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Government's 'zero-tolerance policy' against corruption

How we can use RTI to help achieve it



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In her first address to the nation after being sworn in for her third consecutive term last month, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced “zero tolerance for corruption” as a key policy of her new government. This was followed by the release of Transparency International's annual Corruption Perceptions Index, in which—much to the government's annoyance—Bangladesh was ranked below all other South Asian countries except for war-torn Afghanistan.

Whether or not Bangladesh deserves to be so downgraded, the resolve of the PM to combat “corruption in any form” is welcome news. Her announcement acknowledged the pervasive spread of corruption in governance and recognised that corruption is a serious blot on the otherwise excellent reputation of the country, earned in recent years under her leadership, for progress in economic and social development.

In order for the PM's mission to succeed, citizen's support would be crucial. While this will be a tall order given the fractured politics of the country today, the PM can start by injecting new life into the moribund regime of the Right to Information (RTI) Act, which her government enacted in 2009.

The difference between RTI and anti-corruption laws is that the former is enforced by citizens and the latter by the government. In fact, RTI is the only law in the country that citizens can use vis-a-vis public authority. Every citizen can, therefore, be a watchman for good governance.

The Preamble to the RTI Act 2009 captured the basic objective of the law in the following words: “if the right to information of the people is ensured, the transparency and accountability of all public... organisations... shall increase, corruption of the same shall decrease and good governance of the same shall be established.”

Countries that are found to be the least corrupt also have effective RTI regimes in force. Where RTI works well, government offices function more transparently, public servants are more accountable to the people and corruption is kept under check. The preventive role of RTI is thus an important element for an effective anti-corruption strategy, and citizens are allies of the government in this effort.

One of the earliest achievements of the RTI Act 2005 of India was to end corruption in the government rationing system in New Delhi, under which basic food and other essential items of daily consumption are provided to the needy at subsidised prices. People were not getting their items because government-approved dealers claimed they were not getting the goods from the government. Using their RTI, citizens asked the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution for copies of reports that dealers are required to file with them. This revealed that the dealers falsely reported that they had distributed goods to the beneficiaries while actually selling them on the black market. Corrupt dealers lost their licenses and the public gained confidence in the system.

Similar gains have been made in Bangladesh. Concerned citizens have used RTI to obtain information about the selection process of beneficiaries for the government's safety-net programmes, such as vulnerable group feeding, vulnerable group development, old-age, maternity and widow benefits. There were complaints about widespread corruption in the process.

Faced with their RTI applications, the authorities concerned often considered it wiser to provide the applicants the benefits they enquired about, rather than respond in writing. Officials are now aware that if the list of recipients and the names of those who prepared it were disclosed, the irregularities in the process would be discovered, potentially causing serious trouble. Unfortunately, such requests are often made with NGO support, which is not always sustained. Government support to sustain such efforts and sensitise more people about the RTI process, would go a long way to curb corruption in the distribution of essential services.

Similar NGO interventions to promote RTI use have helped to rid corrupt practices in the distribution of scholarship money at government schools. Indigent patients now benefit from free medicine provided by the government from the local health clinics. This was often denied to them till they resorted to RTI requests for the list of free medicines. Many clinics are now voluntarily posting the list of free medicines on their notice boards, thereby closing a window of corruption.

RTI can also help to combat corruption in public institutions by exposing abuse of power by the police, irregularities in the recruitment process of public jobs, and corruption in awarding contracts for public work.

The usefulness of RTI for the PM's mission is limited only by how often and how many of us use it. On an average only 7,000 RTI requests are submitted annually to public offices in Bangladesh, compared to some 6 million in India. The requests are also largely confined to issues of private concern. Unless the law is used by more people, and more to probe transparency and accountability issues on matters of larger public interest, the efficacy of the law will remain limited.

The Prime Minister can help advance this objective by reiterating her commitment to RTI at regular intervals. This will encourage public officials to obey the law, which presently many disregard without any qualm. It will also be useful to publicise that the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) too has to respond to many RTI requests addressed to her. In one instance, it provided an applicant with information on how many people accompanied her each year, between 2010 to 2015, to the UN General Assembly, why so many went, what was their purpose and who paid for their trips. Had it been publicised, it would have encouraged others to emulate.

The PM's vocal support of the law will also help reassure citizens' minds that by asking for sensitive information, they will not face the wrath of concerned officials. There are unfortunate

instances of the latter harassing the applicants, and in one case, even setting the police against them and, in another, filing a case. If such fears are removed, more people will use the law, which is important for any systemic change. The Information Commission too will be more confident to apply the law without fear of displeasing the administration. The prime minister's endorsement of an oversight mechanism for the Information Commission itself would also help to set in motion necessary reforms of the Act. It is time for all of us to recognise that RTI can be a formidable tool to advance citizen-government relationship, contribute to better governance and take the fight against corruption forward.

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