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THE LOOMING THREAT TO FEDERALISM AND DEMOCRATIC TENETS

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government has proposed the "One Nation, One Election" (ONOE) framework to synchronize Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections. While the proposal aims to improve fiscal and administrative efficiency, it poses several constitutional, democratic, and logistical challenges, which need detailed examination.

Historical Context of Simultaneous Elections

Simultaneous elections were a norm in India immediately after Independence. However, this practice was disrupted due to the imposition of Article 356, or President's Rule, which dismissed State governments and dissolved assemblies.

- **Imposition of Article 356:**
The misuse of Article 356 began with Kerala in 1959, where the dismissal of the State government reflected federal overreach. This practice became a recurring issue, disrupting the balance between the Centre and the States.
- **Ambedkar's View:**
B.R. Ambedkar described Article 356 as a "dead letter." Despite this caution, it has been invoked over 130 times, frequently altering State-level political stability and Union-State relations.

Impact of Defection and Anti-Defection Law

Defections have been a significant factor destabilizing State governments, often leading to unconstitutional regime changes.

- **Defections and Political Instability:**
Legislators switching parties disrupt governance and undermine the will of the electorate. This practice erodes trust in democratic institutions.
- **Anti-Defection Law:**
Introduced through the 52nd Amendment in 1985, the law penalizes individual defectors. However, it has loopholes, such as delays in the Speaker's decision-making and allowances for group defections, which dilute its effectiveness.

Challenges with the ONOE Framework

Implementing ONOE entails complex constitutional, democratic, and logistical issues, which raise concerns about its feasibility and implications.



1. Constitutional and Governance Implications:

- ONOE necessitates amendments to Articles 83 and 172 of the Constitution, which guarantee fixed five-year terms for Parliament and State Assemblies.
- To align election cycles, the tenure of some State governments might need to be curtailed or extended, undermining State autonomy and violating the federal spirit.

2. Democratic Concerns:

- **Voter Perception:**
Simultaneous elections may blur the distinction between national and State-level issues, making it harder for voters to evaluate governments independently.
- **Dilution of Democratic Principles:**
Abbreviated terms for certain governments during midterm ONOE cycles may compromise the principle of “one person, one vote, one value.”
- **Historical Lessons:**
Political turbulence during the mid-1990s highlights that ONOE could paradoxically lead to frequent elections in short intervals, negating its cost-efficiency objectives.

3. Logistical and Administrative Challenges:

- **Scale of Elections:**
Managing elections for over 900 million voters, covering Lok Sabha, State Assemblies, and local bodies, would overwhelm electoral resources and institutions.
- **Voter Fatigue:**
The complexity of simultaneous voting could confuse and exhaust voters, diminishing electoral participation and effectiveness.

Systemic Issues Requiring Attention

Before implementing ONOE, India must address deeper systemic issues that impact governance and federalism.

1. Misuse of Article 356:

Despite judicial interventions like the landmark S.R. Bommai case judgment, which emphasized State autonomy, Article 356 continues to be misused to dismiss governments for political gains.

2. Anti-Defection Law Reforms:

The existing framework requires significant reforms to plug loopholes, such as expediting Speaker decisions on defections and addressing mass defections that destabilize governments.

3. Strengthening Federalism:



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India's federal structure acknowledges the country's diversity and plurality. The ONOE framework, if implemented without safeguards, could centralize power at the expense of State autonomy, eroding the federal character of governance.

Conclusion

- While ONOE offers potential benefits such as cost and administrative efficiencies, its implementation could pose risks to India's democratic and federal framework. The challenges of constitutional amendments, voter independence, and logistical complexities must be addressed before proceeding.
- Democratic governance in India must uphold the principles of federalism, ensuring an equitable partnership between the Centre and the States. Only through systemic reforms and careful deliberation can ONOE align with the essence of India's Constitution and democratic ethos.

Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-looming-threat-to-federalism-and-democratic-tenets/article69058650.ece>

