

India's political parties have agreed that a "strong and effective" anti-corruption law should be ready before the next session of parliament, which begins in August.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made the announcement on Sunday after an all-party meeting to discuss the law.

Civil society and the government have been deadlocked over how powerful a new anti-graft ombudsman should be.

India has recently been hit by a string of high-profile corruption scandals.

Civil society members, led by activist Anna Hazare, have been pushing the government for a strong ombudsman that will have the power to investigate corruption charges against the prime minister, senior judges and MPs, among others.

The government has reportedly refused to include the prime minister and senior judiciary under the purview of the ombudsman.

But the government has said it is committed to draft a "strong and sound" Jan Lokpal Bill (Citizen's Ombudsman Bill) by the end of June.

Media reports said that representatives of opposition parties criticised the government at Sunday's meeting for "bypassing established procedures" of law-making and engaging civil society representatives in preparing the anti-corruption law.

"I must also add that while a good law and a strong institution are necessary to tackle the problem of corruption, these alone would never suffice. Along with these, we need to focus on simplifying procedures, reducing discretion, eliminating arbitrariness and increasing

transparency in the way the government functions," Manmohan Singh told the meeting.

Mr Singh also said that the ombudsman would have to function within the ambit of the constitution.

"It has to add [to], and not detract from, the legitimate role and authority of other institutions in our democratic structure," he said.

Mr Hazare has threatened to resume his fast from 16 August if an effective anti-graft law was not introduced in parliament.

Some of the recent corruption scandals to have rocked India include a multi-billion dollar alleged telecoms scam, alleged financial malpractices in connection with the Commonwealth Games, which India hosted, and allegations that houses for war widows were diverted to civil servants.

Critics of the government say that recent scandals point to a pervasive culture of corruption in Mr Singh's administration - adding to the difficulties of a politician once seen as India's most honest.

A recent survey said corruption in India cost billions of dollars and threatened to derail growth.

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