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**DAILY EDITORIAL
ANALYSIS**

TOPIC

**MISSING SPOTLIGHT ON URBAN
LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS**

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MISSING SPOTLIGHT ON URBAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

In Context

- While the **ONOE debate focuses on synchronizing national and state elections**, it often neglects the crucial third tier of governance – the ULGs. This is a missed opportunity to **strengthen local democracy and ensure regular elections for these vital institutions**.

Constitutional Mandate vs. Reality

- Despite the **74th CAA mandating regular elections for ULGs**, they are frequently delayed, undermining the principles of decentralization and accountability. This disconnect between the constitutional provision and the reality on the ground needs urgent attention.
- Delays in ULG elections and the subsequent operationalization of elected councils hinder effective governance at the local level. This can **negatively impact the delivery of civic services** and the **overall quality of life for citizens**.

Significance of ULGs

- **Economic Backbone:** Cities contribute over 60% to India's GDP, with this share expected to grow further as urbanisation increases.
- **Population Growth:** Urban areas house nearly 40% of India's population, projected to exceed 50% by 2050.
- **Accelerators of Development:** Well-functioning ULGs promote economic growth, social welfare, and cultural development.

Reasons for Delays in Conducting Elections to Urban Local Governments (ULGs)

- **Delayed Elections:**
 - ♦ **Constitutional Mandate Ignored:** Despite the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) mandating elections every five years, over 60% of ULGs face delays, sometimes stretching to years.
 - Delays lead to direct governance by state governments, violating the principle of decentralisation.
 - ♦ **Operational Delays:** Even after election results, delays in council formation hinder governance. For instance, in Karnataka, there was an average delay of 11 months in operationalising municipal councils post-election.
- **Political Interference:**
 - ♦ **State Government Control:** Many state governments delay ULG elections intentionally to maintain administrative control, undermining decentralisation.
 - ♦ **Reservation and Delimitation Issues:** Changes in ward boundaries and reservations for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women are often politicised, leading to prolonged delays.
- **Disempowered State Election Commissions (SECs):**
 - ♦ **Limited Autonomy:** SECs lack the authority to carry out tasks like ward delimitation independently. They often depend on state governments, leading to delays.
 - ♦ **Resource Constraints:** SECs are underfunded and lack adequate manpower, delaying the electoral process.
- **Legal and Judicial Hurdles:**
 - ♦ **Litigation over Reservations and Delimitation:** Court cases challenging reservation policies or delimitation exercises stall elections.
 - ♦ **Legal Ambiguities:** Ambiguities in laws governing ULG elections allow for procedural delays.
- **Administrative Inefficiencies:**
 - ♦ **Delayed Preparations:** Inefficient planning and lack of coordination among state agencies lead to delays in issuing election notifications and conducting polls.
 - ♦ **Lack of Data Updates:** Delayed updates to electoral rolls and administrative records slow the process.
- **Governance Priorities:**
 - ♦ **Neglect of ULGs in Policy Discourse:** ULG elections are often deprioritised compared to state and national elections, leading to a lack of urgency in their conduct.

- ◆ **Limited Public Awareness:** The public and policymakers often underestimate the importance of ULGs, allowing delays to persist without significant backlash.
- **External Challenges:**
 - ◆ **Natural Disasters or Pandemics:** Events like the COVID-19 pandemic have caused postponements of local body elections.
 - ◆ **Logistical Challenges:** Managing elections across thousands of ULGs requires significant logistical coordination, which is often lacking.

Measures to Address Delays and Strengthen Urban Governance

- **Empowering State Election Commissions (SECs):**
 - ◆ **Legal and Financial Autonomy:** Amend state laws to grant SECs the authority to independently conduct ULG elections, including delimitation and reservation exercises.
 - ◆ **Capacity Building:** Increase funding and resources for SECs to ensure timely and efficient election management.
- **Legislative and Judicial Reforms:**
 - ◆ **Streamlining Reservation and Delimitation:** Mandate fixed timelines for delimitation and reservation processes to prevent delays.
 - ◆ **Judicial Fast-Tracking:** Establish dedicated benches to handle election-related disputes for quick resolution.
- **Policy and Governance Reforms:**
 - ◆ **Inclusion in ONOE Framework:** Synchronise ULG elections within a fixed timeframe, such as 100 days of Lok Sabha or state assembly elections, as recommended by the High-Level Committee (HLC).
 - ◆ **Time-Bound Notifications:** Mandate states to notify election schedules well in advance to avoid delays.
- **Strengthening Decentralisation:**
 - ◆ **Devolution of Powers and Finances:** Empower ULGs with the authority and resources to function effectively without over-reliance on state governments.
 - ◆ **Operational Independence:** Ensure councils are operationalised immediately after election results, with no delays in convening the first meeting.
- **Public Accountability and Awareness:**
 - ◆ **Digital Platforms for Transparency:** Use technology to make electoral processes and governance more transparent and accessible to the public.
 - ◆ **Citizen Participation:** Increase awareness about the importance of ULGs to build public pressure for timely elections.
- **Capacity Development:**
 - ◆ **Training for Urban Administrators:** Provide capacity-building programs for elected representatives and administrative staff to enhance governance.
 - ◆ **Data Management:** Regularly update electoral rolls and governance records to streamline election processes.

Conclusion

- Timely elections to Urban Local Governments are essential for decentralised governance and effective urban development.
- Addressing delays requires a combination of legislative reforms, institutional strengthening, and public accountability.

Source: TH



Mains Practice Question

Critically analyze the challenges faced by ULGs in India, particularly concerning the conduct of timely and fair elections, and suggest measures to strengthen local democracy at the city level.