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28 January, 2014

Dear Shri Brahma

This is further to my letter to the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) dated 23 April, 2013 on the issue of Voting Rights of Armed Forces personnel.

On 20 January, 2014, Flags of Honour Foundation had conducted an open house on the issue that was attended by Veterans, ex-servicemen, activists and members of the media, where you and I were present and spoke as the Guest Speakers.

You had agreed that this issue needs speedy resolution and asked to be appraised of solutions that the veterans and serving forces would find acceptable.

The findings and conclusions of the Open House are provided below. The basic theme of these recommendations was that the Armed Forces should be treated the same as civilian citizens as far as possible.

1. Armed forces personnel, their wives and eligible children should be allowed to vote wherever they are serving. In the event of wives and children staying away, their families should be allowed to vote at the place of residence.
2. There should be no stipulation on the duration of posting for the Armed Forces personnel to be eligible to vote.
3. Polling Booths should be set up at Unit Headquarters/Regimental Centres.
4. Proxy Voting has been unsuccessful and it should be done away with.
5. The Election Commission must launch an enrolment campaign along with Armed Forces HQs to enumerate the Armed Forces personnel as voters. In the event of this not being completed, local commanders can certify the personnel serving in their local unit and that should serve as a voters list.



Most of the 14 lakh armed forces personnel and 9 lakh paramilitary forces personnel and their families do not get to vote until they retire.

The Election Commission has done yeomen service taking the ballot box and democracy to remotest areas of our country like polling booths for one single voter inside the Gir Forest in Gujarat to exercise his right to franchise.

I am sure you will agree that the Election Commission should and can deliver on the desire of serving men/women to also participate in the democratic process - a constitutionally given right.

I was indeed encouraged by your positive approach, and I would urge the Election Commission to move quickly to implement these suggestions and right the wrong of the last many decades. The country owes it to them.

All of us and the Election Commission have a duty towards the country's Armed Forces. I would urge you to enable India's brave heroes and their families to vote in the coming Lok Sabha elections.

Yours Sincerely,

RAJEEV CHANDRASEKHAR

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Annexure

Findings of the Open House held on 20 January, 2014

1. Most armed forces personnel get to vote only on retirement.
2. Armed Forces are fed up, they demand their Right to Vote. They want to vote in 2014 elections.
3. Both Postal Ballot and Proxy Vote systems have failed.
4. Postal Ballots do not reach most of the armed forces personnel and when it does reach some it is long after election results are declared.
5. The current requirement of 10 days for ballots to be despatched after the last day of withdrawal and polling is not adequate. In US, the timeline is 45 days, Postal Ballots can be sent online and printouts taken and distributed.
6. The current requirement of being posted at a place for at least six months deprives armed forces personnel the chance to vote. No such restriction on civilians though.
7. There is no regular enumeration of soldiers/sailors/airmen and officers.
8. The Election Commission needs to work with Armed Forces HQs to create awareness.
9. The Election Commission's ERO Handbook 2008 goes against EC's orders of 1995. It states EROs cannot enrol soldiers as voters.
10. Wives of officers and jawans equally affected, they should be allowed to vote at the place of residence or the family station.
11. Proxy Voting has been a non-starter and not reliable. A jawan or officer gets posted around the country and, many a time, has no one from family stationed at what was his original place of residence. He cannot rely on anyone to vote for him and that too, in secrecy.

N. Senanayake