



Parliament Watch 2009

Report on Observation of the First Session of the Ninth Parliament

Executive Summary in English

(The full report in Bangla is available on www.ti-bangladesh.org)

Dhaka, 4 July 2009

Introduction & Objectives

Parliament is the key institution for democracy and national integrity system, especially in the Westminster type of government that Bangladesh has been striving to institutionalize. In view of pivotal role of the parliament in promoting a culture of democratic accountability and for establishing good governance, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has been conducting its research and policy advocacy initiative titled “Parliament Watch” since 2001, under which all 23 sessions of the 8th Parliament (2001-6) were watched and six reports were released. The result of this research showed a huge gap between expectations of the Parliament and its delivery.¹

The 9th Parliament (*Bangladesh Jatiya Sangsad*) was formed with huge expectations for institutionalization of democracy in Bangladesh. It was elected with an unprecedented popular mandate of three-fourths majority in favour of a “grand alliance” headed by the Bangladesh Awami League whose election manifesto reflected voters’ choice for establishing a transparent and accountable governance and a series of commitments for institutional and policy measures for controlling corruption. At the core of the electoral pledge of the ruling coalition as well as other political parties including the main opposition was an effective Parliament.

As a continuation of the Parliament Watch series for the 8th Parliament, the objective of this research is to observe how the commitment to make the parliament effective has been met, and to analyze the role of the 9th Parliament in creating conditions for transparent and accountable governance in the country. This report presents TIB findings from the first session of the 9th Parliament. The specific objectives of this report are to:

- Assess any qualitative change represented by the first session of the ninth Parliament compared to previous parliament as reflected in the first session of the 8th Parliament;
- Analyze how far the Members of the Parliament have succeeded in discharging their rights and responsibilities as elected representatives of the people;
- Assess the extent to which conditions have been created to ensure accountability of the government;
- Observe the legislative functions of the Parliament;
- Analyze the role of the Speaker;
- Make an early assessment of the role of Parliamentary Standing Committees; and
- To offer recommendations for strengthening parliamentary democracy.

Methodology and Source of Information

Information has been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary information includes proceedings of the session as broadcast live by the state-owned national radio channel. Data collected from the Parliament Secretariat as well as interviews of some MPs were another primary source. The secondary information used in the research include reports published in government gazettes, Parliament website, newspapers, books and articles.

Data for estimate of money value of the lost time due to delayed commencement of session for shortage of quorum were collected by using stop-watch while listening to the direct radio broadcast. The Revenue Budget for operation of the Parliament in 2004-5 was taken into consideration as the main factor in this regard. The amount allocated for operation of the Parliamentary Committees was excluded. The average electricity bills that were available were taken into account. The total

¹ Transparency International Bangladesh, *The Role of the 8th Parliament (2001-6)*, TIB 2007.

operating cost so estimated was divided by the net working hours of the Parliament to calculate the unit cost per minute.

Limitations

Like any other social science research, this study also has some limitations, which include dependence on the radio broadcast as the key source of observing the proceedings and for counting time though the stop-watch was used with extraordinary care, caution and precision. Besides, it was not possible to obtain some relevant crucial information such as the attendance record of individual MPs because of non-availability of information from the Parliament Secretariat.

Key Findings

Summary of the key findings and observations about the first session of the 9th Parliament compared to the first session of the 8th Parliament is given below:

Indicator	Eighth Parliament	Ninth Parliament
Party Representation	72% ruling party and 28% opposition members.	88% ruling party and 12% opposition members.
Working time	19 work days, 58 hours 12 minutes. Average duration per working day was 3 hours 4 minutes.	39 working days; 145 hours 22 minutes. Average duration per working day 3 hours 43 minutes.
Prime Minister's Question-Answer Session	Only one day; 40 minutes. Only the ruling party members posed questions to the Prime Minister (The main opposition party boycotted the Parliament).	The Prime Minister answered to direct question on 7 days. Questions were put to the table another day. In total 4 hours 48 minutes were spent for the purpose. The opposition asked 5 questions.
Question-Answer of Ministers	48 questions were put to the ministers of relevant ministries, all by ruling party members. Other opposition members got the opportunity to ask supplementary questions.	237 questions were put to the ministers. The shares of ruling party and opposition members were 218 and 19 respectively.
Accepted Notices on Issues of Public Importance	Of the accepted notices, the shares of ruling party and opposition members were 84.4% and 15.6% respectively.	The shares of ruling party and opposition members in accepted notices were 88.9% and 11.1% respectively.
Passage of Bills	5 bills were passed	32 bills were passed
Formation of Parliamentary Committees	5 committees were formed; but standing committees on the ministries as well as on public accounts were not formed.	A total of 48 committees were formed including the standing committees on ministries and public accounts.
Election of Committee Chairmen	No opposition member was appointed chairperson of the standing committees.	Opposition members were appointed Chairperson of 3 standing committees.
Boycotts and Walk-outs	The main opposition party did not participate. The 8 th Parliament commenced with their boycott. Other opposition parties did not walk out.	The main opposition party boycotted the session for 17 work days centring on seating arrangement. They staged walk-outs 6 times.
Non-Supplementary Questions	20 questions were considered as non-supplementary.	25 questions were considered as non-supplementary.
Unscheduled and irrelevant debates	4.8% of total time was spent on unscheduled discussion and/or points of order. Undue eulogy of leaders were uttered 137 times, undue criticisms 51 times and irrelevant topics 81 times.	3.7% of total time was spent on unscheduled discussion and/or points of order. Undue eulogy of leaders was uttered 251 times, criticisms 342 times and irrelevant subjects 503 times.

Indicator	Eighth Parliament	Ninth Parliament
Election of Women Members to Reserved Seats	The female members were not elected to reserved seats in the first session.	All 45 female members were elected to reserved seats.
Timely commencement of sessions	Of the 19 work days during the first session, the proceedings started on time only on one day. 31 minutes were wasted per day on an average due to quorum crisis.	The sessions started late on all working days. Average time wasted per day due to lack of quorum was 40 minutes.
Election of Speaker	The Speaker and the Deputy Speaker were elected from the ruling party.	The Speaker and the Deputy Speaker were elected from the ruling party. Although the ruling party had pledged to elect Deputy Speaker from the opposition, they did not implement it.
Role of the Speaker	Shares of the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker in running the sessions were 84.3% and 15.7% respectively. The Speaker prompted the members to conclude their speech 188 times, the shares of ruling party and opposition members being 152 (80.9%) and 36 (19.1%). He intervened to put off the microphone 26 times, the shares of ruling party and opposition members being 19 times (73.1%) and 7 times (26.9%).	Shares of the Speaker, Deputy Speaker and panel of chairmen in running the session were 66.5%, 31.5% and 2% respectively. The Speaker prompted the members to conclude their speech 733 times, the shares of ruling party and opposition members being 642 (87.6%) and 91 (12.4%). He put off the microphone 46 times, the shares of ruling party and opposition members being 32 times (69.6%) and 14 times (30.4%) respectively.
Flow of Information	Other than the government-controlled radio and television channels, no private radio or television channels were given permission to broadcast the session. Access of people to the deliberations of parliamentary committees was absent. The parliamentary website was not updated with information on parliamentary proceedings. Collection of information from the parliament secretariat was difficult.	Other than the government-controlled radio and television channels, no private radio or television channels could broadcast the session. People had no access to the deliberations of parliamentary committees. The parliamentary website was not updated with information on parliamentary proceedings. It was also not easy to gather information from the parliament secretariat.

Basic Information on the 9th Parliament

A total of 1,538 candidates directly contested the election held on 29 December 2008. The Grand Alliance led by the Awami League (AL) won 262 seats in this election, of which AL won 230, *Jatiya Party* (JP) 27, Workers' Party 2 and *Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal* (JSD) won 3 seats. The 4-Party Alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) won in 33 seats, of which BNP won 30, Bangladesh Jamaat E Islami (JI) two and BJP won one seat. Besides, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) won in one constituency and independent candidates in four constituencies. Later three out of the four elected independent candidates joined the AL. Twenty female MPs were directly elected. However the number now stands at 19 following the death of one of the female MPs. In sum, the AL and its allies have 88% of the total seats, BNP and its allies 11% and other parties 1%.

Around 58% of the MPs have been elected for the first time, which represents a qualitative difference from the past. Most of the MPs are well-educated, though some elected MPs failed to provide accurate information regarding their educational qualification.

For the majority of the MPs (59%) business is the principal profession. The ratio could be higher as many MPs did not provide the information on profession in their affidavits submitted to the EC.

The first session of the 9th Parliament commenced on Sunday, 25 January 2009 afternoon (3.18 pm) under the chairmanship of the outgoing Speaker Barrister Jamiruddin Sircar. The first session concluded on 7 April 2009 under the chairmanship of the present Speaker Advocate Abdul Hamid. Md. Zillur Rahman was elected the President of the People's Republic of Bangladesh by the 9th Parliament. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was elected the Leader of the House. Former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia was elected the Leader of the Opposition. Mr Shawkat Ali was elected the Deputy Speaker.

Pledge by the Prime Minister against Corruption

After the oath-taking ceremony in the Parliament, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina called upon everybody to take lessons from past mistakes and work together with honesty and integrity. She declared that due action will be taken against anyone found to be guilty of corruption, but no one should be treated unjustly. She stressed that no one shall be above the law, not even Ministers. She further reiterated that the election pledge for building a happy, prosperous and information technology-based Bangladesh must be met. She also promised to keep the administration free from politicization.

Leader of the Opposition – Pledge to make the Parliament effective

After taking oath as an MP, Leader of the Opposition Begum Khaleda Zia gave assurance that cooperation would be extended to the government by playing a constructive role. She hoped that the government would create conducive environment for enabling the opposition to play the due role in the Parliament. She called upon the MPs to regularly attend the Parliament and play a positive role in public interest through constructive criticism of the ruling party.

Session time

A total of 145 hours 22 minutes were spent in 39 working days during the first session. The average time devoted to the session per day was 3 hours 43 minutes. 23.8% of the session time was spent for questions-answers of ministers, 3.3% for the Prime Minister's question-answer, 20.5% for the President's speech and discussions thereon, 9.7% for legislative business, 14.6% for discussions on rejected notices and 7.2% for discussions on accepted notices.

The business hours of the first session were less than those in other countries having parliamentary form of Government. For example, 8 hours of sessions take place on average in each work day in the House of Commons of the United Kingdom.

Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition on President's Speech

The outgoing President delivered a 12-minute speech on the first working day. In the first meeting of the Business Advisory Committee, it was decided to allocate 20 hours for discussion on the President's speech. In reality, 29 hours 45 minutes were spent for the purpose, where a total of 184 MPs including the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition took part. 163 MPs from the ruling party participated spending 22 hours 2 minutes, while 21 MPs from the opposition consumed

4 hours 49 minutes for discussing on the President's speech. Many MPs spent much more than their allocated time for this purpose. However, 24 MPs were absent on scheduled dates and 3 declined to speak.

A review of the contents of discussions on the President's speech revealed the following:

- Almost all the MPs who spoke strayed outside the topic. Some of them even spent almost the entire time on matters related to their respective constituencies, criticism of the opposition, and eulogy of their own party.
- The Prime Minister thanked the outgoing President, whereas the Leader of the Opposition did not do so (ironically the outgoing President was appointed by the opposition party which was then in power). Most of the MPs including the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition sharply criticized the President's speech as well as his role during the tenure of the Caretaker Government. Some of them even made aspersions and sarcastic remarks, which the Speaker did not expunge.
- The BDR tragedy (in which dozens of army mid and high-ranking officers were brutally killed by paramilitary rankers) was politicised instead of efforts to confront it as a national issue. The parties used it for launching verbal abuse against each other.
- In their concluding speeches both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition resorted to personal attacks. Lack of mutual respect and tolerance was visible.

Government Accountability

Question-Answer Session of the Prime Minister: There were 8 work days in the first session of the 9th Parliament for the Prime Minister's question-answer time. The Prime Minister gave answers to direct questions from the floor on seven occasions, while questions were put to the table once. In total 4 hours 48 minutes were spent for this purpose. Out of this, the ruling party members took 1 hour 2 minutes and the opposition members around 13 minutes for asking questions, and the Prime Minister spent 3 hours 11 minutes in giving answers.

Question-Answer Session of Ministers: Ministers faced a total of 1,024 questions on different subjects relevant to the respective ministry. Of these, the ruling party members put 940 questions (91.8%) while the opposition members asked 84 (8.2%) questions. The number of principal questions was 237, of which 218 were raised by the ruling party and 19 by the opposition, while the number of supplementary questions was 787, of which 722 were raised by the ruling party and 65 by the opposition. A total of 34 hours and 33 minutes were spent for the question-answer, which was 23.8% of the total time. Of this, the share of ruling party and opposition members were 37.5% and 3.1% respectively. The concerned ministers took 41.6% of the time and the remaining 17.8% were spent for giving floors.

Non-supplementary Questions: MPs often raised questions which were not supplementary as provided for in the Rules of Procedure. The number of this kind of questions was 25, of which 22 were raised by the ruling party and 3 by the opposition members.

Notices on Issues of Public Importance: The total number of notices during the first session was 1979, of which 1907 were rejected. Of the 72 accepted notices, 64 (88.9%) notices were from the ruling party, and 8 (11.1%) from the opposition. The notices were accepted and allocated almost proportionate to the party representation.

Parliamentary Resolutions and General Discussion

Motions for resolution were disposed of during 8 out of 39 work days of the first session. A total of 39 resolutions were brought during this period, of which 29 were raised. Nine could not be raised as the MPs who proposed them were absent; and one was suspended as the concerned minister was absent. Of the resolutions raised, only 4 were adopted through voice vote and the remainder were withdrawn with the consent of proposing members. The adopted resolutions were on revision of freedom fighters' list, taking necessary actions for restoration of Bangladesh's membership in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, taking steps for restoration of Bangladesh's membership at the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and taking initiative for swift trial of identified war criminals.

The duration of general discussion during the first session was almost one hour. A resolution was passed during the discussion for taking required steps to make *Bangla* an official language of the United Nations.

Legislative Business

During the period from the dissolution of the 8th Parliament to the commencement of the 9th Parliament, the President promulgated 122 Ordinances in accord with Article 93 of the Constitution. There was a compulsion for determining the fate of these Ordinances within 30 days of the formation of the new parliament. An expert panel was constituted to examine these Ordinances to make recommendations. Accordingly, 32 bills were passed in the first session, while 8 bills were under consideration of relevant committee and 2 were waiting for placement in the Parliament. 14 hours 6 minutes were spent on legislative businesses during the first session, which was 9.7% of the total time.

Notable among the Acts passed during the session were the following: the *Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2009*, *Money-laundering Prevention Act 2009*, *Anti-terrorism Act 2009*, *Right to Information Act 2009*, *Consumer Protection Act 2009* and the *Code of Criminal Procedure (Amendment) Act 2009*.

On the other hand, a number of ordinances which could have vital role in ensuring transparency, good governance and human rights were kept pending, which included the *Anti-Corruption Commission (Second Amendment) Ordinance 2007*, *National Human Rights Commission Ordinance 2007*, *Micro-credit Regulatory Authority Ordinance*, *Public Procurement Act (Amendment) 2007*, *Government Attorney Service Ordinance 2008*, *Supreme Judicial Commission (Amendment) Ordinance 2008*, and the *Mobile Court Ordinance 2007*.

Like in the past, there was no scope of participation of the people in the process of adoption of the Acts. It may be noted that in many countries the common people are engaged at various stages of law making. The draft laws are for instance published in parliamentary website and newspapers; people are informed via e-mails; and people's opinions are sought by organising seminars and workshops.

Participation by Female MPs

A notable aspect of the outcome of the 9th National Election is the election of the largest ever number of directly elected female MPs (20). However the number now stands at 19 following the death of one of the female MPs. Later, commendably enough, 45 female MPs were also elected to the reserved seats in the very first session. However, since the MPs elected for reserved seats were

not allocated any constituencies a feeling of being neglected was noticed. The female MPs raised this issue in the Parliament a number of times, but was not given due importance.

Women MPs were included in 17 out of 48 Parliamentary Standing Committees. One female MP has been made the Chairperson of a standing committee, which was considered as a good beginning.

In many instances, the Speaker was found to face problems in running the session as the female members, especially the new ones, appeared to be less familiar with the parliamentary *Rules of Procedure*. It was observed that the Speaker, after giving floor, had to guide them on how to submit notices and refer to laws or how to put questions to ministers. The participation of women in framing laws was also low. During discussions on the President's speech, like their male counterparts, the female MPs seldom remained within the topic; rather they were busy praising their own parties, criticizing the opposition and highlighting the advantages or disadvantages of their own constituencies.

Overall, the participation of women MPs in the first session was low. Despite a rise in their number, the female MPs were not visible in framing laws, representation and establishment of accountability.

Role of the Speaker

The Speaker discharges the responsibility as an executive head or chairperson of the Parliament. Thus he is also called the 'Guardian of Parliament'. The first session of the 9th Parliament lasted for 145 hours 22 minutes. Of this, the Speaker was in the chair for 96 hours 43 minutes (66.5%), while the remaining 45 hours 44 minutes (31.5%) was chaired by the Deputy Speaker, and 2 hours 55 minutes (2%) by the members of the chairman panel.

While presiding over the session, the Speaker gave reminders 733 times to MPs during the question-answer sessions, and discussions on notices of public importance and the President's speech. Of these, the ruling party members were prompted 642 times and opposition members 91 times for wrapping up their discussions. The Speaker exercised his prerogative to switch off the microphone 46 times – 32 times for the ruling party and 14 times for opposition members. It was observed that the Speaker played this role in the interest of better time management without any bias on the basis of party affiliation.

Walk-out and Boycott by the Main Opposition Party

BNP, the main opposition party raised questions about the neutrality of the Speaker and walked out from parliament in protest six times during the first session. The issues on which BNP staged these walk-outs include allocation of seats in parliament, failing to get the opportunity to speak, protesting against the *Money Laundering Prevention Bill 2009* moved by the concerned minister under the sanction of the Speaker in accordance with rule 77; protesting Speaker's ruling for moving of bills including that on *Bangladesh Shilpa Bank*, protesting the State-own Television Channel's failure to live telecast of the speech by the Leader of the Opposition; disagreeing with the expunge the words of opposition MPs deemed as violation of the rules of procedure; and for not including a member proposed by BNP in a parliamentary standing committee.

The opposition boycotted the Parliament in protest against the seating arrangement within the Parliament on 28 January 2009 and returned to parliament after 17 consecutive work days following proposal and assurance given by the Speaker.

Unscheduled Discussions

A total of 5 hours 20 minutes (3.7% of total time) was spent on points of order during the first session. MPs belonging to different parties praised their respective leaders 251 times during the session. The maximum number of partisan praising (158 times) took place during discussion on the President's speech.

Incidents of MPs' criticizing the opponents irrelevant to topics under consideration were recorded 342 times, of which 300 times by the ruling party and 42 times by opposition. Maximum incidents of criticism took place during discussions on the President's speech.

The MPs raised irrelevant issues 503 times, mostly during discussions on the President's speech and the question-answer time for ministers. Of these the ruling party members claimed 444.

Delayed sessions for lack of quorum: money value of the wasted time

The research team made an estimate of the amount spent per minute for running the Parliament, based on the revised budget for parliament for the 2004-05 fiscal year which was Tk 421.4 million. The main items of expenditure taken into consideration were salaries and allowances of employees of Parliament Secretariat, repair and maintenance costs, electricity bills, supplies and services, and remuneration and allowances of MPs. Expenses for parliamentary committees were deducted. The sessions of the 8th Parliament ran for 199 hours 43 minutes in that financial year. Accordingly, Tk 35 thousand was spent per minute on an average for running the Parliament. The actual expenditure could be higher as expenses of some other departments providing services to the Parliament were not included. So it would be if the budget for 2009-10 could be considered.

On average 40 minutes were lost for delayed commencement every working day in two parts, e.g., initial commencement and after prayer break. The total loss of time was 1,548 minutes or 25 hours 48 minutes during the first session. Accordingly the money value of the lost time due to delayed commencement for lack of quorum was estimated to be Tk 54,18 million.

Parliamentary Standing Committees

Formation of Committees

In the very first session 48 committees were constituted, which is an unprecedented positive development in the history of parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh, especially when the 8th Parliament took nearly 18 months to complete formation of the Committees. A few other sub-committees were also formed during this period. A committee was constituted to investigate the alleged irregularities and corruption committed by the former Speaker following demands made by the MPs. In a meeting of this committee held on 13 April, three sub-committees were also formed. The committee summoned the former Speaker, the former Deputy Speaker and the former Chief Whip.

Another positive distinction compared to the 8th Parliament was the appointment of Chair for two Committees from the opposition. MPs from the opposition were appointed in the Committees proportionate to their number of seats in the Parliament.

Notwithstanding these positive moves, the credibility of the 9th Parliament could be much higher if the chair of the committees on such vital affairs as the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) could be appointed from the opposition. In many effective Parliaments around the world such practice exists. The representation of the opposition in the committees could also be higher than proportionate to ratio of seats in the Parliament.

After the formation many committees became very active, though some eight failed to meet the requirement of meeting at least once a month until 30 April 2009. By that time, 16 committees met

once, 15 twice, four thrice, two met four times. Of the remaining three, one committee met for five times, one six and one for eight times. Although no definite conclusions can be reached at this moment, Committees are showing greater activism than during the 8th Parliament when most of the Committees failed to meet the mandatory requirement of meeting once a month.

Constraints against effective functioning of Committees

Conflict of Interest: Until 6 October 1997, the concerned minister used to be the ex-officio chairman of parliamentary standing committee. However, according to the amended Rule 247 of the *Rules of Procedure*, MPs were nominated as chairpersons of the standing committees in place of concerned ministers, which was a positive development, but the ministers continued as ex-officio members of those committees. The inclusion of concerned ministers in these committees can be a source of conflict of interest, and hence a predicament against transparency, accountability, neutrality and dynamism of the committee. .

Implementation of Recommendations: Another problem towards the effectiveness of parliamentary standing committees is that these committees including standing committees on ministries and PAC can only put forward recommendations, but cannot compel the concerned ministries to implement. Experience shows that recommendations of committees are not often taken into account by the relevant ministries or institutions – they do not often even inform the committees about their position. Parliamentary practice in various countries of the world shows that the relevant institutions have an obligation to implement the decisions taken by parliamentary committees.

Openness of Committee Deliberations: The meetings of the parliamentary committees in Bangladesh take place in closed doors. Outsiders including the media are barred from the meetings. The decisions taken by the committees are distributed among the members in accordance with the directives of the chairpersons and these are not made open for the public until placed in the Parliament. The decisions or reports adopted by the committees are also not released in the website of the Parliament. In many countries of the world, the public as well as the media are allowed to be present in parliamentary committee meetings.

Summons by Parliamentary Committees: According to the *Rules of Procedure*, the parliamentary committees can summon any individual. But there is no guidelines regarding the measures to be taken if the summoned person does not appear before the committee, nor is the conflict of interest principle clearly defined to ensure neutrality and integrity.

Continuity between Committees: There is no tradition or provision for handing-over of responsibilities and sharing of experience by the outgoing and the newly formed standing committees. As a consequence, the new committees do not get the opportunity to learn from the experiences of previous committees.

Conclusion

Many positive aspects can be observed in the first session of the 9th Parliament. Notable among these were constitution of all stipulated standing committees, active role of some of these committees during the first session, selection of some committee chairpersons from the opposition, and neutral stance of the Speaker in giving floors to members.

However, some negative features were also observed such as unwarranted eulogies, boycott of parliament by the opposition, and limited right to information on parliamentary proceedings.

No notable differences with regard to the duration of work hours could be observed. If the parliamentary sessions start in the morning instead of afternoon, then it will be possible to increase the duration of sittings, which may yield positive results in different ways.

Although the ruling party had pledged to elect the Deputy Speaker from the opposition at the beginning of the 9th Parliament, they did not execute it. Later, the ruling party gave assurance that a third post of Deputy Speaker would be created by amending the Constitution, and this would be filled up through induction from opposition MPs. However, this has also not been materialized.

As deliberations was dominated quite often by partisan and often personal critique or eulogy spontaneous and substantive participation of MPs with objective and constructive critical approach did not reach the desired level. Article 70 of the Constitution is considered an obstacle in this regard.

The main opposition party boycotted the parliament for 43 percent of working days on the ground of unsatisfactory seating arrangement. This was a violation of their election pledge that “no party or alliance should boycott parliamentary sessions or sittings with the lone exception of issue-based walk-outs”.

Many of the discussions during the first session were not related to the topic. The Speaker cancelled the non-supplementary questions.

45 female members were elected for reserved seats in the 9th Parliament through nominations. The Prime Minister has declared that direct elections for women MPs will be arranged after raising the number of reserved seats to 100. It is expected that a law would be placed in the Parliament engaging the people.

There is no Code of Conduct for the MPs, nor does a Parliamentary Ethics Committee exist that could oversee the conduct of MPs to ensure the desired level of parliamentary behaviour and practice. There are codes of conduct and ethics committees in many countries.

Like the 8th Parliament, private radio and television channels were not given permission to live broadcast the parliamentary sessions. Besides, parliamentary committee meetings continue to operate in an environment of secrecy without much scope public knowledge of proceedings. Even the website of parliament is not updated with information on parliamentary proceedings. Besides, it remains difficult to collect information from the Parliament Secretariat.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are placed by TIB which it believes would strengthen the Parliament and make it more effective in promoting accountable and transparent governance and in institutionalizing democracy in Bangladesh.

To Make the Parliament Effective

1. The provision for cancellation of parliamentary seat of MPs due to absence from sessions should be reduced to 30 consecutive days instead of existing 90 days.
2. To implement the electoral pledge the opposition should join parliament by shunning the culture of boycott.
3. The total working duration of the Parliament sessions should be increased. The working hour should start in the morning instead of afternoon and the number of work days can be increased up to 135 in a year. A parliamentary calendar should be introduced.
4. The duration of question-answer time of the Prime Minister should be increased to one hour from the present 30 minutes. The opposition members should be given priority with regard to asking questions.

5. Participation of the people should be ensured in various phases of framing and reforming laws.
6. MPs should avoid un-parliamentary languages and their deliberations should reflect mutual respect.
7. Measures should be taken for maintenance, storage and analysis of the records of parliamentary proceedings, including those on attendance, through an automated system; the people should be informed about these through website and the media.
8. Regular attendance of Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition in parliament should be ensured. Due recognition should be given for highest attendance in a year. Provisions should be made for deducting the allowances of those members who absent from the session without prior permission of the Speaker.
9. A Deputy Speaker should be elected from the opposition, who should be given the opportunity to chair in at least 40% of the work days, including proceedings related to budget approval and law framing.
10. MPs should inform the people about the successes and failures of their work on an annual basis, and there should be a mechanism for the recall system based on public opinion.
11. Except for formation of the Government, vote of confidence and budget approval the Article 70 of the Constitution on floor crossing should be amended to ensuring free and objective deliberation without inhibitions.
12. The powers of parliamentary committees, especially those related to government funds, should be enhanced and proceedings should be free from partisan influence as well as personal bias.
13. The media including the public and private radio-television channels and newspapers should be provided access to parliamentary sessions. An exclusive television channel can be considered, which will live telecast the parliamentary sessions on a full-time basis and cover in detail the work of parliamentary committees as well as conduct many information and awareness programmes about the importance of the Parliament and role of the MPs.
14. A Code of Conduct for MPs should be adopted and enforced by a Parliamentary Ethics Committee.
15. A parliamentary Ombudsman should be appointed.
16. Training should be organized for improving the skills and efficiency of the MPs.

Making the Parliamentary Committees Effective

17. All stipulated committees have been formed during the first session of the 9th Parliament, which is undoubtedly a commendable development. This should be institutionalized by amending Rules of Procedure to form the Committees during the first session as was provided for in the 1972 Constitution which was subsequently amended.
18. Representation of the opposition MPs in the Committees should be significantly increased not necessarily bounded by the ratio of their seats in the Parliament.
19. Chairperson of such important committees as the Public Accounts Committee should be appointed from the opposition.
20. In accordance with Rule 188(2) of the *Rules of Procedure*, it should be ensured that no member is appointed as a Committee member whose inclusion leads to conflict of interest.

Therefore, the practice of appointing concerned minister as a member of the Ministerial committee should be stopped.

21. The concerned ministries should submit their comments/response in writing within one month of submission of a report by a committee and they should inform within three months what actions have been taken in the light of recommendations made by the committee.
22. The media including public and private radio and television channels as well as newspapers should be informed about the proceedings of the parliamentary committees including recommendations made.
23. A separate committee should be formed after certain intervals of time for evaluating the performance of parliamentary committees.
24. A Standing Committees on religious minorities, ethnic communities, indigenous and disabled people should be constituted for giving due attention to their specific needs and interests.

Participation of Women MPs

25. The representation of women MPs in standing committees related to ministries should be increased.
26. A special caucus should be formed with women MPs for mainstreaming gender sensitive deliberation in the parliament parallel with efforts to promote laws and resolutions for women empowerment. This committee can play a special role in advocating for women-friendly budget.
27. Political parties should increase the ratio of women candidates for election to the parliament.
28. The constituencies of women MPs against reserved seats should be specified.
29. The number of reserved seats for women should be increased to one-third and arrangements should be made for direct elections to these seats.

If the first session of the 9th Parliament is an indicator for the future, there are reasons to be optimistic as it has shown significant positive indicators and achievements. There is, however, a long way to go, which is definitely achievable provided the Members of the Parliament, especially the Leader of the House and Leader of the Opposition demonstrate the genuine political will to fulfil the pledges made to the people at the time of election.
