

An Indonesian woman casting her ballot at a polling centre during the presidential and legislative election in Jakarta on April 17. The official election results will be announced on May 22. The delay has led to speculation about the winner, who by unofficial counts is the incumbent Joko Widodo, and complaints and public protests by the opposition party. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE



A voter posing in a photo booth after casting his ballot during the sixth phase of voting for national elections in New Delhi on Sunday. This year's elections stretch from April 11 to May 19, with the results to be announced on May 23. The multi-phase election in India comes with considerable costs – the most obvious being that governance takes a back seat during the election period. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG



# The long and short of elections

The polls in India and Indonesia show their duration has consequences

**Ronojoy Sen**

For *The Straits Times*

India's Election Commission (EC) has a stellar reputation for impartially running the world's biggest democratic exercise. For this year's general election, it has to oversee a process involving 900 million eligible voters, one million polling booths, over 11 million election officials and 2.3 million electronic voting machines. In addition, around 2,000 political parties were in the election fray. But on one count, the EC has come under increasing scrutiny: The duration of the elections, which this year stretched to seven phases over six weeks. The polling began on April 11 and ends on May 19, with the results being announced on May 23. The last general election was not much shorter in duration. It's not as if the general elections in India were always so lengthy. India's first election in 1951-52 took nearly three months to complete. However, between 1962 and 1989, elections were completed in four to 10 days. The four-day general election in 1980 was the shortest. It was from the 1990s that the election process started getting longer. The primary reason given by the EC for the extended duration is the need to provide security and the logistics of moving troops from one part of the country to another. Indeed, a state like Uttar Pradesh, with a population of over 200 million, is larger than most countries and is having its elections held in seven phases. In contrast, Indonesia, the world's third-largest democracy with 193 million eligible voters, held its presidential vote along with national and regional

parliamentary elections on the same day on April 17. This was done to cut down on costs. While smaller in scale than the Indian elections, the polls in Indonesia were nonetheless impressive with voting conducted in over 800,000 polling stations across hundreds of islands spread over 5,000km. The one-day election in Indonesia had its downside though. The official election results are yet to be declared and will, in fact, be announced on May 22, a day before the Indian election result. So the election process, from voting to result, is taking almost the same time in Indonesia as in India. The delay has also led to speculation about the winner, who by unofficial counts is the incumbent Joko Widodo, and complaints and public protests by the opposition party. Moreover, the Indonesian election has seen a high death toll of poll officials. According to the Indonesian General Elections Commission, over 500 polling staff have died due to fatigue-related illnesses. This has led to demands to replace manual voting with electronic voting machines, as in India. The multi-phase election in India comes with considerable costs too. The most obvious disadvantage is the enforced policy paralysis in India. From the moment the elections are announced, the Model Code of Conduct comes into effect, thereby barring any major policy initiative by the government. One of the provisions of the code states: "The party in power whether at the Centre or in the State... shall ensure that no cause is given for any complaint that it has used its official position for the purposes of its election campaign." This effectively prohibited any

major policy initiatives from March 10, the day elections were announced, to the announcement of results. Besides, the prime minister, central government ministers and state ministers focus their energies on campaigning as soon as the elections are announced, which means that governance takes a back seat during the election period. There are several other disadvantages that come with lengthy elections in India. First, the cost of contesting elections is astronomically high. It is estimated that parties and candidates spent US\$5 billion for the 2014 general election. Some are expecting this to double this year. This naturally tends to favour

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political parties with deep pockets and, this year, it's most definitely the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Financing of political parties in India is an opaque business. The Narendra Modi government launched a scheme of electoral bonds this year, which allows businesses and individuals to donate to parties without their identities being disclosed. Donations to the tune of nearly US\$150 million (S\$205 million) poured in and the bulk of it went to the BJP. Second, a stretched-out election gives an advantage to the party that can effectively convey the message that it is winning. According to surveys, a majority of late deciders in India – those who make up their minds while campaigning is on or just before voting – say that voting for the winning party matters. In 2014, the BJP and Mr Modi were far more effective in campaigning and in conveying that they were likely to win. This was partly tied to the volume of media coverage of Mr Modi, which far outstripped that of his main rival, the Congress' Rahul Gandhi. The impact could be seen in the result, where the Congress' vote share fell from over 35 per cent in the first two phases to under 10 per cent in the last two phases. Neither the six-week election in India nor the one-day version in Indonesia is ideal. There is a need to rethink election schedules for better poll management as well as to provide a level playing field.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Dr Ronojoy Sen is a senior research fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies and the South Asian Studies Programme, National University of Singapore.