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The Dualism of Democratic Consolidation: A Socio-Legal and Federal Assessment of the "One Nation, One Election" (ONOE) Framework in India

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Abstract: *The idea of "One Nation One Election" (ONOE) has emerged as one of the most progressive and significant constitutional and electoral reform measures in the contemporary India. The aim of the framework is to ensure coherence of the elections to Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies, reduce election cycles and provide a common electoral calendar. They argue that simultaneous elections would help to reduce public expenditure, reduce administrative hassles in the Ministries, streamline the policy process and optimise governance. But critics say that the scheme may have a negative impact on federalism, political representation in the regions and democratic accountability. This paper examines critically the ONE approach with a socio-legal and federal perspective. The study is based on a doctrinal and analytical approach, a method that involves a detailed analysis of the constitution, the reports of the Election Commission, the reports of the Parliamentary committees, judicial decisions and scholarly works. Further, the proposed changes to the Constitution under Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill, 2024, and how it will affect the parliamentary democracy and the federal structure of the Constitution are discussed. The results show that although ONOE can lead to administrative and economic advantages, it raises significant constitutional problems in regards to legislative term, early dissolution of assemblies, the Basic Structure Doctrine and the autonomy of states. The study concludes that to be successful, ONOE must involve a wide range of political consensus, constitutional protection, and institutional safeguards for maintaining democratic pluralism and federal balance.*

Keywords: *One Nation One Election, Federalism, Democratic Consolidation, Constitutional Reform, Electoral Governance, Parliamentary Democracy.*

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INTRODUCTION

India as a large democracy is governed by a complex electoral system, considering its federal structure, socio-cultural differences and the emphasis of the constitution on representative government. Elections have been the cornerstone of democratic practices and political accountability since 1952, the first general elections. The Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies were elected simultaneously in the beginning but, due to political instability and early dismissal of the legislatures, the regularity of the electoral cycle was disturbed after 1967. This has given rise to the phenomenon of elections at different levels in India throughout most of the year and an almost permanent electoral atmosphere. The notion of "One Nation One Election" (ONOE)

is gaining ground as part of the electoral reforms agenda with the focus on bringing the elections across the country on a single platform and synchronizing them.

Recently, the ONOE has been in the news due to the High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections (HLCSE) and the Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill, 2024. The advantages of simultaneous elections are how it benefits the people on the public expenditure reduction, continuity of policy, efficient governance and lesser use of the Model Code of Conduct, say the proponents. They believe that a bicommunal elections cycle would allow governments to focus on long-term planning for development rather than on an election cycle. In addition, supporters regard ONOE as a tool that can increase the efficiency of administration, and help build stability in a political nation where numerous elections are conducted.

Despite some perceived advantages, the ONOE proposal has sparked a host of constitutional, political and socio-legal issues. Others say that synchronized elections can lead to the erosion of federalism, as they tend to focus political discourse more at the national level and less at State levels. Also, there has been a worry about the potential to undermine the political parties of the region, the lack of democratic accountability and the challenges confronted in coping with mid-term governments failures. Furthermore, the proposed changes are very broad and significant, and could be contested based on the Basic Structure Doctrine established by the Supreme Court of India. As an aspect of this, the present study strongly critically examines the dualism of ONOE which can be linked with good governance and democratic stability of a nation and possible implications of strengthening federal autonomy, strengthening constitutional governance and strengthening representative democracy. The study is an attempt to analyse socio-legal and federal analysis of whether ONOE is a progressive electoral reform or an attack on the basic tenets of the constitutional democracy in India.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. The 170th Report on Electoral Reforms by Law Commission of India (1999)

The Law Commission of India in its 170th Report was one of the first institutional groups to come up with the concept of simultaneous elections after the synchronization of the electoral process failed in the late 1960s. The report stressed the fact that regular elections not only require a lot of money but also create a major administrative strain and disruption of governance. It suggested taking up ways to have simultaneous elections, but keep democratic principles intact. But the report was the first to admit that "significant constitutional and legislative changes" would be required to accomplish this goal.

Draft Report on Simultaneous Elections, Law Commission of India 2018

The Draft Report on Simultaneous Elections studied the feasibility of ONEs in the constitutional, legal and operational aspects in great detail. The Commission has further expressed its opinion that the regular election would be extremely costly and time consuming, and also would affect the policy implementation due to the reiteration of Model Code of Conduct. It also noted many problems of Federalism, democratic accountability and parliamentary stability. The report found that there would need to be wide consensus on the political level and deep constitutional changes to make it happen.

3. Debroy and Desai (2017)

Simultaneous elections as a tool to bring governance efficiency were strongly recommended by Debroy and Desai in their policy analysis written for NITI Aayog. The authors believe that the election cycle has a negative effect on policy making because it leads to policy paralysis, increased public expenditure and decreased resources available for administration to allocate to

developmental activities. Their work is one of the most convincing bases for ONOE, and has contributed much to the debate on electoral reform.

4. Guha (2007)

In India After Gandhi, Ramachandra Guha examines the evolution of Indian democratic institutions and electoral systems over the years. He points out that the parallel elections in the early decades of the country's independence were not an intentional feature of the constitution but were more because of a single party's ascendancy. Guha says that the end of electoral synchronisation represented the pluralism and progress of Indian democracy.

5. Quraishi (2018)

S. Y. Quraishi, former chief election commissioner, raises an economic doubt over the oft-voiced argument for ONOE. He thinks that dealing with elections is a way to invest in accountability and participation in democracy rather than an administrative chore. Regular polls provide an opportunity for people to test and validate a democracy's responsiveness, Quraishi said. His work is a challenge to one of the efficiency-based arguments in support of simultaneous elections. The issues of accountability and federalism are highlighted again and again in recent public statements by Quraishi.

6. Chhokar (2019)

Jagdeep Chhokar's research interests are related to electoral behaviour and psychology of the voter. He thinks that concurrent elections encourage ‘party-line voting’ at both the national and state levels. It can negatively impact regional political formations, but positively impact national parties' electoral space. His results throw doubts on the political diversity and representative democracy in the Indian federal system.

7. Palshikar (2021)

Suhas Palshikar discusses the relationship between electoral competition and democratic representation. He suggests the concept of the "nationalization effect": the effect of national political stories in simultaneous elections on the election agenda. This may make it more challenging for regional political interests to assert themselves, and for state-level issues to have an impact on election outcomes, Palshikar said. In his essays he shows an opposition between efficiency of elections and political pluralism.

8. Bhatia (2021)

Gautam Bhatia dissects the meaning of ONE from a constitutional standpoint and what it means in light of the Basic Structure Doctrine. He argues that the main constitutional principles of federalism, parliamentary democracy and representative government cannot be ignored when considering electoral reforms. Bhatia has warned that legislatures are given fixed terms and that there is a risk of the assemblies being dissolved and democratic accountability being limited. His work provides a valuable constitutional interpretation of ONOE.

9. Mustafa (2023)

In this article, Faizan Mustafa examines critically the parliamentary feasibility of the ONE in India. He says that the issue of synchronization could occur when the governments are not in majority before their term expires. Constructive votes of no confidence and extended periods of President's Rule, among others, can result in breaches of democratic norms and state autonomy," says Mustafa. His study points to some outstanding constitutional questions that are left unanswered under ONOE.

10. Parthasarathy (2023)

Nivedha Parthasarathy provides a comprehensive examination of ONOE, looking at its historical origins, constitutional considerations and administrative feasibility. The research suggests that while having concurrent elections may result in reduced expenses and greater efficiency, there are significant concerns about constitutional changes, electoral systems and democratic representation. The author emphasises the need for institutional preparedness for implementation.

11. Kumar and Kumar (2024)

Kumar and Kumar speak about ONE in the context of democratic governance and constitutional reform. Considering the law, politics and administration implications of synchronized elections, they observe that although the elections have the potential to increase efficiency, ONOE can pose serious problems for the federal structure of India. The authors stress the importance of good governance and democratic accountability and representation at the regional level.

12. Singh and Dahuja (2025)

Singh and Dahuya talk about ONOE in the context of cooperative federalism. Their work looks at the possibility of improving the cooperation of Union and States by holding simultaneous elections, or whether simultaneous elections can bring political power to the Union. There is no single solution to ONOE, and the authors conclude that the federal balance of the Constitution and the autonomy of the states which it is hoped ONOE will bring will not prevent the loss of autonomy.

Research Gap

The present studies on One Nation One Election focus on three major aspects, namely, administration, expenditure of money and feasibility of the constitution. Some papers refer to the benefits that could accrue from aligned polls; others focus on issues of federalism, democratic accountability and regional political representation. However, there is little scholarly effort that has been directed towards an integrated socio-legal and federal approach to ONOE that would also include the constitutional doctrine, democratic consolidation, electoral behaviour and Centre-State relations.

Besides, the majority of studies that have been carried out have focused on one aspect of feasibility, either legal or political. The significance of ONOE in the process of democratic consolidation of a multi-ethnic federative polity such as India is not well explored. This study is designed to bridge that gap, and to undertake a thorough socio-legal and federal examination of the ONOE framework.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To study the ONOE proposal from a constitutional perspective.
2. To examine the constitution of the ONOE proposal.
3. To examine the implications of ONOE for federalism and Centre-State relationship.
4. To analyze socio-legal aspects of political participation and accountability.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the impact of ONOE on democracy in the aspects of responsibility and representation?
2. What changes to the constitution are necessary for this to come into effect?
3. ONOE is a strengthening or a weakening force of federalism in India?
4. How might simultaneous elections affect the voting habits and competitiveness of voters?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The method of this study is descriptive and analytical with a secondary source approach. The data have been obtained from the constitution, Law Commission Reports, publications of the Election Commission, reports of parliamentary committees, scholarly journals, books, government publications and judicial decisions.

The study uses content analysis and socio-legal interpretation to consider constitutional, political and federal implications of the ONOE framework. Other countries' examples of synchronized elections are also cited.

ANALYSIS

Historical Background

India conducted simultaneous elections in 1952, 1957, 1962, and 1967. Political turmoil and prematurely dissolved legislatures disrupted the cycle. Since then, elections have been held at various times, creating almost a continuous electoral cycle.

Constitutional Analysis

Some of these amendments must be made to Articles 83, 85, 172, 174, 324, 327 and possibly Article 356 to implement ONEs. The goal of the proposed insertion of Article 82A is to create a common electoral cycle.

One of the major constitutional issues is legislative tenure. Synchronization can involve lengthening or shortening the term of elected governments, and may generate issues of democratic legitimacy and electoral mandates.

Further, federalism and democracy has been identified as an integral part of the Basic Structure doctrine. Any amendment which is seen as attacking these ideas may be subject to constitutional challenges.

Democratic Consolidation Perspective

ONOE can help with democratic consolidation through continuity in policy development and decreasing governance shocks due to regular elections.

Advantages include:

- ✓ Disorder among the voters.• Corruption of the ballot.
- ✓ Improved governance efficiency.
- ✓ Greater policy stability.

Voters are less likely to feel "election fatigue.

But in the process of democratic consolidation, there is also a need for accountability. Regular elections enable the people to judge governments and to voice discontent. Such opportunities can be diminished with synchronization.

Federalism and State Autonomy.

Regional parties have been an important voice in articulating local issues and concerns in the areas of language, culture, agriculture, employment and development. Coordinated elections could increase the salience of national political narratives in the electoral narrative, which diminishes the salience of regional concerns.

In the case of S.R. Bommai v Union of India, the Supreme Court recognized federalism as integral to the basic structure of the Constitution. Thus, any reform which significantly changes the Centre-State relations must be constitutionally considered.

- Electoral Behaviour and Political Representation

Empirical research shows that voters are more inclined to vote for the same political party in a simultaneous election. This ‘coattail effect' can reinforce national parties and make it harder for regional parties to do the same.

The book touches on electoral behaviour and political representation.The book deals with electoral behaviour and political representation.

A major challenge in the context of One Nation One Election (ONOE) is its effects on electoral behavior and political representation. There is some empirical evidence that voters generally vote for the same party at the national and state levels when the two are held at the same time. This phenomenon is often cited as the "coattail effect" or "nationalization effect" and could have a dramatic impact on Indian's multi-party political system.

National political stories during simultaneous elections might lighten the priority of local issues like agriculture, local infrastructure, job creation, language rights and developmental issues specific to the state. As a result, voters might be more likely to vote on national leadership issues and national policy agendas rather than on local governance issues when they vote.

The possible consequences are:

Limited political diversity: national parties may win elections in several states.

- Political fragmentation of regional parties, that play an important role in voicing local needs, articulating local identities.

Reduction in competitive pluralism through a greater centralisation of political power in the hands of a few national political formations.

Nationalization of electoral mandates: electoral results becoming more national than state-specific political preferences.

Such developments can impact the representative nature of Indian democracy by diminishing the room for local/regional political concerns and voices.

Administrative and economic implications.

The main reason which has been advanced by the advocates of ONOE is the improvement of administrative efficiency and the cutting down of the cost incurred in the conduct of elections. The frequent elections in India are due to the staggered expiry of terms of the various State Legislative Assemblies and Parliament. This leads to the recurrent use of administrative machinery, security personnel and financial resources throughout the year.

It is expected that simultaneous elections will minimise costs in the management of elections. The Election Commission, state administrations and security agencies would only have to mobilize resources once in a common electoral period, not again for each election.

The important administrative and economic benefits are:

Lower deployment expenses of security forces; the deployment of paramilitary and police forces would be for one national election rather than several elections over several years.

↓ Reduce spending on election management, which involves printing electoral materials, transporting them, arranging polling, manning polling stations, awareness creation for voters, and logistical support.

Less disruption as per Model Code of Conduct (MCC). The MCC is currently being implemented multiple times after the announcement of elections, and sometimes this takes away the decision-making status on policies, projects, welfare schemes and administrative approvals.

Efficient and effective use of administrative resources, so that government departments can devote more time to governance and development and not to constantly preparing for elections.

Supporters say these benefits would help ensure governance continuity and allow governments to plan for the future. But critics warn that financial savings or administrative convenience would not necessarily constitute a measure of democratic participation and accountability. Elections are not just administrative tasks, they are also tools for democratic participation, representation and public accountability.

Findings

The analysis of constitutional provisions, scholarly literature, committee reports, and policy documents reveals the following major findings:

1. ONOE can substantially reduce election-related expenditure

The conduct of elections at different intervals requires repeated deployment of financial, administrative, and security resources. Simultaneous elections can reduce recurring expenditure incurred by the Election Commission of India, state governments, and security agencies. Consolidating electoral processes into a single cycle may result in significant savings in public funds and administrative resources.

2. Simultaneous elections may improve governance continuity

Frequent elections often lead to repeated implementation of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), which can delay policy decisions and development projects. A synchronized electoral cycle may allow governments to focus more consistently on governance, long-term planning, and policy implementation without recurring electoral interruptions.

3. Significant constitutional amendments are necessary

The implementation of ONOE cannot be achieved without substantial constitutional reforms. Amendments to provisions relating to the tenure of Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies, premature dissolution, and electoral management would be required. Such amendments involve complex constitutional and legal considerations.

4. Federalism remains the principal constitutional challenge

One of the most significant concerns associated with ONOE is its impact on India's federal structure. State governments derive legitimacy from independent electoral mandates, and synchronization may affect the autonomy of states. Any reform that appears to centralize political authority could be viewed as inconsistent with the federal spirit of the Constitution.

5. Regional political parties may face structural disadvantages

Simultaneous elections tend to increase the influence of national political narratives and leadership personalities. This may reduce the visibility of regional issues and weaken the electoral prospects of regional political parties. Consequently, the political diversity that characterizes India's federal democracy could be adversely affected.

6. Democratic accountability may be weakened due to reduced electoral frequency

Frequent elections provide citizens with regular opportunities to evaluate governments and express political preferences. Under ONOE, these opportunities become less frequent, potentially reducing the mechanisms through which voters hold governments accountable between electoral cycles.

7. Managing mid-term governmental collapses remains unresolved

A major challenge arises when a government loses majority support before completing its term. The ONOE framework has not yet provided a universally accepted solution for dealing with hung assemblies, coalition breakdowns, or successful no-confidence motions without disrupting the synchronized electoral cycle.

8. Large-scale logistical preparations are essential

India possesses the world's largest electorate, making simultaneous elections an enormous administrative exercise. Successful implementation would require additional Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), VVPAT units, polling personnel, security arrangements, storage facilities, and technological infrastructure. These requirements involve considerable planning and investment.

9. Constitutional validity may be tested under the Basic Structure Doctrine

Federalism, democracy, representative government, and parliamentary accountability have been recognized by the Supreme Court as elements of the Constitution's Basic Structure. Any constitutional amendment introducing ONOE may face judicial scrutiny if it is perceived to undermine these foundational constitutional principles.

10. Broad political consensus is indispensable for successful implementation

Given the far-reaching constitutional, political, and administrative implications of ONOE, successful implementation requires consensus among the Union Government, State Governments, political parties, constitutional experts, and electoral institutions. Without broad political agreement, the reform may face significant legal and political resistance.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✓ Adopt a phased approach rather than immediate nationwide implementation.
- ✓ Introduce constitutional safeguards protecting state autonomy.
- ✓ Develop mechanisms for handling mid-term government collapses.
- ✓ Strengthen consultation with state governments and regional parties.
- ✓ Conduct pilot implementation before nationwide adoption.
- ✓ Enhance voter awareness regarding implications of synchronized elections.
- ✓ Ensure independent review by constitutional experts and the Election Commission.

CONCLUSION

The ONOE framework represents a transformative electoral reform initiative capable of reshaping India's democratic architecture. While the proposal offers significant administrative and economic advantages, it simultaneously raises important concerns regarding federalism, democratic accountability, and constitutional governance.

The study demonstrates that the debate surrounding ONOE extends beyond electoral management and enters the realm of constitutional identity. The challenge lies in balancing efficiency with representation, governance with accountability, and national integration with federal diversity. Ultimately, the success of ONOE will depend upon its ability to preserve the foundational

constitutional values of democracy, federalism, pluralism, and representative government while achieving the administrative objectives for which it has been proposed.

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