

Special session of Parliament likely to pass GST constitutional amendment bill

An emboldened National Democratic Alliance (NDA) is considering either calling a special session or extending the ongoing monsoon session of Parliament as part of a plan to pass the constitutional amendment bill that will allow the introduction of a goods and services tax (GST).

Confirming the plan, senior cabinet ministers said the cabinet committee on parliamentary affairs (CCPA) is expected to meet on Thursday to take a final view on it.

“There is a view in the government that members of Parliament (MPs) can be asked to continue with this session till 25 August. We think that MPs can come back after a break of two days. It is absolutely the prerogative of the government to extend the ongoing session. There is also the option of calling for a short special session only for the GST bill. The final view on the proposal will be taken on Thursday,” said a cabinet minister on condition of anonymity.

The monsoon session is scheduled to end on Thursday.

Senior ministers and ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders are worried that the continuous opposition by the Congress party will derail the economic reforms agenda of the government. In the course of the monsoon session, senior ministers have tried to put forward the argument that the Congress party was deliberately disrupting both houses of Parliament in order to try and slow economic growth.

The government resolve was apparent in comments made by finance minister Arun Jaitley in an interview with CNBC-TV18 on 7 August. The government is seeking to roll out GST on 1 April 2016.

“I am not going to ever give up hope because it is my job to pursue it and pursue it seriously. There are many other options available in politics; I am not in a position to declare all of them to the media right now. I would say that the deadline for 1 April 2016 is an ideal deadline. It is a deadline which not only the central government, (but) all the state governments want,” Jaitley said.

However, some of the senior members of the alliance are worried that it will be difficult to convince the Congress party to stop disrupting proceedings in Parliament. The alliance partners of the BJP are worried that if the Congress doesn't end its protest, the passage of the GST bill will be difficult in the Rajya Sabha where the government is in a minority.

“The kind of dialogue which happened in Lok Sabha today between the government and Congress, what is the guarantee that Congress will allow the house to function? What is the point of extending the session if Congress continues with its opposition and the bill is stuck again?” said a senior NDA leader.

Interestingly, the government has managed to break the unity of the opposition, at least on the GST bill. The NDA, which has just 63 members in the Rajya Sabha, needs the support of at least 163 to pass the constitution amendment bill.

The BJP-led NDA has the support of 124 MPs in the Rajya Sabha and is reaching out to seven independent and 10 nominated members to get the bill passed. The Congress has 68 MPs. Together with the Left's 10 members, it has enough MPs to make it difficult for the bill to be voted through.

The government has not yet formally initiated a discussion on an extension or a short special session with opposition parties—it wants to discuss the issue in the cabinet before taking a final call.

“Normally, the government talks to all the parties before any extension or special session is called by the government. But so far we have not heard from the government. Let us see what happens on the last day of Parliament, whether the Congress party allows the house to function or not,” said a senior leader of the Biju Janata Dal, which has opposed the disruptions by the opposition.

(HT Mint)