Quader Chowdhury. "Whether they have 56 seats or 136 seats in the parliament, they got a huge percentage of votes in the last elections. But instead of letting their voters' voice heard, they have let them down."

About the opposition's allegation that they are not allowed to speak at the House, Chowdhury says, "This is a carry over situation from late Humayun Rashid Chowdhury (Speaker 1996-2001). He was so biased towards the treasury bench that he would hardly look at the left side where we, the member of the opposition, used to sit. Unlike the incumbent Speaker, Rashid had to deal with a bigger opposition party."

After their prolonged disappearing act, the main opposition, however, has come to the floor last month. Chowdhury thinks it is a very positive sign that the opposition has come back to the floor. "I don't think it has happened just like that. There must have been a natural dynamics behind it-- We as politicians were under pressure from people to make democracy functional.

"Even when they were not coming to the parliament they were very much active in the committees, which did not happen last time. Both the parties have realised that unless we demonstrate stability we won't be able to sustain economic growth; that at the end of the day verbal gymnastics do not deliver," says Chowdhury.

The judiciary, the other pillar of the state, is not in great shape either. "The lower judiciary is directly under the law ministry," says Mahfuz Anam, "the higher judiciary is theoretically or constitutionally independent, but through the process of appointment of judges to the High Court and Supreme Court the executive is again using its influence. There is a norm that the Prime Minister, also the chief executive of the state, would consult the Chief Justice while appointing the judges. But there is no way to figure out if the PM really consulted the Chief Justice or if the PM did whatever she has actually wanted to do. Consulting the Chief Justice and following his recommendation is not binding on the PM while the Chief Justice also does not speak in public about these issues. So it remains a blurry area."

The neutral role of the speaker is a prerequisite to the effective functioning of the parliament. Anam points out that the speaker has a dual identity. Firstly, he belongs to a party and he has won the election with his party's ticket. At the same time, the speaker is also the guardian, the keeper of the house. As a speaker he has to conduct the parliament neutrally. But in our country, says Anam, the speaker cannot get out of his party identity. "Even after assuming the office of the speaker he continues to be loyal to the party he belongs whereas his loyalty should be to the house he is running," says Anam. "The culture in our country has been that the speaker has opted more to wear the hat of the party from which he comes rather than the hat of the speaker. Now, the speaker's partiality to the ruling party is bound to hurt the parliament's role as the watchdog over the government activities."



Suranjit Sengupta, AL MP

"Democracy is the highest form of political culture where tolerance and mutual respect is the norm,"

-Suranjit Sengupta

So how can the speaker play a more neutral role? One way, which is practiced in some countries, is the speaker after he/she becomes the speaker can resign from his party, Anam says. But then this solution also has its drawbacks. "If the speaker dissociates himself with the party what happens when the next election comes?" asks Anam, "In fact if the speaker nurtures aspiration to fight the next election it is very unlikely that he would be able to act neutrally even after he resigns from his party. Why should he be disloyal and risk his second chance of becoming an MP?"

There is a good solution to this problem too. "If all the political parties mutually agree that they would not field any candidate in the constituency from where the speaker stands and thereby guarantee his re-election, the speaker may very well act neutrally," Anam says, adding that a number of democratic countries in fact practice this.