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Indian Statistical Institute Bill 2026: Reform, Governance Changes and Autonomy Debate

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Indian Statistical Institute Bill 2026 Latest News

- The Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) Bill, 2026 was introduced in the Lok Sabha recently. It seeks to replace the 67-year-old **Indian Statistical Institute Act, 1959**, and overhaul the institute's governance structure.
- The Bill has triggered protests from ISI faculty, students, and staff, who say it undermines institutional autonomy.

About the Indian Statistical Institute

- Founded by eminent **statistician P.C. Mahalanobis** in 1931 as a statistical laboratory at Presidency College, Kolkata.
- Registered as a society, first under the Societies Registration Act, 1860, later under the West Bengal Societies Registration Act, 1961.
- Declared an **Institution of National Importance** through the Indian Statistical Institute Act, 1959, giving it degree-granting power and access to Central grants.
- **Headquartered** in Kolkata, with centres in Delhi, Bangalore, Chennai, and Tezpur.

- Currently governed by a **33-member Council**, including an elected chairman, six Centre representatives (from MoSPI, Finance Ministry, RBI), and outside scientists.
- Above the Council sits a General Body of over 1,000 members, whose three-fourths approval is needed for any regulatory change.

Why the Government Wants Reform

- The government argues the **existing society-based model is too unwieldy** for meaningful reform:
  - No significant changes have been made to ISI's governing instruments in the last 50 years.
  - Four Review Committees examined ISI's functioning over the years and recommended reducing the Council's size — yet it grew from a smaller body to 33 members instead of shrinking.
  - The fourth Review Committee flagged **over-reliance on elections** for decision-making posts rather than merit-based appointments.
  - The government wants to align ISI's structure with other Institutions of National Importance like the **IITs and IIMs**, which function through compact, empowered Boards.

Key Changes Proposed in the Bill

- ISI will become a **statutory body corporate**, established directly by an Act of Parliament, **replacing** its current society status.
- All assets, liabilities, employees, and academic programmes of the existing society will transfer to the new statutory institute, with service conditions preserved.
- The **President** of India will serve as the Visitor of the institute.
- A new **11-member Board of Governors** will be the principal policy-making body, accountable to the Union government. It includes:
  - A Chairperson nominated by the Visitor on the Centre's recommendation
  - Two government officials (Joint Secretary-level or above)
  - Four eminent persons in statistical sciences, nominated by the Chairperson
  - Four institute representatives, including two Academic Council members
  - The Registrar of ISI as Board Secretary
- An **Academic Council**, headed by the Director and comprising senior faculty, will handle academic matters like courses, eligibility norms, and examinations.
- The **Director** will be appointed by the Board chairperson from a panel recommended by a search-cum-selection committee constituted by the Union government.
- The **Visitor is empowered** to remove the Director and order inquiries or reviews of the institute's functioning.

Concerns Raised by Critics

- **Centralisation of control**: The Centre will have direct or indirect influence over 8 of the 11 Board members, raising fears of loss of institutional autonomy.
- **Director's independence**: Provisions for periodical reviews and an MoSPI nominee on the search-cum-selection committee are seen as reducing the Director to a government appointee.

- **Inadequate consultation**: Faculty, students, and researchers argue the Bill was drafted without wider stakeholder consultation, despite a petition demanding the same last year.
    - The government counters that a brainstorming session was held in Bengaluru in July 2025 with ISI's Society President, NITI Aayog's Vice-Chairman, the Principal Scientific Advisor, and other stakeholders, and that pre-legislative consultation timelines were extended on request.
- **Headquarters ambiguity**: Unlike the 1959 Act, which explicitly names Calcutta (Kolkata) as ISI's registered office, the new Bill omits any mention of headquarters — fuelling apprehensions of a possible relocation, though the government has categorically denied any such plan.

Conclusion

- The ISI Bill reflects a broader trend of aligning legacy research institutions with IIT/IIM-style governance.
- While the government frames it as overdue reform for a century-old body, critics see it as eroding academic autonomy through centralised control — a tension likely to recur across India's premier institutions.

Source: TH | IE
