

RASED's Report on Errors in the Recent Statement by the Ministry of Political and Parliamentary Affairs 10 / 3 / 2015

A number of Jordanian media outlets today covered a press release by the Ministry of Political and Parliamentary Affairs which RASED has found to contain a number of inaccuracies. The statement was released by the Ministry to contest the RASED's 18th Weekly Report on the Performance of the Parliament, which alleged that the Ministry was inconsistently fulfilling its role channeling MPs' questions to the relevant cabinet ministers.

The Ministry's statement included false statements that reflect a lack of understanding of the bylaws of the House of Representatives and indicate the Ministry's poor judgment in attempting to justify its mistakes.

The following is a detailed account of the errors in the Ministry's statement:

The first mistake in the Ministry's statement dealt with Article 128 of the bylaws of the House of Representatives which specifies the required timeframe for the government to respond to MP questions. The Ministry's statement claimed that "Simple arithmetic, in accordance with the bylaws, shows that the length of time for delivering an answer to [an MP's] question is 35 days from the date of its filing with the General Secretariat, including 14 days for the Minister [to answer]."

Article 128 of the bylaws, however, stipulates the following:

- a. "The Speaker [of the House] is to refer the question to the appropriate minister within 7 days from the date of its submission.
- b. The Minister is to respond in writing within 14 days.
- c. The Speaker is to refer the response to the submitter within 14 days of the date of receipt."

Paragraphs A and C of this article are clearly regulatory provisions governing the behavior of members of Parliament and are not included in the timeframe provided for Minister's response to questions. Paragraph A, which instructs the Speaker of the House to submit questions within 7 days, is a new addition to the bylaws. It was included in the bylaws in order to give the Speaker enough time to refer questions in case of a busy workload or travel abroad. The 7 day period is a right for the Speaker, and it is not part of the timeframe given to the Ministry of Political and Parliamentary Affairs. Paragraph C of the article is also regulatory provision for the House and has no relation to the Ministry.

The only paragraph that does regulate the work of the Ministry is Article B, which states that ministers must respond to questions provided to them within 14 days, not 35 as the Ministry claimed. On the whole, the period from the time an MP asks a question to the time that the Ministry directs the answer back to the Speaker of the House should not exceed 21 days. This does not count the time that the Speaker may take to return the answer to the MPs.

The Ministry's faulty interpretation of the allotted timeframe for answering questions has led to frustration and confusion among MPs. During the oversight session of the House last Tuesday, MPs Mufleh al-Rahimi and Mustafa al-Ruwashdeh's expressed their disappointment about the delay in the government's response to questions. Another MP, Adnan al-'Ajarmeh, announced on his Facebook page on March 3 that he had received a response from the Minister of Health to a question that he had posed a full year ago.

The second major issue with the Ministry's statement is the fact that it addresses the absence of Ministers in oversight sessions by claiming the Ministry released an apology for the Minister's absence to the Speaker of the House and its Secretariat prior to last week's oversight session. RASED would like to point out that last week during Tuesday's parliamentary oversight session, MP Nadal al-Hiyari posed an important question that was almost was submitted as an official interpellation. Even during these crucial oversight proceedings, there was no announcement on the floor of the Parliament about any apology from the Ministry of Social Development or a justification for its lack of attendance at the session. If there

had been such an apology issued to the Speaker, this would have been announced to the assembly.

The third problem with the Ministry's statement is its claim about the number of questions that have been posted by MPs. The Ministry's statement claims that MPs have posed 1425 questions to the government, and it also claims that the Ministry has answered 43 questions within the legally specified timeframe and 129 questions late. However, the statement did not mention when or during which session these questions were posed. This is especially important since during the Second Ordinary Session alone, the House has already submitted 500 questions to the Ministry.

In order to clear up any misconceptions contained in the Ministry's statement, RASED offers the following facts regarding questions and responses from the start of the 17th Parliament to date.

1. During the Non-Ordinary Session, MPs posed 1165 questions of which 953 were answered.
2. During the First Ordinary Session, MPs posed 762 questions of which 542 were answered.
3. During the First Extraordinary Session of the First Ordinary Session, MPs posed 164 questions of which 22 were answered.
4. During the Second Extraordinary Session of the First Ordinary Session, MPs posed 49 questions of which 8 were answered.

These facts include numbers of questions from the start of the 17th Parliament until the start of the current Second Ordinary Session. These numbers indicate that MPS asked a total of 2140 questions and received answers to 1525 of them.

As stated above, 500 questions have been asked during the [current] Second Ordinary Session, and as of Sunday, March 8, 190 of them have not yet been answered. Adding these questions to those asked during previous sessions, the total number of questions asked during the 17th Parliament is 2640.

The fourth major problem with the Ministry's statement is its assertion that "Publication of any report, analysis, or information concerning the legislative and executive branches must take the opinion of the Ministry into consideration in order to ensure accuracy, relevance, and service of the collective national interest." These words clearly demonstrate the Ministry's attitude toward its work with the legislative branch. More specifically, the Ministry's desire to be consulted on reports about MPs' questions shows a clear attempt to encroach on the work of the legislative branch. At the same time, it is important to recall that RASED's oversight work was praised by His Excellency Prime Minister Dr. Abdullah Ensour when the Prime Minister sent a request to a number of ministries to follow up with the results of RASED's report on Jordan's participation in the Open Government Partnership.

RASED believes the Ministry's mindset demonstrated in this statement and accompanying press releases do not demonstrate a good understanding of the King's royal directives. His Majesty's recent 5th discussion paper, "Goals, Achievements and Conventions: Pillars for Deepening Our Democratic Transition", states that "Government, embodied in the Prime Minister, Ministers and Civil Servants, is responsible for developing and executing comprehensive programmes for improving the economic opportunities and social well-being Jordanians deserve and aspire for. In doing so, it must earn and maintain the confidence of Parliament according to its policy plan, set standards of excellence for government performance, and champion transparency, good governance and partnership with the private sector and civil society in words and deeds." The Ministry's attempts to diminish the role of civil society organizations, including RASED - which the Ministry disparaged in its report by referring to it as the "so-called RASED" - clearly violate the word and spirit of the royal directive. Instead, the Ministry should work to fulfill its role as a democratic reformer and remain especially receptive to citizens' critiques.