

Thousands protest in anti-govt demo in Iraq

AFP, Sulaimaniyah

Around 4,000 demonstrators crowded Tahrir Square in the centre of the Iraqi city of Sulaimaniyah yesterday, the latest protest against the dominance of two major parties in the region.

Iraqi officials have attempted to head off nationwide rallies in recent days by cutting the pay of ministers and lawmakers, hiking funds dedicated to food for the needy, and delaying the implementation of new import tariffs that would raise prices on goods.

Protests in Sulaimaniyah, the second-biggest city in Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region, have left three young protesters dead and more than 100 wounded since Thursday as demonstrators have railed against corruption and the lordship over the region by two main parties.

Demonstrators in the city yesterday carried banners reading, "Don't Forget Hosni Mubarak," referring to the downfall of the

Egyptian president.

"We will continue our demonstrations until officials implement real change," said Kardo Karim, 35.

In a bid to prevent any further violence from taking place, several of the demonstrators wore white shirts inscribed with the words, "Wall of Peace", and stood between the bulk of the protesters and security forces.

Two protesters were killed on Thursday and another died on Sunday in Sulaimaniyah when security forces fired their weapons into the air in a bid to disperse rallies.

On both occasions, demonstrators had been marching towards the headquarters of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in Sulaimaniyah.

The KDP, led by regional president Massud Barzani, and the PUK, led by Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, have lorded over Kurdistan for decades.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari (L) shakes hands with Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan in Tokyo yesterday. Zardari is on a three-day visit in Japan.

Thai court bails seven Red Shirt' leaders

AFP, Bangkok

A Thai court yesterday released on bail seven top leaders of the 'Red Shirt' opposition movement after they spent nine months in detention over their roles in mass rallies in Bangkok.

The men were held on terrorism charges since their two-month long demonstration ended in May 2010 with a deadly military crackdown that left about 90 people dead in clashes between protesters and armed troops.

A judge at the capital's Criminal Court said the decision to release the seven was based on new evidence from the defence.

SC gets 1st woman judge

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Justice Nazmun Ara Sultana, also the first female judge in the HC, was promoted to additional judge of the HC on May 28, 2000.

President Zillur Rahman made the appointments as per Article 95(1) of the Constitution upon recommendations of the chief justice, sources said.

Chief Justice ABM Khairul Haque will administer the oath at the judges' lounge of the SC today, increasing the number of Appellate Division judges to 12.

Sources said the CJ recommended the president to appoint the four senior HC judges to the Appellate Division a month ago.

Meanwhile, seven out of the nine protesting judges may go on leave from today as their demand of appointing the two judges who were dropped during the regime of BNP-Jamaat alliance government was not met, sources said.

They informed the CJ of their decision yesterday and said they would go on leave for an indefinite period or even step down if the two judges--Justice Md Montazuddin Ahmed and Justice Md Shamsul Huda--are not appointed to the apex court, sources said.

The seven judges are: Justice Md Montazuddin Ahmed, Justice Md Shamsul Huda, Justice Faruque Ahmed, Justice Md Abdul Hye, Justice Marzi-ul Huq, Justice Md Nizamul Hq and Justice AHM Shamsuddin Chowdhury Manik.

They feel their seniority has been cold-shouldered due to an illegal decision of the BNP-Jamaat-led government that had been cancelled by the SC later.

EC meets major parties tomorrow

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elections free from partisan politics and influence.

It is also likely to announce the polls schedule for union parishad today. If it is not possible, the EC will announce the schedule tomorrow, officials at the EC Secretariat said yesterday.

The EC took the decision for holding the talks with the parties in the wake of huge political influence on the recently held municipality elections. Both ruling AL and main opposition BNP formally stepped into the battle of ballots although it was completely non-partisan election.

"The activities of the political parties turned the municipality elections into partisan polls. Therefore, we had to face some difficulties to conduct the elections," Election Commissioner Brig Gen (retd) M Sakawat Hossain said yesterday.

Election Commissioner Muhammed Sohul Hussain said the EC will seek cooperation from the political parties to hold the union parishad elections in non-partisan manner.

The election commissioners were talking to journalists after emerging from a meeting with the law enforcement agencies.

At the meeting, the EC and top officials of the law enforcement agencies discussed the

law and order situation ahead of the elections which is likely to kick off in March.

According to the decision, the EC will sit with ruling AL and its other components in the grand alliance--Jatiya Party, Workers Party and Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal--in the morning.

Liberal Democratic Party was also invited to join the talks along with the AL-led grand alliance.

The main opposition BNP and its other components in the four-party alliance--Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami and Bangladesh Jatiya Party--were invited to sit with the EC in the afternoon.

In line with the decision, the EC Secretariat sent letters to the eight political parties which have representation in the current parliament. Each of the parties was requested to send two leaders to join the talks.

According to the EC's plan, the staggered elections will begin by holding the first phase polls to around 400 union parishads under 90 upazilas of coastal belts at the end of March or early of April.

This time elections to over 4,300 out of total 4,503 union parishads will be held, EC officials said.

The last elections to union parishads were held in between January and March in 2003.

India's immense 'food theft' scandal

BBC ONLINE

The poorest of the poor in India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, are at the heart of a major food scandal.

The Indian media has described it as "the mother of all scams".

It appears to show elements of the state bureaucracy diverting food from citizens who are right at the bottom of the economic ladder.

Officials say massive quantities of food grains and fuel, meant to be distributed through the public distribution system or to be given to the poor under welfare schemes like food-for-work and school meals for poor children, have been stolen over the years and sold on the open market.

This is being investigated by India's federal police and there are countless pages of court documents setting out the extent of the deception.

The scale is immense. It involves thousands of officials from top-level bureaucrats to middle-level officers to ground-level workers. It also involves thousands of trans-

porters, village council leaders and fair-price shop owners.

It stretches across 54 of the state's 71 districts, and investigators say the food is carried out of the state and sometimes even beyond Indian borders to Bangladesh and Nepal.

India's top investigating agency - the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) - once tried to withdraw from the case saying it did not have the manpower to deal with it. It said it would require the registration of 50,000 police cases.

One official said that if all the guilty are convicted, a new jail may have to be built to accommodate them.

The newly-appointed state Food Commissioner Rajan Shukla told the BBC the government is committed to resolving the issue.

"The subsidised supplies were siphoned off and sold in the open markets at much higher rates. In government records, they were shown to have been distributed among the people," says Vishwanath Chaturvedi, who filed a petition in court in 2005 demanding that those involved be punished.

Advertorial

Right to Information : Reality and Possibilities

Summary of the opinions and views collected from the divisional consultation meetings all over the country

Negative observations

- There are two aspects of the RTI: the demand side and the supply side. If the supply side cannot match the demand pressure, it can create a negative image of the government.
- No law can be properly implemented if corruption is not eliminated fully.

B. Perception about the Information Commission

- Establishment of the Information Commission should have been transparent, open and participatory. But that did not happen.
- Information Commission is taking too long time to organize itself to become more functional
- Dominance of bureaucrats in the Commission is a problem
- The Commission should try to raise public awareness of its activities and the RTI Act.

- The Commission should practice maximum openness and accountability.

C. Strengths and weaknesses of the RTI Act

Strengths

- The best side of the law is the compulsory disclosure of information. Authorities

have to reveal information marked in the law even if any one asks for it.

Weaknesses

- It should be further scrutinized whether the law is conflicting with the Constitution and the Official Secrets Act.

D. Use of the RTI Act

Appointment of designated officers and informing the Commission:

Appointment of designated officers and informing the Commission: Although it is mandatory, most of the NGOs did not appoint the designated officer to disclose information. Only 2 per cent of the NGOs reportedly submitted information to the Commission in this regard. Though Chief Information Commissioner while addressing the national seminar mentioned this to be less than 1%. After repeated notification from the NGO Affairs Bureau some NGOs submitted names of the designated officers to the Bureau and the Commission.

E. Challenges of RTI Act implementation

- **People's indifference** : Many people do not go to public offices to get information due to lack of education and knowledge. Many think that seeking information can bring problem in their lives. Many fear that they need to bribe for information.

■ Reluctance in recruiting officer in charge:

Reluctance and lengthy procedure of recruiting officer in charge of disclosing information has been identified as a big challenge by the participants of the meetings. It was found during the meetings that in many of the government offices of Khulna and Rajshahi divisions, officer in charge was not recruited. When asked about the reason, it was told that no such instruction had come from the authority. In many NGOs officer in charge was recruited at the headquarters but not at the branches. Most of the appointed officers do not know their responsibilities.

- **Limitations of infrastructure:** Among other limitations, inadequate infrastructure for information storage is an acute problem. It is difficult to find old documents in the government office due to their inadequate space for storing files. Besides, existing IT infrastructure is not sufficient to build up an information storage system. Same is the situation at the NGOs, particularly at the field level.

- **Power discrimination:** Common people take information seeking as challenging the authority of the government officials. Those who are close to the people in power maintain a patron-client relation which keeps them away from helping people apply their right to information. That is why incidence of seeking information applying this law is rare. Collective adverse attitude of the beneficiaries of development activities will hinder receiving information.

Heads of many organizations lack in concept of RTI Act and they are reluctant to know about the law despite being the authority.

- **Lack of guidance:** Local administration is not yet prepared since no directives and guidance of the government reached the grassroots. One high official of law enforcing agency of Rajshahi says, "We have not received any document related to the law. We don't know about how to provide information."

- **Culture of secrecy:** A big barrier to implementation of RTI law is the long cherished culture of secrecy. This law has brought an opportunity for the NGOs to remove their bad image. Question is, whether they avail this opportunity or not.

F. Measures to be taken for implementing RTI

Measures for disclosure of information as the authority

- **Through disseminating role of authority:** People may feel encouraged to seek information if they know that government and non-government organizations are ready to disclose information. Publicity in this regard may be done through advertisement of government and non-government organizations over media, display notice in front of the office of the organization etc.

- **Proactive disclosure of information:** Government and non-government organizations can motivate people to seek information by displaying the list of deliverable information on their respective information

board. Citing an example of proactive disclosure of information it was told in the Barisal meeting that if a person eligible to receive old age allowance knows how many and who received the money in his ward and under what procedure they were selected, it might help him/her remove wrong conception about the distribution system. The land office publicly display the names of people who have been allocated khas land - This can be an example of proactive disclosure of information that will help change people's fate.

- **Disseminate easy techniques of receiving information:** Some participants think disseminating the provisions of RTI Act is important. Some think it is better not to confuse people with the complications of the Act, rather show them the simple way to seek information and aware them about benefits of information.

- **Specific guidelines for information storage and dissemination:** One recommendation from Barisal division says, Information Commission should provide specific guideline for preserving and delivering information. Government officials have to be informed that non-compliance with the guideline will be harmful for them.

- **National information database:** Participants of Sylhet proposed to set up an information database. Measures may be taken to disclose the information that are not mandated to be disclosed voluntarily. They think information disclosed from the division, region or lower levels may be distorted or misinterpreted. They also think 80% of information can be disclosed spontaneously. It may be mentioned that an e-information cell has come into operation at the initiative of Access to Information program at the Prime Minister's Office.

Empowering people to seek information

- **Involve social and voluntary organizations:** Social and voluntary organizations like Red Crescent, Scout, Girls Guide etc. can be engaged for publicity. Religious institutes like mosques and temples can also be used.

- **Involvement of highest level of the state:** Some participants emphasized upon creating examples of information disclosure from the Prime Minister's Office and the Parliament.

- **Accurate statistics:** Non-availability of accurate statistics has been identified as a big problem. Capacity improvement of Bureau of Statistics was emphasized.

- **Two way information dissemination:** Two-way information dissemination system has been recommended. An effective communication between information provider and recipient would facilitate receiving accurate information easily and create a relation of confidence.

- **Including in the curriculum:** RTI Act is one of few laws which reflects empowerment of people. Participants have recommended including RTI as a topic of education curriculum to build up a culture of practicing RTI.

G. progress of RTI implementation

Indicators to measure

- **Regular survey** : Progress may be measured through regular survey.
- **Categorize information:** Progress may be measured by dividing information into two categories -information to be disclosed and not to be disclosed.
- **Recruiting RTI implementation monitoring officer at the district level** : RTI implementation monitoring officer has to be recruited at the district/upazila level to inform people about the progress of its implementation.
- **Incentive** : Officers providing highest number of information can be evaluated and rewarded.

H. Conclusion

Proactive initiative is needed for breaking the culture of secrecy and reluctance to disclose information. Responsibility of the Information Commission has rightly been expanded to creating public awareness instead of keeping it confined within disposal of complaints. But scope of work of the Commission has

Incidents of information seeking

When the Bandarban Radio Station was constructed? For such a simple question the executive engineer of the Bandarban Public Works Department said "the country now has the RTI Act, for getting information one has to wait for 20 days." He advised the journalist, "apply today, you will get information after 20 days."

not been able to create inspiration among the people and citizens. To overcome financial and manpower crisis commission should work in collaboration with NGOs. In that case possibility of conflict of interest cannot be ignored. Because, government office is also authority under this law. How far the commission will be active depends upon the desire of the government. Conditions of the other commissions of the country hardly make us optimistic.

Another political-economic factor creates barrier to implementation of the law. That is the pervasive "Patron-client" relation. Dependence of one segment of the society on the other prohibits them to dissatisfy others. A poor citizen does not want to risk his existence by annoying the UP chairman through seeking information. An NGO representative would not confront a political leader by seeking information and thereby causing harms to his organization. A government official would never like to risk his promotion by seeking information from another government office. This is simply absence of rule of law and manifestation of people's lack of confidence on rule of law.

Implementation of RTI Act is not possible through project based initiatives. It requires sustainable people centered initiative. We need continuous efforts with the involvement of people. Therefore, there is no alternative to patriotic politics and courageous actions of honest people.

For detail
http://mrdbd.org/publications/Voice_of_grassroots_Bangla.pdf
http://mrdbd.org/publications/Voice_of_grassroots_Summary_English.pdf