

*People Power***Long-term Public Good vs Short-term Political Costs**

One of the great challenges in a democracy is how to reconcile the long-term public good with the short-term political price to be paid. Most sensible public policy decisions have a slow rate of social pay off, but involve instant political losses. Leadership is essentially the ability to persuade people to accept the temporary pain for long-term gain. While there is no substitute to visionary and inspiring leadership, the political culture of a society and the country's electoral system have a profound impact on this ability to reconcile public good with political costs.

The recent debate on simultaneous elections to State Assemblies and Lok Sabha brings this issue to the fore. It does not require great constitutional wisdom to recognize that our Westminster model of parliamentary executive, combined with federal system can never guarantee simultaneous polls for long. Even if we overcome the short-term problems and synchronise the elections at state and national levels, mid-term polls can never be ruled out with certainty.

But the remark of Chief Election Commissioner Lyngdoh that simultaneous polls cannot be held because of security concerns is a severe indictment of our democratic process. That we have come to a stage over the past two decades when vast armies of security personnel have to be moved from place to place at enormous expense and effort in order to maintain peace and order during polling in several states is a testimony to the distortions that crept into our system. The issue is not whether we can spare over a million policemen to conduct elections. Can democracy be meaningful if habitual use of force, terror, deceit and inducement determines the outcome of elections?

Our democracy is alive and kicking. There is genuine political competition; ruling parties and powerful candidates often lose the elections; there is constant change of players with half the incumbents being unseated in every election; the verdict broadly reflects public opinion; and there is constant political churning. But a closer look at our electoral scene reveals disturbing trends of violence, criminalization, money power and deceit. Clearly the past two decades have witnessed heightened political contention and dramatic rise in violence and illegitimate money power in elections. And yet our democracy is resilient. A system of compensatory errors ensures that the malpractices of a candidate are neutralised by his rival! Added to that, the strength of Election Commission, neutrality of public officials, and a tradition of governments not interfering in electoral process have ensured some sanity in our politics.

But the fact is politics has become big business. Often individuals and families with abnormal money power, acquired through political patronage or corruption, are unassailable in the electoral arena. In many constituencies these modern fiefdoms hold sway with money power, political contacts, caste mobilization and criminal links. All major parties are forced to depend on such individuals to enhance their chance of success in the first-past-the-post-system. Once such persons are elected, they seek multiple returns on investment through influence peddling, state patronage and control over public

purse. Parliamentary debate, rational public discourse and sensible policies are rendered largely irrelevant.

While simultaneous election at all levels may not be feasible within Westminster model, we can no longer ignore certain serious questions plaguing our polity. We have to address these important issues on the basis of what is said; not deflect them on grounds of who said it. We need to recognize the genuine problems of governance, and evolve mechanisms which do not allow public good to be held hostage to the short-term quest for power and patronage. We need to make power work for people, and not for private aggrandizement.

What, then, needs to be done? First, it is possible to fill casual vacancies to legislative office through election by local government representatives instead of by-elections. Simple changes can accomplish this, and avoid the need for expensive by-elections which distract attention from governance

Second, the real problem of governance is in states. Honesty and survival in power are increasingly incompatible in our parliamentary executive model. The executive is captive in the hands of legislators whose primary concern is with patronage and spoils of office. Today, government's accountability to legislature is but a myth. A government with a captive majority is unassailable, and there is an unholy alliance between the executive and legislature. We need clear separation of powers and direct election of the head of government. Once it is certain that power cannot be divorced from people's mandate, the nature of government will undergo a transformation. The legislature will be elected directly, and will control the budget, law-making and key appointments, and will exercise oversight functions. A directly elected executive in states can always be kept under check by the union government and constitutional functionaries. Such separation of powers at the union level is both unnecessary and undesirable. Fears of majoritarian domination and genuine concerns about authoritarian tendencies of a directly elected head of state at national level who is also the supreme commander of armed forces cannot be dismissed lightly. The quasi-authoritarian emergency between 1975 and 77 taught us never to underestimate the authoritarian impulses of the union executive.

Third, the union executive can be made more stable by introducing the practice of constructive no confidence motion, whereby a government can be voted out only if an alternative is in place. Article 67 of the German Basic Law can be the model we can adopt. This does not guarantee fixed term of the House, since a government without majority support cannot get bills passed or budget approved. However, it will curb impulsive no-confidence motions.

Finally, we need to break the stranglehold of semi-feudal fiefdoms on our polity. Good and honorable candidates must have realistic chances of success at the polls. Scattered minorities must get fair representation. For this, we need to adopt a model of mixed proportional representation whereby a party will gain legislative presence in proportion to its vote. In order to prevent fragmentation of our polity, a reasonable threshold, say 10% vote in a major state, should be imposed for gaining representation. Internal party

democracy, and nomination of candidates through secret ballot are the essential pre-requisites of a proportional system of election.

Given foresight and good will, these reforms are well within our reach. The crisis of governance which has become the hall mark of our polity can be effectively addressed only if we embark on these sensible reforms quickly. Short term, knee-jerk responses will only camouflage the crisis, and further retard our democratic evolution and economic growth.

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