AS the elections promised by the end of the year draw nearer, speculation about future political alignments continues to mount. Some ask: Will we see a gradual return to one-person rule over political parties? Will the parliament be able to actually discharge its duty of representing the people? Will the creation of new institutions simplify or complicate politics? And many wonder: What will help avoid a future political crisis like the one that precipitated 1/11?

These questions often lead to discussions about the need for more checks and balances to the executive power. In order to move away from the unchecked power of the premiership, agreement between the political parties must be achieved in the upcoming dialogue. This article discusses various options, some feasible within the current constitution, and others that require constitutional amendments, to bring about a much-needed balance of power.

The case for checks and balances

The doctrine of separation of power is a basic pre-requisite for a democratic polity. Simply put, those who make the laws (the legislature), those who run the country according to the laws (the executive), and those who judge when laws are violated (the judiciary) should be separate people, with each of the branches having appropriate checks and balances on the others.

There is a broad agreement that for all of our constitutional history going back to the Raj, the executive branch had been much stronger than the legislative and the judicial branches. Indeed, under our system of pre-1/11 democracy, all powers were concentrated in the hands of the prime minister (or whomever she delegated those powers to). This system made confrontational politics inevitable. And if there is no change to the system, a simple reshuffling of the party leaderships will not result in any qualitative improvement in our politics.

There are a number of ways through which the power of the executive can be trimmed. The need for an independent judiciary is well-recognised. Devolution of power to local government is another idea worth discussion. In addition, an idea that is making the rounds in our chattering circuits is to have a more powerful presidency. But there are strong reasons to be wary of this last idea.

Beware the imperial presidency

While a rebalancing of the powers of the president vis-a-vis the prime minister is often aired, it is seldom made explicit exactly how much power the president should have. In more extreme versions of the idea, the president is given the power to dissolve the parliament or dismiss the prime minister. Pakistani presidents have had this power, and they have used it so well that no prime minister save one in the country's entire history could ever finish their term, even though none lost a confidence vote in parliament.

In Bangladesh, the parliament is directly elected, whereas the president is currently elected by the parliament. If an indirectly elected president is given the power to dissolve the popularly elected parliament, there is a fundamental contradiction in the representative nature of the system. Although a direct election to the post of presidency can be considered, perhaps akin to the French model, it will also be a recipe for gridlock within the extremely polarised political climate of Bangladesh.

Given the inherent risks of imperial presidency and the complexities required in balancing its power, we should focus attention instead on other ways of improving checks and balances, with more representation from the people in these decisions.

Empower parliamentary committees

One way the legislative branch can keep the executive branch in check is through empowering the standing committees. Standing committees would regularly review the bureaucracy, question specific policies, and scrutinise bills. A major benefit of parliamentary committees is that they create practical and manageable forums to enable bipartisan work. The intimate process helps to build mutual respect and trust among antagonistic political personalities. It also creates incentives to come to parliament as a place to do real work, rather than an arena for endless debates or an elaborate hall to merely rubberstamp decisions. Real work at the committee level is certain to reduce the "quorum crisis" that plagued the last parliament.

And the constitution does not need to be amended to make the standing committees more powerful. All that is required is commitment to democracy by all vying for

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