

SDGs AND THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION

We can't have one without the other

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

THE International Right to Know Day on September 28 was observed this year with much less enthusiasm in many countries. Though 90 percent of world population now live in countries where the Right to Information (RTI), or Freedom of Information (FOI), law exists, the promise of transparent and accountable governance presaged in the law remains a distant dream.

The failure to live up to the promise is not a weakness of the law. It is because world politics has undergone a sea change. Autocratic regimes have emerged in many parts of the world, driving democracy into retreat. RTI/FOI laws have been thrown into disarray.

Instead of becoming more transparent and accountable to the people, governments in many countries have increasingly resorted to curbing the RTI. As citizens began using the law, governments became aware of its potential to embarrass them and cause trouble. They turned to negative tactics to discourage both real and potential users. Instead of opening up, they reverted to age-old secretive, even coercive, practices which the law sought to remove.

Faced with this negative stance, RTI advocates have increasingly been discouraged. RTI regimes have stagnated in many countries, and in others, citizens are in a perpetual struggle against government efforts to undermine the law.

There is thus a growing realisation among them that for the law to survive and flourish, they must do more to increase the number of users and generate more demands for information.

Recently, the global RTI fraternity formed online consultation groups to devise effective tactics. A consensus is emerging among them that their best bet is to promote the use of RTI in assessing their government's commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They have agreed upon a common methodology and a scoring mechanism for this purpose.

The SDGs are not just about poverty; they encompass crucial goals such as fighting environmental degradation, gender inequality, corrupt governance, and barriers to healthcare.

Making SDGs the base for the promotion of RTI is a good strategy because governments in the developing world are generally fond of showing off their successes in regard to development, as was the case for the Millennium Development Goals. In their keenness to claim success in implementing the SDGs, they may see value in cooperating with citizens' efforts to assess progress of

SDGs by using the RTI mechanism. A negative RTI report card will reflect badly on a government's claims of meeting the SDGs.

Within the SDGs, Goal 16 calls for all countries to "Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels." It includes important targets for fighting corruption, improving public participation, and public access to information.

Most countries have already put in place a mechanism for assessing progress against the SDGs as a whole. National NGOs and local civil society groups are part of this effort. In addition, as stated above, specialised groups of RTI-watchers will focus on Goal 16 and RTI in particular.

ing, regulations, and decision-making means people can work from a position of knowledge rather than ignorance and participate in important decisions that affect their lives. RTI is about more than government commitments. It empowers people to participate, advocate and monitor for meaningful progress towards development goals.

There are three main measures to be assessed by RTI-watchers. One, the extent to which a state is proactively disclosing information. Two, the extent to which institutional measures have been put in place to assist with implementation. And three, the extent to which citizens' requests for information are being responded to by public authorities.

Proactive disclosure is the release of information by public authorities even without a request. The RTI laws generally

including capacity building of public offices and standard setting.

In Bangladesh, in the absence of a declared nodal agency, the Information Ministry and the Cabinet Division of the government play the role on an ad-hoc basis. The lack of clarity on the matter, however, makes it difficult for citizens to decide who to turn to in case of a need for government intervention to correct or clarify an anomaly or smoothen a process. This will affect Bangladesh's score on this point.

The second institutional measure is the establishment of an independent RTI oversight body to adjudicate disputes between citizens and public authorities and undertake specified activities to facilitate implementation of the law. In most countries, as in Bangladesh, the task is assigned to the Information Commission (IC). The assessment of the IC would include how independent and effective it is to promote the law, the quality of its decisions, and whether it receives necessary support from the government.

Assessing how RTI requests are dealt with by public authorities is the most crucial part of the exercise. In the SDG context, this will require citizens submitting RTI requests to selected public authorities dealing with SDG implementation, such as for education, health, gender, inequality, etc.

The purpose of the exercise would be two-fold: assessing progress of the SDG concerned and how diligently the authorities respond to the request. It would include their commitment to the RTI law, and whether the process is contributing positively to systemic change in their dealings with people.

Public authorities in Bangladesh are still uncertain about how much they should open up to citizens. They must remember, however, that their government has made a firm commitment to implementing the SDGs, of which RTI is an integral part, and they are under public surveillance. A low score on their performance will affect the overall assessment of the SDGs.

There is an opportunity for the people and the government of Bangladesh to show the same determination for achieving the SDGs as they did for the MDGs. It can be a win-win situation for all concerned. But for that, there must be a clear recognition that the SDGs cannot be achieved without institutionalising transparency and accountability in governance which only successful implementation of RTI can ensure.

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Such groups will provide separate reports to Unesco, which is tasked with collating information on progress of Goal 16. They will be based on information gathered through a common approach, as described below.

RTI is not a goal in itself—it is a prerequisite to achieving sustainable development as a whole. To quote Article 19, an international NGO promoting access to information, RTI means "improving access to healthcare and water by empowering people with knowledge to demand services; enabling communities to hold governments and companies accountable for polluting their water supply; and holding governments to account for corrupt practices around development projects. Ultimately RTI promotes accountability on development issues as it does for more political matters. Information on budgets, spend-

require public authorities to publish both institutional information and those relating to procedures for releasing information on a proactive basis. The Bangladesh RTI Act 2009 and its rules provide a list of items to be included in the proactive disclosure list of all public offices. RTI-watchers will score each public authority on whether they disclose the required information on their websites or by any other means and whether they are updated regularly.

Assessment of institutional measures relates to two particular aspects in the overall implementation of the law. One, the institutional arrangement for continuous government engagement in taking the law forward. It often takes the shape of identifying a nodal agency, often a ministry, entrusted with coordinating between different government bodies and others implementing the RTI,

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

India's dangerous Pakistan policy



SHASHI THAROOR

JUDGING by the unsavoury exchanges between the Indian and Pakistani foreign ministers at the recent United Nations General Assembly, the already deeply troubled bilateral

relationship has reached a new low. What immediately preceded the UN session was bad enough. Less than 24 hours after agreeing to a bilateral meeting of foreign ministers on the margins of the General Assembly, India cancelled, citing the killing of three Indian police officers on their shared border and Pakistan's issuance of a postage stamp honouring a slain Kashmiri terrorist.

But such border incidents—including both killings and retaliation—are not new; several have already occurred this year. And while the stamps were certainly an unpleasant manifestation of Pakistan's chronic glorification of anti-Indian violence, they were issued in July, a month before Prime Minister Imran Khan—whose new government proposed the bilateral meeting—was even sworn in.

The Indian foreign ministry's allegation that these incidents exposed Khan's "true face" was a mere fig leaf—and a churlish one at that. In fact, with a general election six months away and five state elections set to take place before the end of this year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government simply did not want a meeting with Pakistan at a politically sensitive moment.

Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) appears to have decided to contest the upcoming elections on a hardline Hindutva platform. Hindutva, the ideology of Hindu chauvinism, prides itself on hostility toward Muslims in India, as well as toward Pakistan. Smiles and handshakes in New York would not have served that strategy.

This reading is reinforced by Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj's use of the UN podium to deliver a political

campaign speech in Hindi to BJP voters back home. In it, she lambasted Pakistan and mentioned Modi twice as many times as she referred to India, on whose behalf she was supposed to be speaking.

This is not to say that Khan's government has been a paragon of diplomacy. Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi has taken a bizarre and damaging approach, alleging, for example, that Pakistan is under siege from Indian "terrorism," a phenomenon that no objective international analyst has yet recognised.

Qureshi also blames India for a 2014 attack on an army school in Peshawar

fever is heating up under a government that has not hesitated to politicise the military and often substitutes marketing for tangible achievements.

For example, the BJP constantly boasts of cross-border raids on terrorist camps in Myanmar and Pakistan. Last month, it celebrated the anniversary of one such raid across the Line of Control in Kashmir, despite the fact that the raid had no lasting geostrategic impact. Cross-border terrorist incursions, aided and abetted by the Pakistani military, have continued in the two years since.

Meanwhile, foreign-policy experts are wondering whether India under Modi

practice, to which earlier Indian governments had responded with official indifference. That November, at the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation summit in Nepal, Modi pointedly stared at a brochure instead of greeting Sharif, though it was later revealed that the two leaders met privately in a hotel suite belonging to an Indian businessman.

The pattern has repeated itself throughout Modi's tenure. One day, the ruling party avers that talks and terror don't go together, and that Pakistan cannot be rewarded with a visit from Indian leaders until it makes progress on punishing the perpetrators of the 2008 terror attack in Mumbai. The next day, Modi is winging impulsively to Lahore to attend a family celebration at Sharif's home, sending India's surprised high commissioner scurrying late to the airport to receive his boss.

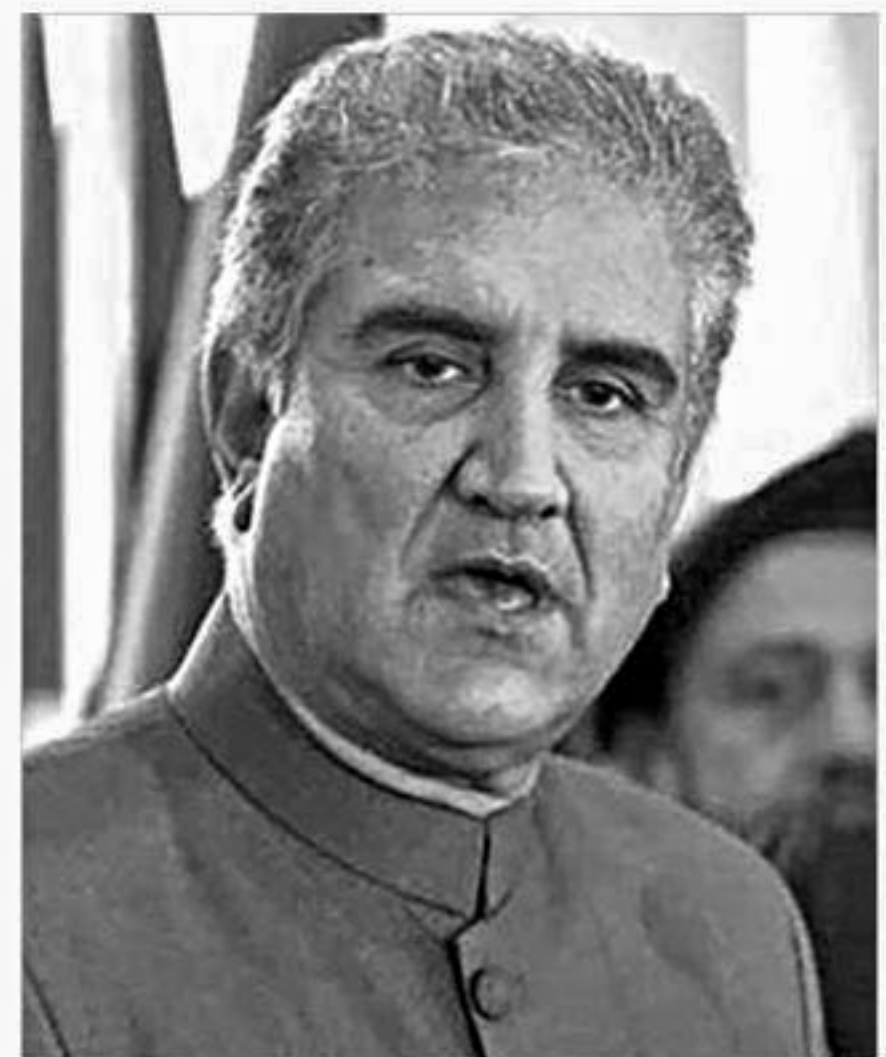
Shortly after that impromptu visit to Lahore in late 2015, seven Indians were killed by Pakistani militants at the Pathankot Air Force Base, putting the bilateral relationship on ice again. More attacks from Pakistan have followed, bringing more inconsistent and episodic responses from India, typified in the latest UN setback.

It is true that many Indian officials have found it frustrating to talk peace to a civilian government that—because the military calls the shots in Pakistan—seems unable or unwilling to deliver on any commitments. But the fact remains that India's government lacks a cohesive policy framework for negotiating the relationship with its most turbulent neighbour, much less a compelling vision for lasting peace.

Modi's is a foreign policy by whim, not by design. As India's election campaigns heat up, one can only hope that those whims—and the incendiary rhetoric that often accompanies them—do not ignite a conflagration.

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India called off a rare meeting between Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj and her Pakistani counterpart Shah Mehmood Qureshi just a day after announcing the talks would take place on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York.



that has been credibly attributed to the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, a homegrown terrorist group waging war on the Pakistani government. Given that the one government the Pakistani Taliban hate more than Pakistan's is India's, the idea that they were doing India's bidding on Pakistani soil is both grotesque and fatuous.

Can the supposedly responsible governments of two nuclear-armed countries sink any lower? Unfortunately, it seems entirely likely. In Pakistan, Khan's government, anointed by the Pakistani military, will progressively consolidate power. In India, election

has a Pakistan policy at all. After demonising Pakistan in his campaign speeches, Modi invited his then-counterpart Nawaz Sharif to Delhi for his 2014 inauguration, raising hopes—reinforced by exchanges of shawls, saris, and even sentimental letters to each other's mothers—of a new dawn in bilateral relations.

Less than two months later, India and Pakistan were exchanging artillery fire across the still-sensitive border. Talks between their respective foreign ministers were called off when the Pakistanis proposed meeting Indian Kashmiri separatist leaders—a common

DSCC given the short shrift

Shouldn't utility service chiefs be accountable?

THAT most chiefs of utility service-providing organisations choose not to attend coordination meetings called by the Mayor of South City Corporation is just shameful. Not only have they defied a direct order from the Prime Minister's Office, but their repeated refusals to attend the meetings are an insult to the mayor and the public.

The entire purpose of the meetings, as highlighted by the PMO circular, was to bring greater coordination among utility service providers which has been woefully missing to the grave detriment of citizens. The amount of time and resources that has been wasted over the years because of unplanned and uncoordinated construction and repair works, not to mention public money, is simply mindboggling. To take just one example, according to a World Bank report last year, Bangladesh has the highest road construction cost in the world even though its roads were largely substandard. And the main reasons for this, the report said, were poor monitoring by the concerned authorities and the resulting failure to complete projects within the designated timeframes.

In spite of all this, the fact that the chiefs of our utility service-providing organisations have remained so brazenly apathetic is completely unacceptable. What this indicates is that they are, perhaps, more concerned about their own interests, which is why they fail to keep costs down, as cost extensions would make more funds available to go into their own pockets. What else explains their failure to further inform the DSCC about the progress their departments have been making in implementing decisions taken during the meetings?

It is high time to hold the chiefs of these organisations accountable for not attending the meetings, and for any future failures by their organisations to provide high-quality and timely services to people.

Focus more on technical education

It will help in achieving SDGs

THERE is a general perception among our people, especially our young generation, that higher education is the only way to become a member of the skilled work force. But as we move towards becoming a middle-income country, we need to change our mindset regarding university education or so-called higher education, and focus more on technical and vocational education to create a skilled workforce for the future. As experts in a recent roundtable have said, there is also no alternative to technical and vocational education to achieve the SDGs.

Unemployment is a big problem in Bangladesh as a large number of university and college graduates find it really hard to enter the job market due to a lack of practical skills. But with proper vocational training, they can easily become a part of the skilled workforce. There is also a perception in our society that such jobs are only for the less affluent. This stereotype must be broken and practical skills must be prioritised. Only then can we achieve the SDG8, which is about "decent work for all."

Furthermore, although there are many government and non-government organisations that have been providing various types of skills development trainings and offering technical courses, information regarding these institutions and courses are not easily available. If such information can be made available to the students, they can decide on what courses or training they need to take to make themselves competent. At present, many private organisations are also providing such training. Therefore, they must work together to change our perceptions towards technical education. More investment in this sector is imperative so that we can take full advantage of our demographic dividend.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Was banning Laguna a wise decision?

In September, the police banned the Laguna, a small passenger-carrier, in many areas of the capital. While I agree that Lagunas exacerbate traffic jams, I question the decision to ban them without putting any alternatives in the first place.

I live in Nobodoy Udyan, half a kilometre past Mohammadpur, and my workplace is located at Kawran Bazar. There are only two bus services that carry passengers from Kawran Bazar to Mohammadpur. On the other hand, Laguna carriers used to make hundreds of trips each evening from Farmgate to many areas of Mohammadpur and Dhanmondi. Now that the Laguna is banned, two bus services are not nearly enough to carry so many passengers.

I urge the authorities concerned to place viable alternatives before banning a service. The authorities should launch new bus services in the Farmgate-Mohammadpur route so that the hassle passengers are currently facing can be alleviated.

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