GDP, ULGs play a pivotal role in economic growth, infrastructure development, and cultural well-being.

#### The 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA)

Introduced in 1992, the 74th CAA aimed to strengthen ULGs by codifying their roles, powers, and responsibilities. Key features of the amendment include the mandatory establishment of three types of municipalities: Nagar Panchayats, Municipal Councils, and Municipal Corporations. Regular elections every five years ensure citizen representation and accountability, while provisions for financial independence empower ULGs to manage funds and generate revenue. Despite its vision, the implementation of the 74th CAA has been inconsistent across states, leaving the objectives of decentralization largely unmet.

#### Elections to ULGs and One Nation One Election (ONOE)

##### ONOE as an Opportunity for Reform

The concept of One Nation, One Election (ONOE) proposes synchronizing elections for all levels of government to ensure efficiency and cost-effectiveness. While earlier reports like the 79th Parliamentary Standing Committee Report (2015) and NITI Aayog Discussion Paper (2017) excluded ULGs due to logistical challenges, recent recommendations highlight their inclusion. The High-Level Committee (HLC) suggested that local body elections be synchronized with national and state elections within 100 days to enhance accountability and ensure timely elections.

#### Importance of Regular ULG Elections

ULG elections are constitutionally mandated to be held every five years, ensuring a consistent democratic process and citizen representation. Regular elections strengthen the principles of decentralization, enabling ULGs to address urban challenges effectively. Delays in conducting elections weaken governance, reduce citizen participation, and leave ULGs under state government control.

#### Challenges in ULG Elections



## Delays in Conducting Elections

A significant proportion of ULGs fail to hold elections on time, violating the constitutional mandate. According to a Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report (November 2024), over 60% of ULGs experienced election delays. These delays undermine the democratic process, leaving ULGs under the control of state governments for extended periods.

## Post-Election Delays in Functionality

Even after elections are conducted, delays in operationalizing elected councils hinder governance. For example, in Karnataka, councils took an average of 11 months to become functional after elections. These delays limit the ability of elected representatives to address developmental priorities, further weakening ULG performance.

## Disempowerment of State Election Commissions (SECs)

State Election Commissions (SECs), tasked with conducting ULG elections, face numerous challenges. Limited authority over ward delimitation, with only four out of 15 assessed states empowering their SECs for this role, undermines their effectiveness. Delays in delimitation and reservation processes by state governments and ongoing legal disputes contribute to election postponements. The lack of autonomy and resources for SECs diminishes their ability to ensure timely and fair elections.

## Path Forward for ULG Election Reforms

### Addressing Electoral Challenges

A comprehensive review of the systemic challenges hindering ULG elections is essential. Nationwide consultations involving Union and State governments can help identify practical solutions to ensure timely and regular elections.

### Implementing Recommendations of the HLC

The HLC's proposal to synchronize ULG elections with national and state elections provides a structured approach to address delays. Establishing an implementation group, as proposed by the Government of India, can facilitate coordination between different levels of government.

### Strengthening State Election Commissions (SECs)

SECs must be empowered with adequate authority, resources, and autonomy to manage delimitation and other election-related responsibilities independently. Streamlining processes like ward delimitation and reservations can minimize delays and court interventions.

### Fostering a Culture of Local Democracy

Regular ULG elections are vital for reinforcing the democratic ethos at the grassroots level. Citizen engagement and awareness campaigns can encourage public participation, fostering accountability in local governance.





# PL RAJ IAS & IPS ACADEMY

MAKING YOU SERVE THE NATION

## Conclusion

Urban Local Governments (ULGs) are the backbone of urban governance and play a critical role in India's development trajectory. However, the objectives of the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act remain largely unfulfilled due to delays in elections and operational challenges. Timely ULG elections, empowered State Election Commissions, and alignment with national reforms like ONOE are essential for realizing the vision of decentralized and participatory urban governance. Addressing these systemic challenges will strengthen local democracy, enhance urban service delivery, and ensure a better quality of life for India's rapidly urbanizing population.

