



Breaking Barriers:

The Fight for Transparent Access to Information in Pakistan

INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO INFORMATION



Executive Summary

The International Day for Universal Access to Information on September 28th highlights the critical state of the Right to Information (RTI) in Pakistan. Despite legislative progress, including the 2002 Freedom of Information Ordinance and the 2017 federal RTI Act, implementation remains inconsistent. Provincial laws, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab, have made strides in transparency, but enforcement at the federal level continues to face bureaucratic hurdles, delays, and exemptions.

Challenges persist with public awareness, especially in rural areas, and government departments often fail to comply with RTI requests. The culture of secrecy and lack of resources further hinder progress. Reforms are needed to build institutional capacity, narrow broad exemptions, and establish independent oversight to fully realize RTI's potential for transparency and accountability in Pakistan's democratic processes.



Transparency on Trial:

28th September, the International Day for Universal Access to Information, is a crucial opportunity to reflect on the state of affairs of the right to information in Pakistan. [UNDP](#) (United Nations Development Programme) describes universal access to information as “the right to seek, receive and impart information.” According to UNDP, this right is an integral aspect of Freedom of Expression. As such, universal access to information is a pillar of healthy, inclusive, informed, and democratic societies.

The Struggle for Information Rights in Pakistan:

The journey towards the establishment of the right to information (RTI) in Pakistan has been long and arduous. It was not until 2002, under the rule of General Pervez Musharraf, that the country saw its first [Freedom of Information Ordinance \(FOIO\)](#), which laid the groundwork for future legislative developments.

However, the FOIO of 2002 was criticized for being ineffective, restrictive, and failing to meet international standards of transparency. It provided limited access, had broad exemptions, and imposed bureaucratic hurdles, which stifled its potential impact.

The provincial governments, notably [Khyber Pakhtunkhwa \(KP\)](#) and [Punjab](#), led the charge for reforms with the introduction of more robust RTI laws in 2013. These laws were hailed as progressive and significantly more effective in ensuring public access to information, aligning more closely with international benchmarks like the Global Right to Information Rating (RTI Rating). For instance, the KP RTI Act has consistently ranked high in global assessments for its commitment to transparency.

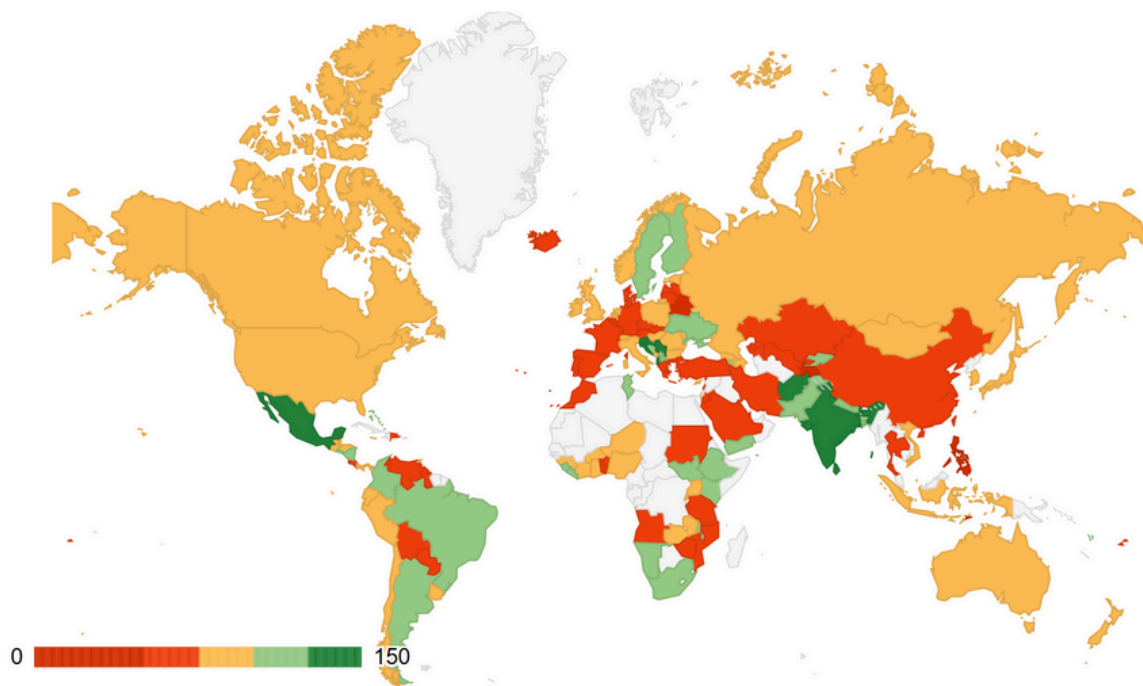
Despite these advancements, many parts of the country, especially at the federal level, continued to lag in meaningful implementation.

The Sindh and Balochistan provinces followed suit with their own RTI laws, but challenges of enforcement, awareness, and institutional support remained prevalent, further complicating the realization of this fundamental right.

Present Landscape: A Right Often Denied:

While Pakistan’s legal framework for RTI has seen significant improvement, the present reality remains deeply concerning. The passage of the [federal Right of Access to Information Act](#) in 2017 was a welcome step, yet implementation remains inconsistent. Despite achieving a commendable global ranking of 33rd in the 2022 Right to Information (RTI) Index, Pakistan’s performance in ensuring meaningful access to information remains hindered by bureaucratic inertia and systemic inefficiencies. The legal framework governing the right to information in Pakistan is robust on paper, with provisions that align with international standards. However, the true challenge lies in implementation. Citizens often encounter delays, non-compliance, or outright refusals when attempting to access public information.

Reports and studies have highlighted a persistent gap between legislation and practice, where government departments lack adequate training and accountability mechanisms to fulfill their obligations under RTI laws. Furthermore, the culture of secrecy and fear of political repercussions also deters officials from releasing information proactively. Without a concerted effort to reform bureaucratic processes, build capacity, and foster transparency, Pakistan risks backsliding on the gains reflected in its RTI ranking. The need for digital transparency portals and independent oversight remains critical to moving from policy to practice. This situation reveals that while Pakistan’s ranking suggests promise, deeper reforms are needed for these laws to genuinely empower citizens and bolster democratic accountability.



Source: <https://www.rti-rating.org/country-data/Pakistan/>

For instance, [Transparency International Pakistan's 2020 report](#) highlighted that while the law grants a 10-day window for government bodies to respond to information requests, in practice, responses are either delayed for months or go unanswered altogether. Even worse, in critical areas such as defense, national security, and intelligence, information remains virtually inaccessible due to vague and overly broad exemptions within the law, which hampers its effectiveness.

Moreover, public awareness of the law remains low. A study conducted by the [Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives \(CPDI\) in 2021](#) revealed that a significant portion of the population, particularly in rural areas, is unaware of their rights under the RTI Act. This lack of awareness is compounded by a deep-seated culture of secrecy in government institutions, where officials either deliberately withhold information or lack the resources and training to facilitate access. This disconnect between legal provisions and practical implementation severely weakens the democratic principle of transparency that the RTI Act is meant to uphold.

Future Prospects: Paving the Way for Greater Access:

The future of the right to information in Pakistan depends on addressing the structural and systemic flaws that currently impede its implementation.

To begin with, greater efforts are needed to build institutional capacity. Government bodies must invest in the training of public information officers (PIOs), ensuring they have the necessary skills and resources to respond to information requests promptly and effectively.

In addition, awareness campaigns are essential. The RTI law will only be as effective as the public's ability to use it. Civil society organizations (CSOs) and media outlets have a crucial role to play in educating citizens about their right to information.

Partnerships between government institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can create a more transparent environment where citizens feel empowered to seek out information.

A crucial area for reform lies in the narrowing of exemptions. Overly broad exclusions related to national security or internal matters must be revised to ensure they do not become a blanket justification for opacity.

The introduction of clearer guidelines, rooted in international best practices, would enable a more targeted application of these exemptions, ensuring the balance between security and transparency is upheld.

Furthermore, the establishment of independent information commissions at both federal and provincial levels, with adequate resources and authority, will be vital for ensuring that RTI requests are handled impartially and efficiently.

These commissions can play a vital role in monitoring compliance with the law, hearing appeals, and holding government bodies accountable for failures to disclose information.

Unfortunately, the Information Commission at the federal level remains understaffed and underfunded, which severely limits its capacity to enforce compliance.

Finally, Pakistan's journey towards achieving universal access to information should also take into account the rapid rise of digital technologies. Leveraging digital platforms to streamline information requests, creating open data portals, and digitizing government records would go a long way in ensuring transparency. Lessons can be drawn from countries like India, which have implemented successful online platforms under their RTI Act, simplifying the process for citizens and reducing delays.

A Right Worth Fighting For:

Universal access to information is not just a legislative requirement—it is the backbone of a functional democracy. In Pakistan, the right to information has come a long way since its first iteration in 2002, but significant hurdles remain in its path. Addressing issues of institutional capacity, public awareness, and legislative clarity will be crucial to ensuring that Pakistan's RTI laws fulfill their democratic potential. As we mark the International Day for Universal Access to Information, it is essential to renew our commitment to transparency, empowering citizens to actively participate in governance, and holding power accountable.

