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Parliament vs parliamentarians

Wrangling between government and opposition has paralysed the 15th Lok Sabha. Anti-corruption bills have fallen by the wayside.

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Political parties and their leaders, in their desperation to seize or retain power, are trying their best to paralyse each other into inaction. (PTI)

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Never in the history of Indian democracy has Parliament been as ineffective as it has been in the last three years. Days, weeks and even months have passed without transacting much business, and the right and ability to disrupt Parliament has been claimed by most political parties including, surprisingly, members of the ruling alliance.

Lesser nations think that the challenges of democracy are the adoption of a parliamentary system, ensuring that there are at least two opposing political parties, holding free and fair elections, and generating voter enthusiasm and participation. Their democracies are challenged by anarchists, and by totalitarian and military regimes. But it takes a great democracy like India to show that the real challenge of democracy is to protect it from itself, to protect Parliament from parliamentarians and to safeguard public interest from the vested interests of those parties vying to represent the public interest.

The wrangling between the NDA and the ruling UPA has paralysed sane democracy in the 15th Lok Sabha. The NDA is delighted to have demonstrated to the nation, and the world, the inability of the ruling UPA to provide a functional and “decisive” government, and hopes to win the forthcoming elections on this plank. But if their ploy works, would it not demonstrate a winning strategy to the new opposition, which would be tempted to not let the next Parliament function in order to demonstrate how non-functional the new government is, ad infinitum?

Recent reports suggest that the plot may be thicker than it appears. According to some news channels, the Bharatiya Janata Party might have considered fostering a deal with the [Congress](#) party, where the latter would be “allowed” to pass the Telangana bill, though the [BJP](#)’s stance is not entirely clear. In return, this version claims, the Congress would then not attempt to enact the slew of anti-corruption bills that are being claimed by [Rahul Gandhi](#) to be from his basket — a quid pro quo that, if accurate, might have been rendered meaningless by the chaos in Parliament. Meanwhile, the Congress continues to use every opportunity to tom-tom its commitment to the anti-corruption bills and, short of resorting to a dharna at Jantar Mantar, would do all that is required to pass them in this session.

But when an opportunity presented itself in the Rajya Sabha, it opted to introduce, instead, the hugely controversial anti-communal violence bill, which had been opposed for being in violation of the federal structure of India, rather than the whistleblowers bill, which has the purported support of all political parties. Inevitably, the anti-communal violence bill was deferred and the opportunity lost. Perhaps the anti-communal violence bill was more important in the sense that it affected a larger number of people, but was it not better to pass the long-pending whistleblowers bill than to pass no bill at all, an inevitability that was obvious even before the bill was introduced?

The greatest casualty of this battle to paralyse has been the Right of Citizens for Time Bound Delivery of Goods and Services and Redressal of their Grievances Bill, 2011, which again seems to have the support of both the UPA and NDA, and should therefore have had a smooth sail through the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. It is perhaps the most important of the good governance bills before Parliament, for the redress of grievances are more fundamental to governance. Despite that, no one is moving it in Parliament. The Congress again parrots in public that “we are committed to it”, and the BJP retorts “let them move it and we will support it”. Yet it, and they, are unmoved.

In the meantime, the billion-plus citizens of the largest democracy in the world wait with their complaints of non-delivery of essential services like rations, pensions, health and water supply. As for those who dare to file complaints or expose corruption, they do so at their own risk, while political parties continue their shenanigans and disrupt Parliament, not allowing these critical human rights legislations to be enacted.

But why the urgency, the armchair observer asks us. After all, the people of India have waited over 65 years, so they can wait another few months. And, yes, the bills will lapse, but they can be re-introduced in Parliament once the elections are over, and if you say there is no opposition, then they will pass like a shot.

Unfortunately, real politics is never that simple. Of course there is opposition. There is strong opposition from the quiet but powerful bureaucrat's lobby, which would be in the firing line once these laws become operative. There is opposition from many a MLA, MP and minister who builds her political career by personally redressing grievances as a form of political patronage. Yet, the logic of an impending general election trumps all this opposition. Once the elections are over, who knows when the opportunity will present itself again?

So democracy faces a new challenge, peculiarly Indian, and is currently acquitting itself poorly. Political parties and their leaders, in their desperation to seize or retain power, are trying their best to paralyse each other into inaction. In doing so, they are alienating and ignoring the very basis of their power, the common people who have grievances, who suffer corruption and who are persecuted and even killed when they complain.

How long will the people of India be silent spectators? How long will their voices be muffled?

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