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Day - 46

POLITY

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Question:

Examine the position of PM and Council of Ministers in Parliamentary system of government. Discuss how centralization of power in the office of PMO impacts the working of this system.

Answer:

The Parliamentary system of government is based on interdependence and routine responsibility of the executive vis a vis the legislature. The Constitution through articles 74 and 78 makes Council of Ministers headed by the Prime Minister the real executive of the system. The relationship between the PM and Council of Ministers is seen as being 'primus inter pares.'

The President is obliged to act according to the advice of the Council of Ministers which is responsible in the real sense of the term, not to the President but to the Lok Sabha. The PM is the leader of the majority party in Lok Sabha, thus playing a crucial role in shaping the business and policies in the legislature.

The real executive and legislature are not visualized as competing centres of power but as inseparable partners or co-partner in the business of Government. Parliament is a large body and does not and cannot govern. The Council of Ministers is the 'grand executive committee' of Parliament charged with the responsibility of governance on behalf of the parent body.

At the same time, from among the Council of Ministers, it is the Cabinet which plays a crucial role in decision making. The head of every Government Department is a Minister and Parliament exercises control over the Department through the Minister. The Parliamentary control over the Ministry rests in the fact that any action of the Ministry can be called in question by any Member through a number of devices and committees.

The Prime Minister's Office or PMO is an extra-constitutional body consisting of the immediate staff of the Prime Minister of India, as well as multiple levels of support staff reporting to the Prime Minister. There has been an increase in the powers and importance of PMO which has impacted Parliament in numerous ways:

1. Firstly, by concentrating powers in the PMO it has eroded the principle of 'first among equals' between the PM and his Council centralizing more powers in the hands of individual Prime Minister.
2. By concentrating all powers in the Prime Minister, the PMO violates the principle of collective responsibility which is the basis of a parliamentary democracy. As it is a department, it has limited accountability towards the legislature.
3. As most of the positions of PMO are from the bureaucracy and therefore, unelected, the increasing power of PMO mirrors the Presidential system in the USA thereby raising questions regarding the health of parliamentary system in the country.

While PMO is an important agency to provide administrative support and assistance to the Prime Minister, it is important it does not eclipse the role played by elected representatives as provided by a democratic, parliamentary system.