

Cabinet Committees

FEATURES OF CABINET COMMITTEES

The following are the features of Cabinet Committees:

1. They are extra-constitutional in emergence. In other words, they are not mentioned in the Constitution. However, the Rules of Business provide for their establishment.
2. They are of two types—standing and *ad hoc*. The former are of a permanent nature while the latter are of a temporary nature. The *ad hoc* committees are constituted from time to time to deal with special problems. They are disbanded after their task is completed.¹
3. They are set up by the Prime Minister according to the exigencies of the time and requirements of the situation. Hence, their number, nomenclature, and composition varies from time to time.
4. Their membership varies from three to eight. They usually include only Cabinet Ministers. However, the non-cabinet Ministers are not debarred from their membership.
5. They not only include the Ministers in charge of subjects covered by them but also include other senior Ministers.
6. They are mostly headed by the Prime Minister. Some times other Cabinet Ministers, particularly the Home Minister or the Finance Minister, also acts as their Chairman. But, in case the Prime Minister is a member of a committee, he invariably presides over it.

7. They not only sort out issues and formulate proposals for the consideration of the Cabinet, but also take decisions. However, the Cabinet can review their decisions.
8. They are an organisational device to reduce the enormous workload of the Cabinet. They also facilitate in-depth examination of policy issues and effective coordination. They are based on the principles of division of labour and effective delegation.

LIST OF CABINET COMMITTEES

In 1994, there were the following 13 Cabinet Committees:

1. Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs
2. Cabinet Committee on Natural Calamities
3. Cabinet Committee on Parliamentary Affairs
4. Appointments Committee of the Cabinet
5. Cabinet Committee on Accommodation
6. Cabinet Committee on Foreign Investment
7. Cabinet Committee on Drug Abuse Control
8. Cabinet Committee on Prices
9. Cabinet Committee on Minority Welfare
10. Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs
11. Cabinet Committee on Trade and Investment
12. Cabinet Committee on Expenditure
13. Cabinet Committee on Infrastructure

In 2013, the following 10 Cabinet Committees were in existence:

1. Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs
2. Cabinet Committee on Prices
3. Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs
4. Appointments Committee of the Cabinet
5. Cabinet Committee on Security
6. Cabinet Committee on World Trade Organisation (WTO) Matters
7. Cabinet Committee on Investment
8. Cabinet Committee on Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) related issues
9. Cabinet Committee on Parliamentary Affairs

10. Cabinet Committee on Accommodation

At present (2016), the following 6 Cabinet Committees are functional:

1. Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs
2. Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs
3. Appointments Committee of the Cabinet
4. Cabinet Committee on Security
5. Cabinet Committee on Parliamentary Affairs
6. Cabinet Committee on Accommodation

The Prime Minister Narendra Modi on June 10, 2014, announced discontinuation of four Standing Committees of the Cabinet. A statement by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) said the functions of Cabinet Committee on Management of Natural Calamities which stands discontinued will be handled by the Committee under the Cabinet Secretary whenever natural calamities occur. The functions of Cabinet Committee on Prices will be handled by the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs; of the Cabinet Committee on World Trade Organisation Matters by the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs and, whenever necessary, by the full Cabinet. On the Cabinet Committee on Unique Identification Authority of India related issues it said that major decisions in this area have already been taken and the remaining issues will be brought to the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs.^{1a}

FUNCTIONS OF CABINET COMMITTEES

The following four are the more important cabinet committees:

1. The Political Affairs Committee deals with all policy matters pertaining to domestic and foreign affairs.
2. The Economic Affairs Committee directs and coordinates the governmental activities in the economic sphere.
3. Appointments Committee decides all higher level appointments in the Central Secretariat, Public Enterprises, Banks and Financial Institutions.
4. Parliamentary Affairs Committee looks after the progress of government business in the Parliament.

The first three committees are chaired by the Prime Minister and the last one by the Home Minister. Of all the Cabinet Committees, the most powerful

is the Political Affairs Committee, often described as a “Super-Cabinet”.

GROUPS OF MINISTERS

In addition to cabinet committees, several Groups of Ministers (GoMs) have been constituted to look into different issues / subjects. Some of these GoMs have been empowered to take decisions on behalf of the Cabinet whereas the others make recommendations to the Cabinet.²

In the past two decades, the institution of GoMs has become a viable and effective instrument of coordination among the ministries. These are *ad hoc* bodies formed to give recommendations to the cabinet on certain emergent issues and critical problem areas. Ministers heading the concerned ministries are inducted into the relevant GoMs and when the advice is crystallised they are disbanded.³

In 2013, the following 21 Groups of Ministers (GoMs) were in existence:

1. Group of Ministers (GoM) for evolving an integrated strategy for water management
2. Group of Ministers (GoM) to consider the reports of the Administrative Reforms Commission
3. Group of Ministers (GoM) for the civil aviation sector
4. Group of Ministers (GoM) on National Pharmaceuticals Policy, 2006
5. Group of Ministers (GoM) on power sector issues
6. Group of Ministers (GoM) to examine various issues pertaining to the functioning of the Prasar Bharati
7. Group of Ministers (GoM) regarding Bhopal Gas Leak Disaster
8. Group of Ministers (GoM) to consider measures that can be taken by the Government to tackle corruption
9. Group of Ministers (GoM) to consider environmental and developmental issues relating to coal mining and other developmental projects
10. Group of Ministers (GoM) on media
11. Group of Ministers (GoM) to consider, and make recommendations with regard to reports of the high level committee on Commonwealth Games, 2010
12. Group of Ministers (GoM) to look into the constitution of an independent regulatory authority for the coal sector – approval for introducing the Coal

Regulatory Authority Bill, 2012 in the Parliament

13. Group of Ministers (GoM) to look into the issue of inclusion of erosion as an eligible calamity for relief under National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF)/State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF)
14. Group of Ministers (GoM) to consider the official amendments to the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Bill, 2011
15. Group of Ministers (GoM) to formulate policy for existing urea units beyond Stage-III of New Pricing Scheme (NPS)
16. Group of Ministers (GoM) on setting up of the National Skill Development Authority
17. Group of Ministers (GoM) regarding issue of Resident Identity Cards to all usual residents of the country of age 18 years and above under the scheme of National Population Register (NPR)
18. Group of Ministers (GoM) to consider the recommendations of the panel of experts on reforms in central public sector enterprises
19. Group of Ministers (GoM) to consider prescribing uniform terms and conditions of service of chairpersons and members of quasi-judicial tribunals / commissions / regulatory bodies, etc
20. Group of Ministers (GoM) to consider and suggest an appropriate cadre structure for the Indian Revenue Service (Income Tax) and other support systems
21. Group of Ministers (GoM) to look into the matter of reviving and revitalising Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) and Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Limited (MTNL)

In 2013, there were the following six Empowered Groups of Ministers (EGoMs):

1. Empowered Group of Ministers (EGoM) to decide the price band and final price of sale of shares held by Government of India in all central public sector enterprises
2. Empowered Group of Ministers (EGoM) on gas pricing and commercial utilisation of gas
3. Empowered Group of Ministers (EGoM) on ultra mega power projects
4. Empowered Group of Ministers (EGoM) on Mass Rapid Transit System (MRTS)
5. Empowered Group of Ministers (EGoM) on vacation of spectrum and

auction of 3G spectrum, and to look into the grant of license and allocation of spectrum in 2G band in 22 service areas

6. Empowered Group of Ministers (EGoM) on drought

The Second Administrative Reforms Commission (2005-2009) made the following observations and recommendations with respect to the working of the GoMs⁴:

1. The Commission observed that the constitution of a large number of GoMs has resulted in many GoMs not being able to meet regularly to complete their work thus leading to significant delays on many major issues.
2. The Commission felt that more selective use of the institution of GoMs would perhaps lead to more effective coordination particularly if they are empowered to arrive at a decision on behalf of the Cabinet with time limits that are prescribed for completing the work entrusted to them.
3. The Commission recommended that there is need to ensure that the existing coordination mechanism of GoMs function effectively and helps in early resolution of issues. Selective, but effective use of GoMs with clear mandate and prescribed time limits would be helpful.

ABOLITION OF GoMs AND EGoMs⁵

Signalling a break from the past, the Narendra Modi government on May 31, 2014, announced the “abolition” of all Groups of Ministers (GoMs) and Empowered Groups of Ministers (EGoMs) “for greater accountability and empowerment.”

Nine EGoMs and 21 GoMs were set up by the previous UPA government to take decisions on various matters such as corruption, inter-State water disputes, administrative reforms and gas and telecom pricing, before bringing them for the Cabinet’s consideration.

During the UPA-II, 27 GoMs and 24 EGoMs were formed with former Defence Minister A.K. Antony heading most of the EGoMs.

A press statement issued by the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) termed the initiative a “major move” to empower Ministries and departments. While allocating portfolios to his Council of Ministers, the Prime Minister said “all important policy matters” would be their domain.

The issues pending before the EGoMs and GoMs will now be processed by the Ministries and departments. “This would expedite the process of decision-making and usher in greater accountability in the system,” the statement said. “Wherever the Ministries face any difficulties, the Cabinet Secretariat and the Prime Minister’s Office will facilitate the decision-making process.”

The announcement came two days after Mr. Modi unveiled his 10-point agenda with a directive to the ministers to prepare a list of issues that they will take up in the first 100 days in office, with focus on efficiency, delivery systems and implementation.

The former minister and Congress spokesperson Manish Tewari said that the GoMs and the EGoMs were meant to operate as a single-window clearance on issues related to various ministries.

INFORMAL GoMs FORMED⁶

In April 2015, it was reported that the proposals sent to the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) have led to the creation of at least 16 informal groups of ministers. Once the ‘informal group’ gives its consent, the proposal is cleared by the cabinet without much discussion.

From selection of a member for the National Commission for Women to guidelines for Internet governance, an informal group of ministers is the new cabinet.

This is a departure from the governance style witnessed in the early days of the Modi government which began by scrapping nine Empowered Group of Ministers (EGoM) and 21 Group of Ministers (GoM).

The multiple sources in the government has said that the Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley is the de facto chairman of several of these ‘informal groups’.

Before that, a draft cabinet note circulated in the ministry concerned had to wait for the PMO nod. In case the PMO wanted changes, these were incorporated and sent back for approval before being introduced in the cabinet.

“The Prime Minister is interested in specifics and every detail of any policy decision. But he also realizes that the PMO cannot get involved in

everything since governance has acquired pace. So the idea and spirit behind such informal groups are to ensure quality discussion on the subject before it appears in the cabinet,” sources said.

But some in the cabinet believe that the change in style came in the wake of former PM Manmohan Singh becoming an accused in the coal scam for having processed the files.

Informal groups were constituted for among other things: Amendment to Juvenile Justice Act; Guidelines for Internet governance; Amendment to Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act; and Bureau of Indian Standards (Amendment) Bill.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. For example, the Emergency Committee was set-up in 1962 after the Chinese invasion.
- 1a. [The Hindu](#), Modi dissolves 4 Cabinet Panels, June 11, 2014.
2. Second Administrative Reforms Commission, Government of India, Report on Organizational Structure of Government of India, 2009, P.136. This commission was headed by Veerappa Moily, a senior Congress leader and former Karnataka Chief Minister.
3. Ramesh K. Arora and Rajni Goyal, [Indian Public Administration](#), New Age International Publishers, Third Edition, 2013, pp. 238-239.
4. Second Administrative Reforms Commission, Government of India, Report on Organisational Structure of Government of India, 2009, pp. 136-137 and 140.
5. [The Hindu](#), Modi scraps GoMs, EGoMs, June 1, 2014.
6. [The Indian Express](#), “GoMs back, in ‘informal’ avatar”, April 19, 2015.