



National Assembly of Pakistan



Parliamentary Committees

Introduction

The prime constitutional functions of any Legislature are to make laws and to oversee how the Executive functions according to those laws. The Parliamentary Committees provide the settings where both these functions are realized.

The ever-increasing complexity of a Legislature's role has resulted in a corresponding increase in reliance on Parliamentary Committees. Reliance on the Committees is primarily due to increase in demand on the time of elected representatives, which limits the amount of time left for legislative work. Legislative Bills and other important issues, which warrant in-depth discussions are, therefore, referred to the Committees. If it were not for the Committees of the Parliament, the legislative business transacted by parliaments would be enacted in summary proceedings thereby defeating the objectives of thorough scrutiny and flawless legislation.

The role of Parliamentary Committees in carefully monitoring the operations of the government is so paramount that American President Woodrow Wilson described the Parliamentary Committees as "little legislatures" and Speaker Reed as "the eyes, the ears, the hand and very often, the brain of the House."

In his study on Congressional Government, Woodrow Wilson believed that Committees not only ensure more in-depth analysis of the issues involved, they also provide a more congenial climate for interaction between different views and approaches.

The time constraints under which discussions are held in a House of the Parliament are relieved to some extent in a Committee. The possibilities of evolving consensus are also far greater. That is why there is almost universal recognition of their role in the fulfillment of the functions of the Parliament.

The Committee System in Pakistan today is stronger and more effective than before, in particular after 1992 when the National Assembly adopted its Rules of Procedure and conduct of Business, which were further amended in 2007. The underlying philosophy of the National Assembly's revamped Committee System has been to fulfill the three-fold role of making laws, supervision of administration and also to pursue its obligations to the electorate Rules 198 245 regulate the working of the Committees of the Assembly.

Types and Functions of Committees

The National Assembly rules broadly classify its Committees as "Standing Committees" and "Other Committees."

Standing Committees

In addition to two non-Departmental Standing Committees, viz Public Accounts Committee and Committee on Government Assurances; and three House (Domestic) Committees, namely Committee on Rules of Procedure and Privileges, House and Library Committee and Business Advisory Committee; rule 198 provides for a Standing Committee of the Assembly for each Ministry of the Government. All the Standing Committees are permanent responsibility Committees.

Committees Corresponding to Ministries

Presently, the Assembly has 42 Standing Committees so as to correspond one Committee for each Ministry of the Government. Consisting of 20 members each, these Standing Committees are empowered to view all matters pertaining to Ministries/Divisions of the Federal Government, if remitted either by the Speaker or the House or upon the will of the Committee. The Committees of Pakistan's Parliament can invite or summon any member or any person having a special interest in relation to any matter under consideration of a committee and may hear expert evidence and hold public meetings. (Assembly rule 227). The Committee Chairmen can also call for the production of such papers and records as may be required and considered necessary for the discharge of their duties.

Once a Committee report is presented in the House, the Committee Chairperson or any of its members may move that the report be taken into consideration whereupon the Speaker may permit a debate on the motion, not exceeding half-an-hour in duration. After the motion is carried out, the Speaker may allot, as per rule 237, one or more days for discussion on the report. In their process of enquiry/investigation, under rule 234, the Committees can appoint sub-committees, which are enquiry or fact-finding Committees and cease to exist upon completion of the assigned task.

Public Accounts Committee

The principle functions of this Committee are: to examine appropriations of Government expenditure, the annual finance accounts of the Government, the report of the Auditor-General of Pakistan and such other matters as the Minister for Finance may refer to it. It comprises of 23 members. (Rules 202 and 203)

Committee on Government Assurance

The main functions of the Committee on Government Assurances are: to take note of and scrutinize the assurances, promises, commitments and undertakings of the Government given by the Ministers, from time to time, on the floor of the House. It consists of 16 members. (Rules 210 and 211)

Committee on Rules of Procedure and Privileges: The principle functions of this Committee are: to consider matters of procedure and conduct of business in the Assembly and examine questions of privileges referred to it by the House or the Speaker. It has 22 members. (Rules 206 and 207)

House and Library Committee

It deals with matters relating to the issue of admission cards to galleries, residential accommodation for members and matters pertaining to Library, its Reading Room, Automation and Research Centre. It comprises of 13 members. The Deputy Speaker is the Chairman of this Committee. (Rules 208 and 209)

Business Advisory Committee

The main functions of this Committee include: to recommend the time that should be allocated for the stage-wise discussion of the Government Bills and other business as the Speaker, in consultation with the Leader of the House, may direct for being referred to it. It consists of not less than 19 members. (Rules 212 and 213)

FINANCE COMMITTEE

In addition to Public Accounts Committee, there is a Finance Committee, constituted under Article 88 of the Constitution to control Assembly's expenditure within the authorized appropriations. This Committee of the House consists of the Federal Finance Minister and such other members as may be elected by the House. The Speaker presides over its meetings. The Committee approves the budget for the House for inclusion in the Federal Budget and also advises it with regard to control over the expenditure.

OTHER COMMITTEES

The "Other Committees" include 'Select Committees on Bills,' and 'Special Committees' appointed by the Assembly for specific functions.

A) Select Committees on Bills

These are ad-hoc Committees constituted to consider Bills referred to them by the House. These Committees consist of the Minister-in-charge of the Ministry to which a Bill relates, the Chairman of the Standing Committee concerned with the Bill, the member-in-charge, the Minister for Law and Justice and the Minister for Parliamentary Affairs and other members, as elected by the House while referring the Bill to the Committee. A Minister may be elected as the Chairman of the Select Committee.

B) Special Committees

The Assembly may appoint a Special Committee to carry out functions as may be specified in the motion. The motion also spells out the composition of such Committees.

FUNCTIONS IN THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

The Committees examine and submit reports with suggestions and recommendations on a Bill, subject or matter referred to them by the House or the Speaker, as a prime function, as per rule 201. When the House has not fixed any time for the presentation of a report, it shall be presented, as required by rule 235, within thirty days from the date on which reference was made to it by the Assembly.

ORGANIZATION OF COMMITTEE SESSIONS

The time-table of the business of a Committee and the agenda for each meeting is determined, under rule 239, by the Chairman of the Committee in consultation with the Minister concerned. Under rule 216, each committee elects its own Chairman from amongst its members. The Committee chairpersons enjoy many privileges. The Chairman of a Committee or Chairperson presiding in his absence, under rule 223, in the event of equality of votes, has a casting vote. They are also provided with an office and some exclusive staff.

Under rule 217, the quorum to constitute a sitting of a Committee meeting is one-fourth of the total membership of the Committee concerned.

