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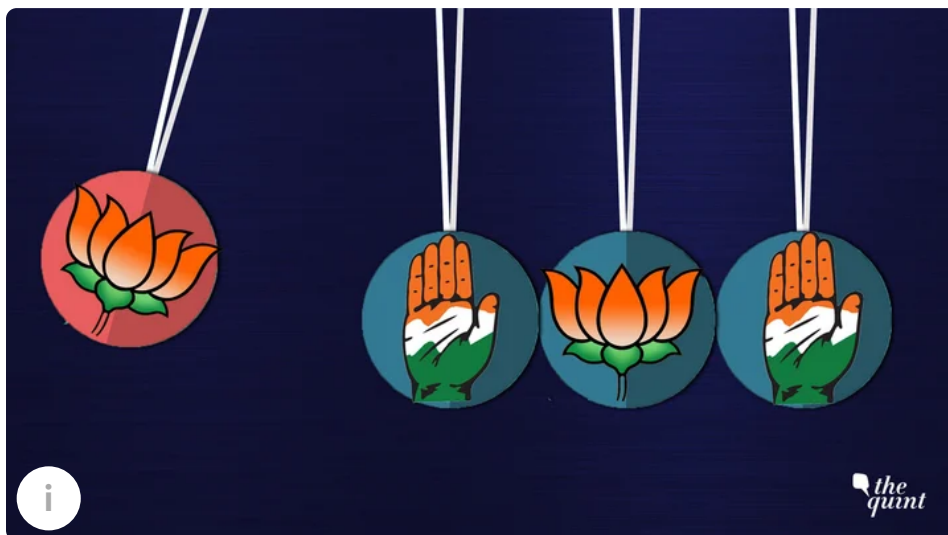
# Post K'taka, Will Modi Push for Simultaneous Elections?

The sub-text to the debate on simultaneous elections is that BJP wants to further centralise power.

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**OPINION**

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*(This is the first part of a [two-part series](#) on simultaneous elections.)*

In 2012, watching Manmohan Singh struggling with a disorderly coalition, an obstreperous cabinet, and a host of powerful state chief ministers, I wrote that he was the [lone prime minister in a nation of presidents](#). In 2014, on the eve of his election as prime minister, I predicted that Narendra Modi would be [more presidential in ambition and action](#).

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**That has come to pass. Most of us agree that Modi is the strongest prime minister we have had since Indira Gandhi. Will he equal, and surpass, her concentration of power?**

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Even if the Karnataka Congress-Janata Dal (Secular) coalition lasts its full term, under Modi the Bharatiya Janata Party has come to dominate our political landscape in a manner not seen since the first two decades after Independence when the

Congress party was all-powerful. Coincidentally, those were also the two decades when India held simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State assemblies – in 1951-52, 1957, 1962 and 1967.

That era of one-party rule ended with the rise of “anti-Congressism”, the 1969 split in the Congress party, the fall of several state governments, and even the early dissolution of the Lok Sabha by Indira Gandhi in 1971. Ever since, we have lived in perpetual election mode. There have been 25 state elections since 2014 and only four of them – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Odisha and Sikkim – were held simultaneously with the parliamentary elections.

The BJP’s ascendancy has been accompanied by a rising chorus of calls for a return to simultaneous elections to parliament and state assemblies. At every opportunity, Modi has said simultaneous elections will reduce the associated disruption, administrative preoccupation, cost and corruption. Will they? The 2014 elections sprawled across a dozen phases and six weeks. If all 29 states and six union territories voted for their legislatures along with the Lok Sabha, it would take at least two or three months to complete the humongous exercise. During that period, policymaking will be

frozen and governance will be on autopilot.

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## A Million Booths, an Ocean of Ballots

Even without state elections, one former chief election commissioner (CEC) told me, the 2019 general election will have a million voting booths. Each booth will need to be manned by five officials. About a million and a half paramilitary forces will have to be deployed to guard the election. More than 900 million adults will be eligible to vote (553 million voted in 2014).

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## Simultaneous elections would add up to the world's biggest logistical, administrative, security and technological challenge.

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There were 464 parties and 8,251 candidates in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. The Election Commission lists a total of 2,119 registered parties nationwide. The vast majority will contest at the state level; some are defunct or consistently win zero seats.

To be fair to Modi, the BJP's 2014 manifesto vowed the party would push for simultaneous elections.



Dark  
Mode

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hung assembly caused a stand-off where the Supreme Court had to intervene.

In July 2016, *The Indian Express* reported that the then CEC, HS Brahma, had in a 28 January 2015 note recorded a call from Nripendra Misra, Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister, saying there was a “strong feeling of having simultaneous elections... He mentioned that the repetitive state elections of all the 36 states and UTs causes lots of disruption, both in terms of implementation of

various schemes as well as the socio-economic scenario. There are states, for example erstwhile Andhra Pradesh, where between 2008-2013, there were 60 by-elections held on flimsy grounds, where (the) same candidate resigns and is re-elected after (a) few months. This causes loss of public confidence besides tremendous financial cost to the state.”

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## Simultaneous Polls May Not Happen Overnight

This direct approach was highly unusual. A year before his appointment to the PMO, in April 2013, Misra, then the director of the Public Interest Foundation, co-authored a paper on electoral reforms that included proposals on strengthening the Election Commission, regulating political parties and their funding, and curbing criminality amongst candidates. Interestingly, that paper does not talk of simultaneous elections.

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## Brahma and other Election Commission

## **officials have said simultaneous elections are doable – if the logistics and resources can be marshalled.**

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Now that Karnataka is hopefully out of the way, a bunch of state elections is scheduled in December-January in Mizoram, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, a few months before the next Lok Sabha polls. Will Modi seize the chance, bring forward parliamentary elections, and bunch them with as many state polls as possible?

Not very likely, said a senior official who knows the prime minister's mind. Simultaneous elections will have to wait on the outcome of the 2019 general election, he said, and "on the political will and consensus". So we may have some years to go for "one nation, one election", as the prime minister likes to say. On Thursday, a newspaper report said the EC, in a letter to the Law Commission, had proposed "one year one election" as a first step to the holy grail – in other words, hold all the elections due in a year at the same time by 'tweaking' the Representation of the People Act, 1951.

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Subhash C Kashyap, a constitutional expert, and former CEC SY Quraishi, who has said simultaneous elections are “desirable but not feasible”, both concede that the government (presumably at the centre) will have more than four and a half clear years for more governance. “Get it all out in one burst,” Quraishi told me. All the drama, the rivalry, the bad blood, the abuse, the hate.

The sub-text to the feverish debate on simultaneous elections is that the BJP wants to assert its supremacy and further centralise power. Feeding into this scenario are the official and quasi-official studies on the subject. A [Parliamentary Standing Committee report](#) in December 2015 was supportive of the idea; so was a [NITI Aayog ‘discussion paper’](#) in late 2016 authored by Bibek Debroy and Kishore Desai; as also a [Draft Working Paper](#) issued in April by the 21st Law Commission headed by retired Supreme Court Justice BS Chauhan, whose term ends in August.



The pressure is mounting.

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