BLOGS

Anoop Baranwal v. Union: Ensuring Independence of Chief Election Commissioner

Indrasish Majumder · 18 Jun 2026

Introduction

The Supreme Court's judgment in Anoop Baranwal v. Union of India marked a pivotal moment in Indian electoral jurisprudence. It tackled a long-standing concern: the method of appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and Election Commissioners (ECs).

Through this judgment, the Court aimed to ensure greater transparency, neutrality, and independence of the Election Commission of India (ECI), thereby safeguarding the sanctity of the electoral process.

Background of the Case

The petition in Anoop Baranwal v. Union of India was filed under Article 32 of the Constitution by a public-spirited individual seeking reforms in the process of appointing the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners.

The primary issue raised was that the current system allowed the executive: particularly the President, acting on the advice of the Council of Ministers- to make these appointments without any consultation or scrutiny by the legislature or judiciary.

This method, the petitioner argued, undermined the independence of the Election Commission, which is a constitutional body tasked with conducting free and fair elections under Article 324 of the Constitution.

The plea relied on constitutional provisions, comparative international practices, previous recommendations of expert committees, and concerns over erosion of institutional autonomy.

Constitutional Provisions and Legal Framework

Article 324 of the Constitution vests the “superintendence, direction, and control” of elections in an Election Commission. It states that:

- The Election Commission shall consist of the Chief Election Commissioner and such number of other Election Commissioners as the President may, from time to time, fix.
- The CEC and other ECs shall be appointed by the President.
- Subject to any law made by Parliament, the conditions of service and tenure shall be determined by the President.

Crucially, Article 324(2) allows Parliament to make laws regarding the appointment of Election Commissioners, but no such law had been enacted in over 70 years.

This vacuum enabled the executive to make appointments without a statutory framework, raising concerns about partisan appointments and the erosion of the commission’s neutrality.

Issues Before the Court

The key legal questions framed by the Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court were:

1. Does the current method of appointing CECs and ECs violate the principles of institutional independence and constitutional morality?
2. Whether the absence of a law under Article 324(2) permits unfettered discretion in the executive.
3. Can the court establish guidelines to address the legislative gap?

Arguments by the Petitioner

The petitioner, represented by senior counsel, submitted that:

1. The exclusive control of the executive in appointing the CEC and ECs compromises the neutrality of the Election Commission.
2. The current practice violates the doctrine of separation of powers and the basic structure of the Constitution.
3. Drawing parallels with other constitutional bodies such as the CAG and judiciary, the petitioner argued that an independent selection committee was necessary.

4. In many democracies, independent commissions or multi-member panels are involved in such appointments.
5. The Law Commission (2009), the Second Administrative Reforms Commission (2007), and others had recommended a broad-based appointment mechanism involving the Prime Minister, Leader of Opposition, and Chief Justice of India.

Arguments by the Union of India

The Union of India contended that:-

1. The Constitution expressly empowers the President (i.e., the executive) to appoint the CEC and ECs unless Parliament enacts a law.
2. The judiciary should not usurp the legislative role by laying down norms for appointments.
3. The current system had delivered credible elections, and there was no pressing need to change it judicially.
4. Any reform in the appointment process must come through legislation, not judicial innovation.

Judgment and Key Observations

The Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court, comprising Justices K.M. Joseph, Ajay Rastogi, Aniruddha Bose, Hrishikesh Roy, and C.T. Ravikumar, unanimously delivered the verdict on March 2, 2023. Justice K.M. Joseph authored the majority opinion.

1. Court's Power to Issue Directions

The Court held that in the absence of a law under Article 324(2), the judiciary could step in to fill the constitutional vacuum. It cited the precedent set in *Vineet Narain v. Union of India* (1998), where the Court had laid down guidelines for the appointment of the CBI Director until Parliament enacted a law.

2. The Doctrine of the Separation of Powers

While acknowledging the doctrine of separation of powers, the Court clarified that inaction by one organ (legislature) cannot be allowed to defeat constitutional objectives. Where constitutional functionaries fail to act, the judiciary is duty-bound to ensure the proper implementation of

constitutional principles.

3. Independence of the Election Commission

The Court emphasized that the ECI's role in preserving the democratic fabric of the country demands institutional independence. The autonomy of the Election Commission is vital to uphold the free and fair conduct of elections, which is part of the basic structure of the Constitution.

4. Interim Guidelines for Appointment

To ensure neutrality and transparency, the Court laid down the following guidelines, which would operate until Parliament enacts a law:

- The CEC and ECs shall be appointed by the President on the advice of a committee comprising:
  - The Prime Minister of India,
  - The Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha (or the leader of the single largest opposition party), and
  - The Chief Justice of India.

This committee-based mechanism, the Court held, would act as a check against unilateral executive appointments.

5. Equal Protection for ECs and CEC

The Court also observed that while the Constitution provides protection to the CEC in terms of removal (similar to a Supreme Court judge), no such protection exists for the ECs. It urged Parliament to consider granting equal safeguards to ensure functional parity and avoid undue influence.

6. Urging Legislative Action

The court explicitly stated that the guidelines would remain operative only until Parliament passes a law. It urged the legislature to enact a comprehensive statute to institutionalize the process.

Conclusion

In Anoop Baranwal v. Union of India, the Supreme Court addressed a long-standing lacuna in Indian electoral law. By directing that the appointment of the CEC and ECs be made through a committee including the Prime Minister, Leader of Opposition, and Chief Justice of India, the Court safeguarded the independence of the Election Commission- an institution central to the democratic process.

The judgment is not merely a legal milestone but a reaffirmation of democratic values and constitutional ethos. It calls upon the organs of the state, especially the legislature to uphold the founding principles of fairness, neutrality, and transparency in the conduct of elections.