

What do MNA's do?

In order to understand the parliamentary procedure and role of MPs, in 2004 New Zealand launched a display of photographs showing off MP's lives. MPs were given disposable cameras to document their interests, roles and their participation in social, public and professional lives as part of the celebration marking the New Zealand Parliaments 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Though the gallery did not portray a complete view of the role of an MP, it provoked research into what a MP does? Is there a job description which also determines their selection into this very important role of public service? The research carried out in New Zealand has brought up another debate, i.e.; the feasibility and effectiveness of a larger MP base as opposed to a smaller one in Parliament.

Pakistan follows the parliamentary system and has 342 seats in its National Assembly and 104 in the Senate. In comparison to Pakistan, the UK parliament boasts 650 MPs in their House of Commons and 760 members in the House of Lords. India has 552 members in the Lok Sabha and 245 members in Rajya Sabha. The UK and India have a larger parliamentary base and are heralded as progressive and prosperous democracies. Do these figures indicate that a larger member count in Parliament relative to population is partially responsible for better governance?

According to Stephen Levine, Professor at Victoria University of Wellington, the job description of an MP has never been categorically defined. Though each MP has a role that is set out for them, there are no clear and widely acceptable job descriptions or performance assessment procedures. He further states that a clear statement of what MPs do within the Parliament is not accessible to voters and that a universally accepted job description is almost impossible. MPs usually handle different constituencies and are voted according to their work in that particular constituency. In Pakistan the system operates on the same grounds, whereas some countries like Israel are not divided into constituencies and the entire country is treated as a single electorate.

Levine formalizes the role of an MP based on tenants of accountability and responsibility. Firstly, he says their utmost priority lies in serving the public that has voted them into office. Secondly, they serve their respective parties. An MP regardless of his opinion gravitates towards the agenda of his party before addressing individual concerns. This partisan nature of MPs may be responsible for several shortcomings within the Parliamentary system. And if so, the leaning towards coalition governments is very fair. Lastly, MPs owe a service to themselves; they are responsible for adhering to their ethical and moral standing and should abstain from corruption and maintain integrity in office.

The next question that arises is whether a large workforce of sincere hardworking MP's make for a more effective parliament than a smaller set of equally hardworking MP's? This question has not been clearly addressed in global politics where large democracies expand their MP base to compensate for the expansive duties to be covered. Although a large or small base of MPs has not been assessed in terms of effectiveness, the financial impact of a larger base is obvious. From rich economies such as the UK to struggling ones such as Pakistan, parliamentary expenditure in the form of high wages for MP's have been condemned by the public who consequentially face a higher tax burden.

In Pakistan MNAs have protested against the lowest salaries in the region. They are paid, approximately, Rs. 2.5 million per year. In comparison, a UK MP receives a basic salary of £65,738 annually. The additional allowance is dependent on their activities and constituency. According to reports, the average expenditure of a UK MP amounts to £200,000 annually. This equates to a pay out of more than Rs. 4 crores. In the absence of a guarantee that higher salaries will improve performance, burdening Pakistani tax payers by increasing salaries may not be well received.

The number of MP's in most countries is chosen according to the number of constituencies that are created so as to facilitate voting. By this logic, India with an area of 3,287,263 km<sup>2</sup> should have a larger number of MP's as opposed to the UK with an area of 243,610 km<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps the debate could take on a new angle, which is the number of MP's in proportion to the population of a country. Even then, India with a population of a staggering 1.24 billion has a smaller base of MP's in comparison to Pakistan with 179.2 million people. . The MP to people ratio in Pakistan is 1:520000 where as in India it is 1:2240000.

The number of MPs does not seem to vary proportionately with the population in the country. India with the largest population has fewer MP's than the UK. And though Pakistan has a relatively larger population than the UK, it has a lower number of MPs relative to its population as well. The variation in the MP to people ratio questions the correlation between effectiveness of a democratic system with number of representatives of public in the parliament. India, the largest democracy in the world, seems to be in favor of fewer MP's to the population size as opposed to UK.

Indian democracy, on many accounts, is flourishing with its smaller number of MPs in contrast with its large population. President Barak Obama called India a flourishing democracy in a news report published in 2010. However, a startling article in the Oxford India Society (2013) states that one in four MPs in the Indian Parliament has a criminal record. More startling is the claim that MPs with a criminal record are more likely to get elected into Parliament as opposed to those with clean records. The

flourishing democracy in India tainted by criminally prosecuted MPs raises concerns about the quality of governance they can dispense.

Assessing an effective Parliament is quite challenging; evaluating the role of MPs in an effective parliament is even harder. The Indian Parliament despite being bogged down by corruption still runs smoothly and is looked at as a textbook case for an efficient democracy given its sheer size and diversity. The fact that a corrupt MP can be voted by the people into power is considered a symbol of democratic power in the electoral system. In Pakistan the current drive to root out corruption from the Parliament lends the assumption that cleaning out the Parliamentary system of members with checkered pasts can lead to good governance. However the British historian, Lord Acton refers to the inevitability of corruption; "All power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely." If the limitations of politics are acceptable then ridding the parliament of corrupt representatives cannot necessarily deliver good governance. Hence we revert to the role of these representatives and the power of institutions which govern them.

A report by The Inter-Parliamentary Union states that Parliaments should generate a system of self-evaluation in order to gain a better understanding of their performance. One of the methods of evaluation is legislation. A Parliament's legislative capacity is what defines the responsiveness and ability of MPs that are part of the Parliamentary body. The Indian Lok Sabha has a strong legislative history. The 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha terminating in 2014 has already passed 151 bills so far; the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha passed 297 and 248 bills respectively. According to the PRS Legislative Research blog, the government has had a 39% success rate in passing bills and a 60% success level of introducing them; making Indian democracy a stable force to reckon with. On the other hand, the 13<sup>th</sup> Pakistani National Assembly (2008-2013) passed 139 bills where as the previous one passed 50 bills before it was cut short by President Gen. Musharraf's coup.

As the Pakistani Parliaments gets back on its democratic track, it must set the scene for a more active legislative tenure. Legislation symbolizes a working government which addresses a situation and advocates change. The Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Bill 2009 on August 4, 2009 is one example of a legislative action against an ill of our society. Though this bill expired due to the Senate's untimely action, it was passed in 2012 by both houses after reintroduction.

Conclusively, comparison of Parliaments in a highly diversified political arena is incorrect. The rising cost of goods coupled with a worldwide recession prompts debates on cutting back on MPs and shrinking

large Parliaments. Since size is no indicator of strength, a smaller number of MPs could get the job done just as effectively regardless of the size of the population being governed.

Although in a democracy an MP /MNA may be elected despite a tainted past, a better defined role of an MP in Parliament through assigned posts in ministries and parliamentary committees will certainly improve the worth of the parliament. MNA's that are well informed and disciplined can change outcomes for the better. A parliamentarian that understands his role as an overseer of national interest in his or her assigned capacity, reaches out to the public he or she represents, consults a greater knowledge base and does not fall prey to just populist means, has the power to deliver better governance.

*Naheed Memon is the CEO of Manzil Pakistan, a public policy think tank in Karachi. She is also a Visiting Faculty at IBA and a Director of a private conglomerate. She holds a MSc in Economics from Birkbeck College, London and an MBA from Imperial College London.*