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Center for Research and Security Studies

House # 60, Main Nazim-ud-Din Road, F-6/1, Islamabad

Tel: (+92-51) 8314801-3. Fax: (+92-51) 8314804

Email: mail@crss.pk. Web: www.crss.pk

National Assembly Speaker's Priority Agenda

1. Background Details:

Dr. (Mrs.) Fahmida Mirza is Pakistan's first women speaker of the National Assembly, the lower house. She contested and won the election on February 18, 2008 directly, unlike many of her party colleagues who became members of the legislature on the reserved seats for women.

This is Ms Mirza's third term since 1997 when she first returned to the parliament and faced all the hardships for being in the opposition party, PPP. During the previous i.e. 1997 and 2002, she made her presence felt on the basis of her active participation in the proceedings of the house. She was also most vocal on the issues of the ordinary Pakistanis and particularly women.

Until now, there is no media criticism on her abilities and much of the focus is on her previous performances which has set a high benchmark for her not only to maintain but also (expectantly) go beyond. How well and effective would she be as the head of the legislature speaker is yet to be seen but Pakistan "today is surrounded by gigantic problems from economic meltdown, destroyed law and order and foreign policy issues," Sardar Asef Ahmed Ali, PPP's former and expected Foreign Minister said in a TV interview. With the new government hinting at opening talks with militants in the troubled tribal areas bordering Afghanistan and insurgents in Balochistan, the pressure from the West is also expected to capping the "appeasement policy" from Islamabad, especially with FATA militants suspected to be linked to Al-Qaeda.

"The Foreign Direct Investment is feared to drop given the deteriorating law and order and energy situation. The energy crisis in particular is likely to hit the already fragile Pakistani economy and that would multiply challenges for the new government and the speaker to objectively manage and direct the house," a prominent Urdu columnist noted in a TV debate on March 19, 2008.

In view of the political and economic problems, opposition parties in the parliament are likely to test Ms Mirza's ability to allow open debate on the issues.

2. Situational Analysis:

Dr. Mirza's election and the continuing political and economic crises require "out of the box thinking" and the prevailing popular sentiment wants her to set her agenda on the following priorities:

1. **Greater Budgetary Control:** Parliament is the supreme-over-all institutions of Pakistan and it must demonstrate and exhibit "character and expertise" in both exercising its control and demonstrating dexterity over the State's financial matters. From development to defense, Parliament must exercise authority in determining the political as well as economic direction for the country. The common expectation is that If parliaments all over the world can exercise this authority, why shouldn't the Pakistani parliament do that?
2. **Creation of the Parliamentary Calendar of Activity:** Ms Mirza would do a great service to the parliament by not only creating but also guiding the calendar of activities.
3. **Reviewing Domestic and Foreign Policy Priorities:** Many political observers and parliamentary historians in Pakistan believe that the previous parliament (2002-07) acted as merely a rubber stamp and did not debate on or formulate policies on key foreign and domestic issues. It resulted in a weaker parliament, shaken political confidence of both the politicians and the people of Pakistan, domestic unrest and recurring embarrassments abroad. A parliament demonstrating authority and control on such key issues will help increasing both the domestic stability and international image. A dominant majority in political circles believe that the new speaker and the parliament can do that.

4. **Enhancement of the Legislative Performance via Effective Committee Systems:** People of Pakistan were not particularly thrilled on the standards of the parliamentary conduct and the activity level of the committee system since 2002. The Legislature was bitterly undermined (and at times insulted) by the Presidency; therefore, the interest of the parliamentarians plummeted. It is upon her now to reinvigorate the spirit of both the parliament and the parliamentarians. She must also encourage the legislators to exhibit interest in Pakistan's affairs via adding to the effectiveness of the committee system of the National Assembly.
5. **Meaningfully Involving the Prime Minister:** "Unlike the PR Prime Minister, the popularly elected PM must ensure he takes full interest in the proceedings of the assembly and none other can do it but Madam Speakers," a parliamentary reporter working for state-run PTV commented.
6. **Encouraging the Opposition via Proportionate Representations in Committees:** Opposition legislators should be taken onboard while deciding about the chairs of the committees of the house. This will increase a healthy cooperation and duality of expertise will add value.
7. **Transparency in Parliamentary Affairs:** Madam Speaker should ensure that all affairs pertaining to the business of the parliament are managed in a fair way and are made accessible to the general public for their information and scrutiny. As a matter of fact, one of the priority agenda items of the house could be the enactment of the Freedom of Information Ordinance.
8. **Decorum and Quorum of the House:** Both the "quality and the quantity" in the house must be ensured as the whole nation is closely watching the house and has great expectations from the newly elected speaker and the parliament in this regard. Many political observers are paying close attention for a likely comparative difference in this and the previous house.

The present parliament is a great opportunity for a new beginning and the expectations' level is extremely high. Dr. Mirza's role is crucial in the success – or failure – of the new house but a directed and objective-driven beginning on the above mentioned priorities could be a good beginning.

3. Recommendations of CRSS:

In the light of the above situational recommendations, CRSS strongly believes that the Speaker should:

1. Proactively pursue the cited objectives to ensure the parliament becomes sovereign and exercise control on the affairs of Pakistan.
2. Take along all the political parties in the house on key issues of national and international importance.
3. Strongly exercise her constitutional executive powers to ensure that the legal and constitutional rights of the parliamentarians e.g. production in the house etc., are not compromised.
4. Generally and specifically encourage the parliamentarians and the committees respectively to demonstrate their performance according to their mandate and interest.
5. Always act in the greater interest of the nation and parliament by rising above her party affiliations.