

REVIEW ARTICLE

Revisiting Electoral Reforms in India: Insights from the High-Level Committee on One Nation, One Election

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ABSTRACT

The proposal of One Nation, One Election (ONOE) has re-emerged as a significant electoral reform debate in India, aiming to synchronize elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. This paper revisits the idea through the lens of the High-Level Committee on One Nation, One Election chaired by Ram Nath Kovind. Drawing on the Committee's report, constitutional provisions, and comparative democratic practices, the study critically examines the rationale, feasibility, and implications of implementing simultaneous elections in India's federal polity. The paper argues that while ONOE promises administrative efficiency, cost reduction, and policy continuity by minimizing the frequency of elections and the repeated enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct, it also raises serious constitutional, political, and democratic concerns. These include challenges to federalism, the autonomy of states, the principle of representative accountability, and the risk of centralization of political power. By engaging with the Committee's recommendations, stakeholder responses, and judicial interpretations, the paper highlights the need for broad political consensus, constitutional amendments, and institutional safeguards. The study concludes that electoral reforms such as ONOE must balance efficiency with democratic pluralism, ensuring that reforms strengthen rather than dilute India's democratic foundations.

KEYWORDS

• One Nation • One Election • Electoral Reforms • High-Level Committee • Indian Constitution • Federalism • Democratic Governance • Model Code of Conduct • Simultaneous Elections

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INTRODUCTION

Electoral reforms have long been central to debates on strengthening democratic governance in India. As the world's largest democracy, India conducts elections at multiple levels—national, state, and local—across diverse political, social, and geographic contexts. Since the first general elections of 1951–52, the country has largely followed a staggered electoral cycle after the initial simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies were disrupted due to premature dissolutions. In recent years, the proposal for *One Nation, One Election* (ONOE) has resurfaced as a major reform initiative aimed at restoring synchronized elections across the country. The idea gained renewed political and policy traction under the Union Government and was formally examined by the High-Level Committee chaired by former President Ram Nath Kovind. The Committee was constituted to examine the feasibility of simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies, and potentially local bodies, and to recommend a framework for implementation. The Committee's report represents one of the most comprehensive institutional efforts to evaluate the constitutional, legal, administrative, and political dimensions of ONOE.

Proponents of simultaneous elections argue that frequent electoral cycles impose substantial financial burdens on the exchequer, disrupt governance due to the repeated imposition of the Model Code of Conduct, and divert administrative machinery from developmental priorities. They contend that synchronized elections would enhance policy stability, encourage long-term planning, reduce campaign expenditure, and minimize political polarization arising from continuous electoral mobilization. From this perspective, ONOE is framed as a reform aimed at improving governance efficiency and ensuring uninterrupted development.

However, critics raise important concerns regarding India's federal structure and parliamentary system. The Indian Constitution provides for separate electoral mandates at the Union and State levels, reflecting the autonomy and diversity of states within the federal framework. Simultaneous elections may require substantial constitutional amendments, particularly concerning Articles related to

the duration and dissolution of legislatures. Questions also arise regarding the handling of hung assemblies, mid-term dissolutions, and the democratic principle of accountability embedded in periodic elections. Critics argue that synchronization could privilege national narratives over regional issues, thereby affecting the representational balance within India's plural political landscape.

The debate around ONOE thus lies at the intersection of efficiency and federalism, stability and accountability, and centralization and democratic diversity. It compels a re-examination of foundational constitutional principles while also responding to contemporary governance challenges. The High-Level Committee's recommendations provide a structured framework to analyze these competing claims and assess the practical pathways toward implementation.

This paper revisits electoral reforms in India through a critical examination of the ONOE proposal and the insights offered by the High-Level Committee. By situating the debate within India's constitutional design, political economy, and comparative democratic experiences, the study seeks to evaluate whether simultaneous elections can serve as a viable reform mechanism without compromising the core values of Indian democracy.

The High-Level Committee President Ram Nath Kovind,

The High-Level Committee on *One Nation, One Election* (ONOE), chaired by former President Ram Nath Kovind, submitted its report after examining the feasibility of conducting simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies.

Highlights of the Committee Report

1. **Support for Simultaneous Elections:** The Committee recommended the phased implementation of simultaneous elections, arguing that frequent elections disrupt governance, increase public expenditure, and lead to repeated enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct.
2. **Two-Phase Implementation Model:** The report proposed:
 - **First phase:** Synchronization of elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies.

- **Second phase:** Alignment of elections to local bodies (Municipalities and Panchayats) within 100 days of national and state elections.

3. Constitutional Amendments Required:

The Committee suggested amendments to specific constitutional provisions relating to:

- Duration of legislatures
 - Dissolution procedures
 - President's and Governor's powers in case of hung assemblies
- It emphasized that constitutional safeguards must be built to protect federal principles.

4. Handling Mid-Term Dissolutions:

In case of a premature dissolution of the Lok Sabha or a State Assembly, the Committee recommended conducting elections for the remainder of the original term rather than a fresh full five-year term, to maintain synchronization.

5. Administrative and Logistical Preparedness:

The report assessed the readiness of the Election Commission, availability of EVMs and VVPATs, security forces, and administrative personnel. It concluded that while the transition would require significant planning and resources, it is administratively feasible.

6. Financial Implications:

The Committee argued that simultaneous elections would reduce long-term expenditure by minimizing repeated election-related costs.

7. Stakeholder Consultations:

The Committee consulted political parties, legal experts, former judges, and constitutional scholars. While some stakeholders supported ONOE for governance stability, others expressed concerns about federalism, regional representation, and democratic accountability.

The Committee concluded that simultaneous elections are constitutionally workable and administratively feasible, provided broad political consensus is achieved and necessary constitutional amendments are enacted. It framed ONOE as a reform aimed at strengthening governance efficiency while maintaining democratic integrity.

1. Political Party Support during Consultations

- The High-Level Committee solicited views from **62 political parties**.
- **47 parties responded** to the Committee's consultation process.
- Of those that responded:
 - **32 political parties supported** the idea of simultaneous elections.
 - **15 political parties opposed** the proposal.
- Some of the parties opposing included major parties like the **Congress, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), and Communist Party of India (Marxist)**, while parties such as the **Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)** and allied regional parties supported the proposal.

2. High-Level Committee Membership

The High-Level Committee comprised the following members:

1. **Ram Nath Kovind** – Chairman (Former President of India)
2. **Amit Shah** – Member (Union Minister of Home Affairs & Minister of Cooperation)
3. **Ghulam Nabi Azad** – Member (Former Leader of Opposition, Rajya Sabha)
4. **N.K. Singh** – Member (Former Chairman, 15th Finance Commission)
5. **Dr. Subhash C. Kashyap** – Member (Former Secretary General, Lok Sabha)
6. **Harish Salve** – Member (Senior Advocate)
7. **Sanjay Kothari** – Member (Former Chief Vigilance Commissioner)
8. **Arjun Ram Meghwal** – Special Invitee (Minister of State, Law & Justice)
9. **Dr. Niten Chandra** – Secretary to the Government of India and Secretary to the High-Level Committee

Total formal participants: 9 individuals (7 members + 1 special invitee + 1 secretary). One originally nominated member, **Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury**, later resigned and did not continue as part of the committee.

Government of India (High-Level Committee on ONOE)

The Government of India, through a High-Level Committee chaired by former President

Ram Nath Kovind, prepared an extensive report examining the **feasibility of conducting simultaneous elections** for the Lok Sabha and state **Legislative Assemblies**, as well as local bodies across India. The Committee was constituted on **September 2, 2023**, and submitted its findings to **President Droupadi Murmu** on **March 14, 2024** after **191 days** of analysis and consultations. The report runs over **18,626 pages** and is based on broad stakeholder engagement, expert inputs, and constitutional-legal studies.

Content and Recommendations

1. **Support for Simultaneous Elections.** The report strongly advocates restoring synchronized elections nationwide, beginning with **Lok Sabha and State Assembly polls** and subsequently aligning **municipal and panchayat elections within 100 days** of their conclusion. It says synchronization would reduce frequent election cycles that disrupt governance and development.
2. **Constitutional and Legal Framework:** The Committee stresses that implementing ONOE requires constitutional amendments. It proposes an enabling framework that maintains the basic structure of the Constitution while facilitating synchronization of electoral cycles. It also suggests introducing **Article 324A** to allow simultaneous elections across local bodies alongside central and state elections.
3. **Addressing Mid-term Dissolutions:** The report recommends that in the case of a **premature dissolution** of Parliament or a State Assembly, elections should still be held only for the remainder of the term to ensure global synchronization, rather than triggering a full fresh term.
4. **Administrative and Logistical Considerations:** It assesses logistical aspects such as the role of the **Election Commission of India**, the need for a **common electoral roll and voter identity card**, and coordination between central and state election authorities.
5. **Economic and Governance Implications:** The Committee argues that synchronized elections would optimize resources, reduce administrative costs, and mitigate disruptions arising from frequent

imposition of the Model Code of Conduct, contributing to improved governance and policy continuity.

6. **Phased Implementation Timeline:** While not prescribing a fixed start date, the report envisions that synchronized elections across all tiers could substantially be realized by **2029** with constitutional amendments and preparatory measures.

Submission and Government Action

The detailed report was formally handed over to the President, and subsequently placed before the **Cabinet** by the Government as a key step toward legislative action and broader consultations. The Government has also introduced constitutional amendment bills and sought referral to a **Joint Parliamentary Committee** to deliberate the recommendations further.

Challenges of Implementing One Nation, One Election in India

The proposal of *One Nation, One Election* (ONOE), as examined by the High-Level Committee chaired by former President **Ram Nath Kovind**, has generated wide-ranging debate in India's political and constitutional discourse. While the reform promises efficiency and governance continuity, its implementation faces several structural, constitutional, and democratic challenges.

1. Constitutional and Legal Challenges

One of the foremost challenges lies in the constitutional framework governing the tenure and dissolution of legislatures. The Indian Constitution provides for a five-year term for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, subject to premature dissolution. Implementing ONOE would require multiple constitutional amendments relating to Articles on the duration of legislatures, powers of the President and Governors, and procedures in cases of hung assemblies. Critics argue that frequent constitutional amendments for electoral convenience may undermine constitutional stability and the basic structure doctrine.

2. Federalism and State Autonomy

India's federal system recognizes the political autonomy of states, each with distinct electoral mandates and regional priorities. Synchronizing elections risks diluting the

federal spirit by aligning state political cycles too closely with national politics. Regional parties fear that ONOE could marginalize state-specific issues and strengthen central dominance, thereby weakening cooperative federalism.

3. Democratic Accountability and Representation

Regular elections function as mechanisms of democratic accountability, allowing voters to periodically evaluate governments. Under ONOE, reduced electoral frequency may limit citizens' ability to express approval or dissent through elections. There is also concern that simultaneous elections may nationalize electoral narratives, overshadowing local governance issues and reducing the representational diversity essential to India's plural democracy.

4. Handling Mid-Term Dissolutions

A critical operational challenge is addressing situations where governments fall before completing their full term. The Committee's recommendation to hold elections only for the remainder of the term raises questions about political stability and voter mandate. Short-term governments may lack legitimacy and policy continuity, potentially leading to governance uncertainty.

5. Political Consensus and Opposition

ONOE lacks broad-based political consensus. While several national and regional parties support the idea, many opposition parties view it as politically motivated and potentially biased toward larger national parties. The absence of consensus poses a significant challenge, as constitutional amendments require special parliamentary majorities and, in some cases, ratification by state legislatures.

6. Administrative and Logistical Constraints

Conducting simultaneous elections across India would demand unprecedented coordination among election authorities, security forces, and administrative machinery. Ensuring adequate availability of EVMs, VVPATs, trained personnel, and security arrangements remains a formidable task, especially in geographically vast and socially diverse regions.

7. Impact on Local Body Elections

Extending ONOE to Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies presents

additional complications, as these elections fall under state jurisdiction. Aligning them with national and state elections could interfere with constitutional provisions under the 73rd and 74th Amendments and disrupt grassroots democratic processes.

8. Judicial and Institutional Scrutiny

Any move toward ONOE is likely to face judicial review, particularly regarding its compatibility with constitutional principles such as federalism, representative democracy, and free and fair elections. Sustained judicial scrutiny may slow implementation and necessitate further institutional safeguards.

The challenges surrounding ONOE underscore the complexity of electoral reforms in India. While the High-Level Committee provides a structured roadmap, successful implementation depends on constitutional prudence, political consensus, and respect for India's democratic diversity. Without addressing these challenges comprehensively, ONOE risks prioritizing administrative efficiency over democratic depth.

CONCLUSION

The debate on *One Nation, One Election* (ONOE) represents a crucial moment in India's ongoing discourse on electoral reforms and democratic governance. As examined through the recommendations of the High-Level Committee chaired by former President Ram Nath Kovind, the proposal seeks to address concerns related to governance efficiency, escalating electoral expenditure, and frequent policy disruptions caused by recurrent elections. The Committee's report provides a comprehensive institutional framework that revives the historical precedent of simultaneous elections while adapting it to contemporary political and administrative realities.

However, the analysis reveals that ONOE is not merely an administrative or logistical reform but a deeply constitutional and political transformation. While the promise of reduced costs, administrative efficiency, and continuity in governance is appealing, these benefits must be carefully weighed against the potential implications for federalism, democratic accountability, and political pluralism. India's constitutional design deliberately accommodates diversity through staggered electoral cycles, enabling states to

reflect regional aspirations independent of national political narratives. Any move toward synchronization, therefore, must preserve this delicate balance. The High-Level Committee's recommendations – particularly those related to phased implementation, handling mid-term dissolutions, and constitutional amendments – offer pragmatic solutions but require broad political consensus and institutional safeguards. Without inclusive dialogue and the participation of states, opposition parties, and civil society, ONOE risks being perceived as a top-down reform rather than a democratically negotiated consensus. Judicial scrutiny and adherence to the basic structure doctrine further underscore the need for constitutional caution.

In conclusion, revisiting electoral reforms through the lens of ONOE highlights the tension between efficiency-driven governance reforms and the normative foundations of democracy. The success of ONOE, if pursued, will depend not only on administrative preparedness but also on its ability to strengthen democratic legitimacy, respect federal autonomy, and enhance citizen participation. Electoral reform in India must ultimately serve the larger goal of deepening democracy, ensuring that efficiency complements – rather than compromises – the representative and plural character of the Indian political system.

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