

Dated: October 03, 2021

To,
Mr. Faisal Javed
Chairperson
Senate standing committee
Information and broadcasting
Senate of Pakistan

Mr. Syed Ali Zafar
Chairperson
Senate standing committee
Law and Justice
Senate of Pakistan

Mr. Walid Iqbal
Chairperson
Senate standing committee
Human Rights
Senate of Pakistan

Open Letter

Civil society opposes the move to exclude Parliament from the purview of right to information

Islamabad: We the civil society activists and organizations take strong exception to the private member amendment bill moved by some senators with the purpose of excluding the Parliament from the purview of the Right of Access to Information Act, 2017. The amendment bill seeks to delete Section 2(ix)(c) of the Act which, if enacted, would mean that Parliament will no longer fall within the definition of public bodies that are required to share non-exempt information with citizens, either proactively or in response to their information requests. We demand the chairperson and the members of the Senate Standing Committee on Information and Broadcasting to reject the amendment bill in its meeting scheduled to be held on October 4, 2021, and instead consult civil society for developing recommendations towards strengthening of the existing Act in the light of regional and international best practice.

We would like to remind the members of the Parliament that the proposed amendment is not only inconsistent with the commitments made by all the major political parties in their election manifestos regarding transparent governance but also against the letter and spirit of Article 19-A of the Constitution, which provides that information should be accessible to citizens 'in all matters of public importance' and that only 'reasonable restrictions' can be imposed by law. It is

hard to imagine why Parliament should be excluded from the citizens' right to information, despite the fact that it uses public funds and the authority vested in its offices by the people of Pakistan through their elected representatives. We believe that a Parliament which is not transparent in its functions would lose public trust and will never be able to exercise any moral authority over other government institutions in the process of requiring them to become transparent and accountable.

We also express our concern that some members of the Parliament thought it appropriate to move such a regressive and anti-people bill and the Senate considered it worthy enough for consideration in the Senate Committee on Information and Broadcasting. The argument that the Parliament performs sensitive functions and, therefore, its information must be exempt from disclosure is completely devoid of any merit, as the information whose disclosure may cause harm to any national or public interests is already exempt from disclosure. The amendment bill has clearly been moved with *malafide* intentions to avoid public scrutiny in relations to matters that clearly involve public interest, for example, perks and privileges, procurements and appointments.

Regards,

Endorsed by following organizations and individual members

Signatory Organizations:

1. Coalition on Right to Information (CRTI)
2. Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI)
3. Institute for Research, Advocacy and Development (IRADA)
4. Centre for Governance and Public Accountability (CGPA)
5. Peace and Justice Network (PJN)
6. Shehri - Citizens for a better Environment
7. Parliamentary Research Group
8. National Legal Incubation Centre (NLIC)
9. Bolo Bhi
10. Peoples' Commission for Minorities Rights
11. Association of Women for Awareness and Motivation (AWAM)
12. Bonded Labour Liberation Front (BLLF)
13. Integrated Regional Support Program (IRSP)
14. Women Action Forum (WAF)
15. Democratic Commission for Human Development (DCHD)
16. Sindh Development Society (SDS)
17. The Network for Consumer Protection

18. Concerned citizens of Pakistan (CCP)
19. Citizens for Environment
20. Accountability Lab Pakistan
21. Sustainable Social Development Organization (SSDO)
22. Lodhran Pilot Project
23. Baidarie, Sialkot
24. Women Action Forum (WAF) Lahore Chapter
25. Digital Media Alliance for Pakistan (DigiMAP)
26. Freedom Network

Individual Signatories:

1. Justice (R) Nasira Iqbal, Lahore
2. Naeem Sadiq, Civil Society Activist, Karachi
3. Muhammad Aftab Alam, Islamabad
4. Khawar Mumtaz, Chairperson, Commission for the Status of Women
5. Zafar Ullah Khan, Researcher and Activist, former Director General, Pakistan Institute of Parliamentary Services (PIPS)
6. Faiza Farooq, Advocate
7. Usama Khilji, Columnist and Activist
8. Peter Jacob, Policy Analyst and Researcher
9. Mahar Safdar Ali
10. Rehan Khan
11. Nida Usman
12. Mukhtar Ahmad Ali, former Information Commissioner, Punjab
13. Ome Kalsoom Seyal, Executive Director, SYCOP, Muzaffargarh
14. Sadia Bukhari, Director, Mohsinini Resource Centre
15. Fayyaz Yaseen, Director Pakistan Program, Accountability Lab Pakistan
16. Tayyba Abbasi, Advocate & Women and Child Rights Activist
17. Shahbaz Akmal Jadran, Advocate, Lahore
18. Saleem Malik, Human Rights Defender
19. Syed Miqdad, Advocate & Child Rights Activist
20. Ahmar Majeed, Advocate & Child Right Activist
21. Iqbal Khattak, Country Representative, Reporters without Borders
22. Adnan Rehmat, Media Analyst
23. Malik Aneeq Ali Khatana, Advocate & Human Rights Activist
24. Gul Buledi, Executive Director, SHIFA Welfare Association
25. Syed Kausar Abbas, Executive Director, Sustainable Social Development Organization (SSDO)
26. Prof. Kalimullah, former Information Commissioner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
27. Syed Raza Ali, Right to Information Activist, Islamabad