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## Persistent delay in restoring the Information Commission is unacceptable

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FILE VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

It is true that observers have so far viewed the performance of the BNP government, which took office in February 2026 following a year-and-a-half-long interim administration, with cautious optimism. But many have been dismayed by the government's failure to appoint the country's three information commissioners since the previous ones, like numerous officials serving in comparable institutions, vacated their positions in the aftermath of the July uprising. Nearly four months into its tenure, the government's continued inaction about restoring the Information Commission to full strength has disappointed those who hoped that the political transition would mark a decisive shift towards more democratic, transparent, and accountable governance.

The much-invoked spirit of the July uprising rekindled hopes for a genuine transformation in governance—one in which citizens' voices would be respected, the rule of law upheld, and the laws of the land used to advance citizens' interests rather than suppress them. Among more vigilant citizens, there was also the expectation that their right to know how the government functions would be meaningfully guaranteed through, inter alia, the effective implementation of the Right to Information Act, 2009.

The failure to move convincingly towards the RTI regime has inevitably raised troubling questions. Is the government hesitating to embrace the transparency and accountability the RTI Act seeks to advance by opening public institutions to citizen scrutiny? Or is it genuinely struggling to identify suitable candidates for the vacant positions? More worryingly, does the prolonged delay suggest an attempt to quietly render the institution ineffective? Citizens deserve a clear answer.

It is necessary to continue highlighting the tremendous potential of the RTI Act as a tool for good governance and to promote meaningful citizen participation in public affairs. To this end, we turn to the concerns raised in a recent editorial published by this daily.

The editorial titled “Address the rot in our infrastructure sector” (May 23, 2026) raises troubling questions about corruption, waste, and the entrenched lack of accountability in the country’s development sector. The alleged irregularities in the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) Road Connectivity Project-2 under the Roads and Highways Department (RHD) paint a disturbing picture of how public infrastructure projects can become vehicles for private enrichment rather than instruments of public welfare.

According to the editorial, funds allocated to upgrade the 190-km Elenga-Rangpur highway to a four-lane road were allegedly also used to construct extravagant facilities in Paikpara, Dhaka, far removed from the project area. It further highlights allegations of inflated costs, repeated revisions benefiting contractors, environmental destruction, and even the demolition of structures designed by renowned architect Mazharul Islam. The project cost, initially estimated at around Tk 11,000 crore, reportedly rose to more than Tk 19,000 crore following repeated modifications and deadline extensions.

The editorial rightly questions how such extensive irregularities could occur without political patronage and systemic weaknesses in oversight. More importantly, it calls upon the authorities to investigate the allegations thoroughly and restore public confidence in the management of development projects.

While the allegations surrounding this particular project are deeply troubling, the broader issue is far more significant: the chronic absence of transparency and accountability in Bangladesh’s infrastructure sector. This is precisely where the importance of the RTI law becomes most evident.

The RTI Act was enacted to ensure citizens’ access to information held by public authorities. It recognises that transparency is not merely an administrative formality but a cornerstone of democratic governance. Citizens have the right to know how public money is spent, contracts are awarded, project costs escalate, and whether environmental and social safeguards are respected.

Had the RTI framework been actively and effectively utilised, many of the questions might have surfaced much earlier. Journalists, civil society organisations, researchers, environmental groups, and ordinary citizens could have sought official documents relating to procurement, contract revisions, feasibility studies, environmental assessments, and cost escalations. Public scrutiny of such records often serves as one of the strongest deterrents against corruption and abuse of power.

Unfortunately, the RTI regime in Bangladesh has become weakened in recent years. The prolonged absence of information commissioners and the resulting institutional paralysis have significantly undermined the law's effectiveness. At a time when large development projects involve enormous public expenditure and foreign loans, weakened access to information creates an environment in which irregularities can flourish with little fear of accountability.

Therefore, the concerns raised in the editorial should not be viewed merely as an isolated scandal. Rather, they should serve as a reminder that development without transparency inevitably risks becoming distorted by corruption, patronage, and waste. Roads, bridges, and buildings alone cannot define progress if public trust is eroded. So, reviving and strengthening the RTI regime is essential if Bangladesh wishes to ensure that development genuinely serves the public interest. This requires not only the immediate appointment of competent and independent information commissioners, but also the cultivation of a governance culture in which disclosure of public information becomes the norm rather than the exception.

The challenge now is whether policymakers, public institutions, and citizens alike will respond by demanding greater transparency and accountability across all sectors. In that endeavour, the Right to Information Act remains one of the most powerful tools available to the people of the country. The responsibility now rests squarely with the government. Citizens naturally look forward to the early restoration of a fully functional RTI regime that safeguards transparency and accountability in public life. The manner in which the government addresses this issue will serve as an important indicator of its commitment to advancing the democratic governance and openness that it has repeatedly pledged to uphold.

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