

EVA STALIN IAS ACADEMY

12/24, Muthuranga Mudali St, next to Deepam Hospital,
West Tambaram-600045

Parliaments past, a mirror to changing dynamics

In an atypical departure from its usual five-day working schedule, the 17th Lok Sabha (2019-2024) concluded its proceedings on a Saturday, marking the culmination of a journey with unexpected twists and turns. Echoing a historical parallel, the previous Lok Sabha too also concluded with an extended parliamentary session. As the nation gets ready for the general election, the question arises: will history repeat itself? Or, will a new precedent be set? This prompts us, as citizens of India, to reflect on the performance of our Parliament in recent years as we wait to usher in the 18th Lok Sabha.

How Ministries fared

Reflecting on legislative activity so far it was apparent that the polity of the nation was in a state of flux. The Office of the Prime Minister found itself inundated with 1,146 questions from Rajya Sabha Members of Parliament, of which only 28 were answered. Interestingly, just as in the the House of Elders, the notices directed at the Prime Minister's Office witnessed a sharp decline also in the House of the People – from 5,000 during the 15th and 16th Lok Sabhas to a mere 1,700 in the 17th Lok Sabha – underscoring waning interest in seeking answers from the apex executive office.

In the bustling corridors of Parliament, where policy debates and national concerns intersect, a notable shift in parliamentary focus has been quietly underway. Over the past three Lok Sabhas, a discernible trend has emerged, shedding light on the evolving interests and priorities of our elected representatives.

At the forefront of this transformation are the Ministries of Health and Family and Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare. These portfolios have ascended to prominence, becoming the top two Ministries with the highest number of questions. Notably, scrutiny of the country's health-care system preceded the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting consistent monitoring by our representatives. But despite being the Ministries with the most number of questions, where farmers to former Ministers seek answers, the number of questions in the House of the People was noticed to be declining marginally.

Yet, the most startling revelation is in a declining interest in matters of national security and internal affairs. The Ministry of Home Affairs, which was the Ministry with the second most number of questions directed towards it till the 15th Lok Sabha, has now faded into near obscurity. It is conspicuously absent from the list of the top five most questioned Ministries in the Upper House, with a decline in notices by 32%. This shift raises questions about the nation's priorities, particularly as the implementation of pivotal legislation looms on the horizon.

Meanwhile, as India charts its course towards economic resurgence from being one of the fragile five economies to aspiring to be one of the top five economies of the world, another



Priyank Nagpal
is a Legislative Assistant to Members of Parliament (LAMP) Fellow, 2023-2024

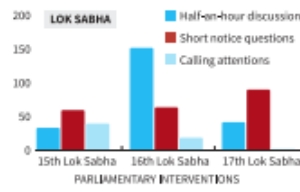
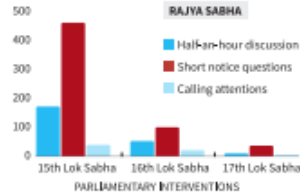


Nehal Sharma
is a Legislative Assistant to Members of Parliament (LAMP) Fellow, 2023-2024

The conduct of business in both Houses so far only points to the need for a revitalisation of legislative engagement and more constructive debate

Trends of parliamentary interventions filed in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha

The Lok Sabha has seen a decrease in the filing of Calling Attention motions, while the Rajya Sabha has seen a decreased filing of all parliamentary interventions



SOURCE: LOK SABHA AND RAJYA SABHA STATISTICAL STATEMENTS

narrative unfolds within the Ministry of Finance. Tasked with steering the nation's fiscal destiny, the Ministry has witnessed a gradual erosion of parliamentary interest, declining to the fourth and fifth position in the Rajya Sabha and the Lok Sabha, respectively. Yet, amidst this apparent disengagement, a glimmer of hope emerges with an increasing rate of questions being admitted for deliberation, signalling a newfound commitment to transparency and accountability in financial matters.

In addition to the profound impact on health, the COVID-19 pandemic has gravely disrupted India's educational landscape. Nevertheless, amidst these challenges, a steadfast commitment to accountability and transparency has endured. Education remains entrenched among the top five Ministries that are subject to rigorous questioning, reflecting its enduring significance in parliamentary discourse. However, regrettably, there has been a notable uptick in the number of questions disallowed, casting a shadow on the efficacy of oversight in this vital sector.

Delving deeper into the statistics, a pattern becomes apparent. In the Lok Sabha, the percentage of disallowed questions has shown a downward trajectory across successive Lok Sabhas.

The trend is significantly reversed for the Upper House where the percentage of disallowed questions is growing consistently. In the 17th Lok Sabha, Ministries such as Health and Family

Welfare, Home Affairs, Defence, Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, and Finance, made up 36.6% of all disallowed questions in Rajya Sabha, while in the Lok Sabha, they made up 37.8% of the disallowed questions, underscoring systemic challenges in parliamentary oversight.

The use of interventions

As the landscape of Indian parliamentary proceedings undergoes a metamorphosis, it is not only ministerial priorities that are in flux but also the utilisation of various interventions available to lawmakers (as shown in the Graph). Amidst these interventions, there is one aspect that stands out in terms of soaring usage: Zero Hour.

Over 15 years, the Rajya Sabha has witnessed a remarkable 62% in this, while the Lok Sabha has seen a significant rise of 34%. This surge reflects a positive signal, indicating heightened focus in addressing pressing issues and grievances, and also seeking clarifications from the government. This coincides with a dwindling usage of interventions such as 'Half-an-Hour Discussions', 'Short Notice Questions', 'Calling Attention', 'Short Duration Discussions', and 'Special Mentions'.

Despite its popularity and usage in addressing key issues, Zero Hour has its inherent limitations. To strike a balance, it is imperative to leverage other interventions such as the 'Calling Attention', 'Short Duration' and 'Half and Hour' discussions which provide a platform for other members to participate in, enhancing the quality of debate and reaching amicable solutions.

In summary, the 16th Lok Sabha demonstrated a relatively higher level of proactivity compared to the other sessions. It displayed notable performance in the admission of questions and the discussions on various interventions within the House.

However, a closer look at the functioning of the House also unveiled a series of overlooked opportunities. Instances of oversight, such as the failure to raise privilege motions against misleading remarks, underscore a larger narrative urging accountability from the government. The Winter Session, 2023 of the Rajya Sabha missed a crucial discussion on the sensitive and key issue of 'Suicides among students due to competitive exams'. Despite the Chairman's readiness to have legislative nuances on the topic, our representatives let slip the opportunity to file for a half-hour discussion. It marked a failure to address societal concerns through parliamentary channels.

There was a time when a strong Opposition could ensure the withdrawal of Bills such as the Communal Violence Bill, 2014. Changing parliamentary dynamics only point to the need to revitalise legislative engagement, where every opportunity should be seized to ensure accountability, foster constructive debate, and enact policies that prioritise the welfare of the nation and its citizens.

EVA STALIN IAS ACADEMY

12/24, Muthuranga Mudali St, next to Deepam Hospital,
West Tambaram-600045

There will be no independent, sovereign Palestine

In today's Middle East, one thing is certain and another, highly probable. The certainty is that there will be no independent, sovereign Palestinian state, 'living side by side with Israel', as the cliché goes. Before October 7, 2023, there was some possibility of a Palestinian state emerging at some time, even with several caveats. Many rounds of negotiations took place between the two sides to work out a detailed road map of how the two-state solution would look. In January, 2001, in Taba, they came close to reaching an agreement.

Hamas versus the Palestinian Authority

Post October 7, governments around the world have resurrected the two-state formula and are repeating it parrot-like. However, the formula is as good as dead. As of today, there is hardly anyone in Israel supporting a Palestinian state. Their reasoning is logical from their point of view. Hamas today is more popular in the West Bank than it ever was. This means that if and when the war ends on whatever terms, elections will have to be held in the Palestinian territories to elect a government. Even before October 7, Hamas had a good following among West Bank Palestinians. Now, support for Hamas has grown many fold. No Israeli is prepared to countenance that eventuality.

What about the Palestinian Authority based in Ramalla? It is a much more moderate group and has in fact been cooperating or collaborating with Israel. The Palestinian Authority is thoroughly discredited among Israelis and Palestinians as being corrupt and ineffective. In even a reasonably open election, Hamas is sure to emerge as the party with a majority. Only if Hamas is totally and effectively eradicated would Israelis be willing to consider the possibility of a Palestinian state. And, the eradication of Hamas is just not going to happen.



Chinmaya R. Gharekhan

served as India's Ambassador to the United Nations and as India's Special Envoy to the Middle East, 2005-09

Governments across the world may be backing the two-state formula, but it is as good as dead

This means that the war will go on. Rafah will be razed in the process of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) destroying the remaining four battalions of Hamas militia. Even respectable revisionist Israeli scholars and historians support the invasion of Rafah.

But what about the 80 or 90 Israeli hostages that Hamas still holds? On this, the Israeli public seems divided. Nearly an equal number give priority to the return of hostages just as there are those who consider the eradication of Hamas to be of higher priority. Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu assures his people that he will secure both these objectives and affirms his determination to proceed with the attack on Rafah, despite a public warning by Israel's strongest supporter, United States President Joe Biden.

The danger of wider conflict

The probability is of the Gaza war escalating into a wider, regional conflict. Mr. Biden is very concerned about this possibility and his Secretary of State, Antony J. Blinken, has been travelling in the region to prevent such an escalation and to secure some sort of a cease-fire. The much-delayed United Nations Security Council resolution of an immediate ceasefire, adopted on March 25, and made possible because of American abstention and supported by all the other 14 members, does not amount to much. It demands a pause in fighting only until the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Thereafter, the resolution, in effect, expresses the hope that the ceasefire will be extended and become lasting and comprehensive. Mr. Biden was forced to take this step out of domestic political considerations. Domestic politics everywhere increasingly guides and determines foreign policy.

Hamis does not seem to care about the huge loss of innocent lives and the destruction of

infrastructure and housing. It might either underestimate Mr. Netanyahu's determination to proceed with the Rafah operation or to agree to its terms for a ceasefire such as the permanent withdrawal of Israeli forces and so on. Hamas is banking on the continued support of the international community for a quick and lasting ceasefire. For his part, Mr. Netanyahu will not stop the war until he accomplishes his objectives.

Already, Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon have been going at one another for some time now, causing casualties on both sides. Hezbollah has thousands of rockets and missiles aimed at Israel. It might see the Gaza war as an ideal opportunity to launch a more deadly attack on Israel in support of Hamas.

Wars make strange bedfellows. Here, a staunchly Shia movement is supporting an equally staunch Sunni group! Tens of thousands of Israeli citizens have been evacuated from northern Israel. Given Israel's deadly attacks on Syrian territory including on the Iranian embassy, Syria and Iran will surely retaliate, leading to another strong response by Israel. If that were to happen, there would be tremendous pressure on Egypt to join the fray. Egypt is under pressure to permit the people from Rafah to enter Egyptian territory when the IDF invades there. That, combined with the pressure of other Arab states, might make it difficult or even impossible for Egypt to stay out. Iran has missiles with a range that is long enough to hit Israel. All these actors might feel that such a 'golden' opportunity to eradicate Israel might not come again.

If this were to happen, the U.S. will go to Israel's help with whatever it might take. If this happens, can Russia be far behind?

Such a frightening scenario should scare everyone, everywhere. It might appear far-fetched at present, but we would be disregarding its probability at our own peril.