

Shahbaz promises right to information law as first priority

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ISLAMABAD: Chief Minister Punjab Mian Shahbaz Sharif has promised that the first legislation to be passed by the next Punjab Assembly will be the Right to Information law if the PML-N came into power, rekindling a hope for the media and civil society organizations struggling for this legislation.

“Mark my words. This will be the first law approved from the Punjab Assembly if we form the next government,” Shahbaz Sharif said with reference to the RTI law in a telephonic conversation with The News on Saturday.

The provincial cabinet recently approved the draft law at the close of its term meaning thereby that the gigantic task of passing it into a law has been left to the next Assembly. The draft law was prepared in 2010, but the provincial cabinet shied away from stamping its approval until recently. It will only come into effect once passed by the Punjab Assembly.

Nevertheless, the Punjab is a step ahead of other provinces and federal government where no concrete effort has been made to recognize the basic right of citizens to have access to information.

Major political parties: PML-N and PPP had agreed through the Charter of Democracy (CoD) that the RTI laws will be made; however, no serious effort has been demonstrated. While the PML-N’s provincial government got this law approved from the cabinet, the PPP federal government lagged far behind. A draft bill in this respect has been pending with the sub-committee of the Senate Standing Committee on Information and Broadcasting for months now.

Zahid Abdullah, coordinator of Coalition on Right to Information (CRTI), has regretted this inordinate delay by major political parties in living up to their promise. The legislation on RTI was part of the CoD signed by the PPP and PML-N, Zahid said while talking to The News.

They have violated their commitment by not passing this legislation, he said. Zahid however lauded the Punjab government for taking some steps in the right direction through the passage of draft law from the provincial cabinet.

Reacting to Shahbaz Sharif’s commitment to declaring it the first legislation to be approved through the Punjab Assembly, Zahid termed it a welcome step and said they will closely watch if Shahbaz will translate his promise into a reality.

Other provincial governments have either done nothing on the RTI laws or acted with total indifference aimed at blocking the access of information to common people. As for Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa government, it has shown no plausible progress at this front.

The provincial governments of Sindh and Balochistan have copied the toothless law introduced during the Musharraf era to allay the concerns of foreign donors: Freedom of Information Ordinance 2002. This ordinance guaranteed no power to the Ombudsman Office,

the appellant authority against the departments not cooperating in granting access to the information.

There is no mention either of an independent information commission to deal with bureaucratic hurdles making this ordinance impotent as for as access to information is concerned.

The Sindh Assembly approved this law knowing well that it was not going to change the ground realities and making the government accountable, while the Balochistan government prepared a draft altogether adopting this ordinance; however, no legislation was done.