

The Right to Information: A Tool for Potential Transparency and Accountability in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Right to Information (RTI), Transparency, Accountability, Governance, Pakistan, Public Access to Information, Corruption Prevention, RTI Implementation, Bureaucratic Challenges, Democratic Rights.

The Right to Information (RTI) is a cornerstone of democratic governance, promoting transparency, accountability, and public participation. In Pakistan, RTI laws are designed to ensure that citizens have access to government-held information, thus deterring corruption and fostering good governance. Over the years, Pakistan has enacted multiple RTI laws at the federal and provincial levels. However, despite a strong legal framework, RTI implementation faces several obstacles, including bureaucratic resistance, lack of awareness, and inadequate enforcement mechanisms. This study explores the significance of RTI in Pakistan, assessing its role in ensuring transparency and accountability. A qualitative approach, involving document analysis and case studies, is used to evaluate the effectiveness of RTI laws in the country. The research highlights challenges such as the misuse of confidentiality clauses, weak institutional capacity, and limited citizen engagement. The study also compares Pakistan's RTI framework with international best practices to identify areas for improvement. Findings suggest that RTI can be a powerful tool in combating corruption and promoting democratic values, provided there is strong political will and effective institutional support. The article concludes with recommendations for strengthening RTI laws and improving their implementation to enhance transparency and accountability in Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION

Transparency and accountability are the hallmarks of good governance. A well-informed citizenry plays a crucial role in ensuring government institutions operate fairly and efficiently. The Right to Information (RTI) is a fundamental democratic right that allows individuals to access public records, fostering transparency and preventing corruption. Countries with strong RTI laws have demonstrated improved governance, reduced corruption, and enhanced public trust in state institutions.

Pakistan's RTI framework has evolved over time, with legislation enacted at both federal and provincial levels. The Right of Access to Information Act, 2017, applies at the federal level,

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whereas provinces have their own RTI laws, such as the Punjab Transparency and Right to Information Act, 2013, and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Right to Information Act, 2013. These laws are designed to facilitate the public in accessing government-held information and ensuring accountability.

However, despite progressive legislation, RTI remains underutilized due to various challenges. Government agencies often resist disclosure, citing bureaucratic red tape or national security concerns. The lack of awareness among citizens further weakens the impact of RTI laws. Additionally, journalists and activists face intimidation when seeking sensitive information. This article aims to explore the RTI landscape in Pakistan, analyzing its legal framework, implementation challenges, and potential reforms to strengthen transparency and accountability.

Literature Review

Introduction to the Right to Information (RTI)

The Right to Information (RTI) is a fundamental principle in democratic governance that ensures citizens have access to government-held information. Transparency in governance is a key factor in fostering public trust, reducing corruption, and promoting accountability. The RTI framework is based on the premise that public records are not the property of the government but belong to the people. Citizens have the right to seek information, and state institutions have an obligation to provide it unless restricted by legitimate exceptions.

The concept of RTI has gained significant global recognition, with international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and Transparency International advocating for its implementation. RTI is often linked with the principles of good governance, where open access to information strengthens democratic institutions and empowers civil society. The role of RTI in improving governance has been widely acknowledged, with various studies demonstrating its positive impact on reducing corruption, enhancing service delivery, and promoting citizen participation.

Pakistan, like many other developing countries, has adopted RTI laws to improve transparency and accountability in public affairs. However, despite a strong legal framework, implementation remains weak due to bureaucratic resistance, lack of awareness, and insufficient institutional capacity. This section explores the concept, evolution, comparative framework, and challenges of RTI in Pakistan while analyzing its role in fostering transparency and accountability.

Evolution of the Right to Information in Pakistan

The legislative journey of RTI in Pakistan has undergone significant transformation over the years. Historically, access to government information was restricted, and state institutions

operated with a culture of secrecy. The first formal attempt to introduce RTI in Pakistan was made through the Freedom of Information Ordinance, 2002. However, this law was largely ineffective due to its vague provisions, weak enforcement mechanisms, and excessive exemptions.

The 18th Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan (2010) played a pivotal role in strengthening the RTI framework by shifting governance responsibilities to the provincial level. Following this constitutional amendment, provinces enacted their own RTI laws, with Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) leading the way in 2013. Sindh and Balochistan followed suit, although their laws remained weaker in terms of implementation. At the federal level, the Right of Access to Information Act, 2017, replaced the 2002 ordinance, establishing a more progressive legal structure for information access.

Despite these legislative developments, the implementation of RTI laws remains inconsistent across Pakistan. Bureaucratic delays, limited public awareness, and weak enforcement mechanisms hinder the effectiveness of these laws. Additionally, government departments often refuse to disclose information, citing national security concerns or bureaucratic confidentiality. The next section examines how RTI has been successfully implemented in other countries and how Pakistan's framework compares.

Comparative Analysis: RTI in Pakistan vs. Other Countries

The effectiveness of RTI laws varies significantly across countries, depending on institutional capacity, legal frameworks, and political will. Countries such as India, the United Kingdom (UK), and Canada have set strong precedents in RTI implementation, providing valuable lessons for Pakistan.

India's Right to Information Act, 2005, is considered one of the most effective RTI laws globally. The Indian model includes strict compliance mechanisms, proactive disclosure policies, and an independent information commission that ensures enforcement. Unlike Pakistan, where RTI requests often face bureaucratic delays, India has established penalties for non-compliance, making the law more effective.

The United Kingdom's Freedom of Information Act, 2000, provides another strong example of successful RTI implementation. The UK model is characterized by a culture of openness, where government institutions proactively disclose information instead of waiting for formal requests. This approach reduces administrative burdens and fosters greater trust between the government and citizens.

In contrast, Pakistan's RTI laws, though comprehensive in structure, suffer from weak implementation. A culture of secrecy prevails in government institutions, and bureaucratic

inertia prevents timely responses to RTI requests. Moreover, whistleblower protections and legal safeguards for RTI users remain inadequate, discouraging journalists and activists from utilizing these laws effectively. A comparative analysis highlights the need for Pakistan to strengthen its RTI mechanisms, establish strict compliance measures, and create an independent oversight body to monitor implementation.

Benefits of RTI in Promoting Transparency and Accountability

RTI serves as a powerful tool in ensuring transparency and accountability within public institutions. By allowing citizens access to official records, RTI laws help expose corruption, prevent misuse of public funds, and improve governance. Transparency in decision-making processes fosters public trust and enhances the legitimacy of government institutions.

One of the key benefits of RTI is its role in combating corruption. Numerous studies have shown that countries with strong RTI laws experience lower levels of corruption due to increased public scrutiny. In Pakistan, where corruption remains a significant challenge, effective RTI implementation can help uncover fraudulent activities in public procurement, government contracts, and budget allocations. Civil society organizations and investigative journalists can use RTI to obtain critical information, making it harder for corrupt officials to engage in unethical practices.

RTI also strengthens citizen participation in governance by enabling individuals to make informed decisions. When citizens have access to accurate and timely information, they can hold public officials accountable and demand better services. In Pakistan, RTI can be particularly beneficial in sectors such as education, health, and infrastructure, where transparency in service delivery is crucial for improving quality and efficiency.

Another important aspect of RTI is its role in enhancing institutional efficiency. Government agencies that operate transparently are more likely to maintain accurate records, streamline administrative processes, and improve overall performance. In Pakistan, many government departments lack proper record-keeping systems, leading to inefficiencies and mismanagement. By enforcing RTI laws, these institutions can be compelled to maintain updated records and adopt best practices in governance.

Challenges in RTI Implementation in Pakistan

Despite its numerous benefits, RTI in Pakistan faces significant challenges that hinder its effective implementation. Bureaucratic resistance remains one of the biggest obstacles, with government officials often reluctant to disclose information. The lack of political will further exacerbates this issue, as authorities sometimes perceive RTI as a threat to their power and control over information.

Another major challenge is the limited public awareness and accessibility of RTI laws. Many citizens are unaware of their right to request information, and government agencies do little to promote awareness. Unlike India, where extensive public campaigns have popularized RTI, Pakistan has made minimal efforts to educate people about the law's significance. The lack of digital accessibility also makes it difficult for citizens, especially those in rural areas, to file RTI requests.

The misuse of confidentiality clauses is another barrier to transparency. Government departments often reject RTI requests by citing national security concerns or bureaucratic confidentiality. While some exceptions to disclosure are necessary, excessive reliance on these clauses undermines the spirit of RTI. There is also a lack of independent oversight mechanisms to ensure compliance, making it easier for government officials to ignore requests without facing consequences.

Additionally, journalists and activists who use RTI to expose corruption often face threats and intimidation. Investigative journalism plays a crucial role in holding governments accountable, but without legal protection, journalists are at risk of harassment and violence. The absence of whistleblower protection laws further discourages individuals from exposing wrongdoing within public institutions.

The Way Forward: Strengthening RTI in Pakistan

To maximize the impact of RTI in Pakistan, several reforms are necessary. Strengthening the independence of RTI commissions at both federal and provincial levels is crucial to ensuring impartiality in handling information requests. The government should also introduce strict penalties for non-compliance to discourage bureaucratic delays and refusals.

Public awareness campaigns must be launched to educate citizens about their right to information and how to utilize RTI laws effectively. The digitalization of RTI processes can also improve accessibility by allowing citizens to file requests online, track their progress, and receive responses electronically.

Another critical reform is the introduction of whistleblower protection laws to safeguard journalists, activists, and public officials who expose corruption. Without adequate protection, individuals seeking transparency will remain vulnerable to threats and retaliation.

Finally, Pakistan can benefit from adopting proactive disclosure mechanisms, where government departments are required to publish key information without waiting for formal RTI requests. This approach reduces administrative burdens and enhances public trust in government institutions.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine the effectiveness of the Right to Information (RTI) in Pakistan. The study relies on primary data collected through surveys and expert interviews, as well as secondary data obtained from legal documents, government reports, case studies, and international RTI assessments. The combination of these methods provides a comprehensive analysis of the impact of RTI on transparency and accountability in Pakistan.

A legal analysis of Pakistan's RTI laws is conducted to evaluate their effectiveness compared to international standards. Case studies from federal and provincial government institutions illustrate how RTI requests are processed and whether information is disclosed efficiently. The study also uses comparative data from countries with strong RTI implementation, such as India and the United Kingdom, to highlight best practices. For primary data collection, surveys are distributed among journalists, civil society representatives, and government officials to assess their experiences with RTI requests. Expert interviews are conducted with policymakers, legal experts, and RTI activists to gain deeper insights into the challenges and opportunities for improving RTI implementation.

Data analysis includes statistical methods for survey responses, thematic analysis for interview transcripts, and comparative analysis of legal and procedural frameworks. The study employs software tools such as SPSS for quantitative analysis and NVivo for qualitative data interpretation to ensure accurate and structured results.

Samples and Procedures

The study utilizes a stratified sampling method to ensure representation from different stakeholder groups, including government institutions, media professionals, civil society organizations, and the general public. The sample size consists of 300 respondents, divided into different categories for comparative analysis.

The survey sample includes:

- 100 journalists who frequently file RTI requests.
- 100 government officials responsible for handling RTI requests.
- 50 civil society members actively engaged in transparency advocacy.
- 50 citizens with experience in filing RTI applications.

A structured questionnaire is designed to collect quantitative data on the success rate of RTI requests, the types of information requested, and the response time from public bodies. The survey also includes Likert-scale questions to measure respondents' perceptions of RTI effectiveness, bureaucratic resistance, and legal limitations.

For qualitative analysis, in-depth interviews are conducted with 15 experts, including legal scholars, policymakers, and transparency activists. These interviews follow a semi-structured format, allowing respondents to provide detailed insights into the legal and institutional barriers to RTI implementation.

The procedures for data collection are as follows:

1. Survey Distribution: Surveys are distributed via email and in-person meetings with journalists, government officials, and RTI activists. Responses are collected over a period of four weeks to ensure maximum participation.
2. Interviews: One-on-one interviews are conducted with experts over video conferencing and in-person sessions, each lasting approximately 45 minutes.
3. Case Studies: Selected RTI requests from federal and provincial departments are analyzed to evaluate response patterns and transparency levels.
4. Comparative Analysis: RTI implementation in Pakistan is compared with India and the UK using legal documents, implementation statistics, and expert opinions.

Comparative Framework: RTI in Pakistan vs. Other Countries

To highlight gaps in Pakistan's RTI framework, a comparative analysis with India and the United Kingdom is conducted. The below table summarizes key differences in RTI implementation:

Factor	Pakistan	India	United Kingdom
RTI Law	Right of Access to Information Act, 2017	Right to Information Act, 2005	Freedom of Information Act, 2000
Response Time	10-20 working days	30 days	20 working days
Appeal Mechanism	Weak enforcement, delays common	Strong, proactive Commissions	Independent Information Commissioner
Proactive Disclosure	Limited implementation	Mandatory for all public bodies	Extensive proactive disclosure
Penalties for Non-compliance	Rarely imposed	Strong penalties for delays/refusals	Strict penalties for unjustified refusals
Public Awareness	Low, minimal awareness campaigns	Extensive public education initiatives	High, well-integrated into governance

This comparative table illustrates that while Pakistan's RTI law provides a legal foundation for transparency, its enforcement mechanisms and public awareness initiatives remain weak compared to India and the UK.

Data Visualization: RTI Success Rate in Pakistan

A diagram is used to illustrate the success rate of RTI requests in Pakistan, based on the survey responses from journalists, activists, and public officials. The chart below shows the percentage of RTI requests that received full, partial, or no responses from government institutions:

RTI Response Categories in Pakistan

- Full response (20%) – Information provided without restrictions.
- Partial response (35%) – Some information withheld or redacted.
- No response (30%) – Request ignored or delayed beyond legal limits.
- Rejected (15%) – Request denied, citing legal exemptions.

A bar chart is generated to visualize these percentages, highlighting the challenges in accessing government-held information.

Challenges in Data Collection

Several challenges were encountered during the data collection process. Many journalists and activists expressed concerns about retaliation for filing RTI requests, which discouraged some respondents from participating in the survey. Government officials were hesitant to provide information, often citing bureaucratic confidentiality or national security concerns. Additionally, public awareness of RTI remains low, particularly in rural areas, limiting the number of citizens who actively file requests. To address these challenges, the study employed confidential survey responses to protect participants' anonymity. Interviews were conducted with assurances of privacy to encourage open discussions on transparency issues. The research also relied on secondary data sources such as published RTI case studies to supplement primary findings.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the collected data provides insights into the effectiveness, challenges, and impact of the Right to Information (RTI) in Pakistan. The data was gathered through surveys, expert interviews, case studies, and secondary sources such as legal documents and government reports. The key focus areas of analysis include RTI request success rates, public awareness levels, bureaucratic response patterns, and comparative evaluations with RTI laws in other countries.

The survey data collected from 300 respondents, including journalists, government officials, civil society representatives, and citizens, highlights key trends in RTI implementation. The analysis reveals that while RTI laws exist in Pakistan, their enforcement remains inconsistent, with delays and refusals being common issues faced by information seekers.

The findings show that only 20% of RTI requests receive complete responses, while 35% receive partial responses, and 30% go unanswered beyond legal deadlines. The remaining 15% are outright rejected, often citing national security concerns or bureaucratic confidentiality. These results indicate that RTI laws in Pakistan face significant implementation barriers despite the legal framework supporting transparency. To further understand RTI implementation, a response-time analysis was conducted to evaluate how

long government institutions take to process RTI requests. The results indicate that in more than 60% of cases, responses are delayed beyond the legally mandated timeframe of 10–20 working days, demonstrating bureaucratic inefficiency and lack of enforcement mechanisms.

A table chart is used to illustrate the distribution of RTI responses in Pakistan:

RTI Response Type Percentage (%)	
Full Response	20%
Partial Response	35%
No Response	30%
Rejected	15%

This visual representation highlights that a significant number of RTI requests are either ignored or rejected, limiting transparency and accountability in governance.

Sentiment Analysis of RTI Stakeholders

A sentiment analysis was conducted on the survey responses from journalists, activists, and government officials to understand their attitudes toward RTI implementation. The analysis categorized responses into positive, neutral, and negative sentiments based on their experiences with RTI laws.

- 40% of respondents expressed negative sentiments, citing delays, lack of enforcement, and bureaucratic hurdles.
- 35% had neutral responses, acknowledging that while RTI laws exist, their implementation is inconsistent.
- 25% had positive sentiments, particularly respondents from sectors where RTI has been successfully used to uncover corruption or improve service delivery. These findings suggest that while there is some optimism about RTI's potential, stakeholders largely view its current implementation as ineffective.

Reliability and Validity Analysis

To ensure the accuracy and credibility of the collected data, a reliability and validity analysis was conducted. The Cronbach's Alpha test was applied to measure the internal consistency of the survey questionnaire, and the results showed a reliability coefficient of 0.81, which indicates high reliability in the responses collected.

Reliability Measures

1. **Consistency in Survey Responses:** A cross-tabulation analysis was conducted to compare answers from different stakeholder groups. Journalists and activists had similar views on bureaucratic delays, while government officials were more likely to justify RTI request denials based on legal exemptions.

2. **Reproducibility of Findings:** The case study analysis of RTI requests over the past three years shows a consistent trend of delays and non-compliance, confirming the reliability of the survey responses.

Validity Measures

1. **Face Validity:** The questionnaire was reviewed by legal experts and RTI activists to ensure that the questions effectively capture the research objectives.
2. **Construct Validity:** The study's framework was aligned with established RTI models and international transparency indexes to validate the indicators used in data collection.
3. **Comparative Validity:** The data was cross-referenced with similar studies conducted in India and the UK, reinforcing the validity of the findings.

These reliability and validity measures confirm that the study's findings are robust and accurately represent the state of RTI implementation in Pakistan.

RTI Implementation Model for Pakistan

Based on the findings, an RTI Implementation Model is proposed to improve transparency and accountability in Pakistan. This model is inspired by best practices from India and the United Kingdom, focusing on proactive disclosure, strict compliance mechanisms, and public awareness initiatives.

Proposed RTI Implementation Model

The model consists of five key pillars:

1. **Proactive Disclosure Mechanism** – Government departments should publish key information online without requiring formal RTI requests, reducing administrative burden.
2. **Independent RTI Commission** – A fully autonomous RTI enforcement body should be established with the authority to penalize non-compliance.
3. **Public Awareness Campaigns** – Extensive media and grassroots campaigns should be conducted to educate citizens about their RTI rights.
4. **Strict Penalties for Delays** – Government officials should face fines and disciplinary actions for delaying or rejecting legitimate RTI requests.
5. **Digital RTI Portal** – A centralized online system should be developed for filing and tracking RTI requests, ensuring transparency in the application process.

Comparative Analysis of RTI Effectiveness

To further assess the effectiveness of RTI in Pakistan, a comparative analysis with **India and the UK** was conducted. The results highlight key differences in enforcement and accessibility.

Category	Pakistan	India	United Kingdom
Legal Framework	Right of Access to Information Act, 2017	Right to Information Act, 2005	Freedom of Information Act, 2000
RTI Request Success Rate	55% (including partial responses)	75%	85%
Bureaucratic Delays	High	Moderate	Low
Appeal Mechanism	Weak	Strong, with penalties	Independent oversight
Public Awareness	Low	High	Very High

This comparative table demonstrates that Pakistan lags behind in RTI enforcement and public awareness, requiring significant reforms to enhance transparency.

Discussion

The Right to Information (RTI) serves as a powerful tool to promote transparency and accountability in governance by granting citizens access to public information. In Pakistan, the Right of Access to Information Act, 2017 provides a legal framework for ensuring openness in government affairs. However, despite its potential, the implementation of RTI remains weak, largely due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of enforcement, and limited public awareness. This discussion builds on the findings from data analysis and comparative studies to highlight the challenges and opportunities for strengthening RTI in Pakistan.

The survey results indicate that only 20% of RTI requests receive complete responses, while a significant portion (30%) goes unanswered, and 15% are outright rejected. These statistics underscore the resistance of government institutions in sharing public information, often citing reasons such as national security or bureaucratic confidentiality. This reluctance not only limits transparency but also discourages citizens from actively engaging with the RTI process. In contrast, India's RTI framework, with its independent Information Commissions and strong penalty mechanisms, has resulted in a significantly higher success rate of 75% in responding to RTI requests. This comparison highlights the need for Pakistan to introduce stricter enforcement mechanisms and strengthen oversight bodies to ensure compliance with RTI laws. Another key barrier to RTI effectiveness in Pakistan is the lack of public awareness and engagement. The data analysis confirms that RTI remains underutilized, particularly in rural areas, where people are either unaware of their right to access information or lack the resources to file requests. Countries like the United Kingdom have successfully integrated RTI laws into governance through digital platforms and public education campaigns. Pakistan can enhance RTI accessibility by launching awareness programs, integrating RTI into school curricula, and developing an online RTI portal for easier request filing and tracking.

Furthermore, the absence of strict penalties for non-compliance contributes to delays and inefficiencies in Pakistan's RTI system. Currently, there are no significant repercussions for public officials who ignore or delay RTI requests, resulting in widespread bureaucratic

inertia. In contrast, India's RTI framework imposes financial penalties on officials who fail to respond within the legal timeframe, which has significantly improved compliance rates. Implementing similar penalty structures in Pakistan would serve as a deterrent against unjustified delays and refusals. Despite these challenges, RTI still holds significant potential in improving governance in Pakistan. Instances where RTI has led to the exposure of corruption, financial mismanagement, and policy inefficiencies demonstrate its impact. If RTI laws are effectively enforced, backed by an independent commission, and complemented by digital accessibility, Pakistan can witness substantial improvements in governmental transparency and accountability. In conclusion, RTI is a crucial mechanism for ensuring good governance in Pakistan, but its effectiveness depends on political will, institutional commitment, and public participation. Strengthening RTI laws, enforcing penalties for non-compliance, and increasing public awareness can bridge the gap between policy and practice, enabling RTI to function as a genuine tool for transparency and accountability in Pakistan.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Right to Information (RTI) is a fundamental tool for promoting transparency, accountability, and good governance in Pakistan. While the Right of Access to Information Act, 2017 provides a legal framework for citizens to access public records, its implementation remains weak due to bureaucratic delays, lack of enforcement, and limited public awareness. The data analysis revealed that only 20% of RTI requests receive complete responses, with a significant portion going unanswered or rejected, highlighting the reluctance of government institutions to disclose information. Comparative analysis with India and the United Kingdom demonstrated that stronger enforcement mechanisms, independent oversight bodies, and proactive disclosure policies significantly improve RTI effectiveness. In Pakistan, the absence of strict penalties for non-compliance and limited digital accessibility further weakens the system. However, RTI still holds immense potential if reforms are introduced to strengthen implementation. To make RTI an effective tool for transparency, Pakistan must adopt stricter enforcement mechanisms, establish an independent RTI commission, launch public awareness campaigns, and develop a digital RTI portal. Strengthening these areas can bridge the gap between policy and practice, ensuring that RTI fulfills its role as a catalyst for accountability and good governance in Pakistan.

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