

The Dark Horse: Standing Committees

The key function of the parliament is legislation, oversight and representation. Scrutiny of government by parliamentary committees brings efficiency in the working of government. The Constitution of Pakistan clearly illustrates the role of parliamentary committees in the process of legislation. These committees hold their position in the Parliament and in the Provincial Assemblies as well. Parliamentary committees are the mechanism for ensuring accountability and transparency.

An analysis of the performance of previous standing committees reveals a dismal picture. Many of the committees have not published their annual reports. There was not even a formal schedule for meetings and on average committees had 5-6 meeting during the five year tenure. Most of the committees provided neither their recommendations nor any sort of critique on the ministry's workings.

It is the responsibility of Prime Minister and his Federal Cabinet to construct the Parliamentary committees within thirty days of the selection of the Leader of the House. After having missed the deadline of 30 days for the formation of standing committees, the PML-N government presented the bill for the formation of 34 standing committees including 5 non-ministerial committees, 28 ministerial committees and one special committee on Kashmir Affairs on 21 August, 2013 in the session of National Assembly which is likely to be approved by the Speaker National Assembly.

The ineffectiveness of the standing committees and their lacked involvement in the government management can be attributed parts to the institutional framework. Committee system in the Constitution of Pakistan does not provide decisive powers to the committees so that they can effectively provide recommendation. An official of Pakistan Institute of Parliamentary Services (PIPS) claims that there is not even a meeting place for committees. These committees are not provided with the logistics, technical staff or any financial incentive to work at an efficient level. An incentives based structure paves the way for personal and organizational efficiency, which is absent in the parliamentary committees.

When contacted, parliamentarian emphasized the role and features of these committees. Justice (R) Iftikhar Ahmad Cheema, an MNA from the ruling party, argued that these committees should work beyond the party policy, working for the effectiveness of ministry they should recommend in the nation's best interest. He also asked for the full support from the PIPS for these committees and the annual reports should be produced without fail.

Mr. Shafqat Mehmood, an MNA from the opposition party, suggested that these committees should be provided more powers. Chairmen of the committees should be elected from opposition and budget of ministries should be approved by the concerned standing committee.

Good Governance, a quintessential idea in modern development paradigm, elaborates how public institutions work and manage public affairs. It may also be defined as the process of making policies and how these policies are implemented. The state institutions like parliament (Upper House and Lower House), Executive and Judiciary play the role for state patronage to improve the governance.

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