

HOUSE MATTERS: ON RESTORING DEMOCRATIC MAJESTY OF PARLIAMENT

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Parliament - structure, functioning, conduct of business, powers & privileges and issues arising out of these

The government's stubborn refusal to allow an immediate discussion on [Delhi's communal conflagration](#), in February, as demanded by the Opposition, has brought Parliament to a gridlock. The violence, that claimed more than 50 lives, took place when the Budget session was on a 15-day recess. The altercation over a suitable timing for a discussion on the issue has heightened the hostility between the treasury benches and the Opposition. The government took the position that the discussion could be allowed only after the situation calms down further. Outnumbered and denied a hearing, Congress members resorted to disruptive tactics which led to the [suspension of seven of them](#) for the rest of the session. The punishment is perhaps too harsh — in the puzzling parallel drawn by the party leader, Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, like sending a pickpocket to the gallows. [Speaker Om Birla has stayed away for three days](#), upset over the behaviour of MPs and also over the hurried decision in his absence to suspend the seven. A discussion will take place this week, and an all-party committee announced on Friday might help resolve the logjam. But a country that is facing many challenges and which requires all hands on deck can ill-afford such disruptions and suspensions.

Elected to Parliament in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had genuflected at its gate as a mark of respect, and [termed it the temple of democracy](#). His government's approach towards the Opposition and parliamentary proceedings has not been in the best spirit of democracy, however. The BJP has a track record of disrupting Parliament when it was in the opposition, but in power, it has taken an unyielding approach towards demands from across the aisle. Its unassailable Lok Sabha majority has been turned into a defence of majoritarian instincts. The Congress has been denied the post of [Leader of the Opposition](#) on a technical ground. The Rajya Sabha, where it has no majority of its own, has been often bypassed by arbitrarily labelling legislation as finance bills, which constitutionally do not require its approval. Debates on far-reaching legislation such as [amendments to the constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir](#) have been hurried. While the PM and Home Minister Amit Shah took charge in persuading friendly Opposition parties on crucial RS votes, there is an evident and troubling disinclination to engage the Opposition on matters of national importance as a regular practice. The Parliamentary Affairs portfolio that used to be handled by a political heavyweight engaging all parties is now reduced in stature. The Speaker's traditional non-partisan role in ironing out conflicts with the Opposition is also being undermined by the combative troops on the treasury benches. The Deputy Speaker's post, which usually goes to the main Opposition party, is vacant. The government must make amends and restore the democratic majesty of Parliament.

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