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Empowering People through Public Engagement: Case of Senate of Pakistan's Outreach Programme



SENATE SECRETARIAT
RESEARCH DIRECTORATE

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1. Introduction

In democratic countries Parliaments have a duty & obligation to encourage public engagement, thereby serving the objective of promoting and strengthening democracy. The work of Parliamentarians must be derived from an open dialogue with the public whose interest they represent. Unless the public are informed about what Parliaments are doing they cannot influence the institutions to address their issues and solve their problems and also they cannot hold Parliaments and their elected members accountable. Thus by promoting open dialogue, effective communication and public engagement, Parliaments can serve to strengthen democratic institutions and help to constitute good governance.

In order to minimize the democratic deficit between the public and their Parliaments, the importance of developing means of effective communication to educate and inform public about the work done by the Parliaments and the Parliamentary Committees, & public engagement programmes have been recognized and thus has become one of the main areas of focus of Legislatures.

In this regard, numerous initiatives have also been taken by the Senate of Pakistan (Upper House) in order to strengthen the communication between the people and the Parliamentarians. These initiatives have helped in increasing public confidence for democracy and their understanding regarding role of Parliament. One such program is the “Senate of Pakistan’s Outreach Programme”. This programme has been a great milestone in important democratic norms, such as public engagement with Parliament, information sharing between the people and the legislature and strengthened bilateral relations between the Parliament of Pakistan with the other Parliaments of world. Such outreach initiatives helped the Senate of Pakistan plant a firm footing in the society and developed the long-needed linkages with positive outcomes.

2. Bilateral Parliamentary Relations

The Senate of Pakistan has been actively engaged in promoting bilateral and multilateral Parliamentary relations by exchange of delegations and participation in international events. These incoming / outgoing visits give an opportunity to Senate of Pakistan to share its point of view on bilateral, regional and international issues in a more candid yet formal manner. For closer cooperation and in order to promote parliamentary diplomacy, the Senate of Pakistan has also earmarked a new initiative of signing bilateral MoUs with various parliaments of the world and has taken many practical steps to strengthen bilateral relations.

Senate of Pakistan is an active member of international forums of Parliaments including IPU, APA, CPU and UN. During Parliamentary Year 2016, the Senate of Pakistan executed 32 Parliamentary Delegations to IPU, CPA, APA, UN and bilateral Parliamentary fora. In the sphere of Conferences and Seminars, during 2016, the Inter-Parliamentary Relations (IPR) Branch organized APA Standing Committee on Social and Cultural Affairs, CPA co-sponsored Staff Development Workshop and Hot Topic Forum for Asia and South East Asia Regions at Islamabad. In order to boost up closer cooperation and coordination with other parliaments of the world, 54 Parliamentary Friendship Groups were constituted and activated during 2016.

3. Youth Engagement with the Parliament

In order to engage, inform and utilize youths with the working of political process in Parliaments, many Parliaments have developed different schemes and programmes which give youths an opportunity to learn about the responsibilities and working of Parliament and Parliamentarians. This engagement enhances the communication between the youths and Parliamentarians and the energies of youths are exploited to develop the working of Parliaments. This exposure has also greatly helped propagate the Parliamentary supremacy and democratic principles into the younger generation.

Pakistan is one the countries where ratio of youths is very high, about more than 62 percent. The Senate of Pakistan is fully aware of treasure of youths in Pakistan and its importance for development of a nation. In this regard different programmes have been introduced to engage youth with the Parliament. **Clerk of the Parliament Programme and Short Term Internship Programmes** are one of such programmes that are being organized by the Senate of Pakistan over the period of year. The programme is launched by short and long duration. The candidates are selected on the basis of merit and qualification.

Clerk of the Parliament Programme

Under the main and long term component titled “**Clerk of the Parliament Programme**”, candidates are selected after standard process of exam and interview. After selection, they are attached with Legislation wing, Committees wing and various other Branches of the Secretariat to understand the Parliamentary process. In 2016, 23 individuals were selected against this program.

Short Term Internship Programmes

Under Short Term component, six months internship continued to be offered, through universities, to final year / semester student or recent graduates. The Third Batch of Short Term Internship programme has been launched from 1st March, 2017. The Clerk of Parliament and Interns are given training to enhance their capabilities and skills. Yearly, more than hundred youths are given opportunities in the Parliament to explore their own skills and understand the working of Parliament and democracy.

4. Public Petition Table

Another new great initiative of Senate of Pakistan is the establishment of **Public Petition Table** where people can submit petitions regarding public issues through an online portal available on Senate's website or can send their petitions through mail on Senate Mailing address. Public Petitions Table (PPT) has provided an almost unprecedented opportunity to the ordinary individuals or even communities and groups to reach out to the Senate of Pakistan with their concerns of public importance. The petitions are either discussed in the House or in the committees. This online portal is facilitating Senate's intervention in redressal of issues and problems of public importance through Senate Committees Recommendations and discussions in the House, which might otherwise not have been highlighted.

Committees can also call the petitioner for briefing or clarity on matter under discussion. Online portal also gives the petitioners access to their submitted petitions where they can find the status and progress made against their submitted issue. This reflects the steps that parliament takes for people's engagement with the parliamentarians. It increases the confidence of people on democracy and the parliament. During current Parliamentary year of 2016-2017, Public Petition Table received more than 550 public petitions through PPT online portal and postal mail. 54 petitions have been referred to Standing Committees from which 42 petitions have been disposed of by the Committees.

5. Public Engagement through Website

Internet is fast becoming the main source of communication with the public for Parliaments around the world and Parliaments are now focusing more on implementing the concept of E-Parliament. One such tool is the use of Parliaments Website which is tailored to their institutional identity and audience requirements.

The **Senate's Website** now serves as an online information hub providing public and other stakeholder's up-to-date and timely information regarding legislative business, House proceedings, including Agenda, Order of the day and details about Committee meetings. Information relating to question answer session and Hansard (Debates) is also promptly available on the website. Online registration for booking Guided Tour to Gali-e-Dastoor is also provided on the Senates website and if anyone is unable to physically visit Parliament they can explore Parliament's buildings through Senates Website guided **Virtual Tour**.

Public Petitions (Drop Box) on the Senates Website also facilitates the public by allowing them to submit their petitions online by filling in the Performa on the website. The **Online Video Broadcasting** of proceedings in real time is also available on Senate Website via the internet .It enables the Parliament to reach public in areas where you would not otherwise be able to view proceedings on in-state television channels.

6. Publications by the Senate of Pakistan

One of the key objectives of effective communication is the information quality and its accessibility to the public. Thus in order to ensure open access to information and improve levels of knowledge about a Parliament and its working, the Senate of Pakistan offers an impressive amount of information through their Publications. These publications were published in order to transmit information to the public at large and also to streamline the work being performed by the House, its Committees and Members.

The Senate of Pakistan has published various books for awareness of people to understand their duties and power. The book namely the "Constitution of Pakistan, 1973" and "Consistent Parliamentary Cord - Fundamental Rights of the Citizens of Pakistan" has been published to spread the awareness among the people for law and their Fundamental Rights. The book titled "Report to the People of Pakistan" has been published to give detail of whole year of activities of Senate of Pakistan.

7. Public Visit of Parliament

Parliamentary institutions are seen as the symbols of democracy as are the iconic buildings in which these institutions are located. Parliamentary Institutions serve as a testament and a witness to a country's political history. Thus in order to preserve the democratic principles of openness and accessibility and engage the interest of the public of all ages, Senate of Pakistan has introduced a set of new initiatives which provides opportunity to the **Public to Visit and witness**

what is happening at Senate. Senate of Pakistan has hosted visits to the Parliament Buildings from number of groups and delegation and gave them insight into the working of the Senate of Pakistan.

Constitutional Alley (Gali-e-Dastoor)

Another such initiative of the Senate of Pakistan is the establishment of “Constitutional Alley” (**Gali-e-Dastoor**) in the Parliament House building envisioned and materialized by the Honourable Chairman Senate of Pakistan, Mian Raza Rabbani. It was built to pay humble tribute to the teeming millions of Pakistanis who were killed, tortured, jailed, lashed or sent into exile in view of their struggle for democratic rights. It is a corridor that is artistically designed to represent the democratic history of Pakistan that has been full of dictatorial hurdles. Interested visitors can also book the tour online through Senate website. As of now; from September 2016 to March 2017, more than 1600 people that include: students, advocate, members from civil society, bureaucrat, families, ambassadors, and parliamentary delegations, have visited Gali-e-Dastoor.

Monument in Remembrance of ‘Unsung Heroes of Democracy’

Pakistan Monument Wall illuminates the struggle of unsung heroes. The wall reflects and testifies the long lasting struggle of workers, labourers, students, poets, journalists, politicians and the people of Pakistan for restoration of democracy and liberty in Pakistan. This novel idea by the Senate of Pakistan is another step of Public Outreach Programme. The Monument Wall is emotional mean to engage public with the idea of democracy and feelings of Parliament for common people.

8. Media

Senate of Pakistan has also taken a number of initiatives to effectively communicate and reach out to the Public through Media.

Communication through Print & Electronic Media

All proceeding of Senate Session and Committee meetings are open for Media monitoring except in camera sitting in extraordinary circumstances. The Senate Hall has a separate gallery for Press. The Media Wing in Senate also regularly sends press releases to a wide variety of Newspapers and Radio and TV channels to keep Public informed on the developments in the Senate especially about important bills, agenda items discussed in Committee meetings and information about ongoing events and seminars etc.

Communication through Social Media

Also realizing importance of the social media, the Senate of Pakistan has also launched **Facebook and Twitter accounts** of the House of Federation to effectively communicate with media and the people. All information relating to the House, Committees and other important meetings is shared through these tools.

To conclude, Senate of Pakistan believes in empowering the people through public engagement of Parliament. Public engagement with Parliament illuminates the participatory democracy which results active involvement of people in democratic process. Realising its importance, these initiatives helped the Senate of Pakistan plant a firm footing in the society and developed the long-needed linkages with positive outcomes. Senate of Pakistan has taken many initiatives and will continue to work to enhance public engagement of Parliament with international community.