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India at ITLOS: Bimal Patel and the Law of the Sea

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WHY IN NEWS

On June 19, 2026, India's Bimal N. Patel was elected a judge of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) at the 36th Meeting of States Parties to UNCLOS, held at United Nations Headquarters. He secured 115 of 168 valid votes, succeeding Neeru Chadha, and will take office on October 1, 2026 for a term running to 2035.

BACKGROUND: UNCLOS AND ITLOS

The **United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), 1982**, often called the “constitution for the oceans”, codifies the rights and responsibilities of nations in their use of the world’s oceans. It established three institutions, of which ITLOS is one.

The **International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS)** is an independent judicial body created under UNCLOS to adjudicate (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/adjudicate/>) disputes arising from the interpretation and application of the Convention.

FEATURE	DETAIL
Parent treaty	UNCLOS, 1982
Seat	Hamburg, Germany
Number of judges	21
Term of judges	Nine years (renewable)
Function	Settle disputes under UNCLOS

Judges are elected to ensure equitable [\(https://ujiyari.com/vocab/equitable/\)](https://ujiyari.com/vocab/equitable/) geographical representation and the representation of the principal legal systems of the world. ITLOS handles matters such as maritime boundary disputes, the prompt release of detained vessels and crews, and provisional measures.

THE MARITIME ZONES UNDER UNCLOS

A recurring Prelims theme is the set of maritime zones UNCLOS defines, measured from the baseline:

ZONE	EXTENT FROM BASELINE	COASTAL STATE RIGHTS
Territorial Sea	Up to 12 nautical miles	Full sovereignty (https://ujiyari.com/vocab/sovereignty/)
Contiguous (https://ujiyari.com/vocab/contiguous/) Zone	Up to 24 nautical miles	Customs, fiscal, immigration, sanitary control
Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)	Up to 200 nautical miles	Sovereign rights over resources
Continental Shelf	Up to 200 nm, extendable to 350 nm	Rights over seabed resources

Beyond national jurisdiction lies the **High Seas** and the international seabed, known as “the Area”, whose resources are the common heritage of mankind, administered by the International Seabed Authority (ISA). India is an ISA explorer with rights in the **Central Indian Ocean Basin**.

ABOUT THE JUDGE: BIMAL N. PATEL

Bimal Patel is a distinguished international law scholar. He is a member of the **International Law Commission (ILC)**, the UN body that codifies and progressively develops international law, and the Vice-Chancellor of **Rashtriya Raksha University**. His election strengthens India’s presence in international adjudicatory bodies and continues India’s representation at ITLOS following Neeru Chadha, who was India’s first woman judge there.

ANALYSIS: WHY THIS ELECTION MATTERS

- **Strategic voice:** As a maritime nation with vast EEZ interests, energy shipping lanes and deep-sea mining ambitions, India benefits from having a judge on the principal law-of-the-sea tribunal.
- **Soft power and credibility:** Indian representation in UN judicial and codification bodies enhances its standing as a champion of a rules-based maritime order.

- **Indo-Pacific relevance:** With contested waters and the importance of freedom of navigation (<https://ujivari.com/terms/freedom-of-navigation/>), an Indian voice at ITLOS aligns with India's Indo-Pacific and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision.
- **Continuity:** It maintains India's uninterrupted presence at the tribunal.

WAY FORWARD

- Leverage (<https://ujivari.com/vocab/leverage/>) the position to articulate principles balancing freedom of navigation with coastal states' rights.
- Deepen India's engagement with UNCLOS dispute-settlement mechanisms.
- Advance India's deep-sea exploration interests responsibly under the ISA framework.
- Build a wider pipeline of Indian experts for international courts and tribunals.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims: ITLOS (seat, parent treaty, number of judges, term); UNCLOS maritime zones (12 / 24 / 200 nm); ISA and "the Area"; Central Indian Ocean Basin; ILC.

Mains (GS2): "India's election to ITLOS reflects its growing stake in a rules-based maritime order. Discuss the significance of UNCLOS for India's strategic and economic interests." Examine the role of international tribunals in settling maritime disputes.

FACTS CORNER

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ITLOS: International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea; established under UNCLOS 1982; seated in Hamburg; 21 judges; nine-year terms.

Election: Bimal N. Patel elected June 19, 2026 with 115 of 168 valid votes; succeeds Neeru Chadha; takes office October 1, 2026, term to 2035.

UNCLOS zones: 12 nm territorial sea; 24 nm contiguous zone; 200 nm EEZ.

Patel: Member of the International Law Commission; Vice-Chancellor of Rashtriya Raksha University.

India and the seabed: ISA explorer in the Central Indian Ocean Basin; "the Area" is the common heritage of mankind.

Sources: Ministry of External Affairs (<https://www.mea.gov.in>), The Hindu (<https://www.thehindu.com>)

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