



Question Hour and Zero Hour

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Why in News

Recently, the Central government has decided to **suspend the Question Hour** and **curtail Zero Hour** for **Monsoon Session**. This has been done in view of the **Covid-19 pandemic**.

In the past too, the Question Hour has been suspended. However, they were suspended during national emergencies. The current suspension has been done during a regular session.

Key Points

- **Question Hour:**

- **Definition:** The **first hour of every parliamentary sitting** is slotted for the Question Hour. However, in 2014 the Question Hour **was shifted in the Rajya Sabha from 11 am to 12 noon.**
 - During this one hour, Members of Parliament (MPs) ask **questions to ministers** and hold them accountable for the functioning of their ministries.
 - The questions can also be asked to the **private members** (MPs who are not ministers).
- **Regulation:** It is regulated according to **parliamentary rules.**
The **presiding officers of the both Houses** (Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha) are the **final authority** with respect to the conduct of Question Hour.
- **Kinds of Questions:** There are three types of questions asked.
 - **Starred question** (distinguished by an asterisk)- this requires an **oral answer** and hence supplementary questions can follow.
 - **Unstarred question**- this requires a **written answer** and hence, supplementary questions cannot follow.
 - **Short notice question** is one that is asked by giving a **notice of less than ten days.** It is answered **orally.**
- **Frequency:** Question Hour in both Houses is **held on all days of the session.** But there are **two days when an exception is made.**
 - When the **President addresses MPs from both Houses.**
The President's speech takes place at the beginning of a new Lok Sabha and on the first day of a new Parliament year.
 - On the day the Finance Minister presents the **Budget.**

- **Zero Hour:**

- Zero Hour is an **Indian parliamentary innovation.** It is not **mentioned in the parliamentary rules book.**
- Under this, MPs can raise matters **without any prior notice.**
- The zero hour starts immediately after the question hour and lasts until the agenda for the day (i.e. regular business of the House) is taken up.
In other words, the **time gap between the question hour and the agenda** is known as zero hour.

- **Impact:**

- Over the last 70 years, MPs have successfully used the parliamentary device of 'Question Hour' to shine a light on government functioning. Their questions have **exposed financial irregularities** and brought data and information regarding government functioning to the **public domain**.
- Suspension of the Question Hour would mean that the **Opposition would lose the right to question the government**. Also, the **Ministers are not liable to reply to the issues raised during the Zero Hour**.
- This would mean that the **MPs would not be able to hold the government accountable** for its action. This will go **against the spirit of parliamentary democracy**.

Way Forward

Since the government is accountable to the parliament, the parliamentary proceedings meant to hold the government accountable should not be suspended or curtailed as it will go against the essence of the Constitution.

Source: IE