

Election Commission of India

Vs

Shivaji and Others

Civil Appeal No. 2849 of 1987 in Special Leave Petition (Civil) No. 12198 of 1987

(E S. Venkataramiah, K. N. Singh JJ)

10.11.1987

JUDGMENT

VENKATARAMIAH, J. -

1. We are very much disturbed by the manner in which the High Court of Bombay (Aurangabad Bench) has interfered not once but twice with the process of election which was being held under the provisions of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 (hereinafter referred to as 'the Act') to the Legislative Council of the State of Maharashtra from the Osmanabad-cum-Latur-cum-Beed Local Authorities Constituency. The Governor of Maharashtra by a notification dated September 18, 1987 issued under Section 16 of the Act called upon six local authorities constituencies in the State of Maharashtra to elect one member from each of the said constituencies in order to fill the vacancies in the Maharashtra Legislative Council which had been caused by the retirement of the members representing the said constituencies on the expiration of their terms of office. On the same day the Election Commission of India, the appellant herein, issued a notification under Section 30 of the Act fixing the calendar of events for the purpose of holding the elections accordingly. Osmanabad-cum-Latur-cum-Beed Local Authorities constituency was one of the six constituencies referred to above. According to the notification issued by the Election Commission the last date for making nominations was September 25, 1987. The date for the scrutiny of nominations was September 26, 1987. The last date for the withdrawal of candidatures was September 28, 1987 and the date on which the poll, if necessary, was to be taken was October 18, 1987. The entire election process had to be completed within October 21, 1987. Respondents 1 to 5 Shivaji son of Vishwanath Gangane, Prof. K. S. Shinde, Prabhakar son of Bapurao Pudale, Shankarrao Madhavrao Mane and Ashok son of Rangnath Magar filed a writ petition under Article 226 of the Constitution in Writ Petition under Article 226 of the Constitution in Writ Petition No. 1459 of 1987 on September 26, 1987 before the High Court of Bombay (Aurangabad Bench) challenging the validity of the notification issued by the Election Commission on September 18, 1987 on the ground that the notification was invalid because the Zila Parishad of Osmanabad and the Zila Parishad of Latur district which were within the constituency had not been constituted and the Administrators were appointed to run the said Zila Parishads and therefore the members of the said Zila Parishads who were entitled to take part in the said elections had been deprived of their right to participate in the said election. Along with the writ petition an application was made for an interim order and the counsel who moved the said application just prayed for the postponement of the last date for withdrawal of candidatures from September 28, 1987 to October 1, 1987. It is not clear why such a prayer was made. The learned Single Judge before whom the writ petition came up for consideration however passed an order on September 26, 1987 issuing notice on the writ petition and passing an interim order ex part directing the postponement of the last date of withdrawal of candidatures from September 28, 1987 to October 1, 1987. A Division Bench of the High Court

which was presided over by the learned Single Judge who had issued the interim order earlier heard the writ petition on October 1, 1987 and dismissed it by the order passed on the same day. In the course of its order the Division Bench relied on the decision in *Inderjit Barua v. Election Commission of India* (1985 Supp 3 SCR 225 : (1985) 4 SCC 722; (1985) 1 SCC 21 : AIR 1984 SC 1911) which had laid down that the validity of an election process under the Act could be challenged only in an election petition filed under the Act as provided by Article 329(b) of the Constitution. While dismissing the writ petition the High Court did not make any observation as to the effect of the interim order passed by it earlier on the election programme. 18 candidates withdrew their candidatures by October 1, 1987 which was the last date for withdrawal of candidatures as per the interim order passed by the High Court. In the circumstances the Election Commission considered it fair to postpone the date of poll from October 18, 1987 (as originally notified) to some later date in order to secure compliance with the spirit underlying Section 30(d) of the Act which contemplated an interval of 20 days between the last date for withdrawal of candidatures and the date of poll. Ordinarily a week's postponement would have been in the opinion of the Election Commission Adequate in the present case but as the postponement would have led to the date of poll falling during the festival season the Election Commission revised the date of poll as November 1, 1987 and notified the change of the date of poll in the official gazette on October 15, 1987. The Election Commission also notified under the same notification the date before which the election had to be completed as November 4, 1987 instead of October 21, 1987 which was the date fixed for that purpose originally. But on October 16, 1987 respondents 1 to 5 filed a review petition in Civil Application for Review No. 2035 of 1987 before the High Court seeking a direction to the effect that the election programme might be re-notified on the ground that clear 20 days' interval was not there between the last date of withdrawal of candidatures and the date of poll which had been originally fixed as October 18, 1987. The said review petition came up for consideration on October 16, 1987 before the very same Bench which had dismissed the writ Petition earlier on October 1, 1987. On that occasion it is alleged that it was brought to the notice of the High Court by the learned counsel appearing for the State of Maharashtra, Collector, Osmanabad and the Returning Officer for the Osmanabad-Latur-Beed Local Authority Constituency and the District Returning Officer for Maharashtra Legislative Council Constituency No. 26, Osmanabad-Latur-Beed Local Authority Constituency, Osmanabad, that the Election Commission had on October 15, 1987 already postponed the date of poll from October 18, 1987 to November 1, 1987. Despite the above submission made by the said counsel the High Court was pleased to make the following order on October 16, 1987 :

Notice before admission. In this matter, the election fixed for October 18, 1987 will have to be stayed till we pass further order on October 26, 1987, looking to the mandatory provision of Section 30 of the Representation of the People Act, S. O. till October 26, 1987.

2. The case was adjourned to October 26, 1987 for hearing. Aggrieved by the interim order passed in the writ petition postponing the last date of withdrawal of the candidatures from September 28, 1987 to October 1, 1987 and by the interim order passed on October 16, 1987 in the review petition the Election Commission has filed this appeal by special leave.

3. The special leave petition filed in the above case came up for hearing on October 27, 1987. On that date this Court directed issue of notice on the special leave petition and also ordered stay of the operation of the stay order which had been passed by the High Court. The Election Commission was permitted to proceed with the election process. The contesting respondents took notice of the petition in the court through their counsel. The case was adjourned to October 30, 1987 for final hearing. On October 30, 1987 the case was heard and the court passed the following order :

Special leave granted. The appeal is heard. We allow the appeal, set aside the order dated October 16, 1987 passed by the High Court of Bombay at Aurangabad and dismiss the Review Petition No. 2035 of 1987 in Writ Petition No. 1459 of 1987. The Election Commission shall proceed with the election in accordance with law. Respondents 1 to 5 shall pay Rs. 5000 by way of costs to the appellant. Reasons will follow.

4. The appeal was accordingly allowed with costs. The following are the reasons for allowing the appeal.

5. Part XV of the Constitution contains the provisions relating to the elections. Article 324(1) of the Constitution vests the superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of the electoral rolls for, and the conduct of all elections to Parliament and to the legislature of every State and of elections to the offices of the President and the Vice-President held under the Constitution in the Election Commission. Article 327 of the Constitution provides that subject to the provisions of the Constitution, Parliament may from time to time by law make provision with respect to all matters relating to, or in connection with, elections to either House of Parliament or to the House or either House of the legislature of a State including the preparation of electoral rolls, the delimitation of constituencies and all other matters necessary for securing the due constitution of each House or Houses. In exercise of the power granted under Article 327 of the Constitution Parliament has enacted the Act to provide for the conduct of elections to either House of Parliament, to the House or either House of the legislature of each State, qualifications and disqualifications for membership of those Houses, corrupt practices and other offences in connection with such elections and the decision of doubts and disputes arising out of or in connection with the such elections. Article 329(b) of the Constitution provides that notwithstanding anything contained in the Constitution no election to either House of Parliament or to the House or either House of the legislature of a State shall be called in question except by an election petition presented to such authority and in such manner as may be provided for by or under any law made by the appropriate legislature.

6. The disputes regarding the elections have to be settled in accordance with the provisions contained in Part VI of the Act. Section 80 of the Act states that no election shall be called in question except by an election petition presented in accordance with the provisions of Part VI of the Act. The expression 'election' is defined by Section 2(d) of the Act as an election to fill a seat or seats in either House of Parliament or in the House or either House of the legislature of a State other than the State of Jammu and Kashmir. Thus a dispute regarding election to the Legislative Council of a State can be raised only under the provisions contained in Part VI of the Act. Section 80-A of the Act provides that the court having jurisdiction to try an election petition shall be the High Court. An election petition has to be presented in accordance with Section 81 of the Act. In view of the non obstante clause contained in Article 329 of the Constitution the power of the High Court to entertain a petition questioning an election on whatever grounds under Article 226 of the Constitution is taken away. The word 'election' has by long usage in connection with the process of selection of proper representatives in democratic institutions acquired both a wide and a narrow meaning. In the narrow sense it is used to mean the final selection of a candidate which may embrace the result of the poll when there is polling, or a particular candidate being returned unopposed when there is no poll. In the wide sense, the word is used to connote the entire process culminating in a candidate being declared elected and it is in this wide sense that the word is used in Part XV of the Constitution in which Article 329(b) occurs. In *N. P. Ponnuswami v. Returning Officer, Namakkal Constituency* (1952 SCR 218 : AIR 1952 SC 64) this Court held that the scheme of Part XV of the Constitution and the Act seems to be that any matter which has the effect of vitiating an election

should be brought up only at the appropriate stage in an appropriate manner before a special tribunal and should not be brought up at an intermediate stage before any court. Any other meaning ascribed to the words used in the article would lead to anomalies, which the Constitution could not have contemplated, one of them being any dispute relating to the pre-polling stage. In the above decision this Court ruled that having regard to the important functions which the legislatures have to perform in democratic countries, it had always been recognised to be a matter of first importance that elections should be concluded as early as possible according to time schedule and all controversial matters and all disputes arising out of elections should be postponed till after the elections were over so that the election proceedings might not be unduly retarded or protracted. Hence even if there was any ground relating to the non-compliance with the provisions of the Act and the Constitution on which the validity of any election process could be questioned, the person interested in questioning the elections has to wait till the election is over and institute a petition in accordance with Section 81 of the Act calling in question the election of the successful candidate within forty-five days from the date of election of the returned candidate but not earlier than the date of election. This view has been reaffirmed by this Court in *Lakshmi Charan Sen v. A. K. M. Hassan Uzzaman* (1985 Supp 1 SCR 493 : (1985) 4 SCC 689) and in *Inderjit Barua v. Election Commission of India* (1985 Supp 3 SCR 225 : (1985) 4 SCC 722; (1985) 1 SCC 21 : AIR 1984 SC 1911). Realising the effect of Article 329(b) of the Constitution the High Court even though it had by oversight issued an interim order in Writ Petition No. 1459 of 1987 on September 26, 1987 postponing the last date for withdrawal of candidatures to October 1, 1987 dismissed the petition by its judgment dated October 1, 1987. The relevant part of its judgments reads as follows :

The challenge must fail mainly on two grounds. First on the ground that the stage has reached of withdrawals of nominations for the said election which was in fact, fixed on 30th but has been postponed because of our orders as on today. Article 329 (b) bars every challenge to any election including all the election process which commences from the date of notification in the official gazette, except by way of election petition under the Representation of the People Act. Mr. Chapalgaonkar, appearing for the respondent has relied upon a decision - reported in *Inderjit Barua v. Election Commission of India* (1985 Supp 3 SCR 225 : (1985) 4 SCC 722; (1985) 1 SCC 21 : AIR 1984 SC 1911) to support this plea that all election including every election process must be challenged only by way of election petition under the Representation of the People Act.

Having thus dismissed the petition on October 1, 1987 the court committed a serious error in entertaining a review petition in the very same writ petition on October 16, 1987 and passing an order staying election which had been earlier fixed for October 18, 1987 till further orders "looking to the mandatory provisions of Section 30 of the Representation of the People Act". The High Court failed to recall to its mind that it was not its concern under Article 226 of the Constitution to rectify any error even if there was an error committed in the process of election at any stage prior to the declaration of the result of the election notwithstanding the fact that the error in question related to a mandatory provision of the statute relating to the conduct of the election. If there was any such error committed in the course of the election process the Election Commission had the authority to set it right by virtue of power vested in it under Article 324 of the Constitution as decided in *Mohinder Singh Gill v. Chief Election Commissioner* ((1978) 2 SCR 272 : (1978) 1 SCC 405 : AIR 1978 SC 851) and to see that the election process was completed in a fair manner.

7. It is true that the Zila Parishads of Osmanabad and the Latur districts had not been constituted and administrators were functioning in their place. The total voters in the local authorities constituency

in question were 577 out of which 533 were members of Municipal Councils and 44 were members of the Zila Parishads. Even if the Zila Parishads of Osmanabad and Latur districts had been in existence the total number of their members would not have exceeded above 110. As such more than three-fourth of the voters entitled to vote in the constituency in question were in existence. The Election Commission had a guideline that if at least 75 per cent of the local authorities in a local authority constituency were functioning and again at least 75 per cent of the voters in the total electorate were available, then the electorate should be asked to elect their representative to the Legislative Council. In the instant case 75 per cent of the total electorate (including the number of members of the Zila Parishads of Osmanabad and Latur districts who would have been voters had the said Zila Parishad been constituted) were entitled to participate. Since the existing position in the constituency satisfied the guideline prescribed by the Election Commission, the election from the said constituency had been ordered. It was only on account of the interim order passed by the High Court on September 26, 1987 postponing last date for withdrawal of candidatures from September 28, 1987 to October 1, 1987 and not on account of any mistake committed by the Election Commission the interval between the last date of withdrawal and the date of poll which had been originally fixed as October 18, 1987 fell short of the period of twenty days prescribed by clause (d) of Section 30 of the Act. After the judgment of the High Court was pronounced dismissing the writ petition on October 1, 1987 in order to ensure that there was an interval of 20 days between the last date for the withdrawal of candidatures and the date of poll, the Election Commission had on its own postponed the date of poll to November 1, 1987 and had published a notification in the official gazette of the State of Government even before the court passed another interim order on October 16, 1987 in the review petition. All these changes in the calendar of events of the election in question came about because of earlier interim order of the High Court. It has to be stated here that it is not the law that every non-compliance with the provisions of the Act or of the Constitution will vitiate an election. It is only when it is shown that the result of the election was materially affected by such non-compliance the High Court would have jurisdiction to set aside an election in accordance with Section 100(1)(d)(iv) of the Act. The High Court was in error in thinking that it alone had the exclusive power to protect the democracy. The success of democracy is dependent upon the cooperation of the Legislature, the Executive, the Judiciary, the Election Commission, the Press, the political parties and above all the citizenry and each of them discharging the duties assigned to it. Every member of the body politic should play his legitimate role for the success of the democracy. Sometimes the success of democracy also depends upon the observance of restraint on the part of the constitutional functionaries.

8. We are constrained to observe that the High Court grievously erred in entertaining the review petition and in passing an interim order on October 16, 1987. We are of the view that both the interim orders the one passed on September 26, 1987 postponing the last date of withdrawal of candidatures from September 28, 1987 to October 1, 1987 and the other passed on October 16, 1987 were without jurisdiction. There was hardly any justification for entertaining the review petition in the circumstances of this case and for issuing notice thereon particularly after the High Court itself had rejected the writ petition on the ground that it had no jurisdiction to interfere with the process of election at that stage in view of the provisions of Article 329(b) of the Constitution. The review petition filed before the High Court was liable to be dismissed. We directed respondents 1 to 5 to pay Rs. 5000 to the appellant by way of costs since the entire proceedings in the High Court amounted to a clear abuse of the process of law. These are the reasons for our order passed on October 30, 1987 allowing the appeal.

</html