



# Phased Elections

---

## ***Challenges and Strategies to Preserve Integrity in Nonsimultaneous Polls***

Brief | December 2024

# Phased Elections

## Challenges and Strategies to Preserve Integrity in Nonsimultaneous Polls

Author:

**Dr. Fernanda Buriel**

*Deputy Director – Center for Applied Research and Learning*

Contributor:

**Katherine Ellena**

*Vice President - Programs*



International Foundation  
for Electoral Systems



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

# Table of Contents



Acknowledgments .....	4
Introduction .....	5
Terminology: phased, sequential, or staggered elections .....	6
How do phased elections fit within international conventions and other standards for democratic elections?.....	7
Challenges, concerns, and considerations related to phased elections.....	8
For voters, political parties, and candidates.....	8
Potential disenfranchisement of voters in specific regions.....	8
Deepening of political representation gaps and related grievances.....	8
Confusion regarding voting dates.....	9
Early election results or projections affecting later voter turnout .....	10
Early results affecting incentives of losing candidates to disturb subsequent election activities.....	10
Voters making decisions under different rules or political and information environments.....	11
Longer disruptions to public order .....	11
Increased ingroup bias and political polarization.....	12
Potentially more violence and criminality in regions <i>not</i> holding elections .....	12
Longer campaign periods, more costs .....	13
Hindered governance and policymaking .....	13
For election administration.....	13

Legal impediments and obstacles ..... 13

Potentially heavier logistical burden on the election administrators and higher costs..... 14

Risks to security of ballots and election material..... 14

More complex voter information campaign and efforts ..... 14

Heightened perceptions of fraud ..... 15

Challenges for election dispute resolution..... 15

Challenges for election observation ..... 15

Challenges in measuring instability, establishing acceptable benchmarks, and collecting accurate data ..... 16

Strategies to mitigate concerns and drawbacks ..... 16

    Additional security measures and investments in the most challenging regions to prevent the disenfranchisement of voters..... 17

    Work with security forces and other agencies to secure roads and routes used to transport electoral material and personnel and prevent losses ..... 17

    Maintaining sufficient security personnel in regions *not* holding elections ..... 17

    Investing in targeted and timely voter information..... 17

    Imposing limits or prohibitions regarding changes to key rules and legal provisions for the duration of all phases of election ..... 18

    Establishing clear rules for incumbents to prevent abuse of state resources during the campaigns while minimizing governance paralysis ..... 18

    Sensitizing political parties and candidates to the risk of heightened polarization and seeking cooperation for peaceful campaigns ..... 18

    If withholding counting, securing stored ballots and enabling citizen observation ..... 19

    Handling the publication of projections and early results ..... 19

    Finding consensus on violence and stability benchmarks..... 19

Final considerations..... 20

## **Acknowledgments**

The authors would like to thank Anna Denis, Staffan Darnolf, Erica Shein, Jacob Buchholz, Gracia Angulo Duncan, and Inza Diomande for their reviews and thoughtful inputs to this brief, as well as Steve Canham for his contributions to the voter registration section.

## Introduction

While most countries reserve one single day for voters across the national territory to cast their ballots, some administer national elections on multiple days. Multi-day voting might mean maintaining polling stations open for a certain period prior to the scheduled election day to allow for early voting<sup>1</sup> or having different election days or periods for different geographical areas. While some considerations in this brief also apply to early voting settings, its focus is on the latter: phased elections.

Elections are major logistical endeavors that require substantial resources and personnel mobilization. As the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network explains, the most common rationale for the progressive conduct of elections is “to provide efficiencies where election equipment, logistics capacities, security capabilities, and staff expertise are scarce resources, or where the sheer size of the voting population makes single-day elections difficult to manage.”<sup>2</sup> Nepalese national security agencies, for instance, have mentioned that phased elections enabled them to “concentrate their effort, deploy permanent professional police, and avoid the investment in time and effort to recruit, train, and deploy temporary police.”<sup>3</sup> Phasing elections might also allow electoral management bodies (EMBs) to deploy their most experienced personnel to administer or oversee the electoral processes across the country, facilitating quality control.

Especially in particularly dire security contexts, domestic forces might struggle to secure all electoral activities across the country. In these scenarios, some governments have decided to phase elections by, for instance, 1) setting up an election calendar with different pre-established polling dates for different regions or municipalities or 2) conditioning electoral events upon defined security benchmarks, moving forward with electoral activities in regions where security indicators reach acceptable levels. However, security is not the only consideration around phased elections, and the complexity of the issue is important to understand as countries consider such an approach in fragile conflict or post-conflict environments.

---

<sup>1</sup> For instance, Australia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States allow for early voting or “pre-polls.”

<sup>2</sup> Multi-day voting. (n.d.) ACE Project. <https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/vo/vog/vog01/vog01c>

<sup>3</sup> Pokharel, Malla-Dhakal and Morrice (2012) *Electoral Violence and Mitigation Assessment, Nepal*, p. 25.

While India is the most well-known country that consistently holds national-level elections in multiple phases,<sup>4</sup> other countries have also implemented this strategy from time to time, such as Nepal,<sup>5</sup> Pakistan,<sup>6</sup> Afghanistan,<sup>7</sup> and Ethiopia.<sup>8</sup> With conflict and political violence on the rise globally,<sup>9</sup> more countries might consider phasing elections in an effort to concentrate and optimize resources and personnel on polling days, but decision-makers should be aware that this strategy is also fraught with risks. This brief discusses a series of factors election authorities and other stakeholders should consider before opting for this strategy, and recommendations for addressing potential challenges stemming from multi-day voting.

### Phased Elections – Choice or Last Resource?

Phased elections might be implemented as a proactive strategy, planned with enough time and for the long run, as is the case of India, or as a response to new or unexpected security and other logistical challenges.

#### India (1951 – Present)

India has been conducting elections in phases since the beginning of its democratic history. The country's first electoral exercise (1951-1952) after independence from British colonial rule had 17 polling days spread over four months. Each phase takes place in a specified set of regions until all regions are covered. Votes are only counted after all phases are completed. According to India's legal framework, there must be a polling station within two kilometers (1.2 miles) of each residence, and the logistics to ensure this rule is followed are extremely complicated, with poll workers having to cross mountains, deserts, and jungles to reach the country's nearly one billion voters.

#### Nepal (2017)

Differently from India, Nepal adopted the phased-elections approach temporarily for its 2017 general elections, the first under the 2015 constitution that established a new federal system. The election timeline had already been delayed due to political disagreements over new local, state, and federal boundaries and, to meet constitutional deadlines, the government decided to hold both national and state elections simultaneously. The Election Commission of Nepal expressed concerns over the logistical challenges of such an exercise, particularly in mountainous and remote districts, leading to the decision to hold these elections in two phases for better allocation of resources. Nepal held its subsequent 2022 general elections on a single day.

## Terminology: phased, sequential, or staggered elections

Phased elections refer to polling that is conducted in multiple phases or stages rather than at the same time. They are often also referred to as “multi-staged,” “sequential,” or “staggered” elections, although the

<sup>4</sup> India's 2024 elections were held in seven phases, from April 19 through June 1.

<sup>5</sup> Nepal's 2017 general elections were held on November 26 and December 7.

<sup>6</sup> In 2008, elections for 28 seats could not take place on February 18 mainly due to security reasons, forcing Pakistani authorities to administer new phases in the following months.

<sup>7</sup> Afghanistan's 2018 parliamentary elections were generally held on October 20, but Kandahar's polls only took place on October 27.

<sup>8</sup> In 2021, most Ethiopian regions elected members of the House of Peoples' Representatives on June 21, whereas voters in Harari, SNNPR, and Somali regions only went to the polls on September 30.

<sup>9</sup> ACLED Conflict Index (2024). <https://acleddata.com/conflict-index/>

latter is also commonly used in reference to systems in which only a portion of the seats for a specific body are being contested at a time, leading to staggered tenures. To avoid confusion, this brief refers to polls for the same race that occur on different days in different regions as *phased elections*.

## **How do phased elections fit within international conventions and other standards for democratic elections?**

The main international conventions and global standards for democratic elections do not address the phased-elections approach specifically – neither to condemn nor endorse it. However, several documents do specify principles and requirements that elections must meet to be democratic, regardless of how many phases it takes to implement them. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), for instance, provides that every citizen should have the right to freedom of association with others and the right and opportunity to be elected at genuine, periodic elections.<sup>10</sup> The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), in its Article 21, provides that “the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government [and] this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by equivalent free voting procedures.” While these standards and principles face risks in any election, challenges can be heightened when polling takes place on different days. The sections below highlight some of these key challenges to accepted international principles, and provide considerations and recommendations for mitigating them, where feasible.

---

<sup>10</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Articles 22 and 25, available at <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>.



# Challenges, concerns, and considerations related to phased elections

## For voters, political parties, and candidates

### Potential disenfranchisement of voters in specific regions

As discussed above, authorities might make decisions regarding when to hold elections in specific regions based on levels of security and stability. As the voting phases take place, however, some regions within a country might be relatively safe and enable their residents to vote while others might experience further delays or cancellation of voting activities. Voters in these unsafe areas are likely to be disenfranchised either because they are not able to vote given polling station closures or because they do not feel safe enough to go to the polls that have been set up. This is a common problem in conflict-affected environments and not unique to those holding phased elections, although there is usually an expectation that, if elections are phased, citizens will eventually get a chance to vote – and this expectation might not be met. This promise of future elections when security conditions allow may keep authorities from considering more immediate solutions to enfranchisement, such as alternative, remote voting methods.

In these circumstances, the legitimacy – and acceptance – of election results can be compromised. Furthermore, malign actors can intentionally target specific areas (e.g., specific candidates' or parties' strongholds) and instigate or perpetrate violence to hinder election activities and affect voter turnout and election results. While this risk is also present in simultaneous elections, it can be exacerbated in phased elections, particularly when governments can postpone elections indefinitely in areas that do not meet security benchmarks (see Ethiopia's case on the right).

### Deepening of political representation gaps and related grievances

In countries experiencing conflict or other crises, the toll of violence and insecurity can vary across urban and rural regions, or across areas of varying socioeconomic levels. People in the areas most affected by

**Ethiopia (2021):** Ethiopia held general elections in most of its regions in June 2021. However, in regions affected by conflict or logistical challenges, including Tigray, parts of Oromia, Somali, and Harari regions, elections were delayed. A second phase of voting was conducted in September 2021, but voters in Tigray were once again excluded due to persisting conflict. Relationships between the Tigray region and the national government are still very tense, and Tigray leaders have criticized the lack of government accountability.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [Arena Tigray sounds alarm over accountability, warns of 'drums of war' echoing in Tigray](#) (Sep 5, 2024). *Addis Standard*.

insecurity will face the most challenges to vote freely (or at all, if polls are cancelled in their regions). If they are ultimately not represented in the elected government, it is less likely that their needs and interests will take priority in the country's political agenda, potentially exacerbating grievances and fueling instability. Again, this is not unique to phased elections, although it can be aggravated if citizens in certain regions keep waiting for their chance to vote and the security situation is never deemed stable enough to enable polling.

### **Confusion regarding voting dates**

Memorizing one single election day for the whole country is more straightforward than identifying and remembering which of the multiple polling days has been assigned to one's region. Voters in one region will also likely have access to national broadcasts and other non-local media resources that will be covering information about elections in other locations, contributing to confusion and potentially affecting turnout. Confusion can be further increased by deliberate disinformation about election dates or other aspects of the process.

**Papua New Guinea (2022):** Papua New Guinea's 2022 national general elections were held between July 4 and 22, on different days in various regions. In addition to the already complicated polling schedule, delays in the production of voter information materials hindered their dissemination, contributing to voters' confusion about the electoral process.

<sup>i</sup> [Summary Paper on the 2022 National General Election](#) (2023). *Transparency International PNG*.

## Early election results or projections affecting later voter turnout

If elections for national-level positions take place in some regions before they are held in others, and the results of these early elections are known, this knowledge might affect turnout and voter choices in the areas holding elections later. For instance, if early results show that a candidate is winning by a narrow margin, opposition candidates might make concerted efforts to gain more votes in regions with upcoming polling, and voters might also be more motivated to cast their ballots knowing how impactful they can be. On the other hand, if a candidate's margin of victory in early results is perceived to be irreversible, campaign activities by the opposition might be cancelled and opposition turnout might decrease in the areas

holding polling later. These dynamics could deprive parts of the population of more active political engagement and inflate final margins of victory while reducing perceived legitimacy of elected candidates due to decreased voter turnout. It is important to note that, even if the election administration manages to secure the cast ballots and delay the count until all votes are cast – which is already a significant endeavor –, exit polls and turnout numbers can provide important insights into results.

## Early results affecting incentives of losing candidates to disturb subsequent election activities

Related to the above challenge, the publication (or leak) of early results or projections can also affect incentives, particularly among losing candidates, to disturb the rest of the electoral process. If early results are unfavorable, these candidates might see more value in undermining trust in the process and mobilizing supporters to protest or even engage in violence.

**India (2004):** A statistical analysis of exit polls and post-poll survey data from the 2004 Indian general elections has found that late voters react to surprises in voting returns and increase, by 20%, their probability of voting for parties that made substantial early-poll gains based on exit poll results.<sup>i</sup> Exit polls are restricted in India, but several media outlets publish forecasts regardless of prohibitions in place.

<sup>i</sup> Patnam, M. (2013). [Learning from exit polls in sequential elections](#). *Penn State University*.

**Nepal (2017):** In 2017, Nepal's government decided to hold phased local-level elections, driven mostly by violent protests and threats of election boycotts. In between the phases, however, significant legal and administrative changes were made, including to the status of some municipalities and the deadlines for registering political parties. A new national government also assumed power between local election phases, changing the political landscape and prospects for the country.

## Voters making decisions under different rules or political and information environments

When election days are far apart (not just in countries holding phased elections but also in those offering early voting), events happening in between can affect how voters cast their ballots. This applies both to intentional changes (e.g., authorities changing electoral rules or other legal provisions with an impact on elections) and unexpected developments (e.g., natural disasters, the death of a candidate). These events might mean that voters in different regions at different times will face different incentives or obstacles to vote.

**India:** Former Indian Chief Election Commissioner S.Y. Quraishi suggested that frequent elections perpetuate caste, religion and communal issues: “elections are polarising events which have accentuated casteism, communalism, corruption and crony capitalism. If the country is perpetually on election mode, there is no respite...holding simultaneous elections would certainly help in this context.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Debroy, B. Desai, K. (2017) [Analysis of Simultaneous Elections: The “What”, “Why” and “How”](http://niti.gov.in/writereaddata/files/document_publication/Note%20on%20Simultaneous%20Elections.pdf), NITI Aayog.

## Longer disruptions to public order

Campaign rallies, polling processes, and other election activities can disrupt normal life<sup>11</sup> – e.g., leading to more road traffic, causing more sound pollution, disrupting work hours, and dominating news media over other important developments.

---

<sup>11</sup> Debroy and Desai, *Analysis of Simultaneous Elections: The “What”, “Why” and “How”*, NITI Aayog, at 3.27, [http://niti.gov.in/writereaddata/files/document\\_publication/Note%20on%20Simultaneous%20Elections.pdf](http://niti.gov.in/writereaddata/files/document_publication/Note%20on%20Simultaneous%20Elections.pdf)

## Increased ingroup bias and political polarization

Studies consistently point to heightened ingroup bias during election periods (i.e., stronger positive emotions toward one's own group and increased hostility toward outsiders).<sup>12</sup> During phased elections, as campaigns stretch over a longer period, ingroup bias might also persist, potentially increasing political polarization. Increased intensity of in-group bias and polarization may be of particular concern in conflict or post-conflict election contexts, where mistrust and grievances are often still fresh and can instigate renewed violence.

## Potentially more violence and criminality in regions *not* holding elections

If security planning and allocation are not done appropriately, ensuring all regions maintain a minimum number of security forces capable of guaranteeing stability, the movement of security personnel can backfire. With the knowledge that most country security forces will be occupied and concentrated in specific areas or regions during a certain time, criminal and violent groups might feel emboldened to commit crimes in other, less protected areas.

**Democratic Republic of Congo:** While not related to the administration of elections, the movement of troops in the DRC illustrates the inadvertent problem this strategy can cause to broader security. As Congolese national forces deployed to the eastern side of the country to fight the armed group 23 March Movement (M23), a security vacuum was exacerbated in other territories of North Kivu. According to the United Nations, armed groups are taking advantage of the situation to commit summary executions, abductions, forced displacement, and sexual violence.<sup>i</sup>

<sup>i</sup> [Escalating Violence in Democratic Republic of Congo Exacerbating Humanitarian Crisis, Special Representative Warns Security Council, Urging Durable Political Solution](#). (Feb 21, 2024). *Relief Web*.

<sup>12</sup> Sheffer, L. (2020). Partisan in-group bias before and after elections. *Electoral Studies*, 67, 102191.

## Longer campaign periods, more costs

Longer election periods might require candidates and political parties to extend their campaigns and outreach efforts, which also means more costs.

Smaller parties could suffer the most in such a scenario, being forced to stretch limited funds and personnel across regions and time.

## Hindered governance and policymaking

During phased elections, not only security forces and election personnel will concentrate efforts in areas holding elections, but so will candidates, including incumbents running for reelections. Longer campaign periods often mean that they will spend more time trying to secure votes, potentially to the detriment of investing time in policy development and governance.

**India:** To prevent government officials from using their position to influence voters, certain activities are prohibited during the electoral period. Former Minister of Urban Development, Shri M. Venkaiah Naidu, stated that the continuous cycle of elections and campaigning has been “affecting the developmental process and good governance...[and] forcing the political class to typically think in terms of immediate electoral gains rather than focus on long-term programs and policies for the overall progress of the nation and its people.”<sup>i</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Debroy, B. Desai, K. (2017) [Analysis of Simultaneous Elections: The “What”, “Why” and “How”](#), NITI Aayog.

## For election administration

### Legal impediments and obstacles

Depending on the country, existing legal and regulatory frameworks might not allow for the administration of elections across multiple days. Even legal frameworks that do not directly prohibit phased elections might still impose other impediments – for instance, by establishing certain deadlines for electoral activities, promulgation of results, or resolution of electoral disputes. A thorough analysis of legal and regulatory provisions is therefore needed to identify and reform or adjust existing frameworks to enable phased elections.

**India:** A 2023 study estimated that, if India were to conduct elections simultaneously, its reduced expenditures related to election administration, security deployments, and governance disruptions would generate annual savings upwards of ₹45 billion (~US\$ 535 million)<sup>l</sup>

<sup>l</sup> George, A. S. (2023). [One Nation, One Election: An Analysis of the Pros and Cons of Implementing Simultaneous Elections in India](#). *Partners Universal International Research Journal*, 2(3), 40-60.

## Potentially heavier logistical burden on the election administrators and higher costs

Especially in countries where planning and administration of all election activities across the country fall under the responsibility of one single institution (no support from state or local level election management bodies), phased elections can mean a heavier workload or a longer period of strenuous work for election authorities and officials. Additionally, while one of the goals of phased elections is to optimize resources, transporting material, equipment, and personnel throughout the country for a long period can incur extra costs and challenges, particularly if roads and other infrastructure are in poor shape. It is true, however, that costs can be reduced in cases where the EMB can decrease, for instance, the number of vehicles rented for delivery of material or the number of electronic voting machines or voter identification equipment being procured. If minimizing costs is a top priority, country authorities must engage in a more sophisticated cost analysis to determine whether potential phased-election savings are worth it.

**India:** A 2023 study estimated that, if India were to conduct elections simultaneously, its reduced expenditures related to election administration, security deployments, and governance disruptions would generate annual savings upwards of ₹45 billion (~US\$ 535 million).<sup>i</sup>

<sup>i</sup> George, A. S. (2023). [One Nation, One Election: An Analysis of the Pros and Cons of Implementing Simultaneous Elections in India](#). *Partners Universal International Research Journal*, 2(3), 40-60.

## Risks to security of ballots and election material

If a country holding phased elections decides not to proceed with the count until all phases are completed (to prevent some of the other problems discussed above), it needs to ensure all cast ballots are stored and secured for the entire duration of the election. This might require maintaining security in place after polling to guard the election material for what could be a long time, which could turn into a counterproductive strategy when the goal is to optimize the use of security personnel. These costs can be minimized if the votes are stored in warehouses in military bases, for instance, but this may present new challenges with respect to public trust, and measures would need to be taken to protect the chain of custody and to facilitate access to observers and party agents.

## More complex voter information campaign and efforts

As discussed earlier in this brief, it could be easier for voters across the country to get confused about when they are expected to cast their ballots if polling is occurring on different days in different regions. Minimizing this confusion will require more intensive and targeted voter information efforts, the development of different information material for different locations, and preventing the dissemination of

misinformation or disinformation intended to exacerbate confusion and affect turnout. It would also be important to define and clarify ahead of time when and how poll workers and security personnel working during elections can cast their ballots (e.g., whether during early voting, specific election phases, or any phases).

### **Heightened perceptions of fraud**

Perceptions of ballot box stuffing, vote rigging, and other fraud could increase if votes are not counted on election day in front of observers, party representatives, and the media. Even if security personnel are in place guarding the cast ballots while they wait to be counted, suspicions might rise that political actors are using the extra time and lack of citizen observation to tamper with the results. Suspicions of fraud can be even more widespread if there is a low level of trust in those guarding the material. Furthermore, the EMB's decision-making regarding the electoral calendar and when to hold elections in each region can be subject to criticism and allegations of favoritism toward specific political actors. Finally, allegations of fraud occurring during earlier phases of the elections could impact people's trust in the process and discourage participation in later phases.

### **Challenges for election dispute resolution**

Phased elections can also disrupt election dispute resolution systems and processes. For example, cases of electoral problems and violations arising in early phases of the election might need to wait to be heard and resolved until after later phases are completed, potentially leading to plaintiff dissatisfaction, increased backlogs and delays, prolonged uncertainty on election results, and a destabilized post-election period. Additionally, if disputes from early phases remain unresolved when later phases conclude, the appeals process may become more complex, leading to prolonged legal battles and uncertainty about the final election outcome. Alternatively, if rulings are issued while elections in other regions are still ongoing, they could also affect behavior (e.g., if sanctions for violations are perceived to be light, actors could calculate that the political gain is worth it). Political actors who know or assume earlier results are not favorable to them could also try to overload the system with complaints in an attempt to sow distrust in the process.

### **Challenges for election observation**

As with security forces, phased elections can also help focus election observation personnel and even potentially enhance standardization of data collection and reporting as the same individuals could cover several regions. However, deploying the same individuals to several election events, especially if for longer-term missions could lead to fatigue. Organizations that cannot afford to cover observation across phases will also have limited data from which to extrapolate findings. Finally, given the longer time between



elections in different places, negative observation findings that are published or leaked to the media could affect trust in the process and decrease voters' motivation to cast their ballots in later phases.

## Challenges in measuring instability, establishing acceptable benchmarks, and collecting accurate data

For countries that choose to implement phased elections citing security issues, a number of other challenges emerge from conditioning polls based on acceptable benchmarks of peace and stability. Authorities within different parts of the country and international organizations might differ in their views of

1) what is acceptable and 2) whether the evidence matches that level of acceptance. For instance:

- Differing data due to different metrics:

Different government agencies, civil society organizations, and international groups might reach different data based on prioritized indicators and other metrics. For instance, while government security forces might focus on military successes against perpetrators of violence in a region, CSOs might focus on ongoing impact on civilians.

- Differing data due to underreporting or other data collection challenges:

Local authorities could be motivated to underreport violence data to prevent stigma or to enable voting in their regions, potentially subjecting residents to higher risks than they anticipate. There could also be inaccuracies in data collection due to difficulty in reaching the most violent areas.

**Nigeria:** Although not directly related to elections, Nigeria is an example of a country that has experienced issues with data collection and reporting on violence and insecurity. Local authorities have been accused of lacking political commitment and transparency in how the government was dealing with Boko Haram,<sup>1</sup> which likely led to inaccurate data on actual stability levels

<sup>1</sup> Brechenmacher, S. (2019). [Stabilizing Northeast Nigeria After Boko Haram](#). *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.

## Strategies to mitigate concerns and drawbacks

Given all the potential challenges highlighted above, EMBs and legislators should be very cautious in introducing phased elections, make sure to consider all pros and cons of this strategy, and take proactive measures to minimize negative consequences of multiple-day voting. Not all concerns discussed in this brief can be easily addressed or are under the control of EMBs, but election authorities and other decision-makers can consider some mitigation strategies discussed below to alleviate potential problems.

### **Additional security measures and investments in the most challenging regions to prevent the disenfranchisement of voters**

As mentioned earlier in this brief, a common objective of phased elections is to optimize security resources by moving and concentrating them in the areas holding electoral activities. Yet, some areas or regions usually need more active measures than others to enable their residents to vote. In addition to concentrating security forces in these areas, authorities might also consider mapping special locations for polling stations, employing faster and more secure transportation methods for electoral material and personnel, and establishing joint operation centers with representatives of different agencies to plan strategies and monitor and respond to incidents in and around polling stations.

### **Work with security forces and other agencies to secure roads and routes used to transport electoral material and personnel and prevent losses**

Electoral personnel, equipment, and material can become the target of violence. Knowing their routes throughout the country, malign actors can more easily attack them and cause a large impact on the following electoral activities. Authorities should consider measures such as keeping the routes confidential, enhancing security for the convoys, or securing the roads and routes used by these personnel (e.g., banning vehicle movement during certain periods). It is also important to implement redundancy strategies to prevent the loss of data (e.g., keeping secured copies of voter rolls and extra ballots stored in additional places).

### **Maintaining sufficient security personnel in regions *not* holding elections**

To prevent security vacuums (or the perception of security vulnerabilities and opportunities for impunity), authorities should develop a sound risk and threat assessment and ensure sufficient security resources and personnel remain stationed also in regions not holding elections. Public messaging should highlight the implementation of security measures across the country and avoid creating the perception that security will only be prioritized in areas holding polling.

### **Investing in targeted and timely voter information**

To minimize voter confusion regarding polling dates and locations, election authorities might consider developing a detailed voter information activity plan (to be integrated into the overall operational plan). Activities should focus on providing targeted voter information through, for instance, the organization of local voter-engagement activities and the dissemination of information material tailored to the different regions. Moreover, election authorities might also consider sending official slips of papers to each

registered voter confirming the date of polling and the location of their assigned polling station. It is also important for the polling schedule to be defined as early as possible, giving election officials, civil society, and media outlets enough time to disseminate relevant information.

### **Imposing limits or prohibitions regarding changes to key rules and legal provisions for the duration of all phases of election**

To ensure people across the country can vote under as similar circumstances as possible, authorities might consider imposing limits or prohibitions against passing major legal changes and reforms that could impact the election process, results, or allocation of seats.

### **Establishing clear rules for incumbents to prevent abuse of state resources during the campaigns while minimizing governance paralysis**

Incumbents should not be allowed to leverage their positions, state resources, and public platforms to get electoral advantages, but governance and the delivery of services cannot be paused for the lengthy period of phased elections. Authorities should consider the development of clear and fair rules to enable governments to continue operations while incumbents run for elections.

**Pakistan:** Some countries, like Pakistan, install caretaker governments to oversee elections. The primary role of the interim government is to ensure neutrality and prevent the ruling party and incumbents from using their position to obtain electoral advantages. The leader of the caretaker government is chosen based on consultations between the outgoing minister and opposition leaders.

### **Sensitizing political parties and candidates to the risk of heightened polarization and seeking cooperation for peaceful campaigns**

As campaigns stretch longer and partisan affiliations remain salient through the different phases of elections, it is important for political parties to tone down their hostile rhetoric and encourage their supporters to participate in the electoral process in a peaceful manner. Election authorities can support and even lead these efforts by convening political parties and building consensus on codes of conduct for the electoral campaign and by applying sanctions for violations.

## **If withholding counting, securing stored ballots and enabling citizen observation**

As discussed above, withholding counting until the completion of all phases of voting can bring challenges to the security of the cast ballots and contribute to suspicions of vote tampering. To mitigate these issues, electoral authorities should ensure ballots are secured while stored (e.g., tamper-proof, sealed ballot boxes in storage places guarded by trusted security forces). In addition to enabling citizen observation of all phases of the elections, authorities might also consider the installation of live cameras in the storage rooms so these observers and other stakeholders can monitor activity and ensure no violations are occurring.

## **Handling the publication of projections and early results**

To prevent projections and early official results from influencing voter behavior or interfering with the overall perception of integrity of the process, some countries apply restrictions to their publication. Nepal, for instance, has banned exit polls. India restricts the dissemination of exit poll results until after the final phase of voting is completed.<sup>13</sup> Canada used to ban the publication of federal election results until all its polls had closed (given the five time zones across the country), but the ban was repealed in 2014 amid allegations it violated the right to free expression and given the simple fact that it was hard to enforce as technological advances allowed for information to flow across the country more easily. Understanding the drawbacks to citizens' rights and trust, and technical difficulties of prohibiting the publication of voting data and projections, authorities might want to consider a different approach, such as ensuring that media outlets, political actors, and other stakeholders who publish these data do so with mandatory disclaimers about their being unofficial and/or partial results.

## **Finding consensus on violence and stability benchmarks**

If authorities decide to condition elections on specific violence and stability benchmarks, considerable effort should be made to ensure that 1) these benchmarks are widely accepted by different stakeholders and 2) the evidence being contrasted with the benchmarks is as accurate as possible. Consultations with political actors and civil society from different regions could help assess the level of comfort with polling in different security scenarios. It might also help to engage different actors in the collection and analysis of data to ensure accuracy and transparency.

---

<sup>13</sup> Exit polls and the rules governing it in India (Jun 1, 2024). *Business Standard*. [https://www.business-standard.com/elections/lok-sabha-election/exit-polls-and-the-rules-governing-it-in-india-all-your-questions-answered-124060100470\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/elections/lok-sabha-election/exit-polls-and-the-rules-governing-it-in-india-all-your-questions-answered-124060100470_1.html)

## Final considerations

The choice of administering phased elections is a difficult one, often driven by an even more difficult security and logistical context. The sole fact of holding elections on different days in different areas of a country does not itself violate international standards and good practices, but it creates several additional challenges that need to be addressed so democratic principles are met. Before choosing such path, authorities are encouraged to carefully consider the issues outlined in this brief, their specific impact in the candidate countries, and the EMB and other institutions' capacity to mitigate risks and ensure the integrity of the electoral process across all its phases. If, after thorough and inclusive deliberation, phasing elections is still deemed necessary, authorities must be clear and proactive in communicating with stakeholders about the process, what changes to expect, and their role in ensuring its success.



HQ | 2011 Crystal Drive | Arlington, VA 22202 | USA

 [www.IFES.org](http://www.IFES.org)