

A paralysed Information Commission is undermining citizens' right to know

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FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Recently, Dr. Zahed Ur Rahman, adviser to the prime minister on information and broadcasting, has welcomed constructive criticism from citizens regarding the government's performance. We take that invitation in the spirit in which it was offered—not to criticise the government per se, but to reiterate the deep concern of many citizens over the troubling state of Bangladesh's Right to Information (RTI) regime and to urge swift corrective action.

This decline began soon after the interim government assumed office in August 2024, when the three information commissioners vacated their positions amid political uncertainty. Their posts have remained unfilled ever since, severely impairing the effectiveness of one of the country's most important instruments of democratic accountability, the Information Commission. Repeated calls for timely appointments went unheeded, perhaps reflecting an unwillingness on the part of the interim authorities to submit themselves to the scrutiny the law was designed to ensure.

We had hoped this would be rectified with the arrival of an elected government committed to strengthening democracy and amplifying citizens' voices. Unfortunately, that expectation remains unfulfilled. One is left to wonder whether the government has yet fully appreciated the central importance of the RTI Act to its stated goals of good governance, transparency, and public participation.

This column, therefore, urges the government to revisit this issue urgently.

To begin with, we would like to underline that there is no necessary connection between appointing information commissioners to restore the RTI regime's full functioning and the separate question of amending the RTI Act, which has recently arisen.

The RTI Amendment Ordinance, introduced by the interim government, lapsed when it was not placed before parliament by the incumbent government. Subsequently, through sustained engagement by concerned citizens, the government initiated consultations with civil society groups on possible amendments to the act. This is welcome. Encouragingly, there are also indications that the appointment of information commissioners is receiving serious attention, although no public announcement has been made yet.

Both of these processes may proceed in parallel. But if the government has any thoughts of linking the appointments to the amendments, as suggested in some quarters, we urge that this approach be abandoned. The two issues are entirely distinct.

Moreover, the matter carries legal urgency. In response to a writ petition filed by concerned citizens, the High Court, on August 31, 2025, directed the ministry of information and broadcasting to inform the court of the steps taken regarding these appointments. Despite the time that has since passed, the government is still under a clear legal obligation to act. Moreover, RTI requests on the matter remain pending with the relevant government office.

Even with the absence of information commissioners, the RTI Act has continued to be used by many of its most committed adherents across the country. What has been lost is not the law itself, but an effective avenue of redress when public officials refuse to comply, while complaints continue to accumulate at the commission.

Despite this institutional paralysis, committed citizens across the country continue to use the law with remarkable courage. In the northern districts alone, some 2,650 RTI applications were filed in 2025 by fishermen, farmers, women, minorities, and youth seeking answers to issues affecting their communities. A few examples will illustrate this spirit.

In Nilphamari, citizens used RTI to investigate the sale of government-owned trees, secure livestock vaccination services, and challenge irregularities in local schools. In one case, when residents seeking information about questionable school activities were threatened by an angry headmaster, they appealed to higher authorities rather than baulking. It resulted in the withholding of the headmaster's salary.

In Jaldhaka, when activists faced intimidation for seeking information about an abandoned bridge project, fellow campaigners responded by filing multiple RTI applications in solidarity, effectively neutralising the pressure. In Cox's Bazar, residents used RTI to question the official response to rising dengue cases, prompting stronger public health measures.

Back in Nilphamari, citizens responding to chemical contamination of a local river caused by industrial effluents filed multiple RTI applications, ultimately compelling the authorities to act and bringing the pollution to a halt.

These may appear to be isolated incidents, but together they reflect something deeper: the emergence of what may be called "organic activists"—ordinary citizens using the law not merely to resolve personal grievances but to protect public resources, demand accountability, and strengthen democratic culture.

Most significantly, during the nearly two years of institutional paralysis, such citizen-led initiatives have kept the spirit of the RTI Act alive at the grassroots. This momentum culminated in the formation of a national citizens' platform in January 2026 to support and protect RTI users nationwide.

It has taken years to nurture public trust in, and commitment to, the RTI Act. Any further delay in appointing the information commissioners risks undermining that trust, dampening citizens' confidence, and weakening one of the country's most promising instruments of democratic accountability. That would be immensely harmful for the country, and a setback to the government's pledge to strengthen people's power, but—more importantly—for the growth of a new civic culture in which citizens actively promote good governance, use the law to voice their concerns, and seek redress, rather than resort to protest on the streets.

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