

Civil society organisations' protest against proposed amendment to RTI Act to exempt political parties from its purview - 15th August 2013, Town Hall, Bengaluru

The government is planning to amend the Right to Information Act (RTI Act) to keep political parties outside the purview of the RTI Act in the monsoon session of Parliament which began on the 5th of August 2013. The amendments are planned in response to the recent Central Information Commission order, which held that political parties are public authorities under the RTI Act and therefore should be accountable to citizens of the country. The move of the government to amend the Act only goes to show that political parties are not willing to subject themselves to the transparency law and be open public scrutiny under the Act.

The undersigned organisations condemn the hasty and opaque manner in which the government and political parties are moving amendments to the RTI Act. Accountability of the political process is important. The efforts of parties to use parliamentary power to evade transparency issue is unacceptable. We demand that all bodies which function on public funds should be accountable. The rationale of RTI Act is to ensure transparency, not just in govt, but also in governance and to create an informed citizenry.

Amending the RTI Act by keeping political parties out of its ambit will lead to corruption which is detrimental to democracy. During elections, given the unholy nexus between capitalists and political parties, there is no doubt that RTI is an invaluable weapon to fight fraudulent and corrupt practices. The root cause of corruption is political corruption. And political corruption begins with sources of political funding. Transparency in political funding is the need of the day. If Political parties are really serious to fight corruption, they should offer total transparency in their funding. Citizens are entitled to know where parties got their funding from as many problems arise from the use of black money in elections. The aim of the RTI Act is to ultimately improve governance. It is the political parties that are mainly responsible for bad governance but are not accountable for it. Since money is the root cause, as seen again in Durga Shakti Nagpal's case in UP, there is more urgency to control political finance. We request all parties to bring in transparent ways in their functioning so that common man starts believing in politics and politicians.

Corporates should make their donations to political parties available in the public domain. The legal bribery known as 'campaign contributions' (and routine contributions to individual members of legislative assembly-MLAs and MPs), turns party chiefs, ministers and legislators into agents of the corporates, big builders, mining and other mafias. Our votes become meaningless; our democracy gets hijacked by 'donations'. Corporate lobbyists are using such 'donations' to arm-twist the government to relax environmental and health norms and bring in policies that favour them with tax exemptions, etc.

Parties have said that they are not public bodies. Political parties are like any other public authorities. If political parties were unhappy with the CIC decision, they should have gone through a legal course. The Parliament has a right to frame a law. But once they've made it, to change it for their benefit is completely unacceptable. Besides, is it legal for the cabinet committee to put political parties out of RTI ambit? If political parties take themselves outside the ambit of the RTI Act, whereas other public authorities continue to remain within its ambit, then the question is, would they not be violating Article 14 of the Constitution of India titled 'Equality Before Law'?"

We welcome the stand of the CPI, Aam Aadmi Party, Trinamool Congress, and Raghuvansh Prasad of RJD that they do not support any amendment to the RTI Act. We are organising a protest at Town Hall on 15th August 2013, Independence Day, between 10.30 AM to 1 PM, to protest against this curtailment of our freedom of information. Justice N. Santosh Hegde and other eminent citizens will be participating. We request citizens to participate in this protest in large numbers. This is a call to **SAVE DEMOCRACY and SAVE THE RTI ACT!**

An online petition has also been created to oppose the proposed amendments. We request citizens to please sign and share the petition, which is available at <http://www.change.org/en-IN/petitions/shri-manmohan-singh-prime-minister-government-of-india-save-rti-act-from-amendments>

CIVIC Bangalore
IT for Change
KRIA Katte
Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement