



Research article

Parliamentary question: Insights from the Federal National Council in the UAE

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the paramount role of parliamentary questioning as a control mechanism exercised by the Federal National Council (FNC) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The surge in its utilization, attributed to heightened awareness among FNC members and ministers, has significantly enhanced the Council's control capabilities, especially in the absence of alternative parliamentary control instruments such as interpellations. The paper underscores the simplicity and adaptability of parliamentary questioning, which spans diverse topics and addresses everyday state matters, rectifies errors, monitors law implementation, and fills legislative gaps. The structure of the paper comprises two sections: the first scrutinizes procedural requirements within the UAE's Constitution and the FNC's Bylaw, while the second section explores practical examples, offering insights into the distinctive nature of the FNC's parliamentary questioning compared to regional practices.

1. Introduction

The Parliamentary Question serves as a formal inquiry directed to a government minister, aiming to acquire information or urge the Government to take action. It stands out from other parliamentary control mechanisms due to specific rules that govern its use, ensuring that the questioner is satisfied with the response received [1,2]. These rules have been codified in the Federal Constitution, with further elaboration provided by the Council's bylaw concerning the parliamentary question [3]. These rules encompass both procedural aspects and conditions governing the interaction between the questioner and the relevant minister, spanning from the submission of the question to the provision of an answer. Adherence to these procedures and conditions plays a crucial role in activating this instrument and reaping its benefits. Thus, the subsequent sections will delve into the detailed explanation of these procedures and conditions.

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1.1. Research questions

This research endeavors to demonstrate the impact of parliamentary questioning on the activation of control measures within the FNC over the government. To accomplish this objective, the research is structured into two primary sections. One section delves into the overarching bylaw that govern the exercise of the parliamentary questioning by members of the FNC. The second section explores some examples and observations regarding the relevant articles of the FNC's bylaw that govern questions. In this sense, this research study aims to investigate the following research questions.

- What are the procedures for submitting a parliamentary question in the FNC?
- What are the conditions to be met through the question's review process?
- How parliamentary questioning was practiced in the period 2020–2023?

1.2. Purpose and rationale of the study

The significance of this research derives from its endeavor to examine the influence of parliamentary questioning on the activation of control mechanisms within the FNC of the UAE. While previous literature [4–7] has touched upon the subject of parliamentary questioning, this research approaches it from the perspective of its role in empowering the FNC's authority to scrutinize the government's decisions. The research investigates a three-year period, from 2020 to 2022, offering a comprehensive analysis of the influence of parliamentary questioning within the Federal National Council. This timeframe captures significant events, developments and unprecedented challenges posed by the global COVID-19 pandemic [8], allowing for an in-depth examination of the Council's authority in scrutinizing government decisions.

The research addresses the operating framework of parliamentary questioning and offers concrete practical applications, supported by numerous examples extracted from the FNC's session records, which bestows both theoretical and practical importance upon this research. To elaborate, the research stands out by specifically focusing on the influence of parliamentary questioning within the unique context of the FNC of the UAE, offering a distinct perspective that diverges from existing research. Unlike previous literature that has merely touched upon parliamentary questioning, our research delves deeper, examining its role in activating control mechanisms and empowering the FNC to scrutinize government decisions. The novelty of our research lies in its concentration on the practical implications of parliamentary questioning, exploring how it enhances the Council's authority in evaluating governmental actions, a facet that has been inadequately addressed in prior studies. While the existing body of knowledge acknowledges parliamentary questioning, our research breaks new ground by elucidating its operational framework, providing a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms at play within the FNC. This research contributes to the field by not only highlighting the theoretical importance of parliamentary questioning but also offering concrete practical applications, creating a bridge between theory and real-world governance scenarios.

Our research innovatively employs numerous examples extracted from the Council's session records, providing empirical evidence to support theoretical claims and offering a nuanced understanding of the impact of parliamentary questioning. By adopting this approach, the research introduces a fresh perspective to the discourse on parliamentary questioning, transcending the conventional discussions in the literature and addressing a critical gap in research. What sets our research apart is its emphasis on the Council's authority to scrutinize government decisions, a dimension often overlooked in prior research, thus expanding the scope of understanding in the field. The significance of our research is underscored by its focus on the activation of control mechanisms, an aspect that has been insufficiently explored in the context of parliamentary questioning within the FNC. In summary, our research not only contributes to the theoretical foundations of parliamentary questioning but also enriches the practical understanding of its implications within the unique governance framework of the UAE, marking a substantial advancement in the field.

1.3. Methodology

In this research, a qualitative research methodology has been employed to thoroughly examine the influence of parliamentary questioning on the activation of control mechanisms within the FNC. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for this research as it allows for a deep exploration of the intricate dynamics involved in parliamentary questioning, offering a nuanced understanding of the Council's authority in scrutinizing government decisions. The research design involves a comprehensive analysis of the FNC's session records, extracting several examples to illustrate and support the identified patterns and themes. By adopting a qualitative approach, this research seeks to capture the richness and complexity of the phenomena under investigation, enabling a more in-depth exploration of the operational framework of parliamentary questioning within the unique governance context of the UAE. The qualitative research methodology chosen aligns with the research objective of providing a contextually relevant analysis of the subject matter.

Our research primarily relies on qualitative analysis of selected parliamentary questions extracted from the Legislative Meeting Minutes spanning the period 2020 to 2023. The data collection process involved a systematic sampling strategy, wherein a representative subset of parliamentary questions was chosen to ensure a comprehensive representation of topics and concerns raised within the FNC. These questions were meticulously extracted from the official minutes of legislative meetings, providing a robust foundation for our analysis.

Furthermore, our analytical framework for qualitative analysis adheres to established principles of legal text analysis. We employed a combination of thematic coding and content analysis techniques to identify recurring themes, patterns, and nuanced insights within

the parliamentary questions. This method enables us to delve deeply into the subtleties of the legal discourse, offering a nuanced understanding of the issues at hand. By presenting this methodology in detail, we aim to provide clarity on our research process, ensuring the rigor and reliability of our findings. The inclusion of this methodological framework enhances the scholarly value of our research, contributing to the robustness of our research design.

1.4. Research limitations

It's important to note that the temporal scope of our analysis is limited to the period from 2020 to 2023. While this timeframe offers contemporary insights, it may not fully capture the historical trajectory of legislative themes within the FNC. To address this limitation, future research could extend the temporal scope or consider a longitudinal analysis to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving parliamentary landscape.

Furthermore, our research relies predominantly on the analysis of parliamentary questions as the primary data source. This approach, centered around the procedural and review aspects of these questions, may inadvertently introduce a bias toward issues explicitly addressed during formal sessions. It's crucial to acknowledge that parliamentary questions represent only a fraction of the broader legislative discourse, potentially omitting crucial topics discussed in other formats. Therefore, the research is inherently limited by the availability and nature of parliamentary questions, emphasizing the need for caution when generalizing findings to the entire spectrum of legislative activities. We strive to be transparent about these constraints to foster a balanced interpretation of our research, recognizing the importance of future endeavors that explore supplementary data sources to enrich the depth of analysis concerning the FNC.

Finally, while we recognize the significance of parliamentary practices in other GCC countries, the scope of our research is intentionally centered on the UAE context. The decision to limit the research to the UAE is based on the specificity and depth required to comprehensively explore the nuances of one specific parliamentary control mechanism, i.e., parliamentary question. In this sense, we acknowledge that the findings are specific to the UAE, recognizing that parliamentary practices may vary across the GCC region.

2. Literature review

The UAE 1971 Constitution has defined the political power allocated to the new federal institutions. In addition to the Supreme Council, the Council of Ministers and the Federal Supreme Court, there is the FNC [9]. The institutional dynamics and relationships between federal and local governments are still evolving [10]. One example is unifying the armed forces that took place in the mid 1970s. "However, despite the gradual evolution of these systems, they have not replaced the traditional forms of government." [11].

The traditional institution of *majlis* continue to exist in all the seven emirates and continue to play a consulatory role in managing public affairs. For example, "one can often hear a detailed and heated discussion regarding policies that should be adopted or issues with neighboring countries." [12] These consultative traditions have evolved at the local as well as the federal levels. Individual emirates have their own Consultative Council, and the federal state has the FNC [13]. Though the FNC does not assume all the parliamentary functions in the traditional sense, it is fair to say that the FNC is efficiently playing a considerable role in shaping policies using the available tools according to the Constitution [14]. In 2008, constitutional amendments were introduced to Articles 72, 78 and 91 to expand the FNC's role in the UAE affairs.

The powers of a parliament extend beyond passing laws and approving budgets. Instead, it has assumed a political role, which involves overseeing the government's activities, ensuring accountability for all actions, and scrutinizing public policies implemented by the executive authority [15–17]. Through this monitoring power, the parliament gains insight into the government's approach and the execution of various tasks, while ensuring adherence to constitutional principles and the public's best interests [18–21].

The UAE Constitution established the FNC as the fourth authority among the five federal authorities in the country [22,23]. Its role encompasses both legislative and political oversight [24]. Article 110/3 (a) of the UAE Constitution states that "if the Federal National Council inserts any amendment in the draft law and this amendment is not acceptable to the President of the Union or the Supreme Council, or if the Federal National Council rejects the draft, the President of the Union or the Supreme Council shall refer it back to the Federal National Council. If the Federal National Council inserts any amendment on that occasion which is not acceptable to the President of the Union or the Supreme Council, or if the Federal National Council deems fit to reject the draft, the President of the Union may promulgate the law after ratification by the Supreme Council." While the Council's impact on the legislative process remains somewhat limited [25], it has made significant progress in enhancing its control capabilities. Given the multitude and complexity of state agencies, along with their expanding presence across political, economic, social, cultural, and educational domains, the Constitution explicitly grants the FNC the responsibility to monitor the executive authority's activities in these realms [26]. Specific mechanisms have been outlined to facilitate this monitoring process [27].

While the FNC may not possess all conventional parliamentary control mechanisms such as parliamentary interpellations and votes of confidence [28], the Federal Constitution has provided the Council with the opportunity to exert direct influence over the executive authority when fulfilling its control role. This influence is facilitated through specific instruments outlined in the FNC's bylaw. These instruments include the ability to initiate discussions on general subjects, pose inquiries, offer recommendations on particular topics, and investigate citizens' complaints [29].

With the establishment of the seven emirates and the formation of the UAE under the interim constitution of 1971 [30], the right to question was officially recognized as a mechanism to oversee the work of ministers. This right was further solidified and made permanent through Constitutional Amendment No. (1) of 1996. As part of this framework, Members of Parliament have the privilege to address questions directly to ministers, allowing them to inquire about the activities and operations within their respective ministries

[31]. This development of the right to question has led to the establishment of a legal framework closely resembling the right exercised in one of the oldest parliamentary traditions in the region, namely, Egypt. The next paragraphs examine the legislative frameworks of parliamentary questioning within the FNC and Egypt's House of Representatives (HR).

By scrutinizing their respective national council bylaws introduced in 2016, with the UAE implementing a new bylaw in 2023, we aim to illuminate the practical dimensions of parliamentary questioning in both nations. This focused analysis reveals significant commonalities and subtle distinctions in the articles governing the Parliamentary Question. Delving into these legal intricacies provides a nuanced understanding of how each country structures and implements parliamentary oversight mechanisms. This comparative approach enhances our insights into the dynamic landscape of parliamentary questioning in the UAE and Egypt, shedding light on the legal, societal, and philosophical dimensions inherent in their respective legislative practices.

The FNC operates in accordance with the 1971 Constitution and Presidential Order no. 11/2023, which introduced its bylaw (FNCB). The FNC's bylaw consists of 161 articles, with Articles 140 to 150 specifically governing parliamentary questions. On the other hand, the Egyptian House of Representatives operates based on the 2014 Constitution, Law no. 46/2014 (as amended by Law no. 92/2015), and Law no. 1/2016, which promulgated its Bylaw (HRB). The bylaw of the Egyptian House of Representatives comprise 437 articles, and parliamentary questions are regulated by Articles 198 to 211.

It is evident that there are notable similarities between the bylaw of the institutions in the UAE and Egypt. For instance, both Article 140 of the FNC's Bylaw (FNCB) and Article 198 of the House of Representatives' bylaw (HRB) defines the scope of a question. However, it appears that the language used in Article 140 is more restrictive compared to Article 198. While both articles allow questions about "a matter unknown to the member or a fact," Article 198 in addition includes "... or the government's intentions towards a topic." A similar comparison can be made with Articles 141 (FNCB) and 199 (HRB), both of which require that questions do not contain any "inappropriate expressions." However, Article 141 adds the additional criterion of not causing harm to individuals, organizations, or the national interests of the country.

Furthermore, a comparison of Articles 149 (FNCB) and 200 (HRB) reveals a similar trend. While both articles permit a written response to a question, Article 200 has a broader scope as it lists four cases, whereas Article 149 only mentions one case referenced in Article 199/4. Both articles allow for a written response when the question is submitted between terms. However, Article 200 expands on this by including additional cases: if requested by the member, if the question seeks statistical data, or if the question pertains to a local matter but requires a response from the relevant Minister.

The next sections focus on two distinct theoretical aspects of the FNC's Bylaw: Submission Process of Parliamentary Questions, specifically the Procedural Framework governing this process, and the Review Process, which encompasses the conditions questions must meet.

2.1. Submission process of parliamentary questions: procedural framework

When a member of the FNC wishes to seek clarification from the Prime Minister or a minister regarding the government's policies and its management of the country, the member initiates the process by formulating and submitting the question to the Council's Bureau [32]. The Bureau is responsible for verifying whether the question fulfills all the necessary conditions [33]. If the question fails to meet the required criteria, the Bureau may exclude it, notifying the member accordingly. In case the member disagrees with the Bureau's decision, the matter is presented to the Council for a decision without further discussion [34].

If the question meets the necessary requirements, the Bureau forwards it to the Council's Chairman, who subsequently transfers it to the prime minister or the relevant minister, following the designated procedure. Once the question is included in the list of questions for a particular session, the concerned minister is informed through a letter from the Chairman, providing details of the session's date and agenda. As per Article 144 of the Council's bylaw "The Prime Minister or the concerned minister shall respond to the question in the session set to consider the same and the Prime Minister or the concerned minister may request to postpone the reply to a date not exceeding fourteen days to give the reply. Postponement for a period more than two weeks shall be by a Council's resolution." Thus, the responsible minister has the option to postpone the response for a maximum of 14 days [35], with the Council's approval being required for any further extension beyond this timeframe [36].

If questions are submitted outside of the regular session schedule, the response to those questions is provided in writing to the Council's Chairman, who subsequently informs the members who raised the questions. The timing of the response is not bound by the usual session dates and is instead included in the agenda of the next available session [37].

Upon receiving the minister's written response, the questioner is promptly notified by the Council's Secretary General. During the designated session, the Council's Secretary General reads out the written response, and the member who posed the question retains the right to provide comments on the content of the response. If the questioner remains unsatisfied, there is an option to request the minister's presence for a personal response. In such cases, the question is deferred to a subsequent session, following the same procedures of notifying the minister. If the minister is in attendance, they may choose to respond to the question verbally. Following the minister's response, the chairman grants the questioner the opportunity to comment. The questioner has the right to provide concise comments twice: once in response to the minister's initial answer and another in response to any additional comments made by the minister. The question concludes after these comments [38].

While the question concludes with a response, there is a possibility for the Council to present a recommendation to the Council of Ministers, upon a proposal from the questioner. This recommendation urges the government to take appropriate action based on the information provided in the question and the minister's response [39].

2.2. Review process: the question's conditions

The Federal Constitution and the Bylaw of the FNC have established specific conditions that must be met for a parliamentary question to be accepted and included in the Council's sessions [40,41]. Adhering to these conditions is essential for the question to effectively serve as a control instrument and to prevent any misuse of this mechanism. If any of these conditions are not met, the question will not be accepted. Given the significance of these conditions, we will now elaborate on them as follows.

2.2.1. Clear and signed question

The constitutional provisions and parliamentary bylaw universally emphasize the importance of a clear and well-written parliamentary question. This requirement arises from the inherent right to pose a question and the purpose it serves. Putting the question in writing allows officials the necessary time and space to adequately prepare their response, conduct research, and gather relevant data. Moreover, it prevents any surprises and helps optimize the efficient use of parliamentary time. Clarity is paramount in the question, as it should explicitly indicate the specific details being addressed. This ensures that the question is easily understood and enables officials to provide a precise and relevant response. A vague question diminishes the likelihood of receiving a specific answer, undermining the intended purpose of the inquiry [42].

The requirement for a clear and written parliamentary question is explicitly stated in Article 141 of the bylaw of the FNC. According to this article, the question must be signed by the questioner and written in a clear and concise manner to the best of their ability. This rule applies to original questions that are submitted in writing. However, additional questions that arise spontaneously after the minister's answer are not required to be written, but rather can be asked orally during the Council session following the minister's response.

Nevertheless, there are exceptions to this condition as outlined in Article 147 of the bylaw. It states that the aforementioned procedures for questions do not apply to inquiries directed to the Prime Minister or ministers during budget discussions or any subject under debate in the Council. Members are allowed to address such questions orally during the session. This exception is based on the nature of these questions, as they are typically raised when the issues being discussed are the subject of general debate in the Council and can be answered in a shorter timeframe.

By including the provision in Article (141) of the Bylaw, it is made clear that the questioner must affix their signature to the question intended for the relevant minister. This is a common procedure found in the bylaw of many parliaments, serving as evidence of the questioner's intention to raise a specific query. Failure to sign the question would render the request anonymous and would not meet the necessary conditions, resulting in its invalidation [43].

2.2.2. One member-to-one minister exclusivity in question direction

Article (93) of the Federal Constitution specifies the question addressees by stating, "The Prime Minister, one of his deputies, or the relevant minister answers the questions directed to them by any member of the Council who inquires about matters as per their jurisdiction." Whereas the concept of this constitution article indicates that the question is submitted by one member to one minister or to the prime minister. The second paragraph of Article (140) of the FNC's bylaw confirms more clearly and explicitly this condition for the question to be accepted. "The question may be asked only by one member and shall be addressed to the Prime Minister or to one minister." [44,45].

These provisions reflect the view that a parliamentary question is an individual right granted to a legislator, thereby intended to be posed by a single member of parliament. This likely serves as a preventive measure against potential abuse of parliamentary control mechanisms, wherein a group of parliament members submits collective questions not for the purpose of seeking information but rather to initiate a general discussion without adhering to the prescribed procedures. It is important to note that this condition prohibits union among parliament members regarding the question itself, rather than the substantive unity of addressing a particular topic. Consequently, two members of parliament are not permitted to jointly direct a question to a minister. However, it is possible for individual members to submit a series of questions on a single subject matter. As a parliamentary question is an individual right, a member of parliament retains the prerogative to withdraw their question at any time, effectively treating it as if it had never been submitted. In such cases, any other member may assume responsibility for the question [46].

When it comes to inquiring about the State's public policy, the parliamentary question is directed to the Prime Minister, while specific matters within the scope of a ministry's competence are addressed to the respective minister. Therefore, the parliamentary question facilitates a bilateral discussion between a single member of parliament and a minister. It is not permissible for multiple Council members to jointly direct a question, nor should a question be addressed to more than one minister, as that would divert the process into questioning the government as a whole. However, a minister has the option to consolidate similar or related questions and provide a collective response [47].

2.2.3. Relevance of question subject to ministerial mandate

For a parliamentary question to be accepted, it is essential that it aligns with the interests of the state and the government's management. The question should be focused on a specific issue that the questioner needs clarification on or wishes to verify an incident. The purpose of the question is to receive official answers and not to spark a dispute or provoke a general discussion involving others. It is acknowledged that the subject of the question may be relevant to multiple ministries, in which case each relevant minister will provide a response pertaining to their respective ministry [48].

As per the provisions outlined in Article (93) of the UAE Constitution, and further reinforced by Article (140) of the FNC's bylaw, a parliamentary question directed to the Prime Minister, one of their deputies, or the relevant minister should pertain to matters falling

within their jurisdiction. This condition allows members to address inquiries about internal affairs within the respective competencies of these officials, including seeking clarification on unfamiliar issues or verifying the occurrence of specific events that have come to their attention.

These provisions hold significant importance as they define the subject matter and jurisdiction of the parliamentary question. It is explicitly stated that when addressing the Prime Minister, the question should pertain to matters within their specific competence, particularly relating to the government's public policy. On the other hand, when directing the question to a minister, it should focus on issues that fall within their jurisdiction or the scope of their respective ministry. It should be noted that if a question is mistakenly directed to a minister who lacks the necessary competence, it does not render the question irrelevant or invalid. In such cases, the minister acknowledges their lack of authority and the question is subsequently referred to the appropriate minister. This established procedure is well-known and has been applied numerous times within the FNC [49].

2.2.4. Exclusion of inappropriate expressions or harm individuals, organizations, or national interests

The constitutional right to question a member of the parliament serves as a crucial mechanism for the legislative body to exercise control over the government's actions and performance. However, this right is not absolute, as it is subject to limitations imposed by other constitutional rights, such as an individual's right to personal freedom, privacy, dignity, and respect for their private life [50]. It is imperative to refrain from including questions that infringe upon these rights, such as divulging personal information, mentioning individuals' names, or delving into their private affairs.

To strike a balance between the exercise of the right to question and the protection of personal rights, FNC's bylaw have been put in place to govern the questioning process. These bylaws aim to ensure that questions serve their intended purpose without impeding government operations, jeopardizing state interests, wasting the time of the legislative body, or hindering its functioning [51,52].

Additionally, a member of parliament may request the relevant minister to provide information or data related to specific individuals in their response, as long as the publication of such information would not harm their reputation or cause them embarrassment. This approach is designed to maintain a fair and respectful environment while fulfilling the purpose of the questioning process.

In summary, the legislation surrounding the functioning of parliaments aims to regulate the right to question in a manner that serves its purpose effectively, without impeding the government's work, jeopardizing state interests, or disrupting the functioning of the legislative body.

Article (141/1) of the FNC's bylaw provide clear guidelines regarding the use of appropriate language in parliamentary questioning. According to this article, it is essential to avoid improper expressions or phrases that may harm individuals, organizations, or undermine the supreme interests of the country.

This condition emphasizes the importance of maintaining a respectful and constructive tone during the questioning process. Members of parliament are expected to refrain from using derogatory or defamatory language when addressing the minister or discussing the actions and performance of their ministry. The purpose of parliamentary questioning is to investigate and gather information about specific situations or policies, rather than engaging in personal attacks or character defamation.

By adhering to this condition, the questioning member ensures that their inquiry remains focused on the matter at hand, enabling a more productive and respectful exchange between the legislative and executive branches of the government.

Violation of this condition involves situations where the parliamentary question includes content that could harm individuals or organizations, compromise the higher interests of the country, or reveal sensitive information that is crucial for public safety or national security. Such violations may occur when the question delves into confidential matters like secret communications with foreign governments, public security issues, commercial or professional secrets, private information about individuals, details about arms sales, Ministry of Defense contracts, government debt, or discussions held within the cabinet [53].

Engaging in these practices turns the parliamentary question into a tool for personal vendettas, attacks, and defamation, rather than serving its intended purpose of questioning or seeking clarification on matters related to the state ministries. It is important to respect the boundaries established by the Constitution and bylaw to ensure that the parliamentary question serves as a responsible instrument for accountability and transparency, without compromising the security, privacy, or broader interests of the country.

It is essential to uphold certain limitations when it comes to the parliamentary question in order to avoid interference with the executive authority's role in conducting the state's foreign policy and managing its external relations with other countries, including negotiations, talks, and the conclusion of treaties, which is the prerogative of the President of the state. The overt nature of parliamentary discussions may not align with the sensitivity and discretion required in handling these matters.

The government bears a distinct responsibility in its external actions compared to its responsibilities concerning internal affairs due to their inherent differences. Therefore, it is not permissible to ask or provide answers to questions regarding ongoing treaties or engage in discussions about diplomatic issues within the Parliament.

Recognizing the unique nature of foreign policy and diplomatic relations, it is crucial to ensure that these matters are treated with the necessary caution and confidentiality. This allows the government to effectively fulfill its responsibilities in these areas while preserving the integrity and effectiveness of the state's external actions.

If a parliamentary question fails to meet the aforementioned conditions, the Council office has the authority to exclude it from consideration. This decision is typically made upon referral from the President of the FNC. In the event that the member who raised the question disagrees with the Council's decision, the matter can be presented to the Council for a final decision without engaging in further discussion. This process is outlined in Article (141/2) of the Council's bylaw, ensuring a systematic approach to handling questions that do not adhere to the established conditions.

3. Findings and discussion

Undoubtedly, the parliamentary question stands out as the most frequently employed and commonly utilized control mechanism, often serving as a catalyst for various other control instruments. In recent years, this control instrument has gained significant prominence and prevalence within the FNC's oversight of ministers. According to the Council's statistics, the parliamentary question has emerged as the foremost instrument, both in terms of its frequency and quality, as it encompasses a wide range of subject areas. The increased utilization of parliamentary questions has remarkably enhanced the control role of the National Council, particularly in the absence of more impactful parliamentary control instruments in terms of their consequences.

The records of the FNC's meetings provide evidence of the members' impressive level of education and political consciousness, as reflected in their submitted questions and comments on the Minister's responses. In these comments, members often present recommendations, to which the Minister usually responds by pledging to examine and potentially adopt them. These recommendations vary in nature, ranging from concise suggestions to more detailed proposals that demonstrate the member's comprehensive understanding of the suitable utilization of civil or criminal sanctions when necessary [54].

An instance arose where a question was addressed to the Minister of Financial Affairs, inquiring about the Ministry's approach towards the persistently low Emiratisation [55] rate [56] in the banking sector, despite the implementation of various initiatives and programs aimed at improving it [57]. In response, the Minister provided a comprehensive explanation of the Strategy adopted by the Cabinet and implemented since January 2017, with the Central Bank (CB) being responsible for its execution. Additionally, he highlighted that the Central Bank has devised a Points system policy to incentivize Emiratisation across different administrative tiers, taking into account the operational revenue of each bank.

During his comment, the FNC member highlighted that while the Points system had been partially implemented in 2017, the Central Bank (CB) had chosen not to impose criminal fines on banks that violated the system. However, he noted that in 2018, the CB started imposing criminal fines, but he argued that the imposed fines were not sufficiently deterrent. As an example, he mentioned that in 2019, 11 banks that violated the system were fined a total of 3,600,000 AED, which he deemed insignificant compared to the revenues generated by these banks that year. Considering that the fine for each Point was set at 20,000 AED, the member proposed three recommendations, one of which was to increase the fine to 200,000 AED or higher.

In another instance, a question was directed to the Minister of Governmental Development and Future, who also serves as the head of the Federal Authority of Governmental Human Resources, focusing on the issue of Emiratisation within governmental institutions [58]. The question raised concerns about certain practices observed in these institutions, specifically their engagement in contracts with private sector companies for certain tasks. This practice was deemed problematic as it hinders the achievement of a realistic Emiratisation rate, as these contracted individuals from the private sector are not considered part of the institution's workforce. Among the 10 recommendations put forward, the 9th recommendation proposed the enactment of legislation that would make it a criminal offense for any local or federal institution to provide false information regarding their Emiratisation rate.

The Minister of Culture and Youth received a third question regarding the Ministry's initiatives to enhance youth awareness regarding the prevalence of fake news and rumors, particularly during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic [59]. The FNC member acknowledged the existence of legal regulations and criminal sanctions in place but emphasized the need for a comprehensive policy that extends beyond legal measures alone [60]. The member suggested that addressing this issue requires coordination among various ministries, including the Interior, Education, and Culture. The Minister concurred with the FNC member, recognizing the importance of inter-ministerial collaboration in tackling this matter.

In certain cases, members of the FNC faced challenges in preparing and submitting their questions. One such case involved a question directed to the Minister of Health regarding the pricing of pharmaceutical products [61]. The member highlighted the issue of exorbitant prices set by some pharmacies for medications used in the treatment of lifelong diseases. Citing specific articles from Law no. 8/2019, which regulates Pharmaceutical Products, the member emphasized the distinction between pharmaceutical products and "Over the Counter (OTC)" products. The Minister, in response, clarified the Ministry's efforts in addressing the concern. Additionally, the Minister mentioned the development of an application to assist customers in checking prices set by the Ministry and promptly reporting any violations. The member expressed satisfaction with the Minister's response, affirming that the pricing issue raised in the question specifically pertains to medications and not OTC products.

The following example illustrates how the parliamentary question could result in a rapid change in policies. On June 14, 2022, during a parliamentary question directed to His Excellency Mohammed bin Hadi Al Hussein, the Minister of State for Financial Affairs, by FNC Member Hamad Ahmed Al Rahoumi concerning "financial loans for senior citizens," the government's response was prompt and unambiguous [62]. The member raised concerns about the challenges faced by elderly citizens in securing loans. Additionally, he highlighted that the approved loan percentage for seniors was 30% of their income, whereas non-retired employees enjoyed a higher percentage of 50%. Following the examination of the question and the minister's response, the member submitted an extensive commentary proposing an increase in the loan percentage granted to seniors to align with the 50% afforded to non-retired employees.

In response, the Minister expressed his intent to explore this suggestion, deeming it potentially beneficial. He conveyed his plan to consult the Central Bank, stating, "I think we will ask the Central Bank - as I recommended - if it is possible to raise the limit on the amount that a person can borrow." Subsequently, on July 30, 2022, the UAE Central Bank translated this response into action by issuing new directives pertaining to Sheikh Zayed Housing Program loans. Notably, these instructions included elevating the debt burden ratio for retirees and senior citizens from 30% to 50%. This sequence of events underscores the significance of the parliamentary question in contributing to positive changes, enhancements and effectiveness.

4. Conclusion

The FNC possesses a limited set of parliamentary control instruments, which include raising general topics for discussion, posing parliamentary questions, providing recommendations on specific matters, and monitoring citizens' complaints. Although the Council does not possess all the comprehensive instruments of parliamentary control over the government, its members have set a commendable example by effectively utilizing parliamentary questions to oversee government actions. While it is acknowledged that the parliamentary question may not be the most potent instrument compared to other legislative authority controls worldwide, it has emerged as the foremost quantitative instrument and the most significant qualitative instrument for the Council's control over the government. Through the employment of parliamentary questions, Council members have successfully addressed numerous crucial topics that directly impact citizens' daily lives, seeking clarifications, uncovering irregularities, making recommendations, and proposing amendments. Consequently, this has occasionally placed ministers in uncomfortable positions, prompting them to implicitly admit their mistakes and pledge to rectify them.

The widespread and frequent use of the parliamentary question can be attributed to its ease and simplicity. The members of the National Council, with their high level of education, cultural awareness, and diligent monitoring of Union affairs and ministry activities, coupled with the ministers' understanding of the Council's role and their support of its control function, have greatly contributed to the development of using questions as a crucial instrument to activate the Council's oversight. However, this paper asserts that the primary reason why the question has become the most influential means of exercising control is the absence of certain control instruments, such as investigation, the right to question the government, and the ability to withdraw confidence, within the UAE Federal Constitution. This has elevated the significance of the question as a vital substitute for these instruments.

The inclusion of the most significant control instrument, i.e., the parliamentary interpellations, within the UAE Constitution in the future would enhance the role of ministerial oversight. However, under the current constitutional framework, there is a possibility to activate existing control instruments, particularly the parliamentary question, through the FNC's diligent monitoring and engagement with the questions raised. Numerous examples presented in this research demonstrate that questioners often accompany their inquiries with requests for recommendations that carry substantial importance for the Cabinet. However, the effectiveness of these recommendations may be hindered by a lack of follow-up. The role of the Council's chairman is pivotal in ensuring such follow-up occurs in order to achieve legal effectiveness [63,64].

The Cabinet has a significant opportunity to leverage parliamentary questions addressed to its ministers to enhance the quality of services offered by different ministries and entities. However, to fully capitalize on this opportunity, it is crucial to ensure thorough follow-up on the results and recommendations derived from these questions. To facilitate this process, the Cabinet may consider establishing a dedicated body responsible for monitoring the implementation of recommendations, rectifying errors or irregularities uncovered, and tracking the corrective measures undertaken by the ministers. Moreover, the Cabinet can extract valuable insights from these recommendations to inform its future directives and development plans, benefitting from an alternative perspective that draws inspiration from the current reality and prevailing circumstances.

Finally, in light of the findings presented in this research on the prominent role of parliamentary questioning as a control mechanism within the FNC, several recommendations emerge for both researchers and practitioners, including decision-makers. Researchers should consider further exploration of the evolving dynamics of parliamentary questioning within the FNC, examining its impact on governance, policymaking, and the overall democratic process. Comparative studies with parliamentary practices in other nations may yield valuable insights. Practitioners, particularly decision-makers within the UAE government, should recognize the efficacy of parliamentary questioning as a tool for accountability and transparency. Encouraging ongoing dialogue between FNC members and government officials can foster a more robust and responsive governance structure. Additionally, the research suggests a continued emphasis on the education and political awareness of FNC members to optimize the effectiveness of parliamentary questioning. As the FNC continues to refine its control mechanisms, practitioners are encouraged to actively engage with parliamentary questioning to enhance the democratic governance framework in the UAE.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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