

Making parliament effective



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FROM PAGE 18
in legislation is exercised by the executive. So in these particular fields we should concentrate on how to make Parliament effective without becoming radical to make it a perfect system, asserting the sovereign right of the people to govern itself through its elected representatives.

About the mechanism of controlling the government, the fruitful use of question hour is very urgent. "Question time is one of the last bastions of the right of private members to exercise political control over government." "Posing questions to ministers does not consist in merely pumping out information from the government or the grievances of constituencies." The question hour in Pakistan Parliament was usefully utilised by the legislators from the then East Pakistan to bring to the public the extent of economic disparity between the two wings of Pakistan that contributed much to consolidating the public opinion to demand the right to self-rule and ultimately for independence.

The supplementaries at the same time are more important than the question itself as than bring out the core of the matter, if the members so want it. So sufficient supplementaries should be allowed and the length of time of question hour may be extended to accommodate more supplementaries. Herein comes the responsibility of MPs as not to fritter away the chance of making the government accountable to it by unprofitable questions and supplementaries. The duty of the chair, as well of the Parliament secretariat, is to see that the question

hour is not overburdened with questions respective nature. Though there are clear rules, the practice is otherwise. The respective parliamentary parties are to take responsibility to educate and guide its members in all sorts of parliamentary engagements including formulating questions and supplementaries. The individual members in the parliament bears the responsibility for his or her work and may even excel in that. But to make Parliament meaningful it needs the coordinated and concerted efforts of all.

One redeeming feature of the Seventh Parliament of Bangladesh is the introduction of Prime Minister's Question Hour. My own motion in this regard in the Fifth Parliament got a cold shoulder from the Rules of Procedure committee. In a Parliamentary system the Prime Minister is the number one executive and by virtue of his/her becoming leader of the house too in our Parliament, a thorough scrutiny of his/her work is all the more essential. But the Prime Minister's question hour now being practised is half baked one. This has not been properly conceived. As the practice has shown that the PM is not confronted on policy matters, rather the questions are put in such a way as to allow her making speeches on government's good doings.

But even with this weakness the Prime Minister's Question Hour can make parliament effective, as the PM in our country is more than equal in the Cabinet. He or she combines in him/her not only the responsibility of running the government but also of party functions and

every other thing as well.

The use of adjournment motion has been watered down to 'definite matters of interest and of public importance' in the Rules of Procedure. Although the majority of the adjournment motions cannot meet the rigour of the rules, the Speaker while hearing the minister's objections on the grounds of its inadmissibility can allow the members to be informed about the matter and at the same time can suggest a member to pick up the topic under an appropriate motion.

But the most important weapon for making parliament effective is the committee. It is said that "a legislature may be known by the committee it keeps." Though the constitution of Bangladesh and the Rules of Procedure spelled out in clear terms the formation and functioning of committees but here the greatest weakness of the parliament still persists. The report of the Team Leader on the implementation plan on Strengthening of the Parliament, jointly sponsored by GOB and UNDP, has listed the weaknesses of the committee system as: (1) Ministerial Committees are chaired by the Minister; (2) Committee has no enforcing mechanism/authority; (3) Public has no or limited access to committee report; (4) Financial accounting and investigative committees are far behind schedule to have any practical impact.

My own experience with regards to the reform of committee composition and operation is quite frustrating. In the second parliament my amendments with regards to the amendment of the provi-

sion of minister chairing the committees on its own ministry was voted out on the ground that in that case the administrative personnel would not feel obliged to attend the committee or send papers to it or would dilly-dally the whole process. These arguments themselves show that even though it is clearly written in the rules that committee would be able to summon any person or paper to testify before it, these are not taken very seriously. As has been told earlier though parliament by Fifth Amendment was restored, it acted as an adjunct of the executive only. But the changeover to a parliamentary system also did not change the mind set about parliament automatically, rather it persisted. So the Fifth Parliament also did not consider my proposals. It was sent to the cold storage again and did not get to see the light of the day again until the Seventh Parliament took up the issue. The sub-committee to propose amendment to the rules & procedures has proposed that the chairman of the standing committees on ministries should be selected from among the members. But more things are to be done to make committees really effective to give strength to the whole system. The debates should be held in public, except in the case of clearly defined matters of high security concern. The reports should be made public and should not only be laid on the table as is the usual practice, but should also be debated.

Possible ways of strengthening the committee and its functioning involve issues of

political culture as well as institutional and logistic support. The political culture should envisage election of the chair from among the opposition. Particularly committees on financial accounting and the investigative committees should be chaired by the opposition. This practice is followed by several countries. The chair of the Public Accounts Committee is given to the opposition. In some countries the committee on Foreign Affairs is usually given to important leader of the opposition. In nominating members to the committees MPs should be given to the same committee in successive parliament so that the individual members can specialise on the subject. But what is more important is the logistical support to the members of the committees. The MPs in Bangladesh are constrained by the lack of information, research support and above all staff support. They are to deal with every aspect of parliamentary work along with his work in the constituency. So if parliament is to be made effective it should be given resources for giving support to its members to perform their function properly.

In matters of legislation the role of committee is also very important. As has been said earlier the executive pushes through the legislation it wants. It is through the committee parliament can demand to know the justification and purpose of a new law the government wants to enact and the effect of it on the society. In the matter of approving the spending of the government it should be professional and demand as to what output or results are

expected and be achieved from the proposed expenditure. For proper scrutiny of the ministerial work the law on secrecy should go. Otherwise everything would be hidden under the carpet in the name of observing the oath of secrecy the executives take while assuming responsibility of the government. Everything must be transparent and made known to the members. The parliament should develop comprehensive system of investigatory committees which for example, could extend parliamentary scrutiny to policies on women, on security and on judicial system.

These works require the complete overhauling of the Rules & Procedures to absorb the spirit of the change in constitution where it is necessary. Institutional and operational reforms are to be made so that the parliament can act according to expectations of the people.

Besides committee work, the performance on the floor of the House is also very important. There is a noticeable deterioration of quality of debate on the floor of the House. The members are more interested about playing to the gallery than taking up substantive issues. The parliamentary speeches are marked by aggressive delivery and is aimed more at scoring political point. The blocking of debates, jeering and cheering have become norm in our parliaments to stupefy the public in even thinking whether this public exercise is at all necessary or not. The media now a days plays important part in influencing parliamentary debates. There is growing trend in parliamentary reporting about

ignoring substantive issues sometimes and highlighting the trifles that tempt the members to keep them busy with the trivialities. So the role of media is to encourage debates on issues of public concern. The introduction of television has made the thing more complicated as TV demands showmanship.

There is also serious gender imbalance in many parliaments of the world including ours. The Bangladesh parliament is extremely unrepresentative in composition as far as woman is concerned who are fifty percent of our population. The election process to the reserved seats for woman is also a slur to the womenfolk. The present women MPs cannot apply their strength due to selection. They are used to ensure or bolster the strength of the majority party in parliament. The debates in the parliament are also gender biased and even disrespectful to women. The gender balance should be corrected immediately so that the women's voice is heard.

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The author was member of parliament in the Second and Fifth Parliament of Bangladesh and is the President, Workers Party of Bangladesh.