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## When institutions falter, the defence of RTI falls to citizens

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While 2025 was a year marked by despair over the paralysis of Bangladesh's right to information (RTI) regime, the beginning of 2026 has brought a welcome note of resistance and resolve. One may recall that the departure of all three information commissioners in September 2024 effectively rendered the Information Commission defunct, leaving RTI users frustrated and the law itself dangerously adrift. Yet, rather than surrendering to institutional inertia, RTI activists who persisted in using the law throughout 2025, however hesitantly, began the new year with a clear and defiant pledge: transparency and accountability will not wither through neglect.

At a meeting held in Dhaka on January 8, activists from across the country, joined by prominent representatives of leading civil society organisations, announced plans to form a citizens' platform to coordinate collective action, support embattled RTI users, and confront the persistent intransigence of public authorities who continue to treat the RTI Act of 2009 with derision. This moment of mobilisation is significant because the RTI regime stands at a critical juncture today. For around 17 years, Bangladesh's RTI law has survived not because of robust institutional enforcement but because of the quiet perseverance of a relatively small yet committed group of users—journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens—trained and supported

by a handful of dedicated NGOs. Their steady engagement demonstrated that access to information could improve service delivery, expose maladministration, and strengthen democratic participation. It was never a mass movement; it was a living one.

That fragile ecosystem has been severely shaken in recent times. With the Information Commission inactive, oversight mechanisms have effectively vanished. Public officials, already inclined towards secrecy, now face little consequence for ignoring requests, delaying responses, or invoking exemptions indiscriminately. Predictably, RTI applications have declined and successful disclosures have become rare. A law that exists only on paper risks becoming a symbol rather than a tool.

Yet, the response of RTI activists at the dawn of 2026 signals an important truth: transparency is not solely an institutional function; it is also a civic practice. Laws alone do not guarantee accountability; citizens do, too. When oversight bodies fall silent, organised public pressure becomes indispensable. The proposed citizens' platform reflects this understanding. Its objective is not confrontation *per se*, but rather coordination, sharing strategies, offering legal and moral support to users facing obstruction, and reminding public authorities that the right to information is neither suspended nor negotiable.

This development also invites broader reflection on why RTI regimes struggle not only in Bangladesh, but also globally. Across countries, similar patterns recur: bureaucratic resistance rooted in colonial-era secrecy; weak record management; overbroad exemptions; under-resourced oversight bodies; and political cultures uncomfortable with scrutiny. Even mature democracies struggle with delayed disclosures and administrative gatekeeping. The lesson from this is sobering but instructive: transparency requires constant vigilance. This is more so in Bangladesh where an interim government that came to power riding on popular support for democracy and people's power seems to have fallen into familiar patterns of resistance to transparency and accountability.

Bangladesh's experience underscores another uncomfortable reality. While governments often champion transparency rhetorically, commitment tends to waver when disclosure becomes inconvenient. The absence of information commissioners for more than a year is not a technical oversight; it reflects a deeper ambivalence towards accountability. Restoring the commission with qualified, independent, and adequately supported members is therefore essential, a task that the interim government was well-placed to perform but failed to do. However, restoration alone will not suffice unless accompanied by a clear political signal that the RTI Act truly matters.

In this context, the emergence of a citizens' platform serves as a corrective to the state's failure. But civil society and citizens cannot, and should not, permanently fill an institutional vacuum. However, history shows that reform is often propelled from below. In the absence of

formal enforcement, collective civic action by an alert citizenry can keep the law alive, prevent further erosion, and build pressure for institutional revival.

The timing is also crucial. As Bangladesh approaches another political transition, commitments to democratic governance will inevitably be tested again. Political parties, policymakers, and public officials should recognise that a functioning RTI regime is not a threat but an asset. Transparency enhances trust, improves policy outcomes, and strengthens the legitimacy of public institutions. Conversely, neglecting RTI fuels suspicion, alienation, and cynicism—costs no society can afford.

The activists who gathered in Dhaka on January 8 have issued a quiet but powerful reminder: that rights, once granted, cannot be allowed to lapse through indifference. Their determination to organise, support one another, and persist despite institutional paralysis deserves not only admiration but also support from civil society, the media, and all citizens who value accountable governance.

The RTI story for Bangladesh in 2026 is still being written. It can either become a lullaby of a democratic promise quietly allowed to fade, or a testament to how citizens can revive a stalled reform through collective resolve. The choice lies not only with the state, but with all of us. Transparency, after all, is not merely a legal entitlement; it is a shared civic responsibility.

The forthcoming national election provides a timely opportunity for political parties to renew their pledge to the people for better governance, an objective that can best be achieved with the active participation of citizens ready to unearth the failings, inaction, negligence, misdeeds and outright corruption of public officials entrusted with serving the public interest, through the effective use of the RTI Act. But for the citizens' resolve to be fully unleashed, political parties aspiring to form the next government must make their commitment unmistakably clear: that they are genuinely prepared to promote a participatory democracy in which citizens are encouraged to act as vigilant watchdogs of good governance.

No other law matches the scope of the RTI Act in enabling this vital democratic purpose. To demonstrate their seriousness, political parties must commit that, if voted to power, they will immediately fill the three vacant information commissioner posts with independent, competent, and politically neutral individuals. Equally important is a clear pledge to make the law more citizen-friendly by removing provisions that obstruct transparency and deter accountability.

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