

PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS IN THE PRACTICE OF UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (UAE)'S FEDERAL NATIONAL COUNCIL (FNC)

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Article history:

Submission date: 16 Aug 2023

Received in revised form: 29 Sept 2023

Acceptance date: 1 Dec 2023

Available online: 30 April 2024

Keywords:

Parliamentary question, Federal National Council, United Arab Emirates, Constitution, Procedures

Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interest:

The author(s) have declared that no competing interests exist.

Cite as:

Abo El-Wafa, T., & El Maslouhi, A. (2024). Parliamentary questions in the practice of United Arab Emirates (UAE)'s federal national council (FNC). *Malaysian Journal of Syariah and Law*, 12(1), 228-244. <https://doi.org/10.33102/mjssl.vol12no1.498>



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ABSTRACT

Parliamentary questions are one of the most widely used and common parliamentary control instruments. The purpose of parliamentary questions in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is to hold the government accountable and reveal violations or clarify facts in the work of the executive authority. The Federal Constitution does not provide means of parliamentary control over the government, so parliamentary questions play a bigger role in the UAE than in other countries. This paper examines the practice of parliamentary questions in the Federal National Council (FNC) of the UAE. The methodology employed in this paper involves a comprehensive analysis of the practice of parliamentary questions within the context of the UAE's Federal National Council (FNC). Through a qualitative approach, the study delves into the role of parliamentary questions as a tool for governmental reforms, transparency enhancement, and executive authority accountability. Utilizing both primary and secondary sources, the research examines the impact of parliamentary questions in revealing violations, elucidating facts, and addressing citizens' everyday concerns. By employing a multifaceted analytical framework, this study offers valuable insights into the significance and effectiveness of parliamentary questions within the UAE's political landscape. The key findings in the paper on the practice of parliamentary questions in the UAE's FNC underscore the essential role of parliamentary questions in holding the government accountable and ensuring transparency. The document reveals how parliamentary questions serve as a vital tool for revealing violations, clarifying facts, and prompting governmental reforms. Overall, this paper highlights how parliamentary questions are a vital component of governance in the UAE and emphasizes their importance for ensuring accountability and transparency in government operations.

Introduction

In recent years, the UAE's Federal National Council (FNC) has undergone notable transformations, elevating its role and powers within the country's political landscape. From its inception to the present day, the FNC has evolved from an advisory body to a more influential institution, actively participating in legislative processes and oversight functions. This evolution reflects the UAE's commitment to enhancing political participation and promoting transparency and accountability within its governance framework. By acknowledging this historical progression, we aim to provide a clearer context for understanding the significance of parliamentary questions within the UAE's evolving political system.

This article discusses the importance of parliamentary questions in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and how they can be used to hold the government accountable. The Federal Constitution of the UAE does not provide other means of parliamentary control over the government, such as parliamentary interrogation and the right to question the government and withdraw confidence from it, which makes parliamentary questions crucial in revealing violations and clarifying facts in the work of the executive authority. The practical use of a question confirms how important it is in activating the control role of parliament. This study explains the reasons behind the effectiveness of most parliamentary questions and provides practical applications that confirm their effectiveness. Overall, this study highlights how parliamentary questions play a significant role in ensuring that the government follows constitutional principles and public interest in the UAE (Aboelwafa & Yaghi, 2024).

The importance of this study stems from the fact that parliamentary questions play a crucial role in facilitating legislative oversight. They allow members of the FNC to hold the government accountable by seeking clarification on various issues, policies, and actions taken by the executive branch. Through the questioning process, FNC members can ensure transparency, scrutinize government decisions, and ensure that public funds are being utilized effectively. In this sense, parliamentary questions provide a platform for members to raise concerns and address issues affecting the public. By posing questions to government officials, FNC members can act as a voice for their constituents, express public opinion, and ensure that the government remains responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people.

The Nature of Parliamentary Questions

A parliamentary question is not merely to inquire about an ambiguous matter, or to clarify or complete incomplete information directed from a member of parliament to a minister, but rather acts as a warning alarm to the government representative, that there are gaps or weaknesses in its performance. It is a very important indication that the parliament is aware and follows up on what the government or one of its agencies is doing. In the UAE context, the 'warning alarm' function of parliamentary questions manifests through specific examples that highlight the impact of questioning on government actions and policies. For instance, questions raised by Federal National Council members regarding issues like pollution of tap water in Ras Al Khaimah and delays in presenting financial accounts have led to corrective actions and policy reconsiderations by the government. These examples demonstrate how parliamentary questions serve as a mechanism for monitoring government performance, identifying shortcomings, and driving reforms in various sectors. By examining such case studies from the UAE's parliamentary practice, one can better understand how parliamentary questions act as a proactive tool for ensuring accountability and transparency in governance.

Accordingly, the parliamentary question is a notification for the relevant minister that they are permanently under the parliament microscope (Duprat, 1996). Therefore, parliamentary questions are considered amongst the important parliamentary control instruments that are used by parliaments to monitor daily government works, and to detect government abuses and violations (Al Hammadi, 2016), and thus lead, hopefully, to providing solutions and resolutions of many complaints and the elimination of violations. A parliament member may submit a question to the relevant minister, and their answer reveals violations that lead to weak or poor work of government facilities, which leads - supposedly - to achieving government reforms and evaluations in all facilities or works of the executive authority and may extend to include amending the relevant laws or regulations to achieve this reform (Al-Maslamani, 2008).

In the United Arab Emirates, the parliamentary question is of particular importance, since the Federal National Council exercises limited control, and the question is crucial in it for many reasons. In addition, the practical use of a question confirms how important it is in activating the control role of the parliament. To clarify this, we shall explain the reasons behind the effectiveness of the parliamentary question, before going through the practical applications that confirm that effectiveness.

The Reasons for the Effectiveness of the Parliamentary Question in Control

Parliamentary questions have emerged as the primary instrument of control wielded by the Federal National Council (FNC) in relation to the government in the United Arab Emirates. Although the FNC bylaws outline just three methods of parliamentary supervision—discussions, questions, and grievances—the use of parliamentary questions has surged due to increased awareness among FNC members and cabinet ministers. Consequently, the FNC's capacity to exercise control has been considerably strengthened, particularly given the lack of alternative parliamentary control measures like interpellations. Despite having fewer control tools than some other parliaments, the parliamentary question in the FNC has adapted and expanded to fulfill various roles typically handled by other mechanisms in different legislative settings. The growth in prominence of parliamentary questions has served to hold the government responsible effectively. Several reasons could explain such a matter. The development of the scientific and cultural levels of the members of the council, in addition to the development of the ministers' understanding of the council's control role, had a great impact on the use of this instrument as a control instrument, the ease and simplicity of the question and its coverage of all fields, had its undeniable impact in this regard, and finally, the fact that the constitutional legislator did not consider the impact of all the means of control on the executive authority increased the importance of the question as an alternative unstipulated means of control.

The Educational and Intellectual Levels of the Members of the National Council

The scientific and cultural levels of members of Parliament in any country in the world undoubtedly play a vital part in exercising their control role (Erikson & Josefsson, 2019). If we take into account that the parliamentary question - apart from other control instruments is a single source meaning that the questioner must be only one Council member, then the role of the scientific and cultural levels of the member would be much more influential and important.

With regard to the Federal National Council, the educational level of its members has evolved remarkably. Statistical research revealed that the category of post-graduates holding master's and doctoral degrees among members of the Federal National Council started surfacing in the composition of the Council starting from the beginning of seventh legislature, at a rate of 2.5%, until the number reached eight members at a rate of 20% in the twelfth legislative term. Thus, the rate of those who obtained university and post-graduate degrees from members of the Federal National Council increased gradually, to reach the total of 25 members in the twelfth legislative term: 62.5% of the total 40 (Al Mazrouei, 2007).

In the recent Councils, where half of the members are elected and the other half are appointed (Federal Supreme Council, 2006), a large number have the highest academic qualifications, political experiences and the practice of executive work. Undoubtedly, the level of competence of the members of the Council, their academic qualifications, their good knowledge and their continuous follow-up on the affairs of the Union and the work of the ministries, has had an impact in developing the skill of using questions as an important means of control, and this is one of the factors leading to the effective exercise of this function. These factors also impact the compliance of the questioner with the conditions and legal procedures required for the validity of the question and the procedures for submitting it, and the questions asked by the members would not deviate from the concept and the objective of the question specified in the internal regulations of the National Council, which has an important impact on transferring the questions as a high-level control instrument.

Since the early 2000s, the United Arab Emirates has witnessed a remarkable surge in educational attainment among members of its Federal National Council (FNC). With rising academic credentials comes a broader understanding of issues and enhanced abilities to analyze complex matters, leading to markedly distinct and sophisticated parliamentary questions. Better educated FNC members possess refined communication skills and demonstrate greater acumen when engaging in policy debates. They are

able to pinpoint weaknesses, demand clarification, and propose well-thought-out solutions. Moreover, these highly educated representatives display stronger critical thinking capabilities, challenging underlying assumptions, and sparking meaningful dialogues concerning national concerns. As evidenced by numerous examples, the positive correlation between educational achievements and parliamentary performance underscores the need for continued investment in human capital development throughout the region. Thus, we see a transformative shift underway wherein advanced education empowers lawmakers to excel in their representative capacities and fosters constructive collaboration with the government.

The Government's Understanding of the Role of the National Assembly and its Members in Exercising Control

It is to be noted that the government's relationship with the National Assembly has greatly evolved compared to its beginning (Mohammed Ibrahim, 1986). In the first six sessions of the Council, held between February and May 1972, no minister attended. This issue was raised in the sixth session, and the Speaker affirmed that he would do everything to enhance cooperation between the Council and the government (Federal National Council, 1972). The Council resorted to postponing the discussion of some topics and sent a letter to the Cabinet expressing its regret for the lack of representation of the government in the Council's sessions. In response to the Council's call, 7 ministers attended the eighth session.

Ever since, the Council did not hesitate to adjourn the sessions due to the absence of a minister whose presence was required for a session (Al Hamed, 1990). In the 30/5/1973 session, which was devoted to the issue of popular housing, and to answer the questions relative to this, the Minister of Public Works and Housing apologized for attending the session, so the members of the Council requested ending the discussion and issuing a decision to adjourn the session. The decision was issued in a form less than described as being strong, as the decision was issued with the following text: "The Federal National Council has noted with great regret the government's continued failure to attend the sessions of the Council as per the constitution, which led to the disruption of the Council from performing its duty. Having noted this, the Council cannot but decide to adjourn today's session and postpone its sessions except for a period to be determined later and to submit the matter to His Highness the Prime Minister to take the appropriate decisions in this regard (Federal National Council, 1973).

However, the situation changed a great deal later, and the ministers showed more understanding and openness to the role of the National Council and its members in exercising control, and thus became more cooperative. Although the minister can respond in writing to the question, the questioner may request the minister's presence in person to respond, and in most cases the minister responds and attends to answer the question and comments delivered by the member. The questioner may be satisfied with the written response and commenting on it, but the Minister of State for Council Affairs recognizes the importance of the comment provided by the questioner and requests the Council to refer the comment to the government to make the best use it (Federal National Council, 2008a).

After facing initial reluctance from the government to engage with the Federal National Council (FNC), a notable transformation occurred, characterized by heightened understanding and willingness from ministers to collaborate with council members in executing their monitoring duties. Several key factors contributed to this transition. First, persistent advocacy efforts by FNC members calling for a more substantial role in governing processes gradually gained traction, prompting a reassessment of the government's stance. Second, increasing educational attainments among FNC representatives resulted in higher-quality parliamentary questions, boosting the council's credibility and influence.

As a consequence of this shift, parliamentary questions have grown significantly in stature as a control mechanism, enabling the FNC to scrutinize government actions more rigorously, demand greater transparency, and enhance overall accountability. Improved dialogue between council members and ministers facilitated a better grasp of respective roles and responsibilities, resulting in swifter resolution of pressing national concerns. Ultimately, this rapprochement bolstered the FNC's ability to shape legislation and monitor the executive branch effectively.

Despite the intensity of the questions and comments often delivered by some members of the National Council, the ministers were very receptive to criticism, ready to answer the question, and understanding that the role of the National Council was to complement their role in serving the country and the citizen.

This resulted in a good response from the ministers by replying and presenting sufficient information, statements, documents and data on the issues in question.

In the question directed by a member of the Federal National Council to the Minister of Energy about the reasons for the lack of energy in the northern emirates and the timeline for resolving the degrading crisis, the Minister of Energy - Speaker of the Board of Directors of the Federal Electricity and Water Authority - responded in a lengthy written answer that included eight paragraphs, although the questioner was not convinced of the answer, and replied: I regret that I have documents that are not compliant with what was stated in the minister's response, and therefore I request the presence of the minister to discuss this issue (Federal National Council, 2008b). In a question addressed to the Minister of Economy in the November 19th, 2007 session, the questioner stated in his response to the minister's answer that she deviated from answering him about the sufferings of citizens, yet the minister's response was that she did not evade and that she spoke clearly and transparently, but it seemed that the question formula made her understand it differently from what the questioner intended, and that she was ready to answer the part that she understood by then from the questioner, but after preparing the answer (Federal National Council, 2016a). Clearly, the success of parliamentary questions in activating control over the government requires the members of the government to understand the role of the council in terms of control, and the importance of the parliamentary question particularly in activating this control, and the target by the end lies in achieving the public interest through cooperation and common understanding, and work to correct errors, if any.

Ease and Simplicity of the Question and its Coverage of All Fields

The expansion of the use of parliamentary questions as a means of parliamentary control is due to its simplicity and ease of use, as it does not require specific expertise of the questioning member, as the question is often put in any abbreviated form, making it easily accessible by any member of the Legislative Council without any trouble (Kanean & Al-Hafiti, 2016) & (Saeed, 2013).

While the question is the most widely used instrument in controlling government actions (Batikh, 2002), it is the most varied instrument in the topics and areas covered (Hafez, 1999).

Interestingly, the Council was able, in the last legislative term (number 16), to discuss 157 questions that dealt with educational, health, social, economic, environmental, service and security fields. Social issues represent the largest number of questions that were discussed. A total of (54) questions of a social nature were discussed, with a percentage of 34% of the total number of questions that were handled. The economic issues ranked second with (29) questions with percentage of (18%). Service issues ranked third with (17) questions and (10.8%) of the total number of questions discussed by the council, then security issues with (8.2%), education (7.6%), health (7%), and environmental issues (4.4%), while other issues amounted to (6.3%) (See the Council's publication "Achievements" 2015-2018).

The analysis of the previous ratios reveals that the parliamentary question has become the most common control instrument in the types of control exercised by the National Council. It is also the most comprehensive in all fields, which shows the role the question plays in the effectiveness of the control exercised by the National Council on the Government.

The Federal Constitution Does Not Adopt All Means of Control

While the FNC's bylaws delineate only three avenues for parliamentary supervision—namely discussions, questions, and grievances—the utilization of parliamentary questions has seen a notable surge owing to heightened awareness among both FNC members and cabinet ministers. As a result, the FNC's capacity to wield control has been significantly bolstered, especially in light of the absence of alternative parliamentary control mechanisms such as interpellations. Despite possessing fewer control tools compared to certain other parliamentary systems, (Egypt has 11 parliamentary control mechanisms and Morocco has 8 parliamentary control mechanisms) the parliamentary question within the FNC has adapted and expanded to fulfill diverse functions typically managed by alternative mechanisms in varying legislative contexts. The increased prominence of parliamentary questions has effectively held the government accountable.

Although the parliamentary question has a significantly important function with other means of control, its role is more important and widely used if the Parliament does not have other more powerful means of control. In case the constitution stipulated the right of members of Parliament to use all means of parliamentary control, including the right of interrogation and withdrawal of confidence, the question would have an important role in influencing the course of events due to its frequent use and ease of use as already shown above, and it would be considered the key to other means of control, as it may end with the need to start using the most effective means at the political level (Al-Baz, 2006). However, in case members of Parliament do not possess means of control stronger than the question, the importance of the question would increase greatly to cover this shortcoming, as the question in this case would be an alternative to these means, even if it does not reach the same results as other means.

The UAE Federal Constitution was issued without stipulating the right of the Federal National Council to exercise all means of control entrusted to the legislative authority over the executive authority, especially the right to question the government and withdraw confidence from it, which made the question an important alternative (Abo El-Wafa, 2021). This explains the flow in the number of questions, especially in recent years, as well as the sharpness of the comments and the end of questions, not a few times, with requests for recommendations. This work does not claim that the question substitutes for these means that were not stipulated in the constitution with the consequences that follow. The argument here is that members rather rely on means available to them, especially the question, to compensate for the lack of other instruments. All of this raises the question, in number, position and importance, of being the most effective and influential instrument in the control role of the Federal National Council.

The Effectiveness of the Parliamentary Question as a Control Instrument

Despite the belief of some constitutional law jurists that the parliamentary question is only a form of cooperation and information exchange between members of Parliament and the Ministry and that it is not a means of parliamentary control instrument, and therefore it is a practically ineffective measure, and the Parliament cannot take any decision regarding it (El-Gamal, 1974), the practical reality confirms that Parliamentary questions are considered as a serious and effective means to control the government in its application of legal rules in general and constitutional rules in particular, because they clarify the issues and behaviors, and direct the government's consideration of certain violations to remedy them (Al-Shaer, 1983).

The parliamentary question is also an instrument for Parliament to follow the steps of the executive bodies in implementing and executing laws, and to reveal the difficulties they face when implementing them, which may lead to the required reforms, in addition to a polling of member of parliament regarding any shortcoming or dilemma, which may help in the development of administrative work of the government and its agencies (El-Gamal, 1974).

The Role of the Question in Influencing Citizens' Daily Concerns

The quality of the questions submitted by the Council members indicates the extent of the council members' interest in citizens' daily concerns, and their work to facilitate their interests. When a member of the Council asked the Minister of Infrastructure Development about the Ministry's plan to develop the Emirates Road (formerly Dubai Transit) linking the Emirates of Dubai and Sharjah, the member explained that the traffic congestion at the weekend (peak time) reaches 10 kms, especially when people come back from their jobs from Abu Dhabi towards Dubai, Sharjah and the Northern Emirates, causing concerns for many people. In addition, Mohammed bin Zayed road converts into a two-lane street from the left and the right and it hosts heavy vehicles when it reaches Umm Al Quwain and heads up to Ras Al Khaimah, which is a burden on the street. Despite this, there is no bridge or tunnel to make a (Federal National Council, 2016b). The question had a clear impact on the development of this road, which is the vital artery in linking the Emirates that make up the Federation.

The Council continues to consolidate its role in interacting with citizens' daily issues in light of the (COVID-19) crisis, and it raises many questions in this concern, the most prominent of which was the question directed to the Minister of Economy about (measures to limit price increases in unusual circumstances), which addressed the measures taken by the Ministry to ensure inhibiting the rise of the prices of main commodities in times of crises, as is the case actually, in light of the crisis of fear of the

spread of the Corona virus infection. Where the questioner confirmed that the prices had increased exaggeratedly, until the price of a pack of masks reached up from 20 to 150 Dirhams at the beginning of the crisis in the absence of strict control, and the prices of many commodities also increased. The questioner continued to produce several proposals to the Minister of Economy, including the demand to activate the Consumer Protection Law, activating the control role of the ministry and municipalities in a tangible way, and setting appropriate penalties to deter anyone who violates this, especially in basic food commodities and medicines, and the need for strict laws to fight those who neglect human values and take advantage of the absence of control to take personal profits. The Minister welcomed the proposals of the questioner, confirming that the members of the Council will note in the coming period some of the decisions that will be taken to activate the Consumer Protection Act, control and price control in the state (Federal National Council, 2021a).

The questions of the Council members also focused on the issues of the retirement pension in the private sector, the delay in payment of the retirement pension to some groups, the new pension law and the installment of the amount of service inclusion, the supplementary allowance and calculating the inflation rates in the retirement pension. This led to the clarification of many issues and calming state workers after many press leaks about the new pension law and the changes that would occur to it, which was a concern to a large group of workers about their future career. In their discussions, the members affirmed the need to amend the law of the General Pension and Social Security Authority that serves the public interest and does not harm the interest of the citizen. They added that amending the law should not be considered from a financial aspect only, but from various aspects, too, including providing multiple positive options for citizens (Federal National Council, 2015).

Parliamentary questions also had an important role in discussing the high federal fees in the state, and how this affects the daily lives of citizens and their living conditions. Council members asked about high federal fees for licensing the practice of economic activities and increased transaction fees in the Ministry of Human Resources and Resettlement, and they assured in their discussion that the consumer is affected by these high fees, and ultimately, they would have to pay to pay high costs for commodities based on high service fees (Federal National Council, 2018a).

The examples cited above showcase the supervisory role that the Council performs through the question to improve the quality of the citizens' and residents' daily lives, and to lift the burdens off their shoulders, which makes the question a quick control instrument that interacts with people's daily lives.

The Role of the Question in Detecting Errors and Violations

Parliamentary questions in the UAE have proven instrumental in instigating policy changes and rectifying errors, as evidenced by various instances where Federal National Council members raised inquiries resulting in tangible outcomes. Noteworthy examples include amendments made to laws or regulations following questions regarding delays in financial accounts presentation, showcasing the direct impact of parliamentary questions on legislative processes. Additionally, inquiries concerning the formation of labor organizations prompted a reevaluation of a draft resolution by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, underscoring the influence of parliamentary inquiries on policy decisions and ensuring thorough consideration of implications. Moreover, addressing concerns such as pollution in tap water through parliamentary questions spurred government action to mitigate the issue, highlighting the role of such inquiries in driving responses to critical public health and environmental challenges.

Members of the Federal National Council used parliamentary questions as an important instrument to monitor daily government work and activities, detect government abuses and violations, clarify government programs, and localize deficiencies in permanent government work. By means of the questions, it was also possible to achieve a higher goal, which is the pursuit of governmental reforms in the state's facilities, future plans, regulations and laws (Farraj, 1991). This includes all aspects of daily life, and all areas administered by the state.

In addition, a parliamentary question constitutes a public questioning of the minister, who may be convinced - after studying the subject matter of the question - that the procedure they have previously taken is not right, so that they issue a counter decision correcting the situation or reconsidering the policy that would be followed in the future (Ibrahim, 1991). In this context, one of the questions addressed to

the Minister of Energy and Industry, Speaker of the Board of Directors of the Federal Electricity and Water Authority, revealed the existence of violations relevant to the pollution of tap water in homes in the Emirate of Ras Al Khaimah, represented by the presence of a high percentage of iron and the beginning of the growth of algae in tanks, which may greatly affect citizens' health. This question had a great impact in directing the government's attention to this issue, and hence its (Federal National Council, 2019).

Further, in the areas of finance and industry, a member of the Council submitted a question to the Minister of Finance and Industry about the delay in presenting the final accounts of the Federation, stressing that the matter is a violation of Article (135) of the Federal Constitution, which is related to the obligation to submit the final accounts statements to the financial administration during the four months following the aforementioned fiscal year, and the minister's response was that this period is practically insufficient, but the matter needs to be addressed (Federal National Council, 1993).

One of the most important examples in this issue is the question submitted by one of the members to the Minister of Cabinet Affairs and the Future, which contained a constitutional violation of Article (111) of the Constitution. The questioning member clarified that the aforementioned article stipulates that "*laws shall be published in the Official Gazette of the Union within two weeks at most from the date of their signature and issuance by the President of the Union after the approval of the Supreme Council. It shall be applicable one month after the date of its publication, unless otherwise stated by the law.*" In addition, Federal Decree-Law No. (9) of 2007 regarding pensions and retirement benefits for the armed forces was issued on November 13th, 2007. It was stipulated in Article No. (56) that this Decree-Law shall be published in the Official Gazette, provided that it shall be implemented as of from 1/1/2008. Federal Decree-Law No. (2) of 2008 regarding retirement benefits for employees of the Ministry of Interior was issued on July 13th, 2008, and Article (56) of it stipulated that it would be published in the Official Gazette, and it shall also be enforced on 1/1/2008. Article (6) of it stipulated that it shall be published in the official Gazette, but it was not published in the Official Gazette. At the end of his question, the member asked, saying: Since the failure to publish laws or decrees by laws after they are signed and issued by the President of the Federation represents a constitutional violation, why is it not published immediately to remove this constitutional violation? (Federal National Council, 2018d) Thus, the question plays its role in detecting violations, alerting ministers about them, and working to correct them.

The Role of the Question in Following Up on the Implementation of Laws, Regulations, Decrees and Decisions

The parliamentary question is a serious means to monitor the government in its application of legal rules in general, because the question seeks clarification on various subject matters, ensuring that the government implements laws and regulations, and revealing the difficulties it faces when implementing them, which leads to carrying out some legislative reforms and following up on the implementation of decrees and ministerial decisions. The question can also be an effective way to bring about legislative reforms, which enables the questioner to submit proposals to address deficiencies, shortcomings, or ambiguities in laws and regulations so that they manage to keep pace with the practical reality of the administration and the continuous development in the structure of the state, its governmental facilities and its various programs.

Specific instances where parliamentary questions in the UAE resulted in actual legislative changes can be observed in various domains. For instance, a member of the Federal National Council directed a question to the Minister of Economy concerning the implementation of Federal Law No. (24) of 2006 on consumer protection and the measures adopted by relevant authorities. This inquiry likely spurred a comprehensive review of the existing consumer protection framework, potentially leading to amendments or improvements in laws safeguarding consumer rights. Similarly, inquiries pertaining to civil service matters, including pensions and retirement benefits for government employees, elicited responses from the Minister, which likely prompted discussions influencing the development or refinement of laws governing civil service regulations and pension schemes. These examples underscore the substantial impact of parliamentary questions on driving legislative changes in critical areas such as consumer protection and civil service regulations.

This is because the members of Parliament can follow up on the implementation of laws by the executive authority, except using the parliamentary question through which their members may know the extent of the ministers' commitment to implementing the laws relevant to their fields of competence. Among the manifestations of this follow-up is the inquiry of members of Parliament about the reasons for the delay in issuing laws or the delay in issuing the executive regulations for the laws that have been approved and published, or about the reasons for not implementing them although the legal periods specified for their issuance and implementation expired (Kanean, 2009).

The sessions of the Federal National Council witnessed members directing many questions to the relevant ministers in this regard. Among that is the question directed to the Minister of Finance about the reasons for the non-compliance of government agencies with the implementation of Resolution No. (19) of 2006 regarding the role of nurseries in ministries, authorities, public institutions and government departments, which orders to establish joined nurseries that provide care to children of working public female employees if married working women reached (50) employees, or the number of children of working women in the age group of 0-4 years reached (20). The Council affirmed the importance of following up the implementation of this decision as despite it being issued 11 years ago, some authorities did not apply it, despite its importance and its positive effects on employees and their children (Federal National Council, 2017a).

Among the important examples in this regard are the questions related to the delay in issuing a specific law. In this regard, the question directed by a member of the Council to the Minister of Cabinet Affairs about the reasons for the severe delay in presenting two federal bills to the Federal National Council, and its effect on expediting the procedures for issuing the two laws. The two awaited laws were of great importance due to their relation to the civil service in the Federal Government, and pensions and retirement benefits for civil servants and employees. The Minister's response was received in writing to the council, but the questioner was not convinced by this written answer, which required the Minister's presence to answer the question personally. The Minister informed of the arrival of the two bills to the Legislation Committee in the Council (Federal National Council, 1994a), which clarifies the role of the parliamentary question in the field of expediting the procedures for issuing legislation when need be.

In the area of issuing decisions, the question directed by a Council member to the Minister of Labor and Social Affairs was a reason to clarify the reasons that led the Ministry to submit a draft resolution to the Cabinet allowing the formation of labor organizations according to the conditions and controls determined by the Minister and looking into the pros and cons of issuing and applying or not applying this decision. The questioner requested that the government carefully study the decision before allowing the formation of these labor organizations, and to provide the Federal National Council with the draft decision to be issued in this regard given the great importance of this subject ("Minutes of Session 9 - Cycle 1 - Chapter 13, 27/5/2003," The Guide to the Work of Sessions and Committees of the Federal National Council, 2003).

Where activating the application of decisions and laws is concerned, the question submitted by a member of the Council to the Minister of Economy about the implementation of Federal Law No. (24) of 2006 regarding consumer protection and the measures taken by the Ministry and the relevant authorities regarding the implementation of this law (Federal National Council, 2007a) had its effect on activating the procedures for implementing the law and working to have stern control over merchants. The question submitted - recently - by a member of the Council to the Minister of Health about the extent to which health insurance companies can bear the expenses of examinations and treatment of (COVID-19) patients had an impact on activating Cabinet Resolution No. (6) of 2013, regarding the organizational structure of the Ministry of Health. The decision gives the Ministry the right to organize and manage the activities of the Federal Health Insurance and to monitor them and propose legislation regulating them. The Minister of Health also highlighted that the most important legal factors that helped the Ministry provide its services free of charge for examinations and patients (COVID-19) was Law No. (14) of 2014 regarding the control of communicable diseases. The minister affirmed that a new Federal Law is being prepared regarding Health insurance, which the questioner had a suggestion about (Federal National Council, 2021b).

The question directed to the Minister of Human Resources and Emiratization, related to the issue of Emiratization in jobs, was crystal clear in seeking information relevant to the role of the National Council in monitoring the implementation and application of laws, as the member asked about the reason for not activating Article (14) of Federal Law No. (8) for the year 1980 regarding the regulation of labor relations and its amendments on this subject, which states that “The Department of Labor may not approve the employment of non-citizens except after verifying that there are no unemployed citizens among the citizens registered in the Employment Department capable of performing the required work in its records.”. One of the results of this question was that the Minister responsible presented a complete methodology to activate the application of the mentioned article in line with UAE Vision 2021 (Federal National Council, 2018b).

The examples cited above reflect the importance and effectiveness of the parliamentary question as an important means of parliamentary control practiced by the Council in following up on the implementation of laws, regulations, decrees and decisions.

The Role of the Question in Filling in Legislative Gaps

Although the right to propose laws is within the competence of the Cabinet according to the text of the Federal Constitution (Abo El-Wafa, 2021), members of the Council can submit questions related to filling a specific legislative gap and urge the government to submit a draft law to cover a specific area that circumstances, and conditions necessitate addressing it with a legislative text (Abo El-Wafa, 2021). Such was the question submitted by a member of the Council to the Minister of Justice, Islamic Affairs and Endowments regarding whether the Ministry has a proposal for a draft law on “*electronic signature*” in order to be issued and approved in the state. The questioner stressed that the rapid development in the field of modern technology and the information revolution, and some countries governments’ interest in following up on this development and keeping abreast of everything new in it and dealing with it closely, would remarkably lead to saving effort and time, in addition to the development and advancement of these countries to find a place for them in a world that has become almost completely dependent on harnessing this technology in its internal and external transactions. One of the instruments of this development is the “*electronic signature*”, as some countries realized the importance of dealing with it and adopted it and worked on legalizing it and setting the necessary controls for it. The subject is the focus of the Ministry's attention, and in his answer to the question, he ended his pledge to study the issue in the Ministry, and that he would also contact the relevant authorities in the country to seek their opinion in (Federal National Council, 2002).

In this context, members of the Council, on a parliamentary question, propose a legislative amendment aimed at filling a loophole in pre-existing legislation. Such is the proposal of the questioning member to the Minister of Human Resources and Emiratization to amend Article (14) of Federal Law No. (8) of 1980 regarding the regulation of labor relations. This law only applies to private sector establishments, whether they are individual institutions or companies, while there are other areas of Emiratization in jobs that are not subject to this law, such as jobs in the Federal Government, local governments, and the semi-governmental sector, all of which are outside the scope of the application of this law. The recommendation of amendment submitted by the member came to include “*the necessity of passing all new work permits for federal, local, governmental, semi-governmental, and private sector institutions that are not subject to the authority of the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization over the ministry, in order to prove that there are no citizens looking for work registered in its database who are able to perform the required work*”. The Minister expressed his desire to adopt the recommendation and promised to study it and benefit from it (Federal National Council, 2018c).

However, the role of the question submitted by the members of the Council does not stop at this point. It may be followed, when necessary, by issuing recommendations for presentation to the Cabinet, or it may turn into a general topic for discussion, which gives the question a greater impact in activating the control role of the Federal National Council, as shall be explained below.

The Role of the Question in Issuing Recommendations and Initiating Article 140 Discussion

The members of the Federal National Council always strive to make the question a real, not fictitious, control instrument. Therefore, they always wait for convincing answers and irrefutable evidence and

statistics that confirm what they say and ask about from the ministers concerned. Therefore, the members are not usually satisfied with just the answer provided to them. Most of the answers sent in writing by the relevant minister are rejected by the members of the Council, who would request the presence of the minister in person to comment on their answer, and even in the case of personal attendance, one hardly finds an answer provided by a minister that is not commented by the questioner.

Originally, the parliamentary question results in a convincing answer to the questioner; but the question may end up with a recommendation from the House of Assembly on the subject of the question, and so the question may end with a request by the questioner to make it a general topic for discussion if it is adopted by five members of the Council in accordance with the provisions of the Bylaws of the council.

There are notable instances where recommendations have indeed influenced policy changes or legislative amendments:

- **Impactful Recommendations:** There have been cases where recommendations stemming from parliamentary questions have directly influenced policy decisions. For example, recommendations made by the Federal National Council members regarding specific issues such as consumer protection, labor regulations, or civil service laws have led to government actions, amendments in regulations, or the introduction of new legislation to address identified gaps or concerns.
- **Legislative Amendments:** In instances where parliamentary questions have highlighted deficiencies or shortcomings in existing laws or regulations, the subsequent recommendations made by the Council members have sometimes resulted in legislative amendments. These changes reflect the responsiveness of the government to the concerns raised through parliamentary inquiries and the willingness to adapt policies to better serve the public interest.
- **Public Impact:** Recommendations originating from parliamentary questions that have a significant public impact, such as those related to health, safety, or consumer rights, are more likely to lead to policy changes or legislative amendments. The visibility and importance of these issues often prompt swift government action in response to the recommendations put forth by the Federal National Council.

Following the Question with a Recommendation:

The question has a controlling role that may go beyond mere questioning about something unknown to the member or verifying an incident they knew about. Although the question ends with an answer, the Council may, based on a proposal from the questioner, submit a recommendation to the Cabinet asking the government to act according to the contents of that question in light of the minister's response (Federal National Council, 2015). The questioner may end up not fully convinced of the minister's answer, and therefore they request a recommendation that their question be put to the Council members for a vote, and if approved by the Council, it will be submitted for presentation to the Cabinet. Undoubtedly, starting as a question and being upgraded to a recommendation could have a greater impact in getting the government to adopt a particular policy or procedures on a subject, or forcing it to rethink its approach to a particular matter, which gives the question a more influential control role.

Among the applications is a question from a member of the Federal National Council to the Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs about not adopting the state's national anthem. The Minister answered that the anthem has not been approved, yet; nor have its lyrics been agreed upon, and that the anthem in Education is a poetry sung while the national anthem is played in the reveille parade, and this continued by custom and not by law. The Minister followed his answer that there is no objection to the issuance of the national anthem when it is approved, and there is no objection to the National Council recommending this. As a result, the Council issued a recommendation to expedite the preparation and issuance of the state's national anthem, or to adopt the anthem approved by the Ministry of Education as a salute (Federal National Council, 2001a).

Another example is the question submitted by a member of the Council to the Minister of State for Financial Affairs, Vice Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Federal Tax Authority, on the government's plan to increase the salaries of employees to cope with the inflation resulted from the

imposition of value-added tax VAT. After the Minister answered, the questioner requested that the Council adopt a recommendation in this regard, and so was this after the Council's approval of it and stated that "working on a statistical study to calculate the citizen's monthly consumption and expenditure rate and submitting it to the Cabinet. And based on the out-comings, raising salaries shall be studied or allocating allowances to cover inflation rate resulted from imposing the Value-added tax, if priority is given to beneficiaries of the assistance of the Ministry of Community Development and retired civilians and military personnel (Federal National Council, 2017b).

On the occasion of the question addressed to the Minister of State for Financial Affairs, Vice Chairman of the Board of Directors of the General Pension and Social Security Authority, regarding the installment of the amount of restoration, the questioner emphasized the suffering of some citizen employees who resigned from previous jobs due to the problem of adding service after joining the new job because of their inability to pay the restoration fees as one payment to secure approval of the restoration. Then, the member asked: Why doesn't the authority facilitate the rules it has decided regarding the installment of the amount of combining restoration in order to facilitate the conditions to the citizens? The Minister answered, explaining that the board of directors of the authority had set this framework in order to preserve the rights of other participants, and that the members of the National Council demand that the authority achieve an investment return. If these amounts were deducted over long periods, then how will the investment return be achieved? The Minister concludes his answer by emphasizing the need for matters to be realistic, and for there to be a balance between the payment period and the exchange period. However, the questioner was not satisfied with the Minister's answer and requested that his question result in a recommendation to amend what was stated in Clause (4) of Article (5) of the Pensions and Social Security Law promulgated by Law No. (7) of 1999, regarding the terms of previous periods of service addition so that it can be paid in monthly installments and not exceed a quarter of the salary, provided that the installment period does not exceed the insured's attainment of the age of sixty. The Council approved the recommendation (Federal National Council, 2017c).

The Council did not only make recommendations but also followed them up. Sometimes, members submit questions related to the Cabinet's delay in responding to the recommendations made by the Council, or only reply by the clause: "*these questions were viewed*", and that the Cabinet must follow up on these recommendations and represent what has been implemented by them. For example, one of the members submitted a question to the Minister of Council Affairs, in which he explained that the Council's recommendations to the government are the fruit of the Council's and its members' efforts in seeking and researching the observations made to the government. In most cases the recommendations issued by the Council to the government include many items that support the concerned minister, then the questioner confirms that the responses received from the ministries "*remain responses belonging to the ministry, but we demand that the honorable Cabinet adopt these recommendations and clarify whichever have not been implemented of the recommendations of the Council, which level they reached and what obstacles they are facing*". (Federal National Council, 2001b) The Minister's response to the question included what indicated that the Cabinet would take the matter into consideration and would be quicker in responding to the recommendations made to it by the Council.

Thus, the parliamentary question can strengthen the control role of the Federal National Council through the recommendations that sometimes result from those questions, and there is no doubt that these recommendations will play a greater role in getting the government to consider seriously the issues raised by the question, and it is most likely that these recommendations enhance them after consideration to change a policy, modify a path, or correct an error.

Making the Question a General Topic for Parliamentary Discussion

Among the types of supervision exercised by the Federal National Council over the government is to raise a general topic for discussion, as Article (140) of the Council's Bylaws states that "*Upon a request signed by five members, a general subject relating to the federation affairs may be put before the Council for discussion to ask for a clarification from the government thereon and to exchange views. All members have the right to take part in the discussion.*" Undoubtedly, the controls and conditions that govern raising a general topic for discussion differ from the controls, conditions, and procedures required for submitting and accepting the question. However, several attempts were made by some council members to turn their

questions into a general topic for discussion (Abdel Razek Al Naqbi, 2012). And if what one learned from the minutes of the Federal National Council sessions in which questions were submitted by some members who asked to convert them into a general topic for discussion, these attempts proved the possibility of shifting, and that there is nothing in the Council's bylaw to prevent the question from turning into a general topic for discussion, provided that the conditions and procedures specified by the regulation in this regard are met, the most important of which is the adoption of this request by five members.

One of the applications in this regard is the question raised by a member of the Council about the ownership of real estate by non-citizens in the state. The question stated that the government had previously referred to a draft federal law regarding the ownership of real estate by non-citizens in the state to the Council, then the project was returned to the Cabinet. Which level in the preparation of laws did the draft law reach? After the minister answered this question, the Speaker of the Federal National Council and the questioner raised the possibility of turning this question into a general topic for discussion due to its extreme importance, and its relationship to demography discussed by the Federal National Council. The questioner requested the adoption of this question by the members and making it a general topic for discussion due to its importance. The Council agreed to turn this question into a general topic for discussion, if it gets adopted by at least five members, but the number was not completed (Federal National Council, 1994b).

On a question posed by a member of the Council to the Minister of Education about "*the foundations of developing curricula and selecting the educational staff for tomorrow's schools,*" the questioner stated that, based on the discussions that took place with His Excellency the Minister, he hoped that everyone would admit that there are mistakes in the work in the schools of tomorrow. However, that did not happen, and accordingly, the member requested the council to turn this question into a general topic to discuss the policy of the Ministry of Education regarding tomorrow's schools, and the council agreed to that, provided that the required procedures should be followed in this regard (Federal National Council, 2008c).

Time repeated itself when one of the Council members asked to turn his question to the Minister of Economy regarding protecting consumers from price increases into a general topic to discuss the Ministry's policy regarding price inflation in the country (Federal National Council, 2007b). After his question about the measures taken by the Ministry and the relevant authorities regarding the implementation of Federal Law No. (24) of 2006 regarding consumer protection, the member was not convinced by the Minister's answer, stressing that the state has about (23) thousand citizen families, and that he does not believe that there is one of these families that does not suffer from the high prices, that the detailed lengthy response speech given by Her Excellency the Minister of Economy does not, in fact, change the reality, and that the most important decision taken by the Ministry of Economy is to reduce the price of cinema tickets, while some families are unable to provide living for their children because of the high prices. The member asked: Has the Ministry of Economy submitted a study or a request to the Cabinet through which the Government provides direct support in some consumer goods, as in neighboring countries? In his second intervention, the member ended with a request to turn the question into a general topic to discuss the ministry's policy on the phenomenon of high prices in the Emirates. The Speaker of the Council did not object to the turning, but he clarified that turning the question into a general topic involved different procedures, and that the member can discuss with members outside session on this matter.

From the discussion above, the importance of the question in terms of the role of the Federal National Council in monitoring the government's actions is clear. Although the right of the Council is guaranteed independently with the possibility of raising a general topic for discussion regardless of the existence of a prior question or its absence, in asking the question first, it may reveal to the members the importance of the topic that was not previously noticed, or the necessity of reviewing and discussing the government's policy in a field that members did not raise previously and thus need to bring it forward as a topic for discussion.

Conclusion

The parliamentary control instruments available to the Federal National Council are limited to raising general topics for discussion, asking parliamentary questions, making recommendations on specific topics, and following up the complaints submitted by citizens. Although the Council does not have all the instruments of parliamentary control over the government, the members of the Council have been able, through parliamentary questions, to set a good example in monitoring government actions. It is admitted that the parliamentary question is not the strongest instrument among the instruments of legislative authority control over the executive authority in most countries of the world. Despite this, it has become the first quantitative instrument, according to the statistics presented above, and the most important qualitative instrument in the Federal National Council's control over the government. By using it, members of the Council were able to raise many topics that are important to the citizens and affect their daily lives, requesting clarifications, revealing irregularities, making recommendations, and suggesting amendments, which sometimes caused embarrassment to ministers and made them admit, albeit implicitly, their mistakes and promise to work on correcting them.

The ease and simplicity of using the question had a great impact on its spread and frequent use. The cultural awareness of the members of the National Council, their academic qualifications, their good knowledge and their continuous follow-up on the affairs of the Union and the work of the ministries, added to the ministers' understanding in most cases of the role of the National Council and its members in exercising control and their support of that role had a great impact in developing the skill of using questions as an important instrument of activating the council's control. However, the most important reason that has made the question the most influential means in empowering the role of the Council, is due to the fact that the UAE Federal Constitution does not include all instruments of control usually entrusted to the legislative authority over the executive authority, especially investigation and the right to interrogation of the government and withdraw confidence.

The simplicity of the question format in parliamentary inquiries in the UAE plays a significant role in facilitating direct and impactful inquiries, thereby influencing the quality of government responses. The following illustrates how this aspect contributes to a more comprehensive understanding:

- **Accessibility and Clarity:** The straightforward and concise nature of parliamentary questions allows for easy comprehension by both the questioning members and the government officials responding. This clarity ensures that the inquiries are direct and focused, leading to specific responses that address the core issues raised. As a result, the simplicity of the question format enhances the effectiveness of inquiries by eliminating ambiguity and promoting clear communication.
- **Efficiency in Communication:** The simplicity of the question format streamlines the communication process between the Federal National Council members and the government representatives. By presenting inquiries in a clear and uncomplicated manner, members can efficiently convey their concerns or seek clarifications on government actions. This efficiency promotes a more direct exchange of information, enabling timely responses and facilitating productive discussions on pertinent issues.
- **Impactful Inquiries:** The ease of formulating questions in a straightforward format allows members to raise a wide range of issues across various sectors without the need for specialized expertise. This accessibility encourages active participation in parliamentary oversight and control, leading to a diverse set of inquiries that can address critical matters affecting the public interest. Consequently, the simplicity of the question format enables members to make impactful inquiries that prompt meaningful responses and potential policy changes.
- **Quality of Government Responses:** The clarity and specificity of parliamentary questions resulting from the simple format often demand equally precise and informative responses from government officials. The need to address inquiries directly and comprehensively enhances the quality of government responses, as officials are compelled to provide detailed explanations, data, and justifications for their actions or decisions. This dynamic fosters transparency, accountability,

and thoroughness in government responses, ultimately contributing to a more robust dialogue between the legislative and executive branches.

In conclusion, the simplicity of the question format in parliamentary inquiries in the UAE not only allows for more direct and impactful inquiries but also influences the quality of government responses by promoting clarity, efficiency, and effectiveness in communication between the Federal National Council and the government.

A future adoption by the UAE Federal Constitution of the most important control instruments in terms of their consequences would have an impact on strengthening the control role over the ministers. However, considering the current constitutional text, it is possible to activate the current control instruments, especially the parliamentary question, through the follow-up conducted by the National Council pursuant to its reaction or response. Many cases presented in this research work show that the questioner follows his comment with a request to submit recommendations that are of a great deal of importance to the Cabinet, which may not materialise due to the lack of subsequent monitoring. The role of the Speaker of the Council is essential to follow-up on the actions that should be carried out by the executive body.

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