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1. Model Code of Conduct comes into force for 2024 Lok Sabha elections: What does it mean?

Why in News?

The Election Commission of India (ECI) announced on March 16 that the country would vote in seven phases in the Lok Sabha elections, from April 19 to June 1 and the results will be announced on June 4. With this, the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) comes into effect.

Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar asked all political parties and their leaders to strictly adhere to the MCC, which lays down a list of dos and don'ts for leaders and parties ahead of elections. Amongst other things, the code bars the government from announcing policy decisions.

What is the Model Code of Conduct?

The MCC of ECI is a set of guidelines issued to regulate political parties and candidates prior to elections. The rules range from issues related to speeches, polling day, polling booths, portfolios, the content of election manifestos, processions, and general conduct, so that free and fair elections are conducted.

When does the Model Code of Conduct come into effect?

The MCC comes into force from the date the election schedule is announced until the date that results are out. As a result, it kicks in from date of announcement of election schedule and remains in effect until the election process is concluded.

What restrictions does the Model Code of Conduct impose?

The MCC contains eight provisions dealing with general conduct, meetings, processions, polling day, polling booths, observers, the party in power, and election manifestos.

As soon as the code kicks in, the party in power — whether at the Centre or in the states — should ensure that it does not use its official position for campaigning. Hence, no policy, project or scheme can be announced that can influence the voting behaviour. The party must also avoid advertising at the cost of the public exchequer or using official mass media for publicity on achievements to improve chances of victory in the elections.

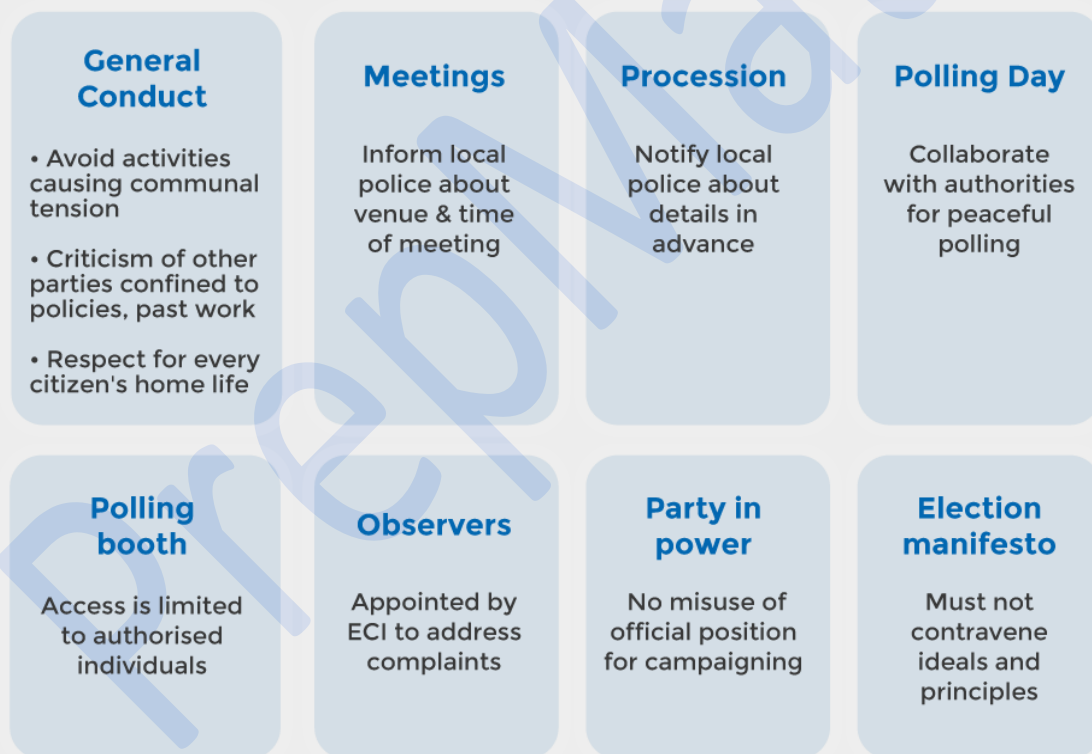
The code also says the ministers must not combine official visits with election work or use official machinery for the same. The ruling party cannot use government transport or machinery for campaigning. It should also ensure that public places such as maidans etc., for holding election meetings, and facilities like the use of helipads are provided to the opposition parties on the same terms and conditions on which they are used by the party in power.

The issue of advertisement at the cost of public exchequer in the newspapers and other media is also considered an offence. The ruling government cannot make any ad-hoc appointments in government, public sector undertakings etc., which may influence the voters.

Political parties or candidates can be criticised based only on their work record and no caste and communal sentiments can be used to lure voters. Mosques, Churches, Temples or any other places of worship should not be used for election campaigns. Bribing, intimidating or impersonation of voters is also barred. Holding public meetings during the 48-hour period before the hour fixed for the closing of the poll is also prohibited. The 48-hour period is known as "election silence". The idea is to allow a voter a campaign-free environment to reflect on events before casting her vote.

MODEL CODE OF CONDUCT

RULES FOR POLITICAL PARTIES AND CANDIDATES



Is the Model Code of Conduct legally binding?

The MCC evolved as part of the ECI's drive to ensure free and fair elections and was the result of a consensus among major political parties. It has no statutory backing. Simply put, this means anybody breaching the MCC can't be proceeded against under any clause of the Code. Everything is voluntary. The EC uses moral sanction or censure for its enforcement.

The ECI can issue a notice to a politician or a party for an alleged breach of the MCC either on its own or based on a complaint by another party or individual. Once a notice is issued, the person or party must reply in writing — either accepting fault and tendering an unconditional apology or rebutting the allegation. In the latter case, if the person or party is found guilty

subsequently, he/it can attract a written censure from the ECI — something that many see as a mere slap on the wrist.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Indian Express

2. Amid Nepal's continuing political turmoil, confidence vote win for PM Prachanda, the task for India

Why in news?

Nepal's Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda won a vote of confidence in the 275-member lower house of Parliament last week, securing the support of 157 of the 268 MPs who were present.

The trust vote, the third won by Prachanda in a little over a year, took place after the Prime Minister broke his party's alliance with the Nepali Congress led by Sher Bahadur Deuba, and forged a new alliance with K P Sharma Oli's Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist).

Under Nepal's constitution, the Prime Minister must seek a vote of confidence after an ally withdraws support to the ruling coalition. The Nepali Congress, with 89 MPs, is the largest party in Parliament, followed by Oli's CPN-UML (79) and Prachanda's CPN-MC (30).

Politics of convenience

Prachanda, 69, took oath for the third time on December 26, 2022 (he had been Prime Minister earlier in 2008-09 and 2016-17), and won 268 votes in the floor test of January 10, 2023 after receiving support from almost all parties, including both the Nepali Congress and the CPN-UML.



However, he had to seek a second vote on March 20, 2023 after CPN-UML and the monarchist Rashtriya Prajatantra Party withdrew support over Prachanda's backing for Ramchandra Paudel of the Nepali Congress to be President. Deuba supported Prachanda in the second trust vote, and the Nepali Congress joined the government.

On March 4 this year, Prachanda dumped Deuba and went back to Oli, which triggered the vote in Parliament.

Prachanda, who led Nepal's Maoist insurgency that caused 17,000 deaths between 1996 and 2006, has proven himself to be a consummate survivor in the years after he joined the mainstream. Even though support for him in Parliament has declined from 268 in January 2023 to 172 two months later to 157 now with only 32 votes from his own party, he has clung on to power — demonstrating a political flexibility that provoked Deuba to denounce him as "dhokhebaaz (betrayer)".

Main Political Leaders

Over the last decade, Prachanda, Deuba, and Oli have been the leading political actors in Nepal, which has had 13 governments since 2008, the year in which the country's 239-year-old monarchy was abolished and a republic was proclaimed.

Concern for India

The extraordinary political instability in Nepal is of concern to India, where Prachanda's moves are being watched with a mix of caution and admiration. However, while Prachanda retains significant goodwill in New Delhi, his now partner in government, Oli, does not.

The actions and statements by Oli in 2015 during the drafting of the Nepalese constitution, which led to protests and the infamous border blockade, had caused a fair bit of bitterness with Indian government. Oli, who was Prime Minister then, portrayed India as the neighbourhood bully in his country.

Indo-Nepal Relations

Politicians in Nepal have often described the country as being "India-locked", meaning it needs India for access to ports — a fact of geography that Indian diplomats prefer to frame as being "India-open". New Delhi has sought to project itself as a benevolent "elder brother" to Nepal.

The Indian foreign policy establishment points out that India is Nepal's largest trade partner, with bilateral trade crossing \$7 billion in FY 2019-20, and that India provides transit for almost all of Nepal's third country trade. Indian exports to Nepal have grown more than eight times over the past decade, while exports from Nepal have almost doubled.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, India provided assistance of more than \$7 million to Nepal, which included the supply of more than 23 tonnes of medicines and medical equipment, more than 9.5 million doses of vaccines, and a medical oxygen plant.

About 8 million Nepalese citizens live and work in India, and some 6 lakh Indians live in Nepal. Indians are about 30% of foreign tourists in Nepal. The bilateral remittance flow is estimated at \$3 billion from Nepal to India, and \$1 billion in the opposite direction. Cooperation in power,

water, and infrastructure has been a major element of India's diplomatic toolkit with regard to Nepal.

India vs China, in Nepal

Nepal is sandwiched between the two Asian giants, and the Nepalese political leadership, including the country's former monarchs, has long sought to play the China card to manage the relationship with India. China has been pouring aid and investment in infrastructure to wean Kathmandu away from New Delhi. Nepalese imports from China almost tripled from (Indian) Rs 49.5 billion in 2013-14 to Rs 138.75 billion (\$1.67 billion) in 2022-23.

With Oli, who has clear China leanings, back in government in Kathmandu, New Delhi would be keenly watching the expected efforts by Beijing to play a more active and influential role in Nepal's domestic affairs.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations

Source: The Indian Express