

The Parliament, without checks and balances

The standing committee's role as an oversight group for ministries, regulatory bodies and public sector enterprises is critical as it improves standards of governance in government; a concept as elusive as it is desirable in Pakistan. The standing committee is the public's eyes within the Parliament with an end goal of achieving predictable, transparent and effective outcomes in the public domain. The standing committee directs ministries by making recommendations on their actions or inaction. Special committees oversee projects that require extraordinary attention such as legacy issues like the Kashmir dispute or the recent Rigging controversy. It is reported that a Rigging Committee will investigate the rigging allegations made during the 11th May 2013 elections.

Woodrow Wilson aptly stated the importance of these committees; "Congress in session is Congress in exhibition, while in its committee room Congress is at work." The lacunae in Pakistan's democratic system, if not resolved, pose a recognizable threat to its credibility. If standing committees are to be 'the gatherers of information, the sifters of alternatives, and the refiners of legislative detail' as claimed by the parliamentary service monitors in the Pakistan National Assembly, the government should be in a hurry to give the committees shape and names.

Rule 200 in The Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in the National Assembly states that the standing committees are to be set up within 30 days of the election of the Leader of the House. A chairperson is also elected for each committee so as to regulate the body and direct them in their affairs. Although the new government catapulted into action on the 5th of June 2013, by the 5th of July the government had yet to choose its' committees. Amongst the ones named most do not have an appointed chairperson yet; 90 days and counting...

A sharp decrease in the number of standing committees, only 33 as compared to last year's 45, has not proved to be helpful in selection. A large number of seats in the lower house, 342, could make the selection process more difficult. However, challenges to the pursuit of democracy in larger parliaments exist and adherence to the parliamentary process as seen in these democracies is instrumental in guiding our legislative bodies. Lok Sabha hosts 545 members, the House of

Commons houses 650 MP's and neither has a single party majority. As democracies become increasingly coalition-led, parliamentary housekeeping will inevitably become more challenging.

PML-N as the strongest party expects to have 18 Chairpersons in various Committees. Each party nominates a candidate for each committee. The candidate who unanimously wins support of the committee is elected as the chairperson of the respective standing committee. The public is still awaiting the election of the Chairperson for the Public Accounts Committee which oversees the expenditure and financial regulation of the government; a watchdog for the Ministry of finance as well. Democratically, the Chair for the PAC is chosen from a party other than the ruling majority; a trend initiated by the ex-PPP government under Asif Ali Zardari. Although nominations for the post of PAC Chairpersons have been received by State Minister for Parliamentary Affairs, Sheikh Aftab Ahmed, an appointment has yet to be made.

As these new appointments have yet to take place, the Parliament nears the end of 3 months in power without a supervisory watchdog in place.

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