

Reviving the RTI regime is essential for our democratic journey

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FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Despite widespread public outcry for over a year, Bangladesh's Right to Information (RTI) regime remains stuck in a deadlock. Its consequences are becoming harder to ignore. Frustration is mounting among those who have long supported the law and used it as a means to hold public authorities accountable. For more than fifteen years, civil society organisations have patiently nurtured a community of RTI users. Their numbers were never large, but their dedication kept the law alive. Through small, steady efforts, they showed all the power of disclosure and the democratic promise embedded in the RTI Act.

However, that momentum has slowed sharply. In recent months, civil society activity around the law has diminished, applications have dropped, and fresh examples of successful RTI usage have become rare. The Information Commission, long the centrepiece of enforcement, remains dormant. Whether it will be revived under the interim government remains uncertain. Promised amendments to strengthen the law have also stalled. In this climate, hopes now rest on political parties preparing for the forthcoming national elections: will they commit to safeguarding and revitalising RTI as a democratic instrument?

As we await political clarity, it seems timely to step back and examine the broader picture: what has the RTI movement achieved globally, why do these laws so often struggle with implementation, and what lessons does Bangladesh need to heed?

Over the last three decades, RTI laws have been adopted in over 130 countries. They aim to transform the state from an opaque administrative fortress to an institution answerable to the people. But implementation has been uneven across continents.

Bureaucratic resistance remains the most significant barrier. Many officials still consider public information to be their personal domain, not the public's. Such tendencies are particularly strong in post-colonial bureaucracies, where administrative culture was built on hierarchy and control. Even mature democracies are not immune to it—studies show persistent delays, excessive redactions, and misuse of exemptions in the UK and Canada.

Weak institutional capacity also undermines RTI. Without organised record-keeping, trained officers, and digital infrastructure, disclosure becomes slow and unreliable. Vague exemptions—such as "national security" or "public order"—are frequently used to deny uncomfortable requests. Low public awareness keeps RTI in the hands of journalists and activists rather than ordinary citizens. Oversight bodies are often underfunded and lack real enforcement authority. Add to this the risk of intimidation faced by many RTI users, and it becomes clear why implementation gaps persist worldwide. The lesson is simple: an RTI law can change rules, but not mindsets—and mindsets are where secrecy lives.

Bangladesh's RTI Act, passed in 2009, was a democratic breakthrough. It recognised information as a public right, created an independent Information Commission, and signalled that transparency was essential to accountable governance. Civil society played a central role in training citizens and demonstrating, through practical use, how RTI could expose corruption in land offices, improve delivery of social safety nets, and correct administrative injustices.

Progress came steadily. The use of the law moved from the personal domain to more national issues. Public officials were trained; designated officers were appointed to respond to information requests, however haltingly; and public bodies began responding to requests. The achievements were small but meaningful.

But entrenched challenges never disappeared—and some have sharpened in recent years. The culture of secrecy continues to dominate public administration. Officials often discourage applications or let deadlines lapse. Record management remains weak, with most files still maintained manually. The application of exemption clauses remains broad and inconsistent. Proactive disclosure is sporadic and often limited to outdated, English-only websites. And RTI users face pressure or harassment when exploring sensitive issues. The result is a regime stuck between promise and paralysis.

If Bangladesh wishes to protect and revitalise RTI, a strategic renewal is essential. First, the Information Commission must be revived and strengthened. Its basic needs, such as the appointment of independent and well-qualified commissioners, adequate staffing, and reasonable financial independence, must be ensured. Commissioners must not feel constrained to apply

penalties for non-compliance. Second, public records must be digitised as soon as possible. Without an organised, easily searchable information system, RTI cannot function effectively. Third, greater awareness about the law is needed. RTI education should reach schools, local communities, and rural areas. Guidance materials must be accessible in Bangla and easy to understand. Fourth, the often-abused exemption clauses of the law must be narrowed, with a clear public-interest override that ensures information is withheld only when the harm of disclosure outweighs its benefit. Fifth, proactive disclosure should become routine for all ministries and local authorities. They should regularly publish budget, procurement, and audit documents. And finally, RTI users must be made to feel protected under the law. Whistle-blower safeguards and mechanisms for reporting intimidation are essential if the public is to exercise its rights without fear.

The Right to Information is not merely a legal instrument. It is a democratic pledge—a recognition that information ultimately belongs to citizens, not administrators. Bangladesh made that pledge in 2009. The question now is whether the nation will honour it.

As political parties craft their election manifestos, they have an opportunity to renew this commitment. A credible promise to strengthen RTI would send a powerful signal about their dedication to accountable governance.

If Bangladesh fails to act now, the steady erosion of one of the most significant democratic gains of recent decades is inevitable. But if it chooses wisely, the country can revive the original promise of RTI and ensure that the public's right to know becomes their ability to know. That choice rests with us—citizens, administrators, and leaders alike.

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