

What is the purpose of a written question?

The facility to ask written questions in Parliament is an important tool for keeping the government accountable – which is the task of the parliamentary opposition.

The current parliament has many groups claiming to be the “real” opposition: The TNA, which has the second highest number of seats outside the governing coalition, The rebel group within the UPFA known as the ‘Joint Opposition’, the JVP which has refused to accept ministerial positions, and the recent 16-group that rebelled against the UPFA at the no-confidence motion against the Prime Minister. If written questions are a measure of doing the work of the opposition, then which of these groups is matching its claims to its actions? Analysis of data from Manthri.lk provided in Exhibit 1, illuminates that question.

Out of the 6 JVP MP’s in Parliament contributing to written questions across this period, a total of 322 written questions was shared between them. This amounts to 53.6 questions per MP. By contrast, out of the UNP MP’s in Parliament, 33 MP’s asked a total of 609 written questions amounting to 18.45 questions per MP. Out of the 30 UPFA MP’s in Parliament, 30 MP’s asked a total of 580 written questions amounting to 19.33 questions per MP. The picture that emerges suggests that the real opposition here is the JVP whose average questions per MP is more than double that of the average questions per MP asked by the UPFA MP’s and UNP MP’s across this same period.

Another statistic that emerges is the performance of the UNP MP Bhuddika Pathirana. Out of a total of 1586 questions asked across this period, one MP Bhuddika Pathirana appears to have monopolised the written question scene. Pathirana has asked a total of 273/1586 questions i.e. 17% of the total. He is followed by the UPFA’s Bandula Gunewardena who has asked a total of 122 of the questions i.e. 7.7%. This indicates that Pathirana’s use of the written questions procedure is more than double that of Gunewardena’s across this period.

The performance of the ITAK MP’s has been disappointing. Out of a total of 11 MP’s, 33 questions have been asked amounting to an average of 3 questions per MP.

However, while the ITAK appears to be relatively inactive on written questions, the highlight of this analysis appears to be the JVP and MP Pathirana, who together have been the most prolific performers on written questions.

Table 1

| Name of MP | Number of written questions asked | Percentage of total (1586) |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Buddhika Pathirana | 273 | 17.20% |
| Bandula Gunawardena | 122 | 7.70% |
| Bimal Rathnayake | 108 | 6.80% |
| Nalinda Jayatissa | 95 | 6% |
| Udaya Gammampila | 88 | 5.50% |
| Vasudeva Nanayakkara | 58 | 3.65% |
| Dallas Alahapperuma | 54 | 3.40% |

Table 2

| Party | Written Questions | MP's | Questions per MP |
|-------|-------------------|------|------------------|
| UNP | 609 | 33 | 18.45 |
| UPFA | 580 | 30 | 19.33 |
| JVP | 322 | 6 | 53.66 |