

NGOs can help citizens learn to use the RTI Act

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SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

Recently, there has been a perceptible increase in government advertisements promoting the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2009, particularly on television. This is welcome news, indicating government recognition of the citizens' role in advancing good governance. The RTI Act was adopted, as enunciated in its preamble, to empower citizens to monitor the work of public offices by seeking relevant information on how they do their jobs. However, this is a complex task, as citizens must first understand the law's myriad possibilities to use it effectively.

Regrettably, there is still a significant lack of awareness about the full potential of the RTI Act. Due to its extensive nature, promoting its use through simple awareness sessions and advertisements is proving to be a challenging, if not impossible, task. The slogans used in ads, such as "Information is power," "Know your rights, ask for information," and "Access to Information is a citizen's right," may not resonate with the people. They require assistance in understanding the reasons for seeking information in the first place. Most individuals believe that information is only necessary for specific purposes and should be sought as and when required. Few realise that the law's primary objective is not to serve citizens' personal information needs, but to promote the larger public interest. They also need help in identifying specific goals for using the law.

Despite the challenges, significant progress has been made over the last 14 years. Many citizens have learnt to use the law to check, for example, if the government's social safety net programmes for those in need are reaching them properly; if school scholarships are reaching the students in full and not being truncated by school authorities; if free medicine at public clinics for people in need is not being sold to others; if contractors are not cheating on construction materials, etc. This progress, largely due to the support of many NGOs, is a testament to the potential of citizen engagement in governance. To maintain this momentum, there is a need to expand the focus and areas of interventions. Government advertisements and efforts of the Information Commission alone cannot achieve this. Citizens need practical support to identify issues and process RTI applications, a role that only NGOs can effectively fulfil.

To help citizens identify issues of common interest likely to benefit from RTI interventions, we consulted citizen groups in different parts of the country engaged in utilising the RTI law. Based on that, we devised a list relating to key public interest sectors in governance. We cite them here as an indicative list to provide a base for further additions. Experience gained in using them will likely lead to higher engagement levels in more sensitive governance

areas.

RTI interventions in the education sector

- Information on resource management of schools/colleges to ensure they are properly and justly utilised.
- Information relating to fair recruitment and promotion of teachers and staff.
- Information on the functioning of management committees and the mechanism to assure their accountability, e.g., teachers' appointments, management of school funds, etc.
- Information related to admission practices, levying examination fees, etc.

RTI interventions in the health sector

- Information relating to the management system of hospitals/clinics, e.g., availability of doctors at all levels.
- Attendance of medical staff and their maintenance of time schedules.
- Procurement of medicines and medical equipment.
- Information to check if healthcare services and resource distribution are available for all, including the disadvantaged.
- Roles and duties of hospital

culverts and other infrastructure.

- Measures to ensure transparency and accountability in the tendering process.
- Measures to reduce corruption and mismanagement in the provision of public services, e.g., appointment of rightful candidates at public services is ensured, and unlawful transfers/promotions are avoided.

RTI intervention on public procurement

- Information on the bidding or tendering process, selection of suppliers, contract awarding processes, monitoring mechanisms for progress, and quality management.
- Information on measures undertaken to reduce corruption and prevent wastage of public funds, e.g., avoidance of repeated extension of project completion period.

RTI intervention in social welfare programmes

- Measures taken to ensure just and equitable selection processes of rightful beneficiaries of specific services, e.g., pensions for old age, widow benefits, etc.
- Information on how specific programmes, e.g., social safety net programmes, are implemented and coordinated at all levels. Measures to reduce corruption in the disbursement of funds under safety net programmes.

RTI objectives for infrastructure development

- Information on measures taken for efficient project implementations related to infrastructure



VISUAL: STAR

administration and their accountability. • Cleanliness of hospital/clinic premises and toilets, how they are managed, and checking on the roster of duties. • Information on the list of free services and free medicines and whether their availability is prominently displayed.

RTI interventions on local government

- Information on budgeting and expenditure on local development projects, justifications for undertaking such projects, their progress, and who is responsible for monitoring and ensuring people's participation.
- Information on how effective public service deliveries are and whether access to such public service is ensured for all citizens.
- Measures to ensure fair implementation and distribution of development projects and resources.
- Measures taken to ensure regular maintenance, repair, and reconstruction of roads, bridges,

development and to reduce corruption and avoid project delays.

- Information on who is specifically accountable for such infrastructure's maintenance, repair, reconstruction, and operation.

Clearly, this is a preliminary and indicative list of issues related to limited sectors. However, they provide a basis to move forward. It must be noted, however, that identifying issues and transforming them into RTI requests are two different things. Experience has shown that ordinary citizens need support in both areas, more particularly in the latter regard. A few NGOs in the country have provided them so far as a part of their mission, though finding funds for them is not easy. Hopefully, they can continue to do so until the law strikes deeper roots. In a country where the more knowledgeable and educated section of society has largely remained aloof from using the RTI law, it is not difficult to understand the fate of the RTI Act in Bangladesh without NGOs' role in keeping it moving.



New British Prime Minister Keir Starmer delivers his speech outside Number 10 Downing Street, following the results of the general election, in London, Britain on July 5, 2024.

PHOTO: REUTERS

A litmus test for UK's Labour Party

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DAVID CHEESMAN and M SAKHAWAT HUSSAIN

The 2024 UK general election was a political earthquake. The Conservative Party was almost wiped out. In the previous election in 2019, the Conservatives won a comfortable majority, with 365 seats, well above the 326 needed to form a majority. Labour, with only 203 seats, was humiliated. It was predicted that the Conservatives would be in power for the next 10 years.

Instead, Conservatives threw their majority away. After losing his seat in 2024, Sir Brandon Lewis, a former Conservative justice secretary, accused his own party of giving the nation a "clown show" of self-indulgent in-fighting and posturing. There were three prime ministers in 2022 and one of them, Liz Truss, wrecked Britain's international reputation for financial competence. She broke another record by becoming, at seven weeks, Britain's shortest-serving prime minister. Voters, who frequently cited Liz Truss as their reason for wishing to remove the Conservatives, took their revenge in this election by voting her out.

The 2024 election was marked by a steely determination on the part of the electorate to eradicate the Conservatives. There was no sign of great enthusiasm for the alternatives. Knowing this, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer ran an exceptionally cautious campaign. The two main opposition parties, Labour and Lib Dem, took advantage of the national mood by concentrating their efforts on the seats they believed they could win. In the constituencies where either Labour or the Lib Dems polled second to the Conservatives in 2019, they did not actively campaign against each other. The results indicate ruthless tactical voting by the electorate, with the Lib Dem vote falling and the Labour vote rising in potential Labour gains and vice versa in potential Lib Dem gains. This confirms that many people voted for parties they did not support in order to kick out the Conservatives. This strategic campaigning won the Lib Dems 72 seats, their best result since 1923, and Labour 412 seats, their best since 1997.

The Conservatives were also fighting on the right. In 2019, the Reform UK Party entered into an election pact under which they would not stand against sitting Conservative MPs but Nigel Farage, the Reform leader, said at the beginning of the recent campaign that the Conservative Party was unfit to rule and his party should replace them. Reform's main manifesto commitment is for tougher immigration policies. The party only won five seats, but they received 15 percent of the national vote and many Labour and Lib Dem candidates won by sailing through the split in the Conservative/Reform vote. Some prominent Conservatives believe they should become closer to the

Reform Party so that they can emulate the success of Marine Le Pen's National Rally Party in France. Others argue that British elections are always won from the centre and so appealing Reform Party voters would take them to the fringes of the far right, making them unelectable.

Though they have a commanding majority in the House of Commons, Labour's electoral support is therefore waver thin. Few people in the UK electorate have strong party loyalties today. The Labour leadership is acutely aware that, if the Conservatives can throw away a majority, so can they. At around 60 percent, turnout was the lowest for 20 years. This reflects disillusion rather than apathy. Though disgusted with the Conservatives, voters consistently say they have little faith in any politicians to make positive change. Such low expectations may work to Labour's advantage.

The single most important foreign policy issue for Britain is the war in Ukraine, though Gaza has taken a big space in public domain. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is widely regarded as an existential threat to UK sovereignty. On his first day as prime minister, Starmer spoke to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

In his first speech as prime minister, Starmer set himself the task of managing expectations, stressing that change cannot come quickly. Instead, he stressed a change in tone. His government would bring back the ethos of public service and show that "politics can be a force for good." If that message comes through, the electorate may trust them enough to give them a second chance at the next election to complete their task. As a demonstration of his commitment to action, he held his first Cabinet meeting on Saturday, July 6, less than 24 hours after becoming prime minister.

The new government will focus on domestic policies, restoring the National Health Service, which the new Health Secretary has described as "broken," improving care services and education, increasing the number of affordable homes, and sorting out local government finance. Their main area of domestic vulnerability is probably immigration. The Reform Party outflanked the Conservatives on this issue. If Labour finds itself on

the defensive about immigration at the next election, Reform might do the same for them.

The single most important foreign policy issue for Britain is the war in Ukraine, though Gaza has taken a big space in public domain. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is widely regarded as an existential threat to UK sovereignty. On his first day as prime minister, Starmer spoke to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. A key factor in Labour's crushing defeat in 2019 was the contempt many traditional Labour voters had for Starmer's predecessor, Jeremy Corbyn. In doorstep interviews, they consistently said that they perceived him to be an unpatriotic pacifist who was not committed to NATO and could not be trusted to defend Britain.

Pacifism brings few votes and keeping Corbyn away from the military machine helped the Conservatives win many Labour seats in 2019. This line of attack failed in 2024. Starmer has restored Labour's credibility as a party of serious government by promising to increase defence spending, confirming unwavering support for NATO and taking a leading role in confronting Russia. Labour must maintain these commitments if it wishes to remain electable.

By contrast to Ukraine, Labour's position on Gaza is an electoral liability. Corbyn has been expelled from the Labour Party but he is back in Parliament as an independent MP, along with four other independents who stood with him on a platform of solidarity with Gaza. All constituencies with substantial Muslim populations saw a fall in support for Labour, in protest against Starmer's refusal to condemn Israel's aggression against Palestine. This cost Labour two of its most prominent shadow cabinet ministers who lost their seats to independents on the Gaza ticket. As a reminder that Palestine is a progressive issue not just a Muslim concern, Starmer's own majority was cut by 18 percent by a Jewish independent standing in support of Gaza. Andrew Feinstein is the South African son of a Holocaust survivor. He was an MP for the African National Congress under Nelson Mandela. His wife is a Bangladeshi.

Given the fragility of Labour's vote, it cannot afford to alienate Muslims and progressives who have traditionally been among its strongest supporters. The Labour manifesto commits the party to recognising a Palestinian state "as a contribution to a renewed peace process," but without stating when this might happen. Given the domestic pressures, recognition of Palestine could be done quickly and at no cost if Labour is serious about rebuilding trust in politics.

We do not know what lasting changes the 2024 electoral earthquake will make to Britain's political landscape. That will depend on the performance of the Labour Party in office and the direction the Conservatives take when they select their new leader. The question remains: will the new prime minister contribute to the international politics of conflict or reconciliation?

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Members of the force
- 5 Archaeologist's find
- 9 Bean-bearing tree
- 10 Find darling
- 12 Houston player
- 13 Praline nut
- 14 Fetters
- 16 Child
- 17 Egg layers
- 18 Spends time at the mirror
- 21 Ram's mate
- 22 Is fearful of

DOWN

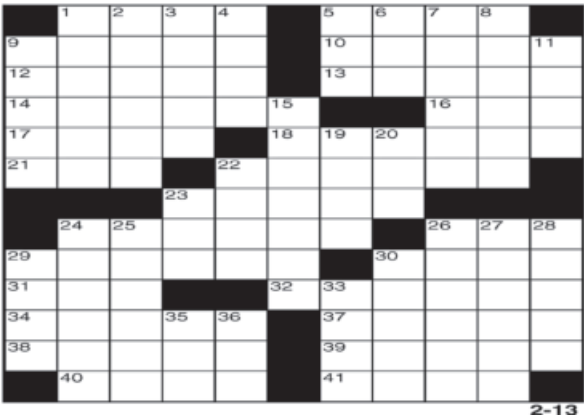
- 23 Intended
- 24 Peaceful
- 26 Poker prize
- 29 Apply hastily
- 30 Dressed in
- 31 Cereal grain
- 32 Laundry problems
- 34 Impassioned
- 37 Detail map
- 38 "Tomorrow" musical
- 39 Suspicious
- 40 Halt
- 41 Whirl of water

DOWN

- 1 Kidney-shaped nut
- 2 Gas pump number
- 3 Louvre location
- 4 Before long
- 5 Keg need
- 6 Keats work
- 7 Ridiculed
- 8 Intelligence
- 9 Secret store
- 11 Finishes
- 15 Sports injuries
- 19 Tear

DOWN

- 20 Have lunch
- 22 Retro style
- 23 Atlas page
- 24 Bison's home
- 25 Hidden
- 26 Self-assured
- 27 Stubborn
- 28 Irritable
- 29 Couch
- 30 Diminished
- 33 Floor piece
- 35 2016 Olympics host
- 36 Slangy agreement



SATURDAY'S ANSWERS

