ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION: A STEP TOWARD EFFICIENCY OR A CHALLENGE TO FEDERALISM

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ABSTRACT

The "One Nation, One Election" ONOE initiative proposes synchronized Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies, and local bodies of India to reduce costs, thereby improving governance efficiency and countering voter and political fatigue. Proponents tout it as a means to simplify governance, reduce disruption caused by frequent elections, and enhance voter participation. Critics say it would weaken federalism, regional representation, and the practical and constitutional intricacies of the exercise on a pan-Indian level. A High-Level Committee, headed by former President Shri Ram Nath Kovind, has proposed a multi-phase exercise that would call for amendments to the constitution, consolidation of electoral rolls, and augmentation of infrastructure. Historical precedents and global examples, such as Sweden and South Africa, underscore the feasibility of ONOE but also reveal challenges unique to India's scale and diversity. Success will depend on widespread political consensus, careful planning, and a commitment to preserving India's federal structure and democratic inclusivity.

Keywords-Election, Federalism, Security

INTRODUCTION

India, the world's largest democracy, boasts an electorate of over **900 million voters, spread across 28 states and 8 Union Territories,** is characterized by its vast and diverse electorate. Over the years, the country has continuously evolved its electoral practices to meet the demands of its population. One Nation, One Election (ONOE) is a concept gaining momentum, advocating for simultaneous elections at all levels of government—Lok Sabha (the national parliament), State Legislative Assemblies, and potentially local bodies. The core idea behind ONOE is to conduct all elections at the same time, reducing the frequency of electoral cycles, saving financial and administrative resources, and enhancing governance efficiency. India follows a staggered election model, where national and state elections are held at different times. This leads to elections nearly every year, with over **17 states** holding assembly elections between **2019 and 2023** alone. While staggered elections allow regional focus, they contribute to political and governance fatigue.

REFORM FOR SIMULTANEOUS ELECTIONS

To explore the feasibility of ONOE, a High-Level Committee (HLC) was constituted under the chairmanship of **Shri Ram Nath Kovind**, former President of India. The committee engaged in **191 days** of consultations, gathering insights from political parties, experts, and the public. Of the **47 political parties** consulted, **32 supported the concept**, while **80% of public respondents** also favored it. Experts, including former Chief Justices, Election Commissioners, and business organizations like **CII, FICCI, and ASSOCHAM**, emphasized the potential economic benefits of ONOE, particularly in mitigating the inflationary and disruptive effects of frequent elections.

Recommendations of the High-Level Committee

The HLC proposed a two-step approach for implementing simultaneous elections:

1. Simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies.

2. Municipal and Panchayat elections synchronized within **100 days** of national and state elections.

3. **Single electoral roll and electoral photo identity cards (EPIC)** for all levels of government.

One Nation One election in Indian and International Context

India initially held simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies in 1952, 1957, 1962, and 1967. However, India transitioned to staggered elections after the premature dissolution of several state governments and the Lok Sabha in 1968-69.

Between **2019 and 2023**, India conducted elections in **14 states**, covering over **400 million voters**. This fragmented electoral schedule ensures governance continuity in individual states but places significant pressure on national resources and frequently stalls government decision-making under the MCC

Countries like **Sweden, South Africa, and Indonesia** have implemented simultaneous elections at various levels of governance. Sweden holds national and local elections every four years, resulting in governance stability and reduced electoral costs. South Africa synchronizes national and provincial elections, streamlining the electoral process. Indonesia, a decentralized democracy, also conducts national and regional elections simultaneously, which maintains governance stability while minimizing election costs.

ECONOMIC REFORM BY ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION

1. Cost and Resource Efficiency

Elections in India are expensive. For instance, the **2019** Lok Sabha elections cost **₹60,000 crores**. ONOE could significantly reduce this expense by consolidating resources like polling booths, personnel, and security forces. Conducting elections once every five years would lead to substantial savings, and the money saved could be redirected toward public welfare programs and infrastructure development.

2. Economic and Governance Stability

Frequent elections lead to governance disruptions due to the MCC, which halts decision- making in poll-bound regions. ONOE would allow governments to function uninterrupted for their full terms, enabling them to focus on long-term projects and economic reforms. Stability in governance would also boost investor confidence, as political uncertainty is often a deterrent for investment.

3. Boost to Voter Participation and Reduced Political Fatigue

Frequent elections can overwhelm voters, leading to lower voter turnout. ONOE could consolidate voter engagement by holding a single major election every five years, potentially increasing turnout. It would also reduce political fatigue for parties and politicians, allowing them to focus more on governance.

4. Economic Benefits

The economic advantages of ONOE extend beyond cost savings. Frequent elections cause delays in public projects, economic reforms, and infrastructure development. A stable political environment created by synchronized elections would allow the government to implement its economic agenda without disruptions. Additionally, the reduction in political distractions could lead to higher investor confidence, fostering long-term economic growth.

CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

1. Impact on Federalism

A significant concern is ONOE's potential impact on India's federal structure. State elections often reflect regional priorities, while national elections focus on broader, country-wide concerns. Synchronising elections may shift voter focus toward national issues, marginalizing local concerns and reducing the influence of regional parties. Additionally, aligning state elections with national ones would require adjusting the terms of state legislatures, which could disrupt democratic mandates and create instability.

2. Logistical and Security Challenges

Holding simultaneous elections across India would require enormous resources. The Election Commission would need millions of additional Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and Voter-Verified Paper Audit Trails (VVPATs). Security forces would also need to be deployed simultaneously across all **29 states and 700+ districts**, putting immense pressure on law enforcement.

3. Marginalization of Regional Parties

ONOE could Favor national parties like the BJP and Congress, whose campaigns often overshadow regional narratives. Critics argue that simultaneous elections may shift voter attention toward national leaders, undermining the political diversity and representation of regional parties focusing on local issues.

4. Constitutional and Legal Hurdles

ONOE would require amendments to key constitutional provisions such as **Articles 83 and 172**, which govern the tenures of the Lok Sabha and state assemblies. Additionally, legal provisions under the Representation of the People Act would need revision to facilitate early or postponed elections.

CONCLUSION

One Nation, One Election offers a vision of streamlined governance, reduced election costs, and enhanced voter participation. While the potential benefits are compelling, the concept faces significant challenges in preserving India's federal structure, logistical complexities, and representation of regional parties. The recommendations of the High-Level Committee emphasize that careful planning, legal amendments, and political consensus are necessary for its success.

Implementing ONOE would require widespread consultation, commitment to democratic principles, and a focus on preserving India's diversity and inclusivity. If executed well,

ONOE could strengthen India's democratic framework, create a stable political environment, and enhance governance efficiency for the nation's benefit.

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