

1 Introduction

The Parliament of Bhutan consists of His Majesty the King, the National Council and the National Assembly. The functions of the National Council are to ensure that the government safeguards the interests of the nation and fulfills the aspirations of the people through public review of policies and issues, Bills and other legislations and scrutiny of state functions. In addition, the National Council is a House of Review on matters affecting the security and sovereignty of the country and interest of the nation and people that needs to be brought to the notice of the Druk Gyalpo, the Prime Minister and the National Assembly. It is mandated to review and comment on policies, plans and programs of the government, review performance of the government, implementation of resolutions and laws and issues of national importance.

In order to enable it discharge its functions, the National Council Act 2008 stipulates different parliamentary devices. One of the important devices is Interpellation which enables a member to question the government during the Question Time. The National Council shall plan the frequency and duration of the Question Time during each of its session. The following is an outline of the objectives of the Question Time, the nature of the questions to be asked, the procedures of asking question and the framework in which Ministers would attend the Question Time.

2 Objectives

The Question Time will facilitate the National Council to fulfill its mandate of conducting public review of policies and issues. Since the National Council is a parliamentary institution of check and balance to ensure good governance, the Question Time is an important means of ensuring transparency and accountability, which are essential elements of good governance. It is also a platform for members of the National Council and Ministers to engage in dialogue. Dialogue helps build confidence and enhance interaction between the government and the National Council. Besides, it provides an opportunity to the Ministers to explain government policies, its position on certain policy

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decisions and clarify doubts on concerns that the members and people might have on certain issues.

3 Categories of questions

Questions will be grouped into two categories. The Chairperson will admit the questions and decide on the categories in which they shall be grouped.

3.1 Category 1

Questions of national importance will be listed in category 1. It shall require written answers to be given. The answers will be distributed to the members and printed in the proceedings of the House except those answers mentioned in section 6 of these guidelines.

3.2 Category 2

All other questions will be listed in category 2. These are questions where the answers will be provided orally on the floor of the House during Question Time.

4 Modality of raising questions

- a. All questions should come as queries of the National Council and not from individual members.
- b. The Ministers are collectively responsible and as such questions should be raised with the government and not with individual Ministers. All questions should be directed to the Prime Minister, who will direct individual Ministers to give appropriate replies.
- c. The questions should be submitted at least fifteen days ahead of the expected date of answer to the Secretary General and ten days ahead to the government.

5 Type of questions

- a. Questions will relate to matters of government policies and with issues arising from or related to specific policy decisions.
- b. Members can also raise questions arising from the consequence of implementation or non-implementation of policies, plans and programs.
- c. Questions can also arise on the implementation of laws and resolutions.
- d. Specific development matters should not be raised during Question Time. Clarifications may be given directly by Secretaries or other senior officials in writing.

6 Answering questions and introducing Bills

- a. Ministers will answer questions pertaining to government policies, strategies and issues of national importance.
- b. Ministers will as a special gesture introduce Bills-to give background information and reasons for Bills.
- c. Ministers will brief the National Council on policies and important national issues.

7 Debate in the Question Time

- a. There should be no debate during Question Time following questions and answers.
- b. The Chairperson shall however, determine whether members may seek clarifications, express views or make recommendations after the answers provided by the Ministers.
- c. Views or recommendations of the National Council shall be taken very seriously and with respect as advice but will not be binding upon the Executive so as to ensure the separation of powers.

8 Officials to accompany a Minister

A Minister when attending the Question Time of National Council may bring along concerned sector officials for clarification as support. However, they shall not address the house.

9 Schedule of Question Time

9.1 Date of the Question Time

Question Time in the National Council is scheduled on every Tuesday and Friday as in the National Assembly during the session of the Parliament.

9.2 Timing of Question Time

The interaction time between National Council and Ministers shall not exceed one hour.

10 Avoiding coincidence of Question Times

In scheduling the Question Time, the Secretary Generals of the respective houses shall ensure that the appearance of a Minister in the Question Time of the National Council shall not coincide with that in the National Assembly.

11 Appearance in Question Time

11.1 Protocol of appearance

- a. Before the commencement of the session or during the session of the National Council, the Chairperson will formally write to the Speaker of the National Assembly seeking his grant of leave to the Ministers who will appear in the Question Time of the National Council on the Scheduled dates and time.
- b. Minister should be received by the Secretary General or the Deputy Chairman and promptly escorted to the meeting.

11.2 Frequency of appearance

No Minister should attend the Question Time of the National Council more than once during a Parliament Session.

12 Withdrawal of questions

A member may, through a written notice to the Secretary General, withdraw a question at any time before the Question Time. Such withdrawal should be immediately informed to the concerned Minister.

13 Conclusion

These guidelines for Question Time constitute a part of the rules of procedure of the National Council. They are based on the provisions of ‘interpellation’ outlined in the National Council Act 2008. The views and suggestions of the Honorable Ministers and Members of the National Assembly have also been incorporated.