



Mains Practice Question

Q. The decision to go without “Question Hour” during the Monsoon Session of Parliament has evoked serious concerns about the democratic functioning of the institution and erodes constitutional mandate of parliamentary oversight over executive action. Discuss. (250 words)

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Approach

- Introduce by briefly writing about the ‘Question Hour’ and ‘Zero Hour’ and mention the significance of the same for democracy.
- Write in brief the reason for cancelling the Question Hour.
- Discuss in detail the concerns about the democratic functioning of parliament in light of evoking the ‘Question Hour’.
- Conclude by suggesting a way forward.

Introduction

- Generally, the first hour of a parliamentary sitting is devoted to the Questions and this hour is called the Question Hour.
- 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. Under this, MPs can raise matters without any prior notice.

Body

Significance of the Question and Zero Hour for democracy

- These have a special significance in the proceedings of the Parliament. Asking of questions is an inherent and unfettered parliamentary right of members.
 - It is during the Question Hour that the members can ask questions on every aspect of administration and Governmental activity.
- Government policies in national as well as international spheres come into sharp focus as the members try to elicit pertinent information.
- Sometimes questions may lead to the appointment of a Commission, a Court of Enquiry or even Legislation when matters raised by Members are grave enough to agitate the public mind and are of wide public importance.

Reason for its cancellation: In view of the Covid-19 pandemic and a truncated Monsoon Session, Parliament has said no to Question Hour and curtailed Zero Hour. Opposition MPs have criticised the move, saying they will lose the right to question the government.

Concerns of evoking the ‘Question Hour’ and Zero Hour

- Question Hour is a device to **criticise government policies and programmes**, ventilate public grievances, expose the government’s lapses, extract promises from ministers, and thereby, ensure

accountability and transparency in governance. The absence of 'Question hour' will impinge on the basic right of democracy i.e. asking the question.

- **Government is duty bound to respond** to questions on different issues such as its failure in handling the pandemic, the unprecedented decline in GDP and its impact on the economy, the New Education Policy, tensions at the border, rising unemployment, the miseries of migrant labour and so forth.
 - By doing away with the Question Hour, the government has opted for a face-saving measure.
- **Democratic rights** are being denied to the elected representatives of Independent India.
- The government's actions erode the constitutional mandate of **parliamentary oversight over executive actions** as envisaged under Article 75 (3) of the Indian Constitution.
 - Moreover, such actions prevent the members of Parliament from carrying out their constitutional obligations of questioning, debating, discussing and scrutinising government policies and actions.
- Question and Zero Hour are the manifestation of a **representative kind of democracy** in operation, in the sense that representation of the people directly questions the government on matters of governance. The government is duty bound to answer the questions in the House as they relate to its people.

Conclusion

- If questions are not permitted in the Parliament physically, the same could be started in virtual meets. MPs could be allowed to ask the question through the digital platform.
- Various options for social distancing can be attempted like reserving each day for select ministries to prevent crowding by officials seeking to help their ministers.
- At the same time an orderly conduct can also ensure that the questions are raised with discipline and they don't affect the safety protocol too.
- The Question hour & Zero hour acts as important tools for enabling the doctrine of checks and balance. Therefore, Parliaments should not dispense with these even at the time of war.