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**FAFEN’s Report on the 23rd (Budget) Session of the National Assembly**

**NA Budget Session Marked by Low Attendance, Multiple Walkouts**

* **Prime Minister attends 5% of the session**
* **161 lawmakers participate in budget debate**

ISLAMABAD, June 26, 2015: The 23rd session of the National Assembly was marked by the passage of the Finance Bill 2015 and adoption of three resolutions, including one to extend the Pakistan Army (Amendment) Ordinance 2015 for 120 days, amid multiple walkouts by the opposition, says the Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN).

The session, comprising fifteen sittings, started on June 5 and concluded on June 25, 2015. On average, each sitting started 16 minutes behind the schedule and lasted five hours and 14 minutes.

The Finance Bill appeared on the list of business during the first sitting and was passed in the 13th sitting. The second sitting witnessed the presentation of the Finance (Amendment) Ordinance 2015. A total of 161 lawmakers participated in the budget debate that consumed 52% of the session time.

Sixty-four lawmakers from the ruling PML-N took part in the budget deliberations, followed by PTI (26), PPPP (25), MQM (16), JUI-F (10), JI (four), PkMAP (three), PML-F (two) and one each from AMLP, QWP, APML, BNP, ANP, AJIP and NPP. In addition, four independent members also contributed in the budget debate.

The Senate Standing Committee on Finance, Revenue, Economic Affairs, Statistics and Privatization submitted 92 recommendations on the Finance Bill, of which 56 were incorporated by the National Assembly.

The National Assembly adopted 143 demands for grants from different departments and disapproved 1,515 cut motions. Forty-nine demands of grants were approved in the absence of the opposition lawmakers.

The lawmakers’ attendance remained low throughout the session – with an average of 40 (12%) members present at the start and 78 (23%) at the end of each sitting. Since the National Assembly Secretariat does not share the attendance of lawmakers with public, FAFEN conducts a headcount of members at the start and end of each sitting and documents the actual time spent by the legislators, including the Prime Minister, Opposition Leader, Speaker, Deputy Speaker and Finance Minister, on the floor of the House.

The Prime Minister attended four out of 15 sittings (5% of the session), while the Opposition Leader was present in 13 sittings for 41% of the session time. The Finance Minister attended 13 sittings for 35% of session. The third was suspended for sixty minutes due to missing quorum pointed out by a PTI lawmaker. Quorum was also pointed out during the 10th and 12th sittings, but was found to be complete upon counting.

Nearly 54% of the session was chaired by the Speaker, who was present in all sittings. The Deputy Speaker was present in 14 out of 15 sittings and presided over 29% of the session. The remaining 97 minutes (2%) were chaired by the Panel of Chairpersons. In addition, the House observed ten breaks that consumed 15% of the proceedings’ time.

The House adopted three resolutions to condemn the massacre of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, to condemn the provocative statements by the Indian leadership and to extend the Pakistan Army (Amendment) Ordinance 2015 for a period of 120 days.

Moreover, the last two sittings witnessed a debate on the situation from the ongoing energy crisis in the country. Six lawmakers from PPPP, in addition to PTI (5), MQM (4), PML-N, PkMAP, JI (two each) and ANP, APML, AMLP and JUI-F (one each) participated in the debate that consumed 9% of the session.

Out of 14 starred questions appearing on the list of business, none was taken up by the House. The House also left two calling attention notices (CANs) regarding alleged irregularities in the recent Local Government elections in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and non-payment of pension at the rate announced by the Finance Minister were also left unaddressed. The House suspended Rule 288 of the Rules of Procedure to allocate more time for the general discussion on the budget.

Nearly 9% of the proceedings’ time was consumed by points of orders (POs). However, none of the 132 POs were able to extract a formal ruling from the Chair. Unless the Chair gives a formal ruling on a PO, it does not lead to any assembly output.

Three reports on the Islamabad Subordinate Judiciary Service Tribunal Bill 2015, the Minimum Wages for Unskilled Workers (Amendment) Bill 2015 and the National University of Medical Sciences Bill 2015 were presented during the session. In addition, the House witnessed the presentation of papers on the supplementary demands for grants and appropriations for the financial year 2014-2015, schedule of authorized expenditure 2015-2016 and supplementary schedule of authorized expenditure 2014-2015.

The House passed two motions to constitute a 21-member committee that would review the progress on the Pak-China Economic Corridor and continuation of the debate on the situation arising out of energy/electricity crisis in the country during the next session.

The session witnessed 11 protests/walkouts over several issues. Five of these walkouts were staged by the entire opposition; twice to demand broadcast of their speeches on television, once each to protest a PML-N lawmaker’s remarks against Chief Minister Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, to detest the excessive load shedding in the country and to protest against ignoring their cut motions.

The Defense Minister’s controversial statement triggered four walkouts, thrice from MQM and once from the entire opposition except MQM. Independent lawmakers, in addition to lawmakers from JI, ANP and PTI, walked out on two separate occasions to protest the energy crisis.

*This session report is based on direct observation of the National Assembly proceedings conducted by Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI) – a member organization of FAFEN. Errors and omissions are excepted.*

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