

Call for freedom of information

Thursday 26 October 2006, by [HRCP](#), [REHMAN I. A.](#) (Date first published: 25 October 2006).

Lahore, October 18: Amendments to the Freedom of Information Ordinance, repeal of the Official Secrets Act, and the obligation of the government to disseminate information proactively, were termed essential for empowering people, transparency and accountability, at a consultation on the right to know at HRCP the other day.

The discussion highlighted the shortcomings of the FOI Ordinance 2002, the possibilities of learning from experiments in the region, and focused on future strategies for ensuring government accountability and transparency.

Former senators Farhatullah Babar and Shafqat Mehmood, Editor of The Nation Mr. Arif Nizami, Secretary-General of Safma Mr. Imtiaz Alam, Executive Director of Centre for Civic Education Mr. Zafarullah Khan, Executive Director of Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives Mr. Mukhtar Ahmad, Council Members of HRCP Dr. Mehdi Hassan and Salima Hashmi, senior journalist Abbas Rasheed, HRCP Director I.A.Rehman and HRCP National coordinator Hussain Naqi participated in the discussion.

The culture of secrecy and the attitudes prevailing amongst government officials have curtailed the development of an open society. There is absolute lack of freedom of information across the country and those affected by this include all citizens. While there does exist an ordinance, the Freedom of Information Ordinance 2002, it is flawed, it makes access to information extraordinarily difficult and not many people are aware of its existence.

Information enables people to make informed decisions and choices and keep tabs on elected representatives. All citizens, even the poorest of the poor, pay a range of indirect taxes to the government. They, therefore, deserve to know how and where public funds are spent by the government. This enables citizens to meaningfully

exercise their rights and determine who is responsible for any violations. The right to information exists for all citizens and there can be no justice without any right to know.

There is lack of awareness amongst the public of the general rights in terms of seeking information from the government. At the same time, officials are not sensitized towards their duty to provide information to those who seek it. The local government bodies, for example, are required to display information on boards regularly.

The environment transcending from the top is not conducive for developing an open society as it is enshrined in secrecy. The culture, therefore, needs to be changed for the law to become effective as it can not really become operative in an atmosphere where facts are concealed and hidden.

The speakers suggested that the struggle for ensuring right to information for all needs to be part of a bigger struggle. While the media must highlight the issue, the civil society must also lobby with parliamentarians for either evolving a new law or refining the amended version. There must be a rule to punish those willfully giving wrong information to the public and placing before the parliament.

The participants discussed the national RTI Act of India that came into effect from October 2005 and provides freedom to every citizen to secure access to information under the control of public authorities. The growing demand for accountability of government officials in India was stated to be the result of a collective struggle by several organizations that remained at the forefront of the struggle since 1996 in order to get an effective law legislated.

The participants asserted that citizens in the country need to address issues dealing with the daily lives of people, including water and sewerage, just like citizens across Delhi are using the DRTI Act to seek information on issues related to their daily lives like road maintenance, laying water and sewage pipes, sanitation and ration distribution.

Information offers a short cut to development and democracy. The Right to Information Act of India has provided the public with a tool to question the government. While there is a serious lack of political will to transform the closed system of governance in Pakistan, the citizens have also taken a back seat and accepted it. The citizens must be committed to and willing to change this attitude.

P.S.

* Circulated by South Asia Citizens Wire | October 25, 2006 | Dispatch No. 2311 - Year 8.

* I. A. Rehman is Director of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP).