

## South Asia

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### India held hostage by democracy

By Kunal Kumar Kundu

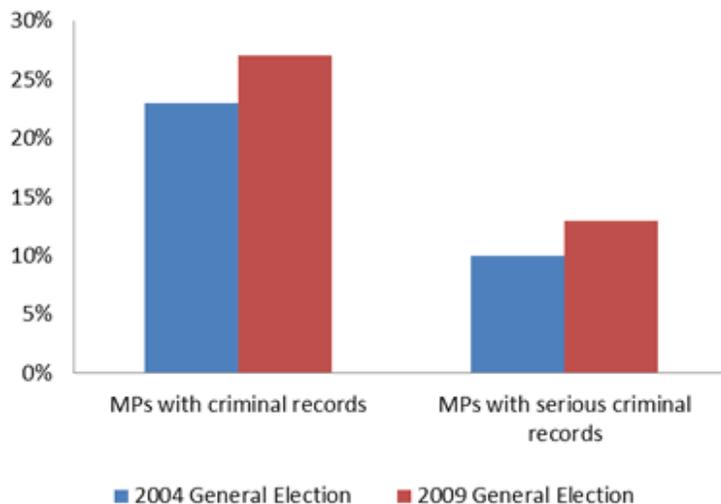
Freedom without responsibility leads to anarchy. The concept of freedom as enshrined in the principle of democracy makes it superior to any other forms of governance, provided that the institutional pillars that uphold the fundamentals of democracy are not undermined by unfettered freedom.

India, hailed as the world's largest and vibrant democracy, and the Indians value the fruits of that political system - be it freedom of speech, rule of law or various rights guaranteed to the citizens by the constitution. However, absolute freedom throws up governance challenges that can act as a threat to both the nation and its people. This is best exemplified by the way the institution of politics in India manifests itself.

Not that rogue politicians are the sole preserve of India. Integrity deficits in politics are a global phenomenon and the recent post-financial crisis period threw up several leadership challenges. For the dirigisme economy that is India, it becomes all the more challenging as the opportunity cost of not being in power is way too high.

Essentially the elected representatives of people became custodians and abusers of power. Along side the increasingly fractious nature of India's coalition governments, there is a rising criminalization of politics, as powerful gang lords are employed by political parties to help them win seats so they can have more say within a coalition government.

### Increasing criminalization of politics

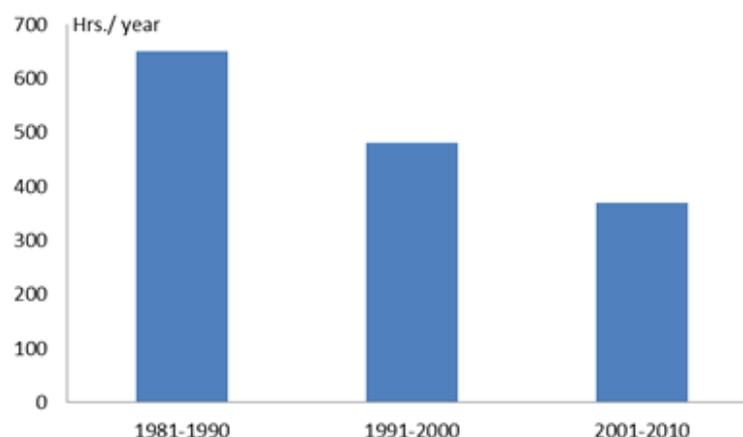


Source: National Election Watch (NEW)

More and more elected representatives, who disclose fewer assets at the beginning of their political career, see their assets multiply many times by the time their tenure in parliament or in a state assembly is at an end.

Parliament, an important pillar of democratic principle, has now been revealed in all its decadence in India. Over the years, India's parliament (called Lok Sabha) has witnessed increasingly lesser and lesser time being spent on debates, discussions and framing of legislation that are pertinent to economic growth and social welfare. Of late, key economic reforms, a restructuring of education, social welfare and other such reforms are getting stuck in an increasingly fractious and uncooperative parliament.

### Average time spent by parliamentarians in parliament



Source: Lok Sabha Secretariat

Disruptions and forced adjournments of parliamentary sessions are increasing as opposition parties vent anger on some issue or other as they try to show the government in poor light. Even the ruling government also has to share the blame for dysfunctional parliament.

Not only has the current government stumbled from one corruption case to another, it also lacks the stomach for debate, as it is fully aware of its shortcomings. As a result, it tends to rush through various business (including legislation) in the least possible time. This has two consequences. First, important debates are eschewed before a policy framework is finalized, and second, these instigate disruptions.

### Time lost during the current Lok Sabha

Sessions of 15th Lok Sabha	Time lost due to disruptions/ forced adjournments
First	00 hrs 00 mins
Second	23 hrs 45 mins
Third	31 hrs 49 mins
Fourth	69 hrs 51 mins
Fifth	45 hrs 00 mins
Sixth	124 hrs 40 mins
Seventh	25 hrs 52 mins
Eighth	51 hrs 06 mins
Ninth	76 hrs 50 mins
Tenth	48 hrs 42 mins
Eleventh	77 hrs 51 mins
Twelfth	59 hrs 07 mins
Thirteenth	N/A

Source: Lok Sabha Secretariat

India's parliament convenes for three sessions in a year - the budget, monsoon and winter sessions. The sixth session of the ongoing 15th Lok Sabha, which corresponds with the winter session of the year 2010, was then the worst session recorded in history, when virtually no business could be conducted as the opposition parties held parliament and the country to ransom as a scandal over the allocation of 2G wireless spectrum broke out.

Not to be outdone, the 11th session (the monsoon session of 2012) saw 80% of time wasted after parliament was adjourned sine die after the Comptroller and Auditor General came out with its report on the allocation of coal blocks for exploitation.

The main opposition party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, ensured that no parliamentary business could be conducted after the tabling of the report, as it insisted on the resignation of the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, no less, while eschewing any form of debate.

The recently concluded budget session (the 13th session of the current Lok Sabha) didn't seem to fare any better (though data is not yet available). The government first allegedly tried, using the office of its Law Minister, to influence the Central Bureau of Investigation while the bureau was preparing its report after investigating the coal block allocation scandal; then news emerged linking the nephew of the railways minister to a large bribe paid for fixing an appointment to an important position. The opposition parties then decided not to allow parliament to function until both the law minister and the railway minister resigned.

The United Progressive Alliance government refused to pay heed to this demand. Finally, the session was adjourned sine die once again, two days before the scheduled close. Subsequently, the government relented and asked the ministers to resign, although it moved only after the Supreme Court came out with scathing comments. By that time the damage had been done.

In a democracy, policymaking is admittedly a slower process than in an authoritarian regime, as the voices of numerous stakeholders need to be heard, especially if the policymaking involves factors of production such as land, labor and natural resources. However, national interest takes a back seat when policymakers are driven by self-gratification.

The consequences then are ominous. Business confidence takes a beating as the policy environment gets vitiated. This forces investors to take their feet off the pedal and seek a stable and predictable business climate elsewhere. The current status of India the nation exemplifies the perils of democracy.

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