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Editorial

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Draft police ordinance

Hold public discourse before adoption

A roundtable arranged by this newspaper on the Bangladesh Draft Police Ordinance 2007 on Saturday highlighted some important police reform issues in the country. An observation of the draft ordinance reveals some features that call for closer scrutiny. There are certain details that need to be worked on in the larger interest of putting in place an efficient and well-meaning police force. Among those details is the very great necessity of reconditioning the police to an atmosphere where it will stay free of political influence. There are, of course, provisions in the draft to that effect that are surely laudable. How effective those provisions will be depends on how foolproof a strong police administration sans political interference is finally put in place.

A positive aspect of the draft ordinance relates to the idea of the Police Complaints Commission. Such a body will afford citizens an opportunity to air their grievances with a view to securing justice. However, there is an absolute need to ensure that complainants' identity is protected in order for them not to be subjected to harassment and other forms of persecution once they have lodged their complaints. Nothing can be more damaging than the spectacle of a complainant becoming a victim of a system intended to do good. Then comes the matter of the constitution of a Police Commission. The proposed composition of the commission seems weighted in favour of the government and ruling party. If such a step is taken, it could defeat the very objective of the police reforms we are talking about. That is why it is important that some leverage in decision-making be given to independent members drawn from other sectors of society. One hardly needs to emphasise the fact that the bureaucracy might not look kindly on the reform process which could dilute their control over the police. Any attempt to scuttle it needs to be guarded against.

The draft ordinance has not clearly delineated the provisions relating to a decentralisation of the police. In order to bring about quality and efficiency in the service, a devolution of authority from the top to the lower rungs of the police administration as well as a definition of powers enjoyed by police personnel away from headquarters are an imperative not to be ignored. Finally, in the larger interest of the nation and in view of the need for a purposeful police system, the draft police ordinance must be put through a national consultative process before it is adopted. This can be done through eliciting the opinions of experts, politicians, civil society members and the like and thereby associating them in the reform of the police administration.