

The Sri Lankan crisis spiked intense RTI activity

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Several RTI requests revealed information that disclosed the real state of Sri Lanka's economy. FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

Sri Lanka has been shaken by a socioeconomic and political crisis that has drawn international attention. We wanted to find out if the public outcry against Gotabaya Rajapaksa's government that led to its eventual overthrow was translated into increased RTI activity. It appears to be the case.

Unlike most other countries in the region, the 2016 Right to Information (RTI) Act of Sri Lanka attracted different strata of society, including its vigilant civil society organisations, from the very beginning. From early on, they put it to use to probe government activities of suspicious or dubious nature.

One illustrative example that we have covered previously was the landmark decision of the Sri Lankan Information Commission on a high-level corruption case that had rattled the nation. On appeal from the Sri Lanka Pilots Guild, the commission issued orders for the release of some extremely sensitive documents relating to the purchase/lease order of five Airbus 350 aircrafts from Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) by Sri Lankan Airlines. The revelation exposed the extent and level of corruption that led to an international money-laundering investigation. A

crucial aspect of the order was the release of the minutes of a meeting presided over by the then speaker of the Sri Lankan parliament, who happened to be the brother of the Sri Lankan president, at his residence, where the deal was approved.

With such a precedent, it was not surprising to find the ordinary Sri Lankan citizens, civil society organisations and the Information Commission itself resorting to the RTI Act to unearth corruption, mismanagement and poor policy decisions by the government behind the recent crisis. Here are some examples.

Cost incurred by the Sri Lankan prime minister's trip to Italy: At the height of public agitations against the government, the Office of the Prime Minister – who took office upon resignation of his predecessor in the face of public wrath – was obliged to release last month the details of former Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa's visit to Italy in 2021, in response to an RTI request. The disclosure that 26 million rupees were spent further revealed a most telltale picture of abuse of public funds by government officials at a time when there were clear indications of an acute fund crisis.

The status of Sri Lanka's foreign currency reserves: As the economic crisis deepened in recent months, the major socioeconomic discourse in Sri Lanka was focused on the necessity to address the situation and identify appropriate corrective measures. People wanted to know what happened to the country's foreign reserves. How they were spent? What investments were made with them?

To find the answers, the Sri Lanka Press Institute submitted an RTI request in May 2022 to the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL). While in normal circumstances such requests would be denied in many countries on grounds of exemptions provided in the RTI Act, the CBSL found it expedient to provide the answers – such was their fear of public wrath. The response showed that when the new government came to power in November 2019, the foreign currency reserve of the country stood at USD 7.3 billion. It then went on to describe how the money was used/invested for different purposes. The release of the information revealed the extent of the crisis facing the nation.



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Information on power shortages: The turmoil in Sri Lanka led, among other things, to severe power shortages in the country. The Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) found itself unable to meet the fuel needs of the country due to the lack of sufficient forex reserves to pay for fuel stocks imported into the country. At the same time, due to fuel shortage, both transport and energy sectors came to a standstill, leaving the public and private sectors to collapse. This situation had a severe impact on the power generation of the country, leading to island-wide load-shedding on a daily basis.

To find out the real picture, the Sri Lanka Press Institute submitted an RTI application to the CEB, inquiring about the supply of fuel for thermal power plants in the country and their daily requirement. CEB duly provided the information, adding that some power plants became dysfunctional from time to time due to insufficient fuel. This disclosure, too, was useful in providing a clearer picture to the public about the reality on the ground.

Cost of celebrating independence anniversary of Sri Lanka: While Sri Lanka was going through its worst economic crisis, the celebrations surrounding the 74th anniversary of the country's independence on February 4 struck many citizens as a callous and irresponsible move. An RTI request to find out its cost to the national exchequer revealed that nearly 95 million rupees had been spent on the occasion, the highest amount spent for this purpose in the last five years. The item-wise expenditure demonstrated the yawning gap between the citizens' perceptions about the economic situation in the country and those of public authorities.

There are many lessons to be learnt from the Sri Lankan crisis. The foremost must be the importance of keeping citizens in a democracy properly informed on all matters of public interest at all times and in particular during crises. The RTI law provides an opportunity to governments to disclose critical information to the public through the proactive disclosure mechanism so that they appreciate the gravity of the situation and are ready to cooperate with them. Another lesson is for the citizens to use the law to keep themselves abreast of matters that concern them and intervene with the authorities as necessary. The Sri Lankan crisis has highlighted the value of regular government-people interaction and RTI's role to foster it. A well-informed nation can be a shield against sudden eruption of public fury.

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