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ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL OPPOSITION IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Ajmeera Murali Krishna
Department of Political Science and International Relationas, Pondicherry Central University, Puducherry.

Abstract
An vital part of the Indian political system is electoral democracy, which gives people the chance to choose their representatives and take part in the political process. India has established a parliamentary democratic system based on periodic elections, political pluralism, universal adult suffrage, and constitutional institutions since gaining its independence. By challenging government policies, advocating for alternative political interests, and defending the tenets of representative government, political opposition plays a crucial role in upholding democratic accountability. However, there are a number of obstacles facing modern Indian electoral politics, such as unequal access to political resources, the impact of the media and money, political polarization, institutional independence, and the shifting dynamics between the opposition and ruling parties. Important discussions on the caliber of electoral competition and the operation of democratic institutions have been sparked by these changes. The relationship between electoral democracy and political opposition in modern India is examined in this essay. It examines the fundamental issues facing democratic competition, the evolving role of opposition parties, the significance of parliamentary accountability, and the constitutional underpinnings of electoral democracy. The study uses an empirical and analytical strategy based on secondary sources, academic literature, election-related articles, and constitutional laws. It contends that real political rivalry, institutional accountability, civil rights, and equal chances for political involvement are all necessary for an electoral democracy to operate effectively. Therefore, bolstering democratic government in India requires a proactive and effective opposition.

Keywords: Electoral Democracy, Political Opposition, Indian Democracy, Electoral Competition, Political Accountability, Parliamentary System, Democratic Institutions, Political Pluralism.

Introduction

The majority of people understand democracy as a form of government where citizens exercise their power through constitutional institutions, representation, and involvement. Because it allows voters to select their representatives through regular elections, electoral democracy is one of the most significant types of democratic administration. Elections provide government's political legitimacy and create an accountable relationship between the electorate and elected officials. Following its independence in 1947, India embraced a parliamentary democracy. The foundations of representative governance, fundamental rights, universal adult suffrage, and autonomous constitutional institutions were formed by the Indian Constitution, which went into effect on January 26, 1950. In a recently independent and socially diverse nation, the first general election, held in 1951 and 1952, marked a major advancement in the formation of democratic institutions.

Political competition, a multiparty system, federal government, and constitutional representation are characteristics of the Indian democratic system. In order to create governments, mobilize people, and articulate public demands, political parties are crucial. Political opposition is equally significant within this framework since it challenges the government's policies and decisions and offers alternative

political options. The opposition in a parliamentary democracy is more than just a collection of non-governing political parties. It is a crucial democratic institution that supports political transparency, public accountability, and legislative discourse. An effective opposition can challenge government decisions, highlight administrative flaws, and offer different approaches to policy.

Nonetheless, there have been a number of significant shifts in electoral struggle in modern Indian politics. The nature of political engagement has changed due to the increasing significance of leadership-centered campaigns, political polarization, social media, campaign funding, and media communication. The circumstances in which opposition parties function and their capacity to carry out their democratic duties have come under review as a result of these developments.

Electoral Democracy in India

India's representative political system is based on electoral democracy. It gives people the constitutional right to choose their governments and hold elected officials responsible. The principles of political equality, periodic elections, political pluralism, and universal adult suffrage form the foundation of the Indian electoral system. The institutional foundation for electoral democracy is established by the Constitution. The Election Commission of India is tasked with overseeing, directing, and controlling elections under Article 324. Elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies are based on adult suffrage, according to Article 326. These clauses show how the constitutional framework places a high value on voting and representative government.

Constitutional Foundations of Electoral Democracy

The concepts of justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity are established in the Indian Constitution. The normative basis for democratic government is provided by these principles. Eligible citizens can use their right to vote without facing discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, gender, language, or economic position thanks to universal adult voter registration. It gives various social groups a chance to get involved in politics. The Council of Ministers' collective accountability to the Lok Sabha is established under the parliamentary system. The government will always be answerable to elected officials thanks to this setup. Parliament, the judiciary, and the Election Commission are examples of constitutional institutions that support democratic processes and constitutional governance.

Evolution of Electoral Politics in India

First phase: Dominance of the Congress Party (1952–1967)

The Indian National Congress dominated Indian electoral politics in the early decades. Both nationally and in a number of states, the Congress party was crucial to the establishment of governments. Opposition parties, however, took part in elections and progressively created alternative political platforms.

Second phase: Emergence of competitive politics (1967–1989)

A major transformation in Indian politics occurred with the general elections of 1967. Non-Congress governments emerged as a result of electoral failures for Congress in a number of states. Basic concerns regarding political freedom, civil liberties, and democratic accountability were also brought up during the 1975–1977 Emergency. The significance of electoral choice in shifting administrations was illustrated during the general election of 1977.

Third phase: Coalition politics and multiparty competition (1989–2014): Following 1989, coalition governments, regional parties, and federal political alliances became increasingly significant. Regional

political forces had a major part in the establishment of national governments, and political struggle became more varied.

Fourth phase: Leadership-centred electoral competition (2014 onwards)
Since 2014, national leadership, political communication, digital campaigning, and centralized campaign tactics have received more attention in Indian electoral politics. Another example of the ongoing significance of coalition politics was the Lok Sabha election of 2024. The National Democratic Alliance won a parliamentary majority, while the BJP won 240 seats. With 99 seats won, the Congress increased the number of opposition members in Parliament.

Role of the Election Commission of India
In order to have free and fair elections, the Election Commission of India is crucial. It is in charge of creating electoral rolls, overseeing elections, identifying political parties, and putting election-related laws into effect. During election campaigns, political parties and candidates can follow the Model Code of Conduct. It aims to uphold fairness throughout the election process, encourage appropriate political communication, and stop the abuse of official machinery. Public trust in the impartiality, independence, and openness of election management organizations is crucial to the legitimacy of electoral democracy.

Electoral Participation and Political Representation
A fundamental measure of democratic engagement is electoral participation. Voting allows citizens to alter the makeup of representative institutions and express their political choices. Political representation is very crucial in India because of its social diversity. Election participation and political mobilization are influenced by caste, gender, religion, class, language, and regional identities. Constitutional procedures for political representation are provided by the legislative seats reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Nonetheless, a crucial topic of discussion in democracy is the representation of women and other historically marginalized groups. Thus, electoral democracy must guaranty both meaningful representation in political institutions and voting participation.

Political Opposition in Contemporary India
A crucial element of parliamentary democracy is political opposition. It offers an institutional framework for challenging government decisions, policies, and administrative acts. Opposition parties in India carry out a number of crucial tasks, such as advocating for other political perspectives, voicing public concerns, scrutinizing government legislation, and holding the executive branch accountable. Election competition and public scrutiny of political power are guarantyd by the presence of opposition parties. Parliamentary democracy may lose crucial institutional critique and political accountability mechanisms in the absence of a strong opposition.

Changing Nature of Opposition Politics in India
Over time, opposition politics in India have seen significant transformation. The Congress had significant electoral dominance in the early decades following independence, while opposing parties were somewhat dispersed. The variety of political options progressively increased with the rise of socialist and communist parties, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, and local political groups.

The exploration concerning opposition unity and civil liberties were intensified during the Emergency. An established ruling party could be challenged by electoral collaboration, as demonstrated in 1977 when various opposition organizations united under the Janata Party. Opposition parties and regional political organizations gained prominence in national politics during the coalition era. They participated in federal political negotiations, coalition building, and parliamentary discussions.

Opposition Parties and Parliamentary Accountability

One of the most significant institutional venues for opposition activity is the parliament. Members of the opposition examine public spending, challenge government policies, and take part in legislative debates. The opposition can request explanations from ministers through parliamentary questions, motions, committee debates, and arguments. Because they offer chances for in-depth analysis of laws and government initiatives, parliamentary committees are especially significant. By pointing out potential flaws and offering substitute ideas, a strong opposition also improves the quality of legislation. Its involvement enhances argument and motivates the administration to provide justification for its choices.

Opposition and Electoral Competition

During elections, political opposition gives voters other options. It creates election manifestos, plans public gatherings, rallies supporters, and offers alternate forms of government. Citizens can assess governments' performance and select representatives based on their political preferences through electoral competition. Therefore, a key component of democratic equality is the ability of opposition parties to organize, communicate, and take part in elections. The Lok Sabha election of 2024 serves as an example of the ongoing significance of coalition building and electoral competition The difficulties and possibilities of opposition unity in India's multiparty system have also been studied in academic research on the 2024 election.

Opposition and Protection of Democratic Rights

Additionally, opposition parties participate in discussions about constitutional safeguards, minority representation, freedom of expression, and fundamental rights. They might demand legislative or administrative action and voice concerns about government policies that impact underprivileged groups. However, opposition parties are not solely responsible for defending democratic rights. A freedom of the press, a vibrant civil society, an independent court, and strong constitutional institutions are also necessary. When political opposition functions inside a system that upholds political liberties and permits citizens to voice opinion without fear, it takes on greater significance.

Issues and Challenges Facing Electoral Democracy and Political Opposition in India

India's electoral democracy and political opposition confront a number of obstacles that affect the standard of democratic governance and political accountability. Despite having a multiparty electoral system and a well-established constitutional framework, India's democracy is hampered by institutional issues, political polarization, unequal political resources, and restrictions on effective opposition. The growing influence of money power in political politics is one of the main obstacles. Significant financial resources are needed by political parties for their organizational, publicity, and electoral campaigns. The concept of equitable political competition may be impacted by unequal access to political money, which could lead to disparities in electoral possibilities. Concerns regarding accountability and public confidence are also raised by opaque contributions to politics.

The independence and integrity of democratic institutions present another significant obstacle. An important part of holding free and fair elections is the Election Commission of India. However, questions over institutional autonomy, transparency, and the fair application of electoral laws have grown in importance in today's political discourse. In a similar vein, conflict over electoral alliances, regional interests, leadership rivalry, and ideological differences make it difficult for political opposition parties to coordinate their efforts. Their capacity to offer a cohesive and successful alternative in legislative politics may be hampered by these restrictions.

The inadequate representation of women and marginalised communities remains another concern. Economic inequalities and social barriers can restrict their participation in political decision-making. Strengthening parliamentary accountability, ensuring transparent political funding, protecting civil liberties, promoting independent media and encouraging constructive opposition are essential measures. Ultimately, electoral democracy requires more than regular elections; it requires fair competition, institutional independence, political pluralism and meaningful public participation.

Strengthening Electoral Democracy and Political Opposition

Thorough institutional reforms, political accountability, and active public participation are necessary for bolstering electoral democracy and political opposition in India. Making sure political finance is transparent is one of the most crucial steps. To encourage accountability and lessen the impact of money power in elections, political parties should make their financial donations and expenses public. To guaranty free, fair, and transparent elections, it is also necessary to safeguard the independence and impartial operation of constitutional institutions, especially the Election Commission of India.

Strengthening the influence of opposition parties in parliamentary democracy is another crucial step. Instead of focusing only on criticizing the current government, opposition parties ought to actively engage in legislative committees, policy talks, and parliamentary debates. In addition to ensuring more government responsibility, constructive opposition can enhance the quality of legislation. Additionally, in order to give voters correct political information and avoid disinformation during election campaigns, it is crucial to safeguard media freedom and promote responsible online communication.

Greater political representation of women, minorities and marginalised communities should also be encouraged to make democratic institutions more inclusive. Civic education, voter awareness programmes and youth participation can strengthen democratic consciousness among citizens. Parliamentary institutions should provide adequate opportunities for discussion, questioning and scrutiny of government policies. Political parties must respect constitutional values, democratic principles and peaceful political competition. Ultimately, strengthening electoral democracy requires cooperation among political parties, independent institutions, civil society and citizens to establish a transparent, inclusive, accountable and participatory democratic system in India.

Conclusion

The two strongly connected foundations of the Indian democratic system are political opposition and electoral democracy. India has established a legislative and institutional framework since independence that allows its citizens to choose their representatives through regular elections and the universal adult franchise. Electoral democracy has persisted because of the multiparty system, federal framework, parliamentary institutions, and independent constitutional bodies.

Political opposition performs an essential function in this system by questioning government decisions, presenting alternative policies and protecting the principles of democratic accountability. It provides citizens with political choices and ensures that elected governments remain subject to public scrutiny. The historical development of Indian politics, particularly the Emergency period, the emergence of coalition governments and the changing nature of electoral competition, demonstrates the importance of political opposition in representative government.

However, there are a number of issues facing modern Indian electoral democracy, such as unequal access to financial resources, political polarization, concerns about institutional independence, media

freedom, disinformation, and insufficient representation of some social groups. Serious institutional and scholarly attention is needed for these issues. The significance of electoral choice in India is further demonstrated by the ongoing voter turnout, the existence of rival political parties, and the potential for election results to alter political representation.

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