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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

One-Horse Races Are No Triumph for Democracy

 THE HINDU

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"When electoral processes appear formally intact yet produce uncontested results at scale, has democratic legitimacy been preserved or merely its procedural shell?"

EDITORIAL SUMMARY:

The Hindu argues that political competition is the oxygen of democracy — without genuine contest, elections become rituals of ratification rather than instruments of citizen choice. The editorial takes the recurring phenomenon of large-scale uncontested seats in West Bengal elections as a case study of how democratic form can survive while democratic substance erodes. It connects voter list deletions, intimidation of candidates, and a weakened Election Commission into a systemic argument about the conditions required for elections to confer legitimate authority.

THE PARADOX OF A FORMALLY INTACT ELECTION

An election is not merely the act of casting a ballot. It is a structured competition for political authority in which citizens choose between alternatives, and in doing so, confer legitimacy on the outcome. When that competition disappears — when a seat is won not because voters preferred one candidate over another, but because no rival candidate dared to file — the election becomes an investiture ceremony, not a **mandate**.

India's constitutional design understood this. Article 324 vests the superintendence, direction and control of elections in the Election Commission of India precisely because free and fair elections are not self-executing. They require an independent referee — one capable of creating the conditions under which genuine competition can occur. Article 326 guarantees universal adult franchise, but the right to vote is rendered hollow if the pool of candidates from which the voter may choose has been reduced to one through extra-constitutional pressure.

The Supreme Court’s reading of Article 19(1)(a) in the context of elections — extended in a series of judgments to include the right to know candidates’ antecedents (*Association for Democratic Reforms v. Union of India*, 2002, affirmed in *PUCL v. Union of India*, 2003) and the right to express dissatisfaction through NOTA (*People’s Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India*, 2013) — reflects a broader constitutional philosophy: that meaningful political participation requires not just the procedural act of voting, but the **substantive** conditions that make choice real. An uncontested election forecloses that right at its source.

WEST BENGAL: A CASE STUDY IN COMPETITIVE ERASURE

West Bengal has provided the sharpest illustrations of this problem in recent years. The 2018 panchayat elections saw the highest count of uncontested seats — with approximately 34% of all seats won uncontested by the TMC, including entire blocks where no opposition candidate was able to file. The 2023 panchayat elections continued this pattern: candidate intimidation, nomination rejections on technical grounds, and proposers coerced into withdrawing remained widespread, albeit with fewer outright uncontested seats than the 2018 peak. Opposition candidates reported systematic pressure — particularly in areas where the Bharatiya Janata Party had failed to establish organisational depth. The pattern was not random; it traced the contours of ruling-party dominance.

The voter list deletion controversy has compounded these concerns. Allegations of large-scale deletions from the electoral rolls — disproportionately affecting opposition-leaning communities — have been raised before both the Calcutta High Court and the Supreme Court. Courts have intervened, ordering special summary revision and re-verification in affected constituencies. That judicial intervention was necessary at all is itself an indictment: the Election Commission of India’s own machinery should have caught and corrected anomalies of this scale before they required court orders.

ELECTION	UNCONTESTED SEATS	COURT INTERVENTION	PRIMARY GRIEVANCE
WB Panchayat 2023	Hundreds across Gram Panchayats	Calcutta HC, then SC	Candidate intimidation, nomination rejection
WB Local Body 2025	Repeated pattern in opposition-weak blocks	SC monitoring	Voter list deletions, roll manipulation
WB Assembly 2021	Post-poll violence documented by NHRC	NHRC report commissioned	Physical violence, booth capturing

The cumulative picture is one of competitive erasure: not a single dramatic coup against democracy, but a sustained reduction of the conditions that make competition possible. Each individual incident may be explainable; their aggregation is a political fact.

THE ELECTION COMMISSION'S STRUCTURAL DILEMMA

The Election Commission of India sits at the centre of this problem — both as the institution mandated to prevent it and as an institution whose own structural independence has come under sustained question. The CEC and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023 removed the Chief Justice of India from the selection committee for election commissioners, replacing a Supreme Court-mandated tripartite process (PM + CJI + Leader of Opposition) with a government-weighted committee (PM + PM-nominated Cabinet Minister + Leader of Opposition). The executive now holds two of three votes on the body that appoints those who oversee the executive's own elections.

This is not a theoretical concern. The logic of institutional independence rests on structural insulation from the party being regulated, not merely on the personal integrity of individual appointees. A commissioner who owes appointment to the ruling executive has a structural disincentive — however subconsciously — to rule against it on consequential questions like candidate intimidation, roll deletions, or booth-level irregularities.

Comparative experience is instructive. The United Kingdom forfeits a candidate's deposit if they receive less than five per cent of votes cast — a mechanism that penalises vanity candidacies but simultaneously ensures that the presence of multiple candidates is the norm, not the exception. Israel has debated minimum turnout thresholds as a legitimacy condition. India has no equivalent safeguard; an uncontested election is as legally valid as a keenly fought one.

DEMOCRACY WITHOUT COMPETITION IS NOMENCLATURE

The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2024 (published 2025) ranks India 41st globally, classifying it as a “flawed democracy.” The classification is contested — India's defenders note its scale, diversity, and the sheer logistics of running the world's largest election. But the “flawed” qualifier tracks precisely the set of concerns this editorial raises: erosion of civil liberties, weakening of institutional checks, and the shrinking space for political opposition in certain states.

The editorial's argument is not that India's elections are fraudulent in a technical sense. It is that democratic legitimacy is a spectrum, not a binary. An election that is formally conducted but structurally uncontested sits at the thin end of that spectrum — closer to authoritarian ratification than to genuine democratic choice. The difference matters not just philosophically but practically: governments that win through competitive elections have stronger mandates, face more effective accountability, and produce better policy outcomes than those that face no real opposition.

The remedy is structural: genuine ECI independence through appointment reform, real-time election roll monitoring with independent audits, candidate protection mechanisms that go beyond paper guarantees, and a political culture in which state governments treat the right of opponents to contest as a constitutional obligation rather than a threat to be managed.

UPSC MAINS ANALYSIS

GS Paper 2 – Polity, Constitution, Governance, and Democratic Institutions

- **Article 324** vests superintendence of elections in the ECI – its independence is constitutionally mandated, not merely statutory.
- **Article 326** guarantees universal adult franchise; voter list deletions strike at the constitutional right of participation.
- **Article 19(1)(a)** – SC has extended freedom of speech and expression to encompass meaningful electoral participation; uncontested elections hollow this out.
- **Association for Democratic Reforms v. Union of India (2002)**: Foundational case establishing voters’ right to know candidates’ criminal, financial, and educational antecedents. Parliament attempted to nullify this through Section 33B of the Representation of the People Act.
- **PUCL v. Union of India (2003)**: Struck down Section 33B of the RP Act – Parliament’s attempt to reverse the ADR 2002 judgment – thus protecting and reinforcing the right to know candidates’ antecedents.
- **People’s Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India (2013)**: NOTA recognised as an expression of voter dissatisfaction; presupposes actual competitive elections.
- **CEC and Other ECs Act, 2023**: Removal of CJI from appointment committee – structural independence argument.
- **Democracy Index 2024 (EIU, published 2025)**: India ranked 41st; “flawed democracy” classification – Prelims-level fact for comparative politics questions.
- **Comparative angle**: UK deposit forfeiture rule (below 5% threshold); Israel turnout debate – India lacks equivalent legitimacy safeguards.
- **West Bengal 2023 panchayat elections** – concrete case study for how uncontested seats arise through extra-constitutional pressure.
- **NHRC report on WB post-poll violence (2021)** – institutional documentation of competitive suppression.

Mains Questions:

- ❶ “Free and fair elections require not merely the absence of fraud but the presence of genuine competition.” Examine this statement in the light of recent developments in Indian electoral practice.
- ❷ Does the CEC and Other Election Commissioners Act, 2023 compromise the structural independence of the Election Commission? Critically evaluate.
- ❸ What institutional reforms would strengthen the Election Commission’s capacity to ensure competitive elections across all Indian states?

Keywords: Article 324, Article 326, Article 19(1)(a), Election Commission independence, CEC and Other ECs Act 2023, uncontested elections, voter roll deletions, ADR v UoI 2002, PUCL v UoI 2003, PUCL v UoI 2013, NOTA, Democracy Index 2024 EIU, flawed democracy, West Bengal panchayat 2018 2023, competitive erasure, democratic backsliding, legitimacy deficit, structural independence, Anoop Baranwal case

The Hindu's deeper argument is that the health of Indian democracy cannot be read off election results alone — it must be measured by what happened before the results: whether candidates could file, whether voters remained on the rolls, whether the Commission acted without fear. A one-horse race may produce a winner, but it produces no mandate. For a polity as diverse and contested as India's, the legitimacy that flows from genuine electoral competition is not a luxury — it is the load-bearing wall of the entire constitutional order.

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