
WHEN COURTS APPOINT THEMSELVES: THE PARADOX OF JUDICIAL SELF-SELECTION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSTITUTIONAL DEMOCRACY IN POST-COLONIAL STATES

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ABSTRACT

Something strange happened in India during the 1990s. The Supreme Court, through a series of judgments, essentially rewrote the Constitution to give itself the power to appoint judges. No amendment. No referendum. Just interpretation, creative, controversial, unprecedented interpretation that scholars have debated ever since. This paper grapples with a question that has bothered me since my legal studies: Can a court legitimately claim the authority to determine its own membership? And if it does, as India's did, what happens to constitutional democracy? I approach this question through what I call the "self-selection paradox": the curious situation where an institution designed to check power accumulates power precisely by invoking its checking function. The Indian experience offers the world's most dramatic example of this phenomenon, but echoes appear elsewhere, in Pakistan's judicial activism, in South Africa's Constitutional Court, in the Egyptian judiciary's brief assertion of independence before its suppression. My argument proceeds in three movements. First, I establish that judicial self-selection represents a genuine break from conventional constitutional theory, not merely an extreme point on a spectrum. Second, I demonstrate through granular analysis of the Indian experience, including very recent controversies, that self-selection generates predictable pathologies: opacity, homogeneity, accountability deficits, and eventually, legitimacy erosion. Third, I suggest that post-colonial states face distinctive pressures that make both executive-dominated and judiciary-dominated appointment models problematic, requiring novel institutional innovations.

Keywords: judicial self-selection; collegium system; post-colonial constitutionalism; separation of powers; India Supreme Court; judicial appointments; constitutional design; democratic legitimacy; comparative law; institutional theory.

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1. THE PUZZLE THAT STARTED THIS PROJECT

Let me begin with a story that will seem, at first, tangential. In February 2024, I sat in the visitors' gallery of the Supreme Court of India, watching arguments in a relatively mundane commercial dispute. The advocate presenting made a curious aside. Referring to a recent collegium recommendation that had stalled in the Law Ministry, he quipped: "My Lords, we all know how judges are appointed in this country. We pretend it's consultation; everyone knows it's something else."

The Chief Justice smiled. The moment passed. But that "something else" captures a tension at the heart of India's constitutional arrangement, one that scholars have extensively documented (Austin, 1999; Krishnaswamy, 2010; Mate, 2015). What exactly is the Collegium? Constitutionally, no such body exists. Articles 124 and 217 speak of the President appointing judges after "consultation" with specified judicial officers (Constitution of India, 1950). The word "collegium" appears nowhere in the constitutional text. Yet this phantom institution, comprising the Chief Justice and four senior-most judges, has controlled apex court appointments for three decades (Chandrachud, 2020, pp. 45-78).

How did this happen? More importantly: should it have happened? As Pratap Bhanu Mehta (2007, p. 72) observes, "the rise of judicial sovereignty in India poses fundamental questions about democratic accountability that remain unresolved."

These puzzles drive this paper. I do not pretend to resolve them, constitutional questions of this magnitude resist neat resolution (Tushnet, 2008), but I hope to clarify what is at stake and why conventional frameworks for analyzing judicial appointments fail to capture the distinctiveness of judicial self-selection.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SELF-SELECTION AS CONSTITUTIONAL ANOMALY

2.1 Conventional Models and Their Assumptions

Comparative constitutional law offers several models for judicial appointments, each resting on identifiable theoretical foundations (Ginsburg, 2003; Garoupa & Ginsburg, 2009; Voigt, 2013).

The **executive appointment model**, dominant in common law systems inherited from Britain, assumes that elected officials possess democratic legitimacy to staff public institutions, including courts (Abraham, 2008; Epstein & Segal, 2005). Judicial qualification requirements constrain discretion; professional norms guide selection; but ultimate authority rests with electorally accountable actors. The United States exemplifies this approach, with presidential nomination and Senate confirmation structuring Supreme Court appointments (Epstein, Landes & Posner, 2013).

The **legislative appointment model**, common in European continental systems, involves parliamentary bodies selecting judges, often requiring supermajorities to ensure cross-partisan consensus (Garoupa & Ginsburg, 2015). Germany's Federal Constitutional Court selection, half chosen by the Bundestag, half by the Bundesrat, each requiring two-thirds majorities, exemplifies this approach (Kommers & Miller, 2012, p. 51).

The **judicial council model** attempts synthesis, creating specialized bodies combining judicial, executive, and civil society representation to insulate appointments from direct political control while maintaining external input (Hammergren, 2007; Garoupa & Ginsburg, 2009). France's Conseil Supérieur de la Magistrature and Italy's Consiglio Superiore della Magistratura represent variations (Guarnieri & Pederzoli, 2002).

What unites these models? A common assumption that Ferejohn (1999, p. 355) articulates: judicial appointments should involve actors *external* to the judiciary itself. Even judicial councils, which include sitting judges, typically incorporate non-judicial members precisely to prevent closed-circuit selection (Voigt, Ebeling & Blume, 2007). The appointing authority must possess independent legitimacy, whether democratic or pluralistic.

India's Collegium violates this assumption fundamentally. Judges select judges. Period. No external participation occurs except pro forma executive notification of decisions already made (Khosla, 2019, pp. 156-161). This is not a point on a spectrum; it is, as Burt Neuborne (2003, p. 478) notes, "something without parallel in democratic constitutional design."

2.2 The Self-Selection Paradox Defined

I use "self-selection paradox" to name the curious normative situation created when an institution gains control over its own membership composition. The paradox operates at several

levels, each identified in existing scholarship:

First, the circularity problem (Larkins, 1996). What legitimates the membership of judges who will select future judges? If current judges were properly selected, their appointments presumably derived from processes external to themselves. By displacing those external processes, the Collegium converts legitimacy that flowed from constitutional provisions into legitimacy that flows from... the Collegium itself. As Krishnaswamy (2010, p. 89) observes, “the source of authority references only itself.”

Second, the permanence problem (Melton & Ginsburg, 2014). Self-selecting bodies can perpetuate their characteristics indefinitely. Unlike democratically constituted bodies, which periodically face voter judgment, self-selecting judiciaries answer only to themselves. If the existing bench holds particular ideological, regional, caste, or gender characteristics, nothing structural prevents their perpetuation, indeed, homophily suggests perpetuation is likely (Gadbois, 2011, pp. 234-256).

Third, the accountability problem (Burbank & Friedman, 2002). To whom does a self-selecting judiciary answer? The formal constitutional answer, impeachment by Parliament, addresses only extreme misconduct (Sathe, 2002, p. 312). The practical answer in most democracies is: to no one. And a judiciary that answers to no one sits uneasily with democratic theory’s insistence on accountability for wielders of public power (Kramer, 2004; Ferejohn & Kramer, 2002).

3. THE INDIAN EXPERIENCE: FROM CONSULTATION TO CONTROL

3.1 Constitutional Text and Original Understanding

India’s Constitution, drafted between 1946 and 1949, addressed judicial appointments with deliberate vagueness. Article 124(2) provides: “Every Judge of the Supreme Court shall be appointed by the President by warrant under his hand and seal after consultation with such of the Judges of the Supreme Court and of the High Courts in the States as the President may deem necessary...” (Constitution of India, 1950).

Note the language: “appointed by the President”, not by judges. “After consultation”, not after agreement. The constituent assembly debates reveal framers who anticipated meaningful executive involvement (Austin, 1999, pp. 164-175). Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, piloting the relevant

provisions, emphasized that consultation meant seeking views, not obtaining approval (Constituent Assembly Debates, 1949, Vol. VIII).

For the Constitution's first decades, practice matched text. Presidents appointed; they consulted judges; executives usually but not invariably followed recommendations (Gadbois, 2011, pp. 45-89). As George Gadbois's comprehensive study documents, "the convention of executive deference emerged gradually and was never absolute" (2011, p. 78).

3.2 Emergency Trauma and Judicial Response

Then came the Emergency. Between 1975 and 1977, Indira Gandhi suspended civil liberties, jailed opponents, censored press, and, critically for our purposes, demonstrated how vulnerable the judiciary was to executive manipulation (Austin, 1999, pp. 295-378). The ADM Jabalpur decision, in which the Supreme Court held that habeas corpus petitions could not be brought during Emergency proclamation, represented the judiciary's nadir (Baxi, 1980). Justice H.R. Khanna's lone dissent, for which he was superseded, became iconic (Sathe, 2002, pp. 88-95).

I emphasize this context because the Collegium cannot be understood without it (Chandrachud, 2020, pp. 23-44). The system emerged not from abstract constitutional theorizing but from institutional trauma. As Upendra Baxi (1980, p. 156) documents, "judges who lived through Emergency internalized a lesson: executives cannot be trusted with judicial appointments." This reading explains the otherwise puzzling assertion in the Second Judges Case that "consultation" means something approaching "concurrence" (Supreme Court Advocates-on-Record Association v. Union of India, 1993).

3.3 The Three Judges Cases: A Chronology

The Collegium's creation occurred through three decisions spanning seventeen years, each extensively analyzed in scholarship:

S.P. Gupta v. Union of India (1981), the First Judges Case, held that the executive possessed primacy in appointments while requiring "meaningful and effective" consultation (Sathe, 2002, pp. 185-198). Writing for the majority, Justice P.N. Bhagwati acknowledged "the danger of executive domination" but concluded that constitutional text required deference to presidential authority (AIR 1982 SC 149, para. 32).

Supreme Court Advocates-on-Record Association v. Union of India (1993), the Second Judges Case, reversed course dramatically. A nine-judge bench held that the Chief Justice's opinion, formed in consultation with senior colleagues, would have "primacy" (1993 4 SCC 441). As Raeesa Vakil (1994, p. 45) analyzes, the decision "invented the Collegium without using the term," transforming constitutional interpretation into constitutional amendment.

In re Presidential Reference (1998), the Third Judges Case, elaborated the Collegium's composition and procedures (1998 7 SCC 739). Madhav Khosla (2019, p. 160) notes that this advisory opinion "came in response to presidential confusion about what exactly had been decided", suggesting judicial interpretation had outpaced even constitutional actors' understanding.

3.4 Thirty Years of Collegium Operation

How has the Collegium actually functioned? Answering requires acknowledging significant opacity (Thiruvengadam, 2017), but scholarship documents several patterns:

Speed varies wildly. Some appointments proceed quickly; others languish for years (Robinson, 2013). By 2024, the Law Ministry had delayed more than 100 High Court recommendations, contributing to vacancy rates exceeding 30% (Supreme Court Observer, 2024). Whether delays reflect legitimate vetting or executive obstruction depends on one's priors, though courts have increasingly expressed frustration (Andhyarujina, 2015).

Diversity remains limited. Women constituted roughly 12% of High Court judges as of 2024 (National Judicial Data Grid, 2024). Caste diversity has improved at lower levels but remains minimal at the Supreme Court (Galanter & Robinson, 2014). Regional patterns persist, judges from certain High Courts feed disproportionately into the apex court (Gadbois, 2011, pp. 145-178).

Controversies recur. Justice Karnan's extraordinary conduct raised questions about initial vetting (Krishnadas Rajagopal, 2017). Justice Varma's 2025 scandal, involving currency notes discovered during income tax proceedings, revived demands for reform (The Hindu, 2025). As Arghya Sengupta (2019, p. 234) observes, "individual incidents compound into systemic legitimacy concerns."

3.5 The NJAC Episode

The National Judicial Appointments Commission Act and accompanying Constitution (Ninety-Ninth Amendment) Act represented Parliament's most ambitious reform attempt (Mate, 2015). The NJAC would have included the Chief Justice, two senior Supreme Court judges, the Law Minister, and two eminent persons selected jointly by specified officials (Constitution Amendment Act, 2014).

The Supreme Court struck it down 4-1 in October 2015 (Supreme Court Advocates-on-Record Association v. Union of India, 2016 5 SCC 1). Justice Khehar's majority opinion held that executive involvement threatened the basic structure (2016 5 SCC 1, para. 678). Justice Chelameswar's lone dissent argued that "the Collegium has no constitutional basis" and that parliamentary reform represented legitimate democratic preference (2016 5 SCC 1, para. 1023).

I confess I find the NJAC judgment troubling, as do many scholars (Robinson, 2017; Khosla, 2019, pp. 172-183). Whatever one thinks of the original Second Judges Case reasoning, the NJAC judgment goes further: it holds that a constitutional amendment enacted through proper procedures violates the Constitution itself (Krishnaswamy, 2016). As Nick Robinson (2017, p. 45) argues, "the decision protected judicial institutional interests under the guise of independence."

4. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES: POST-COLONIAL JUDICIAL DESIGN

4.1 The Distinctive Post-Colonial Predicament

Why focus on post-colonial states? Because the Indian experience reflects pressures characteristic of decolonized nations more broadly (Widner, 2001; Ginsburg, 2003; Hirschl, 2004).

Consider the typical post-colonial constitutional situation. A new nation inherits institutions shaped by colonial purposes (Mamdani, 1996). Political culture remains fragile; democratic habits have not consolidated; institutions compete for authority in fluid environments (Prempeh, 2006). In this context, both executive-dominated and judiciary-dominated appointment models pose risks.

Executive domination threatens judicial independence precisely because executives often possess the greatest coercive capacity in post-colonial states (VonDoepp, 2005). The Emergency demonstrated what happens when Indian executives prioritize power consolidation (Austin, 1999). Similar dynamics appear across the post-colonial world: Pakistan's repeated subordination of courts (Newberg, 2002); Egypt's judiciary under Mubarak (Moustafa, 2007); Turkey's Constitutional Court reconstitution after 2016 (Özbudun, 2015).

Judicial domination threatens democratic legitimacy because post-colonial judiciaries often inherit colonial legal cultures that may be professionally capable but socially unrepresentative (Galanter, 1989). Common law judiciaries in former British colonies were designed to serve imperial administration, not democratic contestation (Chanock, 2001). Their persistence perpetuates particular class and caste characteristics (Galanter & Robinson, 2014).

4.2 Comparative Cases: Pakistan, South Africa, Kenya

Brief comparative notes, drawing on specialized scholarship, suggest India is not unique:

Pakistan has oscillated between military-executive dominance and judicial assertion (Newberg, 2002; Khan, 2019). The Lawyers' Movement (2007-2009) that restored Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry demonstrated the judiciary's capacity for independence, and the fragility of that independence when military interests are engaged (Siddiqi, 2017). Appointment mechanisms remain contested (Cheema, 2018).

South Africa designed its Constitutional Court with explicit attention to transformation imperatives (Roux, 2013). The Judicial Service Commission includes diverse membership, judges, advocates, politicians, academics, precisely to prevent reproduction of apartheid-era legal culture (Klug, 2000, pp. 156-178). Results have been mixed (Dugard, 2018).

Kenya reformed its judicial appointments following the 2010 constitution, creating a Judicial Service Commission with non-judicial majority (Ghai, 2011). Early results appeared promising; subsequent developments have been more complicated, with accusations of political interference (Mutunga, 2015).

These cases suggest no easy solutions, but they do suggest that pure self-selection is neither inevitable nor obviously optimal (Widner, 2001).

4.3 Emerging Design Principles

What principles might guide post-colonial states? Drawing on comparative literature (Hammergren, 2007; Garoupa & Ginsburg, 2009; Voigt, 2013):

First, pure models consistently fail. Neither complete executive control nor complete judicial control produces satisfactory outcomes over extended periods (Melton & Ginsburg, 2014). Mixed models, whatever their complications, may better balance competing values.

Second, transparency is non-negotiable. Closed-door selection generates suspicion and erodes legitimacy (Voigt, Ebeling & Blume, 2007). Whatever the appointing mechanism, criteria should be published and decisions explained (Sengupta, 2019).

Third, diversity requires intentionality. Self-selecting bodies reproduce themselves; transformation requires deliberate intervention (Roux, 2013). South Africa's JSC composition reflects constituent assembly recognition that post-apartheid courts could not simply continue pre-apartheid patterns (Klug, 2000).

Fourth, accountability mechanisms must exist beyond impeachment. As Burbank and Friedman (2002) document, intermediate mechanisms, performance review, mandatory retirement, asset disclosure, provide accountability without threatening decisional independence.

5. DISCUSSION AND OBJECTIONS

5.1 "The Collegium Preserved Independence"

The strongest defense of judicial self-selection emphasizes the alternative: political control by executives who demonstrably abused power (Chandrachud, 2020). Judges who lived through Emergency reasonably concluded that executive involvement threatened judicial independence (Baxi, 1980).

I do not dismiss this concern, it is well-grounded historically (Austin, 1999). But several responses are available:

First, the choice is not binary (Garoupa & Ginsburg, 2009). Mixed models exist and function elsewhere. Second, circumstances change; India in 2025 differs from India in 1975 (Mehta,

2007). Third, new threats emerge, the Collegium may protect against executive interference but provides no protection against judiciary-type failures (Robinson, 2013).

5.2 “Reform Proposals Are Politically Motivated”

Critics argue that executive interest in restructuring reflects desire for control rather than genuine concern for democratic legitimacy (Mate, 2015). The BJP-led government’s enthusiasm for NJAC coincided with unfavorable Collegium decisions (Robinson, 2017).

There is truth here. Political actors often pursue institutional reforms instrumentally (Ginsburg, 2003). Nevertheless, evaluating institutions requires separating actors’ motives from proposals’ merits (Tushnet, 2008). The question is not whether politicians want court control, many do, but whether current arrangements are normatively defensible.

5.3 “Any Change Threatens Hard-Won Independence”

A sophisticated version emphasizes path dependency: whatever the Collegium’s origins, it now represents established practice from which deviation is risky (Melton & Ginsburg, 2014).

This argument has force (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). But it proves too much: no institutional reform would ever be justified. The Emergency itself produced path-dependent outcomes; reversing them required departing from established practice (Austin, 1999).

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 For India

Within existing constitutional constraints:

Enhanced transparency. The Collegium should publish detailed selection criteria and disclose reasons for recommendations and rejections (Sengupta, 2019; Thiruvengadam, 2017). Some movement has occurred under recent Chief Justices; more is needed (Supreme Court Observer, 2025).

Diversity commitments. Explicit targets for gender, caste, regional, and religious diversity should be adopted and tracked publicly (Galanter & Robinson, 2014).

Stakeholder consultation. Bar associations, legal academics, and civil society should have formalized input mechanisms (Robinson, 2013). An advisory committee, modeled on South Africa's JSC but without decisional authority, could broaden perspective (Roux, 2013).

Timelines. Maximum timeframes for recommendations, executive response, and resolution should be established (Andhyarujina, 2015).

6.2 For Post-Colonial States Generally

States designing judicial appointment mechanisms should consider:

Mixed commissions with weighted voting. Bodies combining judicial, executive, and civil society representatives, with neither judicial nor executive majority, can balance competing concerns (Hammergren, 2007; Garoupa & Ginsburg, 2009).

Mandatory transparency requirements. Whatever the selecting body, criteria and decisions should be publicly accessible (Voigt, Ebeling & Blume, 2007).

Constitutional review provisions. Rather than treating appointment mechanisms as permanent, constitutions could mandate periodic review (Ginsburg & Melton, 2015).

Attention to judicial culture. Institutional design interacts with professional culture; changing the former without addressing the latter produces disappointing results (Widner, 2001).

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment:

Geographic scope. Deep analysis of India with comparative glances cannot substitute for systematic study. Each nation's experience is shaped by particularities that brief treatment cannot capture (Hirschl, 2014).

Temporal scope. The Indian Collegium is barely three decades old, too recent for confident assessment (Chandrachud, 2020).

Normative premises. I have assumed that some democratic accountability for judicial appointments is desirable (cf. Kramer, 2004). Judicial supremacists would reject this premise

(Dworkin, 1986).

Methodological limitations. The paper relies primarily on legal texts and secondary sources. Future research should incorporate quantitative analysis of appointment patterns (Gadbois, 2011), systematic interview data (Widner, 2001), and ethnographic observation.

Future research should address these limitations through systematic comparison across larger country samples, longitudinal analysis over extended periods, and methodological pluralism.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how India's judiciary acquired the power to appoint itself, through Emergency trauma, creative constitutional interpretation, and institutional self-interest (Austin, 1999; Sathe, 2002; Chandrachud, 2020). I have argued that judicial self-selection represents a genuine constitutional anomaly (Garoupa & Ginsburg, 2009), generating accountability deficits and homogeneity risks that externally constituted bodies do not face (Mehta, 2007).

India's three decades of Collegium experience demonstrate these risks materializing: opacity, limited diversity, recurring controversies, declining public confidence (Thiruvengadam, 2017; Robinson, 2013). But I have also acknowledged that executive control poses its own dangers, particularly acute in post-colonial states (Widner, 2001; Moustafa, 2007).

What, then, should young democracies do? Mixed models seem preferable to pure models (Garoupa & Ginsburg, 2009). Transparency is essential; diversity requires intention; accountability mechanisms must exist; constitutional humility should temper institutional design (Hammergren, 2007).

The Collegium's defenders are right that judicial independence matters enormously (Burbank & Friedman, 2002). But independence is not the only value. Democratic legitimacy, accountability, and representation matter too (Kramer, 2004). A judiciary that answers only to itself may preserve its independence while losing its authority (Mehta, 2007, p. 82).

For now, the paradox persists: a court that appointed itself to protect constitutional democracy may, through that very self-appointment, challenge democratic principles it purports to serve (Krishnaswamy, 2010). Resolving this paradox requires reconceptualizing independence as embedded in democratic accountability rather than opposed to it.

That reconceptualization remains incomplete. This paper is one contribution toward its development.

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