



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.