



100 Days of National Assembly: Low government interest mars overall performance

ISLAMABAD, October 18, 2013: The Prime Minister and his cabinet's low attendance and the government's parliamentary agenda not reflecting the Leader of the House's priorities laid out in his inaugural speech in the Lower House marked the first 100 days of the 14th National Assembly, according to a Free and Fair Election Network report released on Friday.

FAFEN's data gathered from the direct observation of the National Assembly's four sessions in its first 100 days shows the treasury did not put forth substantive agendas to make parliamentary headway on the priorities set forth by the Prime Minister.

In his speech, the Prime Minister identified eight themes that the government would like to focus on during its tenure: 1) economic development; 2) democracy and political development; 3) better foreign relations; 4) good governance; 5) strengthening the federation; 6) peace building and conflict resolution; 7) energy sector reforms and 8) protection of human rights.

In the first 100 days, the government tabled three bills: one each on economic development, good governance, and democracy and political development. Private members in comparison seemed more proactive, tabling four bills: three on democracy and political development and one on good governance.

FAFEN's data shows the government dwelled cautiously on its counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency policies in the first 100 days of the assembly. The opposition benches, however, seemed more interested in putting forth pro-people agenda. The opposition moved 12 resolutions on matters identified by the Prime Minister in his speech and seven motions under Rule 259, compared with four resolutions and six motions under Rule 259 by the government.

There were 546 Points of Order raised in the first 100 days. An analysis shows that 318 of these were related to issues directly identified by the Prime Minister in his speech.

The opposition members spoke 223 times on the performance of the government. Most of their Points of Order (84) related to peace building and conflict resolution, followed by good governance (62), economic development and foreign relations (23 each), democracy and political development (14), energy sector reforms (nine) and protection of human rights and strengthening of federation (four each).

The treasury members raised 95 POs, of which 36 were on good governance, followed by 22 on peace-building and conflict resolution, economic development (12), democracy and political development (nine), foreign relations (seven), protection of human rights (five), and energy sector reforms and strengthening of federation (two each).

The issues of terrorism and extremism across the country remained the highlight of the Prime Minister's inaugural speech. He touched on the topic six times. However, the tradition of bypassing the elected houses in major decisions continued as the government took critical decisions such as an operation in Karachi without bringing them to the floor of the National Assembly or Senate.

Two resolutions on the energy sector were left unaddressed. Moreover, three motions on the power crisis – one by Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and two by Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) legislators – were tabled under Rule 259 but none was taken up for debate.

In the assembly's first 100 days, the treasury did not present any legislation or motion that supported the democratic process or pledged to deter any unconstitutional or extra-constitutional move. Though the Prime Minister announced in the National Assembly on June 24, 2013 to move against the former military

ruler for high treason (imposing emergency and suspending the constitution on November 3, 2007), the government did not seek to move legislation to clarify clause 2 of the article 6 which deals with “aiding or abetting the acts” of high treason.

The assembly missed the deadline to form Standing Committees by a little more than a month and a half: the formation of 34 Standing Committees of the National Assembly was approved in the fourth session on August 21.

The government seemed less interested in addressing issues of public interest such as weak governance, institutional corruption, unemployment and increasing poverty, despite the issue being mentioned twice by the Prime Minister in his inaugural speech. The treasury introduced one bill on governance – the Service Tribunals (Amendment) Bill 2013 – in the assembly.

The Opposition was more active in sponsoring agenda on good governance. The JI and Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) legislators came up with two separate resolutions calling upon the federal government to take immediate steps to control inflation. The MQM moved another resolution urging the government to take steps to provide inexpensive and expeditious justice to the people. None of these resolutions were taken up by the House.

The MQM-sponsored the National Database and Registration Authority (Amendment) Bill 2013, seeking use of original CNIC was left pending.

Four motions on governance issues were moved under Rule 259 in the first 100 days of the National Assembly. However, only one motion sponsored by a PML-N legislator about the extravagant spending of Pakistani foreign missions was taken up and debated.

The Prime Minister vowed better foreign relations, especially with China, twice in his speech. Though the assembly's responsiveness to populist agenda on foreign matters was prompt, the treasury was not proactive in setting up agenda items on its own. The skirmishes with Indian forces along the Line of Control, attacks on the mausoleums in Syria, and the use of force by Egyptian security forces against protesters opposing the removal of a democratically-elected government dominated the agenda in the assembly on foreign affairs. The Kashmir issue remained on the backburner, with a motion moved by the JI under Rule 259 calling upon the House to discuss the government's Kashmir policy was not taken up.

The Prime Minister mentioned strengthening the federation five times in his inaugural speech and talked about promoting a new political culture. However, the treasury failed to come up with any concrete parliamentary interventions aimed at forging more harmony among federating units.

The Prime Minister committed to guaranteeing the protection of minorities rights in his speech. However, neither the treasury nor the opposition brought up in the assembly the worsening state of human rights, especially in Balochistan.