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Who Governs the Statisticians: The ISI Bill, 2026

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POLITY**ECONOMY****GS2**

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Who Governs the Statisticians: The ISI Bill, 2026

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✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

The Indian Statistical Institute Bill, 2026 was introduced in the Lok Sabha on August 3, 2026 and drew immediate criticism from the institute's faculty and staff and from Opposition members, who argue that it dilutes the autonomy of the 95-year-old institution. The Opposition demanded that the Bill be referred to the relevant Departmentally Related Parliamentary Standing Committee.

THE INSTITUTION

ATTRIBUTE	DETAIL
Founded	1931 , by Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis
Headquarters	Kolkata (Baranagar) ; centres at Delhi, Bengaluru, Chennai, Tezpur
Present statutory basis	Indian Statistical Institute Act, 1959 , which declared it an Institution of National Importance
Administrative ministry	Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation
Distinctive power	Among the few institutions empowered to award degrees under its own Act

Mahalanobis's significance runs well beyond the institute. He devised the **Mahalanobis distance**, a statistical measure still in wide use; pioneered **large-scale sample surveys** in India, work that gave rise to the National Sample Survey; and authored the two-sector, capital-goods-led growth model that underpinned the **Second Five Year Plan (1956-61)**. **National Statistics Day is observed on 29 June**, his birth anniversary.

WHAT IS CONTESTED

The core objection concerns **governance structure**, and the numbers make it concrete. The Bill replaces a **33-member Council that includes 10 elected members** with a **12-member Board of Governors that is wholly nominated**: the chairperson is nominated, and in turn selects three officials of joint-secretary rank, four external experts and four internal representatives including the Director. Elected representation disappears entirely, which is the specific change critics point to, in an institution that has run on academic self-governance for nine and a half decades.

The government's case is the standard one for statutory reconstitution: a modern statutory footing brings **financial stability**, streamlines administration, and aligns the institute with other Institutions of National Importance such as the IITs and IIMs, whose governance is similarly structured.

The comparison drawn by the objecting faculty, rather than one offered by the government, is the **Indian Institutes of Management (Amendment) Act, 2023**, which made the **President of India the Visitor** of the IIMs, with powers relating to the appointment and removal of directors and to the audit and inspection of the institutes. That amendment followed the IIM Act, 2017, which had itself been presented as an autonomy-granting measure. The sequence is instructive: statutory autonomy conferred in 2017 was substantially qualified in 2023, which is exactly the **trajectory** ISI's faculty say they are being asked to begin.

WHY THE AUTONOMY QUESTION IS SHARPER HERE

For most institutions, the autonomy debate is about academic freedom and administrative efficiency. For ISI it carries an additional dimension, and this is the point a strong answer makes.

ISI is not only a teaching and research body. It is the intellectual infrastructure of India's official statistical system. Its faculty and alumni populate the National Statistical Office, the National Sample Survey apparatus, and the technical committees that design India's surveys and set methodology. Its historical role was to build the state's capacity to measure itself.

An institution whose function is to measure the performance of the government, and to train and supply the people who do so, has a credibility that depends specifically on **independence from the executive it measures**. The concern is therefore not generic. Governmental control over the governing board of the country's premier statistical institution creates, at minimum, an appearance problem for the credibility of Indian official statistics, at a time when that credibility has already been the subject of sustained public debate over survey delays, base-year revisions and the withholding of survey results.

The counter-position deserves fair statement. Institutional autonomy is not the same as institutional accountability, and public funding carries a legitimate claim to oversight. Self-perpetuating academic bodies can become insular, resistant to reform, and unaccountable for outcomes. The question is not whether oversight is legitimate but whether **oversight of finances and outcomes** requires **control of governance appointments**, which is a different and larger thing.

THE PROCEDURAL POINT

The Opposition's demand for referral to a Departmentally Related Parliamentary Standing Committee is worth noting on its own terms.

ELEMENT	DETAIL
System introduced	1993 , presently 24 committees
Composition	31 members: 21 from the Lok Sabha, 10 from the Rajya Sabha
Function	Examine Bills referred to them, Demands for Grants, annual reports and long-term policy documents
Nature of recommendations	Advisory , not binding on the House
Referral	Made by the Speaker or the Chairman; not automatic

Referral is the principal mechanism by which stakeholder consultation enters the legislative process for a Bill that affects a specific institution. The proportion of Bills referred to committees has declined across recent Lok Sabhas, which is why the demand recurs and why it belongs in any answer on the erosion of legislative scrutiny.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 2: Parliament and State legislatures, structure, functioning and conduct of business; statutory, regulatory and quasi-judicial bodies; government policies and interventions; issues relating to development and management of the education sector.

Prelims pointers:

- **Indian Statistical Institute:** founded **1931** by **P.C. Mahalanobis**; headquarters **Kolkata**; declared an **Institution of National Importance** by the **Indian Statistical Institute Act, 1959**; administratively under the **Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation**.
- Mahalanobis authored the model underlying the **Second Five Year Plan (1956-61)** and pioneered large-scale sample surveys in India. **National Statistics Day: 29 June**, his birth anniversary. The **Mahalanobis distance** is named after him.
- The contested provision replaces a **33-member Council with 10 elected members** by a **12-member wholly nominated Board of Governors**.
- Precedent: the **IIM (Amendment) Act, 2023** made the **President the Visitor** of the IIMs.

- **Departmentally Related Standing Committees:** introduced **1993**, currently **24**, each with **31 members** (21 Lok Sabha, 10 Rajya Sabha); recommendations are **advisory**.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Indian Statistical Institute Bill, 2026, introduced in the Lok Sabha on 3 August 2026. The contested provision replaces a 33-member Council containing 10 elected members with a 12-member wholly nominated Board of Governors, in which the nominated chairperson selects three joint-secretary-level officials, four external experts and four internal representatives including the Director. Opposition sought referral to a Departmentally Related Standing Committee.

founded 1931 by P.C. Mahalanobis; headquarters Kolkata (Baranagar), with centres at Delhi, Bengaluru, Chennai and Tezpur; Institution of National Importance under the ISI Act, 1959; under the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.

Mahalanobis distance; pioneer of large-scale sample surveys in India; author of the two-sector capital-goods model behind the Second Five Year Plan (1956-61). National Statistics Day is 29 June, his birth anniversary.

the IIM Act, 2017 was presented as autonomy-granting; the IIM (Amendment) Act, 2023 made the President the Visitor with powers over director appointment and removal and over audit and inspection.

introduced 1993; 24 committees; 31 members each (21 LS, 10 RS); recommendations advisory; referral is at the discretion of the Speaker or Chairman.

Sources: ThePrint, Deccan Herald, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation

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