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Covid-19 patients will be able to vote in elections in Bihar, India's third most populous state



Covid-19 patients who are quarantined will be allowed to cast their vote at the last hour of the poll day. PHOTO: REUTERS

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Nirmala Ganapathy India Bureau Chief (mailto:gnirmala@sph.com.sg)

NEW DELHI - In Bihar, India's third most populous state, preparations have started for holding state assembly elections in which Covid-19 patients too will be able to vote.

The eastern state has over 8.7 million voters, which poses a considerable challenge to holding safe and fair elections while coronavirus infections continue to climb in the country.

India has more than 3.31 million cases, of which Bihar has 126,990.

The commission, which is understood to have factored in how countries like Singapore and South Korea had held elections, has come up with guidelines ranging from allowing only five people, including the candidate, to go door to door campaigning, to providing gloves to voters as well as facilities for washing hands and hand sanitisers at every polling booth.

The Supreme Court on Friday (Aug 28) said the coronavirus crisis "cannot be a ground" for stopping elections. The court declined to take up a petition seeking to stop them.

Each polling station will have a maximum of 1,000 voters, instead of 1,500, and voters will have to briefly remove their masks for identification.

Covid-19 patients who are quarantined will be allowed to cast their vote at the last hour of the poll day under the supervision of health authorities, and strictly following preventive measures, according to the guidelines.

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Officials said the first stage of preparations include checking the Electronic Voting Machines and providing training for its staff for the elections, which will be held either in October or November, to pick all 243 seats in the state assembly.

An election commission official who did not want to be named said: "The recovery rate is 80 per cent (compared to the national average of 76 per cent). If this rate keeps going up, it will be good. Returning officers are getting training in how to conduct themselves during this pandemic."

The state saw cases start to climb when hundreds of thousands of migrant workers returned from different parts of the country after a stringent lockdown was lifted in May. It is also currently facing flooding in the state, an annual event brought on by monsoon rains which has affected more than 500,000 people.

Bihar, with a population of 99 million, is one of India's poorest states. Its chief minister, Mr Nitish Kumar, is the leader of the Janata Dal (United) or JDU, which is in a ruling alliance with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

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