power after the election. Such commitment is not unprecedented. During the 1996-2001 Hasina government, every bill passed through the parliament was first scrutinised by bipartisan committees. This was in sharp contrast to the first Khaleda government (1991-1996), where, as research by Nizam Ahmed of Chittagong University reports, only seven out of the 173 bills passed by the parliament was sent first for scrutiny by committees. This sorry trend was repeated by the second Khaleda government. This big difference in democratic performance had everything to do with the political predisposition and the will to make democracy work and nothing with creating new institutions.

Vet national appointments

Parliamentary committees should also be empowered, very importantly, to vet important national appointments. In the United States, for example, all cabinet and higher court appointments (made by the president) have to be approved by Senate committees. As we wrote this essay, a vigorous debate was going on in the Japanese parliament over appointing a governor for the central bank, after standing committees rejected the two previous nominees made by the government. Even at the cost of delay, such vetting and debates are crucial to ensure accountability and competence over vital state institutions. And this process promotes posting by merit and reduces the possibility that posts are just handed out as political rewards.

Similar arrangements can be made in Bangladesh such that appointments to key cabinet posts (home, defence, finance, law, local government), senior judges, and independent commission chiefs (Election Commission, Anti-Corruption Commission, Human Rights Commission, Public Service Commission) have to be vetted and confirmed by parliamentary committees. Similarly, major purchase/procurement decisions, made by cabinet committees, could be made subject to regular review by the relevant standing committees.

Limit ministerial powers

There are three ways to lower the likelihood of ministerial power abuse. First, reduce the number of ministers to ten percent of the legislature (about 33 to 35). A smaller, tighter government is easier to monitor. Certain countries have followed this rule strictly, and with good results.

Second, abolish the posts of deputy minister and state minister. These posts are often handed out merely as rewards and punishments. They are a drain on national resources, and they not only create multiple chains of command but also increase corruption.

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, very importantly, vet important appointments.

Finally, to ensure that MPs have more self-dependence and less fear of retribution, a two-term limit for the prime minister can be introduced. This will ensure that new leaders to take over the premiership will constantly be nurtured in the political parties, making room for fresher ideas and new changes. The first two can be implemented by agreement among parties; the final measure would require a constitutional amendment.

Repeal Article 70

In considering constitutional amendments, the foremost candidate should be Article 70. This article, which prohibits floor-crossing (voting against the party line) by MPs, should be repealed. As a result of this article, individual MPs effectively become toothless in the face of an all-powerful prime minister. They cannot vote with their conscience and they cannot truly represent the interests of the constituencies that elected them. A shining example of what such unbridled power could do is the way that President Badruddoza Chowdhury was deposed in 2002 for not visiting Ziaur Rahman's grave. At that time, a lot of BNP MPs simply had no choice but to go with that diktat from the PM and Hawa Bhaban in spite of having grievances over the decision.

The supporters of Article 70 point to the article's historical background. In the pre-Ayub Pakistan, parliamentary majorities changed frequently. At one stage, Pakistan had four prime ministers in 30 months. During the end days of Ayub's rule, in the negotiations between the army and politicians (including Sheikh Mujib), this parliamentary horse-trading came up as a reason against the parliamentary form of government. To negate that criticism, politicians proposed the idea behind the Article 70.

However, recent history suggests that the article by itself provides no safeguard against auctioning of MPs. For example, the April 30, 2004 political drama allegedly involved bribing MPs to cross the floor and bring down the government. If enough MPs wanted to defect, the article would not suffice in keeping a government in power.