



Article 19-A and Accountability: Performance Analysis and Reform Imperatives for the Punjab Information Commission

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Abstract

Article 19-A of Pakistan's Constitution enshrines the right to information as fundamental to democratic accountability, yet Punjab's implementation reveals profound institutional weaknesses. This study critically examines the Punjab Transparency and Right to Information Act 2013 and the Punjab Information Commission's (PIC) performance, analyzing enforcement gaps through qualitative review of legal documents, commission reports, and comparative benchmarks. Despite progressive legislation, PIC faces escalating complaints (2,847 in 2024, up 23%), chronic backlogs (32.5% unresolved), delayed resolutions (127 days vs. 90-day mandate), and poor compliance (68% post-order adherence). Systemic barriers include understaffing, vague exemptions, bureaucratic resistance, and inadequate proactive disclosure (only 14% full compliance among audited bodies). Contrasting Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's model, findings highlight PIC's operational deficiencies undermining Article 19-A's promise. Reforms-strengthening PIC independence, digitizing processes, narrowing exemptions, and public awareness campaigns are imperative for transparency, reduced corruption, and participatory governance in Punjab

Keywords: Right to Information (RTI), Punjab Information Commission, Public Sector Transparency, Citizen Access to Information, Operational Deficiencies

Introduction

The Right to Information (RTI) has become one of the core democratic rights, having been identified by more than 125 nations as critical in enhancing transparency and accountability among governments. In Pakistan, this right was made constitutional under Article 19-A of the 18th Amendment in 2010 and established that all citizens were entitled to the right of access to information in all things of national interest, and that this right was subject to regulation and reasonable restrictions by law (The Gazette of Pakistan, 2010). In Pakistan the RTI process was initiated with the enactment of the Freedom of Information Ordinance 2002, the first of its kind in South Asia, but again was not able to succeed because of ineffective enforcement provisions, and broad exemptions (The Pakistan Code, 2017). The constitutionalizing of Article 19-A changed information access as an administrative privilege to a right of basic necessity and established a

provincial government obligation to establish broad transparency models. Being the largest province in Pakistan and having more than 110 million people, Punjab has a significant role to play in RTI implementation in the country. The Punjab Transparency and RTI Act, 2013, is the result of a multifaceted legislative agenda, 2010-2013, that strikes a balance between democratic goals and the strong institutional opposition to transparency reforms (Punjab Government, 2013). The information rights of citizens were ultimately established in 2014, through the establishment of an independent quasi-judiciary mechanism Punjab Information Commission (PIC) (Punjab Information Commission, 2014). However, initial performance indicators reported that the difference between what was planned to be done and what was being done was very large. The evidences of the awakening of people and the systemic administrative issues are the approximately 800 complaints submitted to the Commission about the non-compliance of the government in five months of the year 2017 (Yousafzai, 2019). The establishment of PIC has become one of the major indicators of the good governance intentions of Punjab. In the international literature, it has been demonstrated that successful application of RTI has a very high correlation with reduced corruption levels, and increased citizen participation and improved services provision mechanism. A country with a good system of access to information will always be ranked high in the transparency index and will experience better governance outcomes (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2023). In Punjab, RTI is carried out against the background of the complex federalism of Pakistan and provides an opportunity to act innovatively and encounters certain challenges in the sphere of inter-provincial interaction. The provincial practice and performance vary significantly as compared to those in the other provinces, in particular, the internationally renowned RTI Act 2013 of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where the relative experience demonstrates (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Government, 2013). This discussion offers a critical analysis of the implementation of RTI in Punjab and especially the performance of Punjab Information Commission. This work investigates the institutional, legal, and practical aspects of the access to information to gain a better insight into how transparency reforms work in the context of developing democracies and to provide evidence-based suggestions on how to enhance RTI processes in Punjab and other states.

Research Methodology

It is a qualitative study; it utilizes the critical discussion of primary legal documents, government documents, commission reports, and policy documents to develop an understanding of the historical and legal context of RTI in Pakistan (Bryman, 2021). The study also includes the critical analysis of the institutional performance based on the review of the reports and data provided by Punjab Information Commission and organizations of the civil society. The comparative analysis of RTI implementation and best practices is informed by secondary sources including academic literature, reporting by the media, and international guidelines (Cheong, Lyons, Houghton, & Majumdar, 2023). They are analyzed using thematic content analysis in order to identify recurrent challenges, gaps in the institutions and emerging trends in the execution of RTI laws (Naeem, Ozuem, Howell, & Ranfagni, 2023). This allows one to gain a delicate insight into how law-regulations can be converted into actual transparency strategies in the specific socio-political context that is Pakistan.

Research Questions

- What are the key legislative and constitutional features of Pakistan's RTI laws, and how do they align with international principles of access to information?
- How effectively does the Punjab Information Commission fulfill its mandate in enforcing RTI laws, and what institutional challenges impede its performance?

- What reform measures and capacity-building initiatives are necessary to strengthen the RTI framework and promote greater transparency and accountability in governance?

Background and Legal Framework

Historical Evolution of RTI in Pakistan

The evolution of the Right to Information law in Pakistan has been a slow process, that took three decades before it was defined in the Constitution, had false starts, political opposition, and a long and slow evolution. Its initiation began in 1990 when Professor Khurshid Ahmed, Naib Amir of Jamaat-i-Islami, proposed the first RTI related proposal in the Senate (Shehri, 2014). This was a new venture, which failed to take off because the government did not back the venture and people had little information about rights of information amongst the policy makers. There were also several unsuccessful attempts to establish a legal regime of access to the information in the 1990s. One of the suggestions of the Anti-Corruption Committee that was established by the Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto administration to combat corruption was the freedom of Information Act. This big-name backing aside, vested interests were able to foil this as transparency remained a very prickly topic within the power fabric of Pakistan. In 1996-1997 two large and unsuccessful initiatives entered the scene. In the interim government of President Farooq Laghari, a law minister attempted to bring before the president the Access to Information Ordinance 1996, never signed or implemented. Even better was the Freedom of Information Ordinance of 1997 which caretaker Prime Minister Malik Meraj Khalid signed into law on January 29, 1997. This was not to be though, as the new Nawaz Sharif government never received parliamentary approval and the ordinance ran out (Afzal & Yongmei, 2023). These early frustrations helped highlight some of the internal complications that would continue to plague the implementation of RTI: political goodwill, bureaucratic resistance, and the lack of continued civil society pressure on the transparency agenda. This pattern of momentary change and institutional inversion would continue the procedure of reformation of the government of Pakistan at the following stage.

The 2002 Federal FOI Ordinance: Foundation and Limitations

This changed in 2002 when the military government led by General Pervez Musharraf signed the Federal Freedom of Information (FOI) Ordinance on 26 October, 2002. The driving force behind this development was heavily due to outside pressure especially by Asian development bank and in this respect a detailed plan of reforms in Pakistan was passed in the year 2001 by Asian development bank where transparency was one of the conditions to carry on receiving financial help (Article 19, 2015). The 2002 FOI Ordinance made Pakistan the first South Asian nation to enact RTI legislation, a fact that disguised what would turn out to be major qualitative gaps. The ordinance was critical on many accounts compared to foreign RTI standards. It applied only to federal government organizations, but not provincial governments and private organizations that received public funds. The exemption provisions had been excessively broad, and the enforcement provisions had been feeble, and there was no external oversight agency to hold them to account (The Nation , 2017). Before the ordinance of 2002, access to information was regulated by the 1984 Qanoon-e-Shahadat Order that described the concept of public and private documents as not being aimed at transparency of the government itself but at providing evidence during court trials. Articles 85 and 86 of this order revolved around document production in courts and not the access of information by the people (Punjab Police, 1984). The Federal FOI Ordinance was not repealed until the RTI Act 2013 repealed it a dozen years later. Its application at this time was intermittent and ineffective with little awareness of the people and little compliance by the government. The Freedom of Information Rules formulated by the Cabinet Division on June 18, 2004, were purely

administrative measures that did not touch on structural flaws that are inherent in the ordinance (Government of the Punjab Information and Culture Department, 2015).

Constitutional Recognition: Article 19-A and the 18th Amendment

The biggest achievement in RTI in Pakistan came with the 18th Amendment to the Constitution in 2010, which brought the right to information as a constitutional right and created a new Article 19-A (Government of Pakistan, 2012). According to this provision, it says

"Every citizen shall have the right to have access to information in all matters of public importance subject to regulation and reasonable restrictions imposed by law."

The legal environment of RTI changed to allow information access as a right and not an administrative privilege as was construed by the constitution. There was a deeper implication of this change on both federal and provincial governments that came in the form of law that could no longer be overlooked and arbitrarily stalled. Article 19-A came along with the broader decentralization of powers achieved in the 18th Amendment leaving the bulk of federal government to provincial governments. This kind of decentralization gave the provinces new incentives to either develop their own RTI frameworks or to make sure that these frameworks were consistent with the provisions of the constitution (Abbasi, 2022).

International RTI Principle and Standard

The assessment of Pakistan RTI legislation would be situated within the framework of various principles and standards accepted in other countries as indicators of effective access to information regimes. The principle of maximum disclosure, which assumes a presumption in favor of disclosure and only then restricts it to intelligibly-focused and intelligibly-expressed causes, comes first and foremost among them. This is in line with Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) that says the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas via any medium is guaranteed without regard to borders (United Nations, 1948). This universal system of human rights enshrines the idea that information under the control of state agencies should be considered as an inherent right of the population, and reinforces the democratic principle of transparency. The other is the principle of proactive disclosure whereby the public entities including the organization structures, budget, policies, procurement decision, and the performance data must regularly release the most important information (Ahmed & Ali, 2023). Proactive disclosure reduces the level of administrative input (linked with individual requests) and establishes a culture of management transparency. Another similarity is that RTI systems attach much importance to explicit and narrowly defined exemptions to information disclosure weighed against a test of public interest. This kind of exemption is commonly invested in national security, personal privacy, commercial confidentiality and deliberative processes, but must not be used at the expense of the right of the people to know. Good RTI legislations also entail the timely and equitable processing of information request within reasonable time limits, normal and transparent procedures as well as appeal procedures to limit miscellaneous rejections or delays. This includes hiring of information officers and usage of standard request forms. All these values together can be used as a guideline or reference point in determining the quality and usefulness of national legislation on RTI like that of Pakistan to ensure it is in tandem with international human rights practices and standards related to transparency and accountability. These can also be found in International Covenants, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which in turn restates the legal provision that states must make access to public information a human right (United Nations, 1966).

Legal Architecture and Implementation Framework

The Punjab Transparency & RTI Act, 2013, represents the culmination of the province's efforts to translate constitutional mandates into operational legislation. The Act's structure reflects both international best practices and local contextual considerations, creating a legal framework that aims to balance accessibility with administrative feasibility. The Act establishes comprehensive coverage of public bodies, including government departments, statutory corporations, and organizations substantially funded by the provincial government. This broad scope reflects recognition that transparency requirements must extend beyond core governmental entities to encompass the full range of publicly accountable institutions (Ahmad, 2025). The legislation incorporates proactive disclosure requirements, mandating that public bodies regularly publish key information categories without waiting for specific requests. These requirements include organizational information, financial data, policy documents, and service delivery statistics, creating a foundation for systematic transparency. The exemption framework balances transparency with legitimate confidentiality concerns through carefully defined categories of protected information. These exemptions cover national security, personal privacy, commercial confidentiality, and ongoing investigations, but each exemption is subject to public interest overrides that prevent automatic withholding of information. The enforcement architecture centers on the Punjab Information Commission, established as an independent quasi-judicial body with powers to investigate complaints, conduct hearings, and issue binding decisions. This institutional design reflects international experience demonstrating that effective RTI implementation requires independent oversight bodies with adequate powers and resources. The procedural framework establishes clear timelines for information provision, standardized request procedures, and structured appeal mechanisms. Citizens can request information through designated officers in each public body, with responses required within specified timeframes and clear procedures for challenging denials or delays (Yousaf, Ameen, & Mahmood, 2021).

Year	Legal Milestone	Key Outcome / Status
1990	Senate Proposal	First RTI proposal by Prof. Khurshid Ahmed; failed due to lack of government support.
1997	FOI Ordinance 1997	Signed by caretaker PM Malik Meraj Khalid; lapsed after the new government failed to ratify it.
2002	Federal FOI Ordinance	First RTI law in South Asia; limited to federal bodies, with broad exemptions and weak enforcement.
2010	18th Amendment (Art. 19-A)	RTI elevated from administrative privilege to a fundamental constitutional right.
2013	Punjab Transparency & RTI Act	Comprehensive provincial law established; created the Punjab

Table 1: Key Milestones in the Evolution of RTI Laws in Pakistan (1990–2013)

Punjab Information Commission: Structure, Mandate and Performance Analysis

Institutional Structure and Mandate

The Punjab Information Commission (PIC) is the hallmark body to implement RTI in the biggest province of Pakistan. As defined in Section 6 of the Punjab Transparency and RTI Act, 2013, the Commission is an independent quasi-judicial institution established to fill the disconnect between the information rights of citizens and the accountability of government. PIC institutional architecture is based on international best practices in the governance of RTI, whereby independent oversight structures act as neutral interveners between the information seekers and the population

authorities. The Commission consists of one Chief Information Commissioner and not more than two Additional Information Commissioners, who are to be appointed by a process that is intended to be independent and competent. The criteria used to select them are the law background, administrative background, and transparency and good governance. The terms and security of tenure of commissioners ensures the institutional stability that is required to facilitate sufficient monitoring by the commissioners of governmental compliance with the requirements of RTI (Punjab Information Commission, 2014). The PIC statutory requirement has several levels of RTI implementation and facilitation. The Commission is the ultimate court of appeal of citizens whose information request was declined or poorly responded by the agencies. The formal hearings, evaluation of evidence and binding judgments on PIC would be subject to this quasi-judicial role that must be enforced by the government. In addition to its appellate roles, PIC has been charged with the responsibility of creating awareness and adherence to RTI amongst the government machinery in the state of Punjab. This involves creation of principles to be followed by the public organs, training information officers and observing patterns of systemic compliance. Another role of the Commission is as a policy advisory body, by suggesting improvements to the legislature and/or the procedures through experience in implementation.

Registration of Complaints and Flux

In 2024, the Punjab Information Commission recorded 2,847 formal complaints filed by citizens who claimed that their rights were violated by different public authorities in the country in relation to their rights to RTI. This represents a 23% growth over 2,314 complaints registered in 2023, which is explainable by a rise in awareness of RTI mechanisms and their use by the population across the province. The trend of increasing complaint registration indicates not only better access to Commission services but also a continuing problem of first-level compliance with public authorities (Registrar of Punjab Information Commission, 2025). The complaint analysis by sector indicates that there are particular issues in particular areas of government. The most important group consisted of complaints against offices of the district administration (34%), health department units (18%), education department institutions (15%), and local government organizations (12%). This trend shows that citizen-facing service delivery departments experience the most number of access to information disputes, as they indicate more direct contact with the population and, perhaps, less compliance culture within these departments.

Government Sector	Percentage of Total Complaints
District Administration	34%
Health Department	18%
Education Department	15%
Local Government	12%
Total Complaints (2024)	2,847 (23% increase from 2023)

Source: Punjab Information Commission

Periods, and Rates of Settlement

The 2024 resolution performance of the Commission shows both positive and negative results that reveal institutional strengths and capacity limitations. Out of the total number of complaints that PIC received, 1,923 cases (67.5) were solved (a minor improvement over the resolution rate of 64 in 2023). But there are 924 complaints (32.5) yet to be finalized at the end of the year, which leaves a large backlog that impacts the Commission and the trust of citizens. The mean complaint-resolution time of 2024 was 127 days, which is way beyond the legal limit of 90 days stipulated in the RTI Act. The same delay can also be explained by the internal organizational problems with

the Commission capacity to work in this way, such as the insufficiency of the staffing level, absence of appropriate technological facilities and the character of the cases that should be investigated deeply (Registrar of Punjab Information Commission, 2025).

Enforcement and Compliance Results

By examining the complaints that have been resolved, meaningful trends in the compliance with the public authority and the efficacy of the Commission in enforcing the given regulations are revealed. PIC added in 68 percent of cases brought to settlement, directing public bodies to make the information requested available or provide sufficient legal reasons why they declined to do so. Such a high success rate among complainants indicates that many are not being followed or RTI requests processed initially well by public authorities.

The issue of enforcement is seen in the analysis of the rates of compliance after the decision. Though PIC made binding orders against complainants in 1,307 cases in 2024, 894 cases (68 per cent) established a satisfactory level of compliance by public bodies by the stipulated deadline. The other 413 cases needed enforcement measures in form of show-cause notices and penalty proceedings.

Performance Metric	2023 Data	2024 Data	Change / Status
Total Complaints Registered	2,314	2,847	+23% (Increase in public awareness)
Complaints Resolved	1,481 (64%)	1,923 (67.5%)	Slight improvement in disposal rate.
Pending Backlog (Year-End)	833	924	Critical Gap: Backlog is growing despite higher resolution rates.
Avg. Resolution Time	<i>Not Specified</i>	60 - 80 Days	Delayed: Exceeds statutory limit of 60 days.

Table 3: Punjab Information Commission (PIC) Performance Metrics (2023 vs. 2024)

Active Disclosure Monitoring

In addition to resolving complaints on an individual basis, in 2024 PIC engaged in systematic monitoring of compliance with proactive disclosure among 247 public bodies. The analysis revealed perilous flaws in the compulsory disclosure of information where only 34 out of the audited entities had the completely disclosure practice in place. Old organizational information (78% of organizations), incomplete disclosure of financial information (65%), and poor publication of policy documents (58%), were the most common weaknesses.

Operational Challenges and Institutional Deficiencies of Punjab Information Commission

The Punjab Information Commission (PIC) which was set up to bring transparency and accountability. The Punjab Information Commission is encountering severe challenges of operation that have direct consequences to the applicants seeking information. When people make complaints to the Commission, no effective system can be used to make sure that such complaints are recorded and followed. It is a known fact that once they make an application, most applicants do not get any response or feedback regarding their requests by the Commission. The Commission in other instances reject the complaint as well on the grounds of misplacement or the sheer amount of complaints they receive. Moreover, there is often a low level of cooperation between the various departments of the government in the reaction to the decisions of the Commission. The ineffective enforcement powers have caused various departments to disregard the instructions to disclose information and this has diluted the performance of the Commission and left the applicants with no option but to be frustrated. The absence of an appropriate system of managing complaints and

good compliance on the part of the government is a significant undermining factor of the right to information process in Punjab (Yousaf & Mahmood, To What extent Pakistani citizens are enjoying the right of Access to Information? An Exploratory study, 2020).

Assessment of Government Departments' Compliance with RTI Act

The Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) conducted a countrywide assessment of federal government departments in Pakistan in regard to their compliance with the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2017. As the report revealed, disobeying was an order of the day in government ministries and departments. This not fully in accordance with the provisions of the RTI Act to proactively publish their information on their websites. An evaluation of 40 of the 33 federal ministries divisions showed that information such as public services, policies, decision-making, financial information and information access procedures had serious gaps in their availability. Only how to obtain the information in nine divisions was known, and many other important revelations, e.g., reports and investigations, were mostly missing. Moreover, of the 33 ministries to which FAFEN sent RTI requests, 19 provided any form of response and only nine ministries (27) of the 33 responding to the requests met the requirement of the law by responding within 10 working days. Other key ministries such as Finance and Interior did not even reply at all, hence compromising the openness spirit and allowing misinformation in government. The study conducted by FAFEN not only shows low compliance with the RTI Act, but also, it proves the more systematic flaws within the system in terms of laws, means of enforcement and a general ignorance of the population. The report suggests that the RTI framework can be improved, such as by increasing the independence of the Pakistan Information Commission (PIC) and giving it authority to enforce the rules, by rendering proactive disclosures more concrete, and by improving technology, such as by making databases searchable and by making complaints a possibility online. These are said to be the secret behind more responsible governments, information that is delivered to the population in a timely manner, and combating the spread of fake news, which exacerbates the political polarization situation in Pakistan. Increased coordination of government agencies, civil society, and legislative institutions and long-term public education is another recommendation of the FAFEN to encourage RTI use throughout the country (FAFEN, 2025). In summary, the FAFEN report reflects that despite the legislation and constitutional guarantees, compliance with RTI requests and proactive disclosure remains poor across the departments of the Pakistani government. Here, the intervention by law and operations change is an immediate need so that access to the information can be meaningful and effective to inculcate transparency and accountability and that the people can trust their government institutions

Constitutional Promise vs. Practical Reality: The Gap in Pakistan's RTI Implementation

The Right to Information (RTI) laws in Pakistan are progressive on paper, but have severe shortcomings and enforcement issues that have riddled their implementation, as a comprehensive Dawn report reveals. Article 19A of the Constitution states that the RTI framework shall be used to enable the citizens to demand the information that is held by the government agencies in order to promote transparency and accountability. But the fact is, RTI, more than twenty years after its launch, is largely still a tool that has not been practically implemented because of systemic issues. One of the problems identified is that there is no system in place that can enable citizens to appeal against the inaction or the decision made by the Information Commissions, leaving the complainants in no better state and undermining their confidence in the impartiality of the system.

Institutional Weaknesses Undermine Pakistan's Right to Information Laws

The other major barrier is institutional inertia which in Information Commissions can often lead to a great deal of time delay in considering administrative cases, and often long after the statutory deadlines have passed. The delays deter the citizens in making their final requests, thereby ruining the confidence in the RTI system. Although the commissions send formal notices to the concerned departments when applicants file complaints concerning failure to provide information, there are very few law officers to respond to such complaints. As a result of the large number of cases, the commission takes a long time or does not respond to cases at all. The failure to take action at the right time and apply as many sanctions as possible undermines the work of the commission. Moreover, the loose legal provisions including the definition of a public body and exemptions allow the government to refuse information demands on vague and unproven grounds that only worsen the lack of transparency and the citizens right to information (FAFEN, 2025).

Legal Ambiguities and Broad Exemptions Weaken RTI Effectiveness

Certain legal loopholes make them worse. Considering the above, Section 7(b) of the federal RTI Act grants the discretionary power to ministers to classify records that can be misused to conceal information as they please. In contrast to sound international models of RTI, which assume maximum disclosure under limited exemptions, the laws existing in Pakistan permit excessive discretion that promotes secrecy. Also, institutions created under the Constitution, including the Supreme Court or the Election Commission often escape disclosure requirements by claiming not to be covered by the RTI, although the Pakistan Information Commission has made it clear that they are. The outcome of this judicial tug-of-war makes information access controversial (Accountability Lab, 2024).

Provincial RTI Laws: Progress and Persistent Shortcomings

Similar problems also exist with provincial laws. Although one of the more progressive laws, the Punjab RTI Act explicitly does not cover key institutions such as the Lahore High Court and has limited the appointment of commissioners to three, which is possibly too few to effectively monitor enforcement. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the superior courts are out of the scope of the Act, the authority of the Information Commission to proceed with contempt proceedings is restricted and therefore it has lower weight. Additionally, ancillary sections to curb abuse of information can be chilling at times, and deter information seekers by scaring them off with threats of prosecution (Mahmood, 2023).

Political and Administrative Barriers to Transparency in Pakistan

All that is needed is a complete revamp of the law to address these structural deficiencies. The reforms should be aimed at clarifying clearly what the public bodies are to include all the constitutional institutions and to grant adequate enforcement powers to the commissions to create adherences, to reduce delays in administration by giving adequate resources and to restrict excessive broad exemption clauses to reduce access by the people. It now goes further and mandates computerization of records and proactive disclosure requirements to minimize the use of formal demands and convert disclosure into a culture. RTI laws in Pakistan will just stay as laws on paper without any meaningful corrective action, denying citizens who have a constitutional right to know much-needed information and undermining democratic accountability. The statutes of the Right to Information (RTI) in Pakistan may look good on paper, but have severe flaws and implementation issues that hamper their efficiency. RTI legislation is stipulated in the Constitution, in Art. 19A, as a fundamental right aimed at empowering citizens by granting them access to information that is under the control of the public bodies thus rendering it transparent and

accountable. But even though it has been in effect more than twenty years, in reality, there was little actual implementation because the system had weaknesses (Batool, Asmat, & Muzaffar, 2023).

The Need for Comprehensive Reforms to Strengthen RTI Framework

One of the biggest problems found is that there is no adequate appeal system against the decisions or inaction of Information Commissions. Those citizens whose complaints are not handled in this level, cannot appeal in any further level, which means that the mistrust to the system is seriously damaged. The commissions themselves are dogged by delays which greatly exceed the period stipulated by law, and by numerous appeals which are hung up unanswered for months, or even thrown out without prior intimation to the applicants. Moreover, the use of informal channels of communication, i.e. sending WhatsApp messages as opposed to official messages, is also a sign of un-professionalism and un-transparency within the enforcement authorities. These gaps in enforcement are made worse by legal ambiguities. To illustrate, the concept of a public body, as defined in several acts, is ambiguous and can allow numerous bodies of influence such as the Supreme Court and the Election Commission to evade RTI requirements in spite of the clarifications offered by the Pakistan Information Commission to the contrary. Moreover, wide exemptions and discretionary power to classify that are assigned to ministers allow public officials to arbitrarily withhold information and undermines the presumptive right to disclose that is approved by best international practice. These escape hatches have led to numerous issues in the law and lack of due transparency (Editorial, 2025). There are also gaps in provincial RTI laws. Despite being widely regarded as a strong and stable framework, the legislation of Punjab still lacks clarity in some of the institutions such as the Lahore High Court and the maximum number of commissioners, which has been a significant barrier to effective administration of the law. There are no higher courts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the commission there has no powers to directly enforce compliance using contempt proceedings to dilute the effect of the law. In addition, some of the provisions aimed at avoiding misuse of information inadvertently discourage legitimate requests through instilling fears of lawsuits. RTI regime in Pakistan is crippled by institutional inertia, culture of legal loopholes and secrecy. Radical changes are required in RTI laws in order to achieve their potential. They include: specific and transparent definitions of public bodies, enforcement capabilities and independence of information commissions, strict deadlines and adequate staffing and resources, limited open-ended exemptions and the promotion of digitization and proactive information publication. In the absence of these reforms, the democratic transparency and responsibility of the people in Pakistan will remain mostly on paper, as the constitutional right to information is not fulfilled.

Conclusion

Right to Information constitutional and legislative frameworks in Pakistan and especially the Punjab Transparency and RTI Act, 2013, is a progressive legal platform on safeguarding transparency and accountability by the government. Nonetheless, in spite of these encouraging models, there are significant impediments to the actual execution of RTI requirements in Punjab. The Punjab information commission (PIC) which is the most important quasi-judicial institution in enforcing the laws regarding RTI is crippled by gross institutional deficiencies like vacancy of leadership, inequalities of staffing, lack of modern technology and lack of a strong complaints management system. Such shortcomings result in a huge delay in the resolution of complaints and denial of citizens access to information in a timely manner which destroys the confidence of citizens in the system. Also, lack of strong enforcement powers by the Commission would be another factor contributing to a lack of compliance by the government departments, many of which

can flout the decision of the PIC with impunity. This absence of responsibility further cements this culture of secrecy and bureaucratic retaliation and erodes that vision of transparency envisioned in the two constitutional guarantees as well as in the law. These challenges are further compounded by ongoing political interference, lack of budgetary allocations thus reducing the operational autonomy and effectiveness of the Commission. Comprehensive reforms are needed to close the gap which exists between the promise of the right of information in the constitution and its reality on the ground. They involve the enhancement of the institutional capacity of the Punjab Information Commission by using merit to appoint the commissioners, sufficient staffing, modernization, and open ways of tracking complaints. Suggestively, the Commission should be given the powers to enforce explicitly to bring punitive actions and to enforce obedience among the bodies of the society. The proactive disclosure traditions need to be extended and closely controlled to pressurize the formal requests and create a culture of transparency. Other than institutional reform, there is an urgent demand of systemic political dedication to ensure democratic governance using transparency. This includes the elimination of legal grey areas and broad exemptions which allow unreasonable withholding of information. Also, the accessibility of information could be increased through the public awareness and availability of digital RTI filing platforms so that the citizenry could not encounter administrative obstacles during the information request process. In the long term, unless political goodwill, resource allocation and legal reinforcement are maintained, it is possible that the Right to Information in Punjab will still be a right that exists only in theory- and does not empower citizens or encourage good governance. The need to reform these complicated yet necessary reforms will see the Punjab Information Commission have its mandate well met and transparency being a pillar to the democratic consolidation of Pakistan.

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