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Why the government must prioritise RTI

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After the first cabinet meeting of the new BNP government on February 18, a 180-day priority plan was announced focusing on controlling commodity prices, maintaining law and order, stabilising supply chains, and ensuring uninterrupted gas and electricity supply. Given the difficult inheritance from the interim administration, setting these priorities was expected as they addressed the immediate anxieties of ordinary households and the basic conditions for economic stability.

However, if the government truly intends to deliver on these commitments, and sustain public confidence while doing so, it must tackle a less visible but more decisive requirement: a governance system that is transparent, accountable, and responsive to citizens. Without that foundation, even well-designed welfare programmes can be weakened by information gaps, weak monitoring, and administrative inertia.

In this regard, a promising signal was when Prime Minister Tarique Rahman urged senior officials to honour the people's mandate sincerely. He stressed the importance of merit-based performance, insisting that officials act in accordance with the constitution, the laws, and the rules of business. This emphasis on rules-based governance creates an opening to revive one of Bangladesh's most powerful yet chronically underused democratic instruments: the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2009.

Properly applied, RTI can help the government improve service delivery, raise integrity in public programmes, and build trust in institutions. Tragically, RTI was among the laws most conspicuously neglected during the interim period, leaving the regime close to paralysis. If the

new government is serious about a fresh approach to governance, reviving RTI should be among its earliest reforms.

It bears repeating that government initiatives—social safety nets, health services, education stipends, and infrastructure—often falter not because of a lack of intent but because oversight is weak. Beneficiaries are frequently unaware of how the programmes are designed, how resources are allocated, which criteria apply, or who is responsible for delivery. In that vacuum, welfare policies risk remaining promises on paper. RTI addresses this problem at its source.

When citizens can access information about where resources go, how programmes are run, and whether targets are met, a clear chain of positive outcomes follows: transparent information resulting in a more informed citizenry, better monitoring, better accountability, more effective service delivery, and stronger trust in public institutions. RTI turns citizens from passive recipients into constructive participants. It enables them to ask informed questions, detect gaps between policy and practice, and press for corrective action. Far from undermining government programmes, RTI strengthens them by improving integrity, efficiency, and public confidence.

To that effect, the first practical step for the BNP government will be to restore the Information Commission immediately. During the interim period, key positions remained vacant, leaving citizens with little recourse when authorities ignored or obstructed requests. Backlogs grew and civic engagement declined. The government can quickly reverse this by appointing the three designated information commissioners, including the chief information commissioner, through a credible and transparent process consistent with the Act. This is urgent not only to clear pending cases but also to send a clear message to the bureaucracy and public alike that impunity and secrecy will no longer be acceptable.

Once a credible commission begins working, many activists and ordinary users who have retreated in frustration in recent months will return. That said, it is also important that expert recommendations on the RTI (Amendment) Ordinance, 2026 are heeded before the ordinance is passed in parliament.

The value of RTI is best seen in outcomes. One of its strongest contributions in Bangladesh so far has been in improving the integrity of social safety net programmes. Citizens, often with civil society support, have used RTI to ask simple but powerful questions: How were beneficiary lists prepared? Who participated in the selection? What criteria were applied? Frequently, the prospect of disclosure alone deterred nepotism and exposed irregularities, helping ensure that limited resources reached those most in need.

RTI has also strengthened healthcare delivery, especially for vulnerable communities. Citizens have sought information on free medicine supplies, doctors' attendance records, and sanitation schedules at public facilities, often prompting immediate corrective action once officials realised that records could be scrutinised.

A striking example is the Nilphamari Mother and Child Health Welfare Centre, where beneficiaries were repeatedly told that no doctor was available and services effectively ceased. In January 2025, an RTI request seeking the list of posted doctors and attendance records revealed

prolonged unauthorised absences. The disclosure increased public awareness, triggered pressure for accountability, and prompted a more responsive local administration, thus helping restore services for mothers and children.

Similar improvements have been documented elsewhere, reducing misuse of scholarship funds and exposing contractors' non-compliance in roads and highways projects. These instances exemplify how RTI works best, not as a tool for sensational exposure but as a mechanism of continuous correction. This means identifying problems early, fixing them promptly, and improving systems over time.

For a government that wants to deliver results and rebuild trust, RTI offers a constructive pathway. It is therefore vital to establish a clear institutional focal point within the government to engage with RTI users, civil society, and concerned citizens so that feedback is translated into administrative improvements and transparency becomes routine rather than exceptional. For example, citizens can be useful allies in implementing the government's new family card and farmer card programmes.

The government's priorities cannot be achieved sustainably without transparency and accountability. The RTI Act provides proven, practical means to bridge this gap. By restoring the Information Commission, strengthening compliance, and encouraging civic engagement, the new government can improve service delivery and lay the foundations for trust-based, participatory governance.

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