

# The stealth cost of legislature

Saddam Hussein | September 9, 2024



**Lawmaking must be at the core of governance — defining powers, keeping checks in check, and ensuring public trust. Nonetheless, in Pakistan, lawmakers often swap their legislative hats for power-broker crowns. Instead of crafting laws, they're busy chasing development funds and jockeying for influence.**

Elected to legislate and uphold the law, many Pakistani lawmakers seem more interested in the perks and privileges that come with the title. Perks, influence, plush accommodations, and a lifestyle far removed from the average citizen's reality have turned these lawmakers into power-hungry players in a high-stakes game.

Their focus? Securing ministerial posts and channelling funds to their constituencies — moves that boost their clout but leave their duties in

the dust. Others get busy cosyng up to the power axis, as Francis Underwood from House of Cards would put it, deluding themselves into thinking they actually wield it.

As a result, the real work — debating policies, and solving national issues — gets sidelined. Urgent legislation gathers dust while their halls echo with political grandstanding instead of productive dialogue. This negligence not only stalls the legislative process but also brings national progress to a standstill.

*Keeping our federal legislators in luxury costs an eye-watering Rs27.67 billion a year, according to PIDE analysis*

The consequence? A governance gap that fuels inefficiency and deepens public disillusionment, further eroding trust in our democratic institutions. However, it is not without a cost; the one that the people of Pakistan fund.

The Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) assembled a team to dissect the unnecessary costs weighing down our economy. The scope is broad, but let's pick just one at a time. For now, we shall be looking into the cost of federal lawmakers in Pakistan.

Let's crunch the numbers of National Assembly members and Senators. The federal lawmakers pocket a base salary of Rs150,000, padded with Rs38,000 in allowances, bringing their monthly haul to Rs188,000. Toss in session-related extras, and they're walking away with Rs218,000 a month.

However, the real jackpot is in the perks. Each lawmaker is entitled to have a parliament lodge in Islamabad's prime land — the red zone, the rental opportunity cost of which is at least Rs1 million a month, plus office spaces worth Rs0.2m monthly. Just picture this: prime land in the capital opened up for private investors; think of the economic

activity generated, job creation, government revenue, and the multiplier effect. Compared to all that, monetising federal lawmakers' accommodations would be just a drop in the bucket.

Next, hosting a parliamentary session is no small expense either. Each sitting sets us back a whopping Rs66.5m, as reported by the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency. Also, let's not forget the 25 business-class return tickets they get annually, along with road travel allowances. Meanwhile, development funds meant for local governments often detour through these lawmakers, leading to a hot mess of mismanagement.

In addition to that, lawmakers receive extensive institutional support from officers and staff whose salaries, allowances, and retirement benefits are provided because of their service to lawmakers.

Essentially, their roles exist solely due to the lawmakers' presence. Therefore, these costs should also be attributed to the lawmakers.

When all's said and done, keeping our federal legislators in luxury costs an eye-watering Rs27.67 billion a year. So, by dividing all the expenses explained above by the actual number of legislative days – means when the parliament is actually functioning, we can get per day expense of a lawmaker. If we take last five years in consideration, on average National Assembly works 88 days a year and Senate 57 days per year. Break that down, an MNA costs approximately Rs0.7m per day and a Senator costs around Rs1.1 m. When we take weighted average of both, the average daily expense of a federal lawmakers per day stands at Rs0.8m.

However, there is 37pc absenteeism on any given day in both the houses. When we factor in this no-show culture and denominator gets slashed, we get a bigger number. So, the per-day cost of a federal lawmaker soars to a jaw-dropping Rs1.2 m. That's what happens when

we trade legislation for absenteeism.

Then there is another figure that is a real head-scratcher: over Rs500m dished out in grants, subsidies, and write-off loans for both houses during the outgoing fiscal year. But where is the money trail? It's a murky grey area that's just begging for a spotlight.

These costs may not appear that significant, but it would be easier to swallow if they came with real returns, like solid legislation that benefits society. Instead, we're getting a whole lot of political theatrics with not nearly enough meaningful policy debate.

For Pakistan to truly move forward, we need to turn this privilege-driven circus into a powerhouse of accountability and productivity. Lawmakers must step up and actually legislate with dedication and integrity, restoring public trust and breathing life into our democratic institutions. Only then can we build a governance model that's worth every penny and genuinely serves the people, steering the nation toward lasting progress.

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\*Disclaimer: The numbers are estimations based on calculations of author's research at PIDE

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