



National Assembly of Pakistan



The Question Hour

Introduction

In the South Asia Sub-Continent, the first Legislative Council was set-up under the Charter Act of 1853, primarily for making laws and regulations. When the Legislative Council displayed some degree of independence by asking questions and discussing the propriety of the measures of the Executive Government, its functions were curtailed under the Indian Councils Act of 1861 and limited to purely legislative matters.

This led to a demand for reform of the Legislative Council so as to allow its members to elicit information by means of questions. The demand was conceded under the Indian Councils Act of 1892. The rules, framed under this Act, required a six days' notice, in writing, for asking the questions. However, the President of the Council, could curtail or extend the time for answering a question.

The Governor-General used to preside over the deliberations of the Legislative Council till 1921, when the Council gave place to Legislative Assembly and its deliberations began to be conducted by an officer known as President. In 1947, the designation of the Assembly's presiding officer was changed to Speaker.

No discussion was, however, permitted in respect of an answer given to a question. The rules framed under the Indian Councils Act, 1909 extended the minimum period of notice from six to ten days and, for the first time, provided for asking of supplementary questions for further elucidation of the matter. The rule also laid down that questions of excessive length or those containing arguments, inferences, ironical expressions or defamatory statements, or referring to the conduct or character of persons, except in their official or public capacity, or questions asking for expression of an opinion or the solution of a hypothetical proposition were not admissible.

The practice of starred and unstarred questions was introduced in 1921. Till 1937, the rules did not lay down any limit with regard to the number of questions, which a member may ask on one day. However, amendments made in the rules that year stipulated that not more than five questions admitted in the name of the same member would be called for answer on any day.

National Assembly Rules

Rules 69 to 86 deal with the asking of questions by members and furnishing of replies to those questions by the Cabinet. The Federal Cabinet, according to Article 91 (4) is collectively responsible to the National Assembly. A member can ask questions for which, under rule 70, a fifteen days prior notice has to be given in writing, under member's own signature with full name, addressed to the Secretary. Notice has to be delivered to the Notice Office kept open Name, addressed to the Secretary. Notice has to be delivered to the Notice Office kept open for this purpose on every working day or it can be sent by post. A separate notice for each question is another requirement under rule 71.

Question Hour

After recitation from the Holy Quran and taking oath by members, if any, the first hour of every sitting is available for asking and answering of questions, as per rule 69. There is no question hour on Tuesday.

Kinds of Questions

Questions are of two kinds starred questions and unstarred questions. A question to which a written reply is read out by the Minister is a starred question. An unstarred question is the one to which a written reply is supplied but not read out. Each member may ask two starred and two unstarred questions for any day's sitting. A member who desires to ask a starred question for any day has to distinguish it with an asterisk.

Supplementary Questions

A question addressed to a Minister must relate to the public affairs with which he is officially connected or public concern within the special cognizance of the Minister and should not be of undue length. The main purpose of questions is to seek information and also to draw attention of the government to public grievances and to get them redressed. After reply by the Minister, supplementary questions are allowed to seek clarifications and throw light on different aspects of the question and its reply. Ordinarily, not more than two supplementary questions can be asked in respect of any question under rule 84.

Admissibility of questions

In order that a question may be admissible, it should not relate to a matter which is not primarily the concern of the Government of Pakistan, or seek information regarding cabinet discussions or any advice given to the President. Further, it must not contain any criticism on the decisions of the Assembly or the Senate or seek information on matters under consideration before a Committee of the Assembly or already discussed by means of an adjournment motion or otherwise during the same session. It should not criticize or refer discourteously to a foreign country or make references to newspapers by name or exceed 150 words and satisfy a number of other conditions, including:

- It should not contain any reflection on the conduct of the President or a Judge of the Supreme/High Court or (any reflection) on a decision of a court of law or statutory tribunal or ask about matters pending before any statutory tribunal/authority.
- It should not bring in any name or statement not strictly necessary to make the question intelligible. If it contains a statement, the member shall make himself responsible for the accuracy of the statement.
- It should not refer to the character or conduct of any person, except in his official or public capacity. Further, it should not make or imply a charge of a personal character.
- It should not contain arguments, inferences, ironical expressions, imputations, epithets or defamatory statements.
- It should not be trivial, vexatious, vague or meaningless or seek information contained in documents accessible to public or in ordinary works of reference.

Short Notice Questions

With the consent of the Speaker and the Minister concerned, a member may ask a question relating to a matter of public importance with shorter notice than the normal notice of fifteen clear days. The official designation of the Minister to whom a Short Notice Question is addressed, alongwith the reasons for asking the question with shorter notice, should be

stated therein. Where no reasons have been assigned in the notice of question, the question is returned to the member.

On receipt of such notice, an enquiry is made from the Minister concerned whether he is in a position to answer the question at shorter notice and, if so, at which date. In case the Minister is not in a position to answer the question at a short notice and the Speaker is of the opinion that the question is of sufficient public importance to be orally answered in the House, he may direct that the question be placed as the first question on the list of questions for the day on which it would be due for answer under rule 61. In such a case not more than one such question is accorded first priority on the list of questions for any day.

Questions relating to Assembly Secretariat

Questions relating to the Secretariat of the Assembly may be asked of Speaker by means of a private communication and not otherwise.

