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IMPORTANT INSIGHTS

France Faces Deepening Political Instability, Nationwide Protests and Fiscal Pressures Ahead of the 2027 Presidential Election

Recent Developments:

- **France witnessed widespread protests and violent unrest in October 2026**, driven by rising living costs, deteriorating public services, educational grievances and dissatisfaction with President **Emmanuel Macron's government**.
    - Demonstrations escalated into clashes, property damage and security operations across major cities, including Paris, Marseille and Lille.
    - Prime Minister **Sébastien Lecornu** acknowledged shortcomings in the authorities' response, while the government announced additional security measures.
- The unrest has intensified France's interconnected **political, constitutional and fiscal challenges**, particularly parliamentary fragmentation, public debt and disagreements over economic reforms.
- The crisis has acquired greater significance ahead of the **2027 presidential election**, when Macron will complete his second consecutive presidential term.

Political and Constitutional Crisis:

Political Fragmentation:

- France operates under the **Fifth Republic**, established in 1958, with a **semi-presidential system** combining a directly elected President and a Prime Minister accountable to Parliament.
- The **2024 snap parliamentary election** produced a fragmented National Assembly without a stable absolute majority.
- Three major political groupings dominate the parliamentary landscape:
    - **Far-right National Rally:** Emphasises immigration restrictions, national sovereignty and national identity.
    - **Left-wing New Popular Front:** Advocates wealth redistribution, labour protections, public investment and stronger welfare provisions.
    - **Macron-aligned centrist bloc:** Supports European integration, economic reforms and broadly pro-business policies.
- The absence of a dependable parliamentary majority has complicated budget approval, legislative negotiations and government stability.

Article 49.3 and Executive Powers:

- **Article 49.3 of the French Constitution** allows the government to secure passage of certain legislation without a conventional final vote in the National Assembly, unless a motion of no confidence succeeds.
    - Its use is constitutionally restricted, with special provisions for finance and social security financing bills.
    - It became controversial during the **2023 pension reform**, which increased the statutory retirement age.
- **Motions of no confidence (motions de censure)** provide a parliamentary mechanism for holding the government accountable.
    - An adopted motion requires the Prime Minister to submit the government's resignation.

- Repeated confrontations over this procedure have intensified disagreements concerning executive authority and democratic accountability.

Economic and Fiscal Challenges:

Rising Public Debt and Fiscal Deficit:

- France faces persistent **structural fiscal imbalances**, as government expenditure exceeds revenue amid substantial welfare commitments and weak economic growth.
- According to **Eurostat's April 2026 release**, France recorded the following fiscal indicators for 2025:
  - **Government debt:** 115.6% of GDP.
  - **Fiscal deficit:** 5.1% of GDP.
  - **Government expenditure:** 57.2% of GDP.
  - **Government revenue:** 52.1% of GDP.
- France's debt burden reflects accumulated fiscal deficits, while demographic pressures, interest payments and limited economic expansion complicate debt reduction.

European Union Fiscal Rules:

- The **Stability and Growth Pact (SGP)** provides the European Union's framework for monitoring fiscal sustainability.
- Its principal reference values are:
  - **Fiscal deficit:** 3% of GDP.
  - **Government debt:** 60% of GDP.
- These are reference thresholds within a broader fiscal governance framework, rather than absolute prohibitions on borrowing.
- France has been subject to the **Excessive Deficit Procedure (EDP)** since July 2024, requiring fiscal adjustment under European Union surveillance.
- The European Commission and Council oversee compliance, while revised EU fiscal rules emphasise country-specific medium-term expenditure and debt-adjustment paths.

Eurozone Monetary Constraints:

- France belongs to the **Eurozone**, where monetary policy is conducted by the **European Central Bank (ECB)**.
- Unlike countries possessing independent national currencies, France cannot independently devalue the euro or determine monetary policy solely according to domestic requirements.
- Consequently, fiscal adjustment depends substantially on **taxation, expenditure management, productivity growth and structural reforms**.
- However, Eurozone membership also provides monetary stability, financial integration and access to common European monetary institutions.

Pension Reforms and Demographic Pressures:

Ageing Population and Pension Expenditure:

- France operates a predominantly **pay-as-you-go pension system**, under which contributions from current workers help finance existing retirees.
- Population ageing and longer life expectancy create pressures through:
  - A rising number of pension beneficiaries relative to contributors.
  - Longer retirement periods and increasing long-term pension obligations.

- The **2023 pension reform** provided for a gradual increase in the statutory retirement age from **62 to 64 years**, generating extensive opposition.
- Political disagreements over implementing and modifying pension provisions have remained a major source of instability.

Intergenerational Equity:

- High pension expenditure creates difficult choices between **retirement security, education, healthcare and infrastructure investment**.
- Younger generations may face increased contribution requirements, labour-market uncertainty and concerns about the future sustainability of retirement benefits.
- However, pension expenditure cannot automatically be treated as the direct cause of every public-service shortage, because budgetary allocations and service outcomes depend on several factors.

Social Unrest and Public Dissatisfaction:

Major Drivers of Protests:

- **Cost-of-living pressures:** Household purchasing power has been affected by price increases, housing costs and economic uncertainty.
- **Public-service concerns:** Educational conditions, healthcare accessibility and local service provision have become important sources of dissatisfaction.
- **Political distrust:** Repeated government crises and contentious reform procedures have weakened confidence in political institutions.
- **Social divisions:** Immigration, secularism (*laïcité*) and national identity remain politically sensitive issues.

Historical Background:

- The **Yellow Vest Movement (2018–2019)** emerged initially against fuel taxation and subsequently expanded into broader protests concerning inequality and living standards.
- The **2023 pension protests** demonstrated the capacity of trade unions and civil society to mobilise opposition to unpopular reforms.
- The October 2026 unrest reflects continuing tensions between **economic reform, social protection and democratic legitimacy**.

Sovereign Debt and Financial Market Risks:

Government Borrowing Costs:

- Governments raise funds by issuing **sovereign bonds**, whose yields reflect interest-rate conditions, inflation expectations, maturity and perceived credit risk.
- Political uncertainty and doubts about fiscal sustainability can increase the **risk premium** demanded by investors.
- Rising borrowing costs gradually increase debt-servicing expenditure as existing obligations mature and governments issue new debt.

Debt Sustainability:

- Debt sustainability depends on the interaction between **economic growth, effective borrowing costs and the primary fiscal balance**.

- When borrowing costs persistently exceed nominal economic growth, stabilising debt generally requires a stronger primary fiscal position.
- Higher interest expenditure can restrict resources available for infrastructure, education, healthcare and climate-related investment.
- France's fiscal difficulties also matter for the broader Eurozone because financial instability in a major member economy can affect regional bond markets and investor confidence.

Policy Dilemma and Possible Solutions:

Fiscal Consolidation Versus Political Stability:

- **Increasing taxation** may improve government revenue but can encounter resistance from households and businesses.
- **Reducing expenditure** may narrow fiscal deficits but risks weakening essential services and increasing social dissatisfaction.
- **Reforming pensions** may improve long-term fiscal sustainability but requires political negotiation and public acceptance.
- **Promoting economic growth** through innovation, employment generation and productivity improvements can strengthen revenue without relying exclusively on higher tax rates.
- **Gradual fiscal consolidation**, combined with targeted social protection and transparent parliamentary negotiations, may reduce adjustment costs.

Implications for India and Global Governance:

- France is an important **G7 economy, European Union member and strategic partner of India**, making its domestic stability relevant to bilateral economic and diplomatic cooperation.
- Persistent political uncertainty could influence investment sentiment, European economic policymaking and France's capacity to pursue long-term reforms.
- For India, the crisis highlights the importance of **fiscal sustainability, cooperative policymaking, demographic preparedness and efficient public expenditure**.
- It also demonstrates how economic reforms require not only technical feasibility but also **political legitimacy and social acceptance**.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Prelims-Oriented Facts:

- **French Fifth Republic:** Established in 1958; follows a semi-presidential constitutional framework.
- **French Parliament:** Bicameral, comprising the National Assembly and Senate.
- **Article 49.3:** Permits specified legislation to pass without a conventional final National Assembly vote unless a no-confidence motion succeeds.
- **Maastricht fiscal reference values:** Government deficit of 3% and debt of 60% of GDP.
- **European Central Bank:** Responsible for monetary policy in the Eurozone.
- **Excessive Deficit Procedure:** Fiscal surveillance mechanism under Article 126 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.
- **Laïcité:** French constitutional principle of state secularism.
- **Primary fiscal balance:** Government revenue minus non-interest expenditure.

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Mains-Oriented Analytical Dimensions:

- **GS Paper II:** Constitutional governance, executive–legislative relations, democratic accountability and comparative political systems.
- **GS Paper III:** Fiscal deficits, sovereign debt, demographic transition, social-sector expenditure and macroeconomic stability.
- **Essay:** The relationship between economic reform, social justice, public trust and political stability.

Core Analytical Insight: France's crisis demonstrates that fiscal sustainability and political legitimacy are interdependent: durable economic adjustment requires institutional stability, credible reforms and public confidence.

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Chief Justice of India's Refusal to Meet Opposition Leaders Highlights Judicial Independence and Separation of Powers

Recent Developments:

- In October 2026, **Chief Justice of India Surya Kant declined a request by Opposition leaders for a meeting** concerning allegations against Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar during the **Special Intensive Revision** of electoral rolls.
- On 10 October 2026, Opposition leaders wrote to the Chief Justice seeking an appointment to submit a memorandum regarding the Election Commission's conduct and the handling of protests associated with the revision exercise.
    - Their concerns included alleged arbitrary arrests of peaceful protesters, the closure of metro stations, the cancellation of trains and the barricading of major roads in Delhi.
    - The Chief Justice declined the request because related matters were already before the Supreme Court and advised the leaders to pursue established judicial procedures instead of using the Court's administrative channel.
- The development highlights the importance of **separation of powers, judicial propriety, procedural fairness and institutional independence** in India's constitutional democracy. Related proceedings concerning the electoral-roll revision and restrictions on protests have also brought questions of electoral accountability and civil liberties before the Supreme Court.

Constitutional Basis of the Separation of Powers:

Meaning and Objectives:

- The **doctrine of separation of powers** distributes governmental authority among the legislature, executive and judiciary to prevent the concentration and arbitrary exercise of power.
    - **Legislature:** Enacts laws, approves public expenditure and holds the executive accountable.
    - **Executive:** Implements legislation, administers public policies and maintains law and order.
    - **Judiciary:** Interprets laws, adjudicates disputes, protects constitutional rights and reviews the constitutionality of governmental action.
- The Indian Constitution does not establish an absolutely rigid separation among the three organs. Instead, it combines functional differentiation with **checks and balances**, allowing each organ to exercise its assigned powers while remaining subject to constitutional limitations.

- The doctrine supports constitutional government by preventing any single institution from exercising unlimited authority.

Constitutional Provisions and Basic Structure:

- **Article 50:** Directs the State to take steps to separate the judiciary from the executive in the public services of the State. It is a Directive Principle of State Policy.
- **Articles 32 and 226:** Empower the Supreme Court and High Courts, respectively, to enforce Fundamental Rights, with High Courts also exercising writ jurisdiction for other legal rights.
- **Article 13:** Provides the constitutional basis for invalidating laws that contravene Fundamental Rights.
- **Article 121:** Restricts discussion in Parliament concerning the conduct of Supreme Court and High Court judges in the discharge of their duties, except in the context of a motion for their removal.
- **Article 124(4):** Establishes the constitutional procedure for removing a Supreme Court judge on grounds of proved misbehaviour or incapacity.
- The Supreme Court has recognised **separation of powers and judicial independence as elements of the basic structure doctrine**. Under this doctrine, Parliament's power to amend the Constitution under Article 368 cannot be exercised to destroy its basic structure.
- The doctrine therefore protects institutional independence while preserving constitutional accountability.

Judicial Propriety and the Sub Judice Principle:

Judicial Propriety:

- **Judicial propriety** refers to the standards of conduct expected of judges to maintain impartiality, independence, institutional integrity and public confidence in the administration of justice.
- A private meeting with political leaders concerning pending litigation may create an impression that one party has access to the judiciary outside established legal procedures.
    - Even without actual bias, the appearance of preferential access can weaken public confidence in judicial fairness.
    - Judicial propriety therefore requires judges to avoid interactions that could reasonably raise doubts about impartiality.
- In the present case, the Chief Justice's stated reliance on pending proceedings illustrates the importance of keeping judicial decision-making within recognised institutional procedures.

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Sub Judice Principle:

- The expression **sub judice** refers to a matter that is currently under judicial consideration.
- Parties to pending litigation should ordinarily present their arguments, evidence and supporting documents through recognised judicial procedures, ensuring that the opposing parties also receive an opportunity to respond.
- The principle promotes **procedural fairness, transparency and reasoned adjudication**, rather than decisions influenced by private representations.
- However, the sub judice principle is not a blanket prohibition on public discussion of every matter before a court. Its application depends on the relevant law, judicial directions and the circumstances of the case.
- The distinction is between an authorised judicial submission and an informal approach that may compromise the appearance of equal treatment.

Judicial Ethics and the Bangalore Principles:

Six Core Values:

- The **Bangalore Principles of Judicial Conduct**, developed through an international judicial initiative and endorsed for consideration by the United Nations Economic and Social Council, provide an important framework for judicial ethics.
    - **Independence:** Judges must remain free from improper political, executive or other external influence.
    - **Impartiality:** Judicial decisions must be based on law and evidence rather than bias or favouritism.
    - **Integrity:** Judges must maintain standards of conduct that sustain confidence in the judiciary.
    - **Propriety:** Judges should avoid behaviour that creates a reasonable appearance of impropriety.
    - **Equality:** All persons appearing before the courts must receive fair and equal treatment.
    - **Competence and diligence:** Judges must discharge their duties conscientiously, efficiently and within a reasonable time.
- These values demonstrate that judicial independence requires both freedom from actual interference and conduct that sustains public trust.
- The principles serve as an ethical framework; they do not independently replace the Constitution, applicable statutes or binding judicial decisions.

Historical Evolution of Judicial Independence in India:

Major Constitutional Developments:

- **Supersession of judges in 1973:** Following the *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* judgment, Justice A. N. Ray was appointed Chief Justice of India over three more senior judges. The decision generated concerns about executive influence over judicial appointments.
- **Development of the collegium system:** A series of Supreme Court judgments, particularly the Second Judges Case (1993) and Third Judges Case (1998), established and clarified the collegium system for appointments and transfers of higher judiciary judges.
    - The system aims to protect judicial independence by giving senior judges a decisive role in recommending appointments.
    - It has also attracted criticism concerning transparency, accountability and the absence of a fully open selection process.
- **National Judicial Appointments Commission (2015):** The Supreme Court invalidated the constitutional amendment and legislation establishing the commission, holding that the proposed arrangement threatened judicial independence as a basic-structure principle.
- **Judicial press conference in 2018:** Four senior Supreme Court judges publicly raised concerns regarding the allocation of cases and aspects of the judiciary's functioning, highlighting the importance of institutional transparency.
- These developments demonstrate the continuing debate over balancing **judicial independence, executive accountability and transparency in appointments**.

Implications for Constitutional Governance:

Institutional Independence and Accountability:

- The Chief Justice's decision illustrates the distinction between the judiciary's administrative functions and its judicial authority.
- The Chief Justice administers the Supreme Court, but adjudication of disputes must follow established judicial procedures and applicable legal principles.

- The Supreme Court is not an administrative supervisory authority over every constitutional institution. Nevertheless, it can examine alleged violations of Fundamental Rights, electoral legality and unlawful official action through appropriate proceedings.
- **Institutional independence does not mean institutional immunity**. Courts must remain independent while exercising their constitutional responsibilities within the law.

Democratic Accountability and Electoral Integrity:

- The Election Commission of India is a constitutional body established under **Article 324**, which vests it with the superintendence, direction and control of elections to Parliament, State Legislatures, and the offices of President and Vice-President.
- The credibility of electoral-roll revision depends on accurate voter records, transparent procedures, adequate opportunities to correct errors and effective grievance redressal.
- Allegations concerning voter exclusion or administrative excesses require examination through evidence and legally established procedures rather than being treated as proven facts.
- The controversy illustrates the relationship between **free and fair elections, the right to equality, electoral accountability and public confidence in democratic institutions**.

Civil Liberties and Public Protest:

- **Article 19(1)(a)** protects freedom of speech and expression, while **Article 19(1)(b)** protects the right to assemble peacefully and without arms.
- These freedoms are subject to constitutionally permitted reasonable restrictions under Articles 19(2) and 19(3), respectively.
- Restrictions on demonstrations must therefore satisfy the applicable constitutional and legal standards; public-order considerations cannot automatically justify every restriction.
- Judicial review provides a mechanism to examine whether arrests, restrictions on assembly or other administrative actions comply with the law.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Prelims-Oriented Facts:

- **Article 50:** Separation of the judiciary from the executive in the public services of the State.
- **Article 121:** Restrictions on parliamentary discussion of the conduct of higher judiciary judges, subject to the removal exception.
- **Article 124(4):** Procedure for removal of a Supreme Court judge.
- **Article 324:** Constitutional authority of the Election Commission of India over specified elections.
- **Articles 32 and 226:** Writ jurisdiction of the Supreme Court and High Courts.
- **Basic structure doctrine:** Parliament cannot use its constitutional amendment power to destroy the Constitution's basic structure.
- **Bangalore Principles:** Six core judicial values—independence, impartiality, integrity, propriety, equality, and competence and diligence.

Mains-Oriented Dimensions:

- **General Studies Paper II:** Separation of powers, judicial independence, constitutional bodies, electoral reforms and accountability mechanisms.
- **General Studies Paper IV:** Judicial ethics, impartiality, integrity, propriety and public service values.
- **Essay:** Institutional independence, constitutional morality and public trust in democratic governance.

Core Analytical Insight: Separation of powers is not an arrangement for institutional isolation; it is a constitutional framework for distributing authority, enforcing accountability and protecting citizens' rights. Judicial independence is strongest when accompanied by impartial conduct, transparent procedures and equal access to justice.

NHRC's Probe into Children's Involvement in Mumbai Protest Highlights India's Human Rights Protection Framework

Recent Developments:

- In October 2026, the **National Human Rights Commission (NHRC)** took cognisance of allegations that children were involved in a protest in Mumbai and directed an investigation into possible violations of child rights.
    - On 3 October 2026, the Commission sought reports from the police and other authorities, directed the preservation of relevant digital evidence and raised concerns regarding the circulation of children's photographs and videos on social media.
    - The intervention highlighted the importance of protecting children from exploitation, safeguarding their privacy and ensuring accountability for potential violations.
- The development has renewed attention to the **NHRC's institutional independence, investigative capacity, enforcement limitations and compliance with international human rights standards**.
- The proposed downgrade of the NHRC's accreditation by the **Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI)** has also raised questions about its autonomy, pluralism, transparency and effectiveness.

National Human Rights Commission: Structure and Mandate:

Establishment and Composition:

- The **NHRC** is a statutory body established on **12 October 1993** under the **Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993**, to protect and promote rights relating to life, liberty, equality and dignity.
- Its composition includes a Chairperson, five full-time members and seven deemed ex-officio members.
    - The Chairperson must have been the Chief Justice of India or a Judge of the Supreme Court.
    - The five full-time members include judicial members and three human rights experts, at least one of whom must be a woman.
    - The seven deemed members represent specified national commissions concerned with women, minorities, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, backward classes, children and persons with disabilities, in accordance with the Act.
- The **President of India** appoints the Chairperson and members on the recommendation of a six-member committee headed by the Prime Minister, comprising the Lok Sabha Speaker, Union Home Minister, Deputy Chairman of the Rajya Sabha and Leaders of the Opposition in both Houses of Parliament.
- The Chairperson and members hold office for **three years or until attaining 70 years of age, whichever is earlier**, and are eligible for reappointment, subject to the Act.

Functions and Powers:

- Under Section 12 of the Act, the NHRC may inquire into human rights violations or negligence by public servants in preventing such violations, either on a complaint or on its own initiative.

- Its functions include intervening in judicial proceedings with the court's approval, visiting jails and detention institutions, reviewing constitutional and legal safeguards, examining factors that inhibit human rights and promoting research and awareness.
- Under Section 13, the Commission possesses certain **powers of a civil court** during inquiries, including summoning witnesses, requiring documents and obtaining relevant public records.
- Under Section 18, following an inquiry, it may recommend compensation, prosecution, interim relief or other appropriate action, and may approach the Supreme Court or a High Court for suitable directions.
- These powers strengthen investigation and accountability, but the Commission generally cannot directly enforce its recommendations as binding judicial orders.

Challenges Facing the NHRC:

Limited Enforcement Powers:

- The NHRC's recommendations are generally **advisory and non-binding**, limiting its ability to compel authorities to provide compensation, prosecute offenders or implement corrective measures.
- Delayed compliance and inadequate follow-up can weaken remedies for victims, leading critics to describe the Commission as a "toothless tiger".

Institutional Independence and Representation:

- Executive involvement in appointments and the dependence on government agencies for certain investigations raise concerns about the Commission's **autonomy, impartiality and transparency**.
- Inadequate representation of women, minorities and civil society can weaken pluralism and public confidence in the institution.
- A transparent selection process, merit-based appointments and greater diversity are essential for maintaining institutional credibility.

Investigative and Jurisdictional Constraints:

- Dependence on police personnel and other government investigative agencies can create potential conflicts of interest, particularly in cases involving custodial violence or alleged police misconduct.
- Under Section 36(2), the NHRC cannot inquire into a matter after the expiry of **one year from the date of the alleged human rights violation**, restricting its ability to address delayed complaints.
- Under Section 19, complaints involving the armed forces are subject to a special procedure: the Commission seeks a report from the Central Government and may subsequently make recommendations and seek information about action taken.
- These restrictions can limit independent scrutiny and timely redressal, especially where victims face barriers to reporting violations.

Accreditation and the Paris Principles:

- The **Paris Principles**, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1993, establish international standards for national human rights institutions, emphasising independence, a broad mandate, adequate resources, pluralism and effective functioning.
- GANHRI's Sub-Committee on Accreditation recommended downgrading the NHRC's accreditation from **'A' to 'B' status in March 2025**, citing concerns about independence, transparency and compliance with the Paris Principles.
- The appeal against the recommendation was rejected in December 2025, while the final accreditation review was deferred to November 2026; therefore, the proposed downgrade had not been finalised as of October 2026.

- **'A' status** indicates compliance with the Paris Principles, whereas **'B' status** indicates partial compliance and entails reduced participation rights within international human rights institutions.

Measures to Strengthen the NHRC:

Institutional and Legal Reforms:

- Amend the **Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993**, where appropriate, to strengthen follow-up mechanisms, improve implementation of recommendations and ensure timely remedies for victims.
- Establish transparent, merit-based appointments and protect the Commission's administrative and financial autonomy from undue executive influence.
- Promote meaningful representation of women, minorities, civil society and human rights experts in accordance with the Paris Principles.

Investigation and Accountability:

- Develop an independent investigation mechanism with trained personnel, forensic expertise and safeguards against conflicts of interest.
- Review the one-year limitation period and strengthen scrutiny of alleged violations involving the armed forces while respecting the applicable statutory framework.
- Introduce digital case-management systems, monitor action-taken reports and improve coordination among investigative, legal and administrative divisions.
- Provide adequate funding, skilled staff and modern technology to reduce case pendency and improve the quality of investigations.
- Strengthen child-protection procedures by safeguarding minors' identities, investigating possible exploitation and coordinating with relevant child-protection authorities.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Prelims-Oriented Facts:

- **NHRC:** Statutory body established on 12 October 1993 under the Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993.
- **Section 12:** Specifies the NHRC's principal functions.
- **Section 13:** Provides certain powers of a civil court during inquiries.
- **Section 19:** Establishes a special procedure for complaints involving the armed forces.
- **Section 36(2):** Prescribes the one-year limitation period for the Commission's inquiries.
- **Paris Principles:** International standards for the independence and effectiveness of national human rights institutions.
- **GANHRI accreditation:** 'A' denotes compliance with the Paris Principles; 'B' denotes partial compliance.

Mains-Oriented Dimensions:

- **General Studies Paper II:** Statutory bodies, human rights institutions, vulnerable sections, accountability and institutional independence.
- **General Studies Paper III:** Police reforms, custodial violence, digital evidence and administrative accountability.
- **General Studies Paper IV:** Integrity, impartiality, compassion, accountability and respect for human dignity.

Core Analytical Insight: An effective national human rights institution requires more than a statutory mandate. Its credibility depends on independent investigations, adequate resources, diverse representation, enforceable accountability mechanisms and timely remedies for victims.

Supreme Court Recognises Children's Fundamental Right to Internet Access While Strengthening Online Safety Safeguards

Recent Developments:

- **Supreme Court ruling:** In *Just Rights for Children Alliance v. S. Harish*, decided on 15 October 2026, the Supreme Court recognised Internet access as a fundamental right of every individual, including children, under **Articles 21 and 19(1)(a)**. It rejected blanket restrictions as a substitute for effective child protection and emphasised that freedom and safety must coexist.
- **Technology-led enforcement:** The Court called for a national database of digital identifiers and website addresses associated with confirmed **Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Material (CSEAM)**, supported by perceptual hash matching, URL listing and stronger accountability for digital intermediaries.
- **Child-sensitive safeguards:** The Court discussed measures such as private-by-default accounts, restrictions on contact from unknown adults, parental guidance and dedicated child-safety settings. The objective is to restrict harmful content and interactions without denying children legitimate access to education, information and expression.

Constitutional and Legal Framework:

Fundamental Rights and Internet Access:

- **Article 21:** Protects the right to life and personal liberty. The Court has recognised that meaningful digital access supports education, access to information, communication and participation in modern society.
- **Article 19(1)(a):** Guarantees freedom of speech and expression, including the constitutional interest in accessing, receiving and communicating information through the Internet.
- **Article 19(2):** Permits reasonable restrictions on freedom of speech and expression on specified grounds, including public order, decency and morality, subject to constitutional requirements. Restrictions must be legally grounded and proportionate.
- **Key principle:** Recognition of Internet access as a fundamental right does not make every online service or activity an unrestricted entitlement. The State may regulate harmful content through lawful, necessary and proportionate measures.

Important Supreme Court Judgments:

- **Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India (2020):** The Court held that freedom of speech and expression, and the freedom to carry on trade or business through the Internet, enjoy constitutional protection under Articles 19(1)(a) and 19(1)(g). Restrictions on Internet services must satisfy constitutional standards.
- **Pragya Prasun v. Union of India (2025):** The Court emphasised digital access as an intrinsic component of Article 21 while addressing inaccessible digital identity verification processes for persons with disabilities and other affected individuals.
- **Secretary, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting v. Cricket Association of Bengal (1995):** The Court recognised that Article 19(1)(a) encompasses the right to receive and impart information and ideas.

- **Just Rights for Children Alliance v. S. Harish (2024 and 2026):** The proceedings address the circulation of CSEAM and the responsibility of online intermediaries to identify, report and remove such material. The 2026 order reinforced child-protection enforcement while recognising children's fundamental right to Internet access.

Benefits of Internet Access for Children:

- **Education and information:** Online resources expand access to learning materials, digital libraries, educational courses and information beyond the classroom, particularly in remote and underserved areas.
- **Digital skills and employability:** Supervised Internet use develops digital literacy, research skills, creativity, problem-solving and familiarity with emerging technologies.
- **Expression and participation:** Digital platforms enable children to communicate, collaborate, express ideas and participate in educational and community networks.
- **Inclusion and accessibility:** Assistive technologies and accessible digital services can improve educational and social participation for children with disabilities.

Risks and Challenges of Children's Internet Use:

Psychological, Physical and Social Risks:

- **Excessive use:** Unregulated screen time can disrupt sleep, physical activity, concentration and emotional well-being. Problematic use may interfere with education and family relationships.
- **Social isolation:** Excessive reliance on virtual interaction can reduce face-to-face engagement and weaken interpersonal relationships.
- **Cyberbullying and impersonation:** Children may face harassment, identity misuse, threats, non-consensual sharing of personal information and harmful interactions with strangers.
- **Sexual exploitation:** Grooming, coercion, circulation of abusive material and exploitative online advertising can expose children to severe and lasting harm.

Structural and Governance Challenges:

- **Gender-based digital divide:** Restrictions on girls' access can reduce their digital literacy and opportunities to learn online, while unequal supervision and safety awareness may increase vulnerability for different groups of children.
- **Weak platform accountability:** Inadequate detection, delayed removal, redirect links and repeated circulation of abusive material can undermine existing legal safeguards.
- **Privacy risks:** Intrusive age-verification systems may collect excessive personal information or create surveillance risks. Child-protection measures must follow data-minimisation and privacy-by-design principles.

Safeguards and Regulatory Measures:

Court-Discussed Technological Measures:

- **National hash and URL database:** The proposed framework enables confirmed abusive material to be identified through digital fingerprints and associated website addresses, helping platforms detect matching content and prevent repeated circulation.
- **Perceptual hash matching:** This technology identifies identical or visually similar images even when files have been resized, compressed or otherwise modified. It can improve detection but requires safeguards against false matches.

- **URL listing and reporting:** Standardised URL lists, clear reporting channels and time-bound action can strengthen detection, removal and coordination between intermediaries and law-enforcement agencies.
- **Human verification:** Automated screening should be supported by trained human review to reduce errors and ensure that material is classified correctly before consequential action is taken.
- **Intermediary accountability:** Persistent non-compliance should attract effective enforcement under applicable law. Platforms must not treat child safety merely as a voluntary content-moderation objective.

Responsibilities of Government, Platforms and Families:

- **Government:** Establish clear standard operating procedures, define institutional responsibilities, ensure timely reporting and provide accessible grievance-redressal mechanisms.
- **Digital platforms:** Apply age-appropriate defaults, private-by-default settings, restrictions on unsolicited contact from unknown adults, effective content moderation and easy-to-use reporting tools.
- **Parents and caregivers:** Provide age-appropriate guidance, maintain open communication and supervise online activity according to the child's age, maturity and circumstances.
- **Schools:** Teach digital literacy, source verification, privacy protection, cyberbullying prevention and safe responses to suspicious online interactions.
- **Victim support:** Ensure confidential reporting, counselling, psychological assistance and timely legal support, with particular attention to the child's dignity and privacy.

International Comparison: Australia's Social Media Minimum-Age Law:

- **Legal framework:** Australia enacted the *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024*. From 10 December 2025, covered social media platforms have been required to take reasonable steps to prevent users under 16 from creating or retaining accounts.
- **Implementation:** The eSafety Commissioner oversees compliance. The framework raises continuing questions about age assurance, privacy, circumvention, enforcement and the effectiveness of age-based restrictions.
- **Relevance for India:** Australia offers a comparative model for platform accountability, but India must assess the constitutional implications, digital divide, feasibility of age verification and risks of excluding children from beneficial online services before adopting similar restrictions.

Way Forward:

- **Rights-based regulation:** Target exploitative content, unsafe platform design and harmful interactions instead of imposing indiscriminate restrictions on Internet access.
- **Privacy-preserving age assurance:** Use proportionate verification methods that minimise personal-data collection and provide safeguards against profiling and data misuse.
- **Stronger accountability:** Establish clear compliance timelines, transparent reporting, independent audits and effective penalties for repeated violations.
- **Digital literacy and inclusion:** Combine online safety education with affordable connectivity, accessible services and support for children from disadvantaged communities.
- **Child-centred governance:** Involve children, parents, educators, child-rights experts and technology providers in designing safeguards, while ensuring that the child's best interests remain central.

Value Addition for UPSC:

- **GS Paper II:** Fundamental rights, judicial interpretation, child rights, governance and regulatory accountability.
- **GS Paper III:** Cybersecurity, digital platforms, information technology and technology-enabled crime prevention.

- **GS Paper IV:** Dignity, privacy, responsibility, protection of vulnerable groups and ethical technology design.
- **Core analytical argument:** The constitutional challenge is not to choose between children's safety and Internet access, but to create a proportionate digital environment that protects children from exploitation while preserving education, expression, privacy and inclusion.

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India's Space Economy Targets USD 40–45 Billion as Private Investment, Policy Reforms and Commercial Applications Expand

Recent Developments:

- **Growth target:** On 17 October 2026, Union Minister Dr. Jitendra Singh stated that India's space economy, valued at approximately **USD 9 billion**, could reach **USD 40–45 billion over the next 7–8 years**. He emphasised predictable demand, faster regulatory approvals, stronger supply chains and commercially viable space enterprises.
- **Venture capital support:** The **Antariksh Venture Capital Fund**, with a committed corpus of ₹1,005 crore, was operationalised under the Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre (IN-SPACe). Its first investment approvals and disbursements were expected from the first quarter of financial year 2026–27, subject to appraisal and due diligence.
- **Sectoral transformation:** Reforms initiated in 2020 have expanded private participation, shifting the policy objective from demonstrating technological capability towards building globally competitive commercial space companies.

Institutional and Policy Reforms:

New Institutional Framework:

- **IN-SPACe:** Established in 2020, it promotes, authorises and facilitates private-sector participation in space activities, providing a single-window interface between non-governmental entities and the Department of Space.
- **NewSpace India Limited (NSIL):** The commercial arm of the Department of Space facilitates the commercialisation of space technologies, satellite services and launch capabilities.
- **Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO):** ISRO increasingly focuses on research, advanced technology development, scientific exploration and strategic missions, while enabling private companies to undertake commercial activities.

Policy and Foreign Investment:

- **Indian Space Policy 2023:** Defines the roles of ISRO, IN-SPACe, NSIL and non-governmental entities, creating a framework for greater private participation across satellite manufacturing, launch services and space-based applications.
- **Foreign Direct Investment (FDI):** The revised policy permits up to **100% FDI** in specified space-sector activities, but the entry route differs by activity. Satellite manufacturing and operation, satellite data products and ground or user segments allow up to 74% through the automatic route; launch vehicles and associated systems, and spaceports, allow up to 49% through the automatic route. Investment beyond these thresholds requires government approval.

- **Antariksh Venture Capital Fund:** The ₹1,005-crore fund addresses the shortage of early-stage risk capital. Managed by SIDBI Venture Capital Limited, it is intended to support space start-ups, strengthen domestic capabilities and help Indian companies scale commercially.

Growth of the Private Space Ecosystem:

Start-ups and Indigenous Launch Capabilities:

- **Emerging enterprises:** India's space start-up ecosystem has expanded from a small group of firms to more than 200 companies, spanning launch vehicles, satellites, propulsion, geospatial analytics and downstream services.
- **Private launch technology:** Skyroot Aerospace's **Vikram-S**, launched in 2022, demonstrated private suborbital launch capability. Agnikul Cosmos has also advanced private launch-vehicle development through its Agnibaan programme.
- **Financing and market access:** Government-backed investment, technology transfer, streamlined approvals and public procurement can help start-ups progress from prototypes to commercially deployable products.

International Cooperation:

- **Artemis Accords:** India joined the accords in 2023, signalling support for principles of peaceful, transparent and cooperative civil space exploration.
- **NISAR mission:** The joint NASA–ISRO Synthetic Aperture Radar mission strengthens Earth observation for applications such as ecosystem monitoring, land-surface deformation, agriculture and disaster management.
- **Global partnerships:** International cooperation can expand access to technology, scientific expertise, investment and export markets, while domestic technological capability remains essential for strategic autonomy.

Economic Significance of the Space Economy:

Economic Multiplier and Employment:

- **Economic multiplier:** Space-sector investment creates demand across electronics, precision engineering, software, telecommunications, data analytics and advanced manufacturing. An estimate cited in sectoral discussions suggests that each dollar generated by the Indian space sector can produce a wider economic impact of approximately USD 2.54; such multiplier estimates depend on methodology and should not be treated as universal constants.
- **High-productivity employment:** Space activities require specialised skills in aerospace engineering, materials science, robotics, artificial intelligence, electronics and software, creating opportunities for high-skilled employment and industrial innovation.
- **Global market opportunity:** India currently accounts for only a small share—approximately 2%—of the global space economy. Competitive launch costs and expanding satellite capabilities offer scope to increase exports and capture a larger share of small-satellite launches, satellite services and geospatial products.

Strategic Autonomy and Soft Power:

- **Strategic autonomy:** Indigenous launch systems, navigation, communications and Earth-observation capabilities reduce dependence on foreign providers for critical civilian and national-security requirements.
- **Soft power:** Scientific missions and international capacity-building initiatives, including satellite-based cooperation with developing countries, strengthen India's diplomatic influence and its role in the Global South.

Role of Space Technology in Nation-Building:

Governance and Public Service Delivery:

- **Land governance:** The **SVAMITVA scheme** uses drone surveys and geospatial technology to support the preparation of property records in rural inhabited areas, improving land administration and reducing disputes.
- **Agriculture:** Satellite imagery supports crop monitoring, drought assessment, agricultural planning and crop-loss estimation under schemes such as the **Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana**.
- **Disaster management:** INSAT and remote-sensing satellites support cyclone tracking, flood mapping, weather forecasting and early-warning systems, improving preparedness and response.
- **Navigation:** The **Navigation with Indian Constellation (NavIC)** provides positioning, navigation and timing services for transportation, emergency response and strategic applications.
- **Infrastructure monitoring:** Satellite and geospatial data support project monitoring, geotagging of public assets and assessment of implementation progress.

Gender Inclusion and Scientific Capacity:

- **Women in space:** Women scientists and engineers have contributed to major Indian space missions, including Chandrayaan. Greater participation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics strengthens inclusion, widens the talent pool and improves national research capacity.

Key Challenges:

- **Scale and competitiveness:** The global space economy is much larger than India's current sector, and established international companies benefit from substantial capital, mature supply chains and large commercial markets.
- **Financing constraints:** Space ventures require high upfront investment, long development cycles and specialised infrastructure. Private investors may hesitate where demand, revenue and regulatory approvals remain uncertain.
- **Regulatory uncertainty:** A comprehensive statutory framework must provide clarity on licensing, liability, insurance, spectrum allocation, dispute resolution and the responsibilities of private operators.
- **Technological dependence:** Reliance on imported advanced semiconductors, specialised materials, propulsion components and precision systems can constrain self-reliance and expose supply chains to external shocks.
- **Space sustainability:** Increasing satellite numbers raise collision risks, orbital congestion and the problem of space debris, requiring responsible satellite design and end-of-life disposal.
- **Security and dual-use risks:** High-resolution imagery, satellite communications and advanced space technologies have both civilian and military applications, creating requirements for data protection, export controls and cybersecurity.

Way Forward:

- **Legislative clarity:** Develop a comprehensive legal framework for space activities that defines licensing, liability, insurance, dispute resolution and compliance obligations.
- **Predictable demand:** Use government procurement, anchor-customer contracts and proof-of-concept projects to help private companies demonstrate products and establish sustainable revenue.
- **Long-term financing:** Strengthen venture capital, patient private investment, research grants and blended-finance mechanisms to support companies through capital-intensive development stages.
- **Domestic supply chains:** Encourage indigenous manufacturing of semiconductors, sensors, propulsion systems and satellite components through research support, technology transfer and suitable industrial incentives.

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- **Research and skills:** Deepen collaboration among ISRO, universities, research institutions and private firms to accelerate innovation and develop specialised technical talent.
- **Responsible space operations:** Adopt debris-mitigation practices, collision-avoidance systems, satellite-tracking capabilities and internationally aligned space-traffic-management standards.

Value Addition for UPSC:

- **GS Paper II:** Space-sector governance, institutional reforms, FDI policy, public–private partnerships and international cooperation.
- **GS Paper III:** Science and technology, economic growth, indigenous manufacturing, cybersecurity, disaster management and environmental sustainability.
- **Essay:** Technology as an instrument of strategic autonomy, inclusive development and economic transformation.
- **Core analytical argument:** India's space-economy target depends not only on successful missions but also on converting scientific capability into competitive businesses, creating predictable demand, strengthening domestic supply chains and expanding affordable space-based services for citizens.

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QUESTIONS

1. In fiscal economics and public finance, the term "Primary Fiscal Balance" is best defined as:

(A) The net difference between government expenditure on public infrastructure and revenue generated from non-tax sources.

(B) Total government revenue minus total government expenditure excluding interest payments on existing debt obligations.

(C) Total annual tax receipts minus emergency expenditures incurred during economic recessions.

(D) The difference between sovereign borrowing through bond issuances and debt-servicing allocations made by the central bank.

2. Consider the following constitutional descriptions:

(1) A Directive Principle of State Policy directing the State to separate judicial functions from executive authority in public services.

(2) An extraordinary constitutional remedy under Article 32 and Article 226 enabling courts to enforce constitutional rights against arbitrary official action.

Which of the following options correctly identifies terms (1) and (2) respectively?

(A) Article 121 and Sub Judice

(B) Article 324 and Separation of Powers

(C) Article 124(4) and Basic Structure

(D) Article 50 and Writ Jurisdiction

3. With reference to the statutory powers, investigative limits, and international alignment of the NHRC, consider the following statements:

(1) The recommendations issued by the NHRC under Section 18 following an inquiry constitute legally binding directions that can be directly executed against recalcitrant public servants.

(2) In cases involving allegations of human rights violations committed by members of the armed forces, the NHRC follows a restrictive procedure under Section 19.

(3) Under Section 12, the NHRC possesses authority to intervene in pending court proceedings involving human rights allegations.

(4) A downgrade from 'A' to 'B' status under the GANHRI accreditation automatically invalidates the NHRC's statutory mandates.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

(A) 1, 2 and 4 only

(B) 1 and 3 only

(C) 2 and 3 only

(D) 2, 3 and 4 only

4. Consider the following two statements:

Assertion (A): The State cannot impose complete, blanket prohibitions on children's access to the Internet as a regulatory measure to eliminate online child sexual exploitation.

Reason (R): Internet access is recognized as a fundamental right under Articles 19(1)(a) and 21, and any restriction on fundamental freedoms must satisfy the constitutional test of proportionality under Article 19(2).

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

(A) Both A and R are true and R is the correct explanation of A.

(B) Both A and R are true but R is NOT the correct explanation of A.

(C) A is true but R is false.

(D) A is false but R is true.

5. Consider the following key focus areas under the Indian Space Policy framework:

(1) Non-Governmental Entities (NGE) participation across end-to-end space activities

(2) Transition of ISRO away from routine operational launches toward advanced R&D

(3) Creation of a single-window authorization interface via IN-SPACe

(4) Mandatory nationalization of all private satellite patents after 3 years

How many of the above represent explicit objectives of India's space sector reforms?

(A) Only one

(B) Only two

(C) Only three

(D) All four

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ANSWER KEY

1 – Answer (B), 2 – Answer (D), 3 – Answer (C), 4 – Answer (A), 5 – Answer (C)

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