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A People's Police

Reform Suggestions for a Democratic Police





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A People's Police

Reform Suggestions for a Democratic Police

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April 2025

BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD)
BRAC University

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April 2025

Published by
BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD)
BRAC University

Cover and Layout Design
Md. Abdur Razzaque

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1. Background

The agenda for prioritizing a truly democratic reform of the police became imperative following the role of the police in the July uprising. Among the estimated 1,000+ killings of citizens, the police were the primary perpetrators in a large portion, with other armed forces and the Chhatra League following closely behind. After the regime was uprooted and a new interim government was formed to reform state institutions damaged by 16 years of authoritarian rule, police reform became a matter of utmost importance to citizens. Following the deaths of so many people, it became clear that the power dynamic between the police and the people had shifted into a deadly imbalance, empowering the institution to act with impunity toward the citizens of the country. Addressing this imbalance should be a priority in the interim government's ongoing agenda to reform state institutions. In writing about state institutions, political scientist Robert Reiner also contended heavily for careful scrutiny towards the police institution, highlighting that the police is the states primary legitimate expression of power¹. As such, when reforming the state, one must reform the police.

Based on an understanding that a reform to the police is imperative both contextually and structurally, our paper aims provides guiding suggestions to steer the conversation around police reform. Our suggestions are based on a qualitative investigation conducted in Tala Thana of Satkhira District, located in the southern part of Bangladesh. Several qualitative tools—such as in-depth interviews (IDI), key informant interviews (KII), and focus group discussions (FGD)—were used to gather primary data. The participants represent a diverse range of occupations, including teachers, businessmen, farmers, housewives, students, politicians, retired service holders, police personnel, and representatives of local government. Furthermore, religious diversity was also maintained, with respondents belonging to Muslim, Hindu, and Christian households.

¹ Robert Reiner, *The Politics of the Police* (OUP Oxford, 2010).

2. Past Attempts at Police Reform

Reforms to the police apparatus have been a topic of contention in the past. Beginning in 2005, a police reform program was initiated, which claimed to fulfill a vision of five fundamental strategic changes to the institution: organizational reform, community policing, enhanced training, inclusion of women police and gender sensitization, and computerization. However, police personnel—especially senior officials—were uninterested in this holistic research agenda. For them, citizen centricity and progressive reform were largely unimportant. Rather, their idea of reform primarily strengthened the channels of power that the institution thrives on. To them, reform essentially meant gaining autonomy from the government's bureaucratic authority while maintaining the sphere of political influence integral to the institution's power structure. As a result of the 2005 program, some limited reforms were implemented, but no structural change was achieved. In particular, citizen-centric ideas were either discarded (e.g., community

policing) or rendered largely redundant (e.g., police commissions, which eventually became elite-driven and politically influenced bodies). Furthermore, the reform agenda failed to focus on thanas and the networked forms of corruption within the police institution. The police's self-serving reform agenda was also perceived by citizens, who believed the reforms would not challenge the internal and invisible power relations that truly govern the police. Citizens did not feel inclined to take co-ownership of a police force that continued to view them as subjects of—or accessories to—the institution. Given that the old paradigm failed to bring about effective reforms, we suggest a shift in perspective: from viewing the police as a regime security apparatus to a democratic institution.

3. Public Opinion and Democratic Police

Although the Bangladesh police are entrusted with ensuring public safety, people no longer view the institution as a public service entity. Instead, it is widely perceived as authoritarian. In BIGD's TAF surveys from 2024 and 2022, the police were found to be the least trusted state institution. A vast range of negative experiences have contributed to this lack of trust, with incidents like harassment, extortion, politically biased behavior, abuse, etc. being far too common. One participant framed this failure of trust in their statement that "people neither trust nor fear the police." This particular statement implies two fundamental problems: first, the social contract between the citizens and the police was one based, even if partially, on fear; second, regardless of the fragile and problematic nature of the social contract, it was also clear that the contract was no longer operational. For some, the prolonged mistreatment of citizens by the police has even served to justify the attacks on police during the July movement. Nonetheless, despite lacking trust in the police, people acknowledge the centrality of the institution in upholding law and order. At the same time, they expect a new kind of policing, which requires significant reforms to the existing system. According to them, this reform should include both structural changes (i.e., disciplinary measures, new policies, removing the police from the direct control of the Ministry of Home Affairs, and eliminating political influence) and changes in the relationship between the police and citizens. The main objective of this reform

is to put an end to police arbitrariness through public participation and to hold the police accountable.

In addition to the lack of accountability, the major grievances that citizens have with the police fall into the following categories: corruption, mistreatment of citizens/abuse of power, regime control, and political influence. These issues are interlinked. The lack of accountability is rooted in the impunity granted by regime control and political patronage, which enables police misconduct such as abuse of power and corruption. To envision a truly citizen-centric reform of the police, it is imperative to base solutions on the problems identified by citizens themselves.

Our respondents suggested several types of reform during our fieldwork: deploying monitoring cells, involving third parties in conflict resolution by deploying a neutral party, fostering reciprocity between the police and the public, and building stronger connections with the police. Collectively, these ideas emphasize the importance of establishing a community-driven approach to ensure police accountability. Through reforms, citizens want a policing system that maintains a balance of power with the public. This vision is rooted in the belief that, in a democratic country, citizens should hold the ultimate power.

How people envision the police through reforms—balancing power, ensuring accountability, providing impartial service, and engaging the community—can be referred to as a form of democratic policing.

While there is ongoing discourse on the nuances and modality of democratic policing, there seems to be a consensus in the understanding that a democratic policing system is one where the police is mandated to serve the public and remain accountable to them, as opposed to being a coercive political tool with impunity². In the status quo, the police are primarily utilized to protecting the regime and its allies by exerting repressive and coercive power over the public. In contrast, democratic policing emphasizes mutual cooperation, where both the public and the police work together and protect each other in times of need. A structure of accountability could ensure that police services are accessible and equitable. At the same time, building a relationship of trust between the people and the police could also strengthen sustained cooperation between the two parties during times of distress and instability. A democratic policing system would no longer require the police to be subservient to the government or ruling class. It is worth noting that the police are also subjected to various forms of harassment each time a new party comes to power, as a form of punishment for having served the interests of the previous regime (e.g., the public attacks on the police in July–August). If ownership of the police shifts away from partisan actors and toward people-centric ownership, such harassment is also likely to be significantly reduced. In a cooperative model, citizens can also stand up for the police if they are subjected to injustice by ruling parties or political leaders—especially during transitions of power.

Our suggestion for laying the foundational bricks toward establishing a democratic policing institution is to form a citizen-led committee that will ensure police accountability on behalf of the people. Additionally, such a committee would serve as a bridge between the public and the police, working to protect the rights of both parties. Models of such democratic police commissions exist worldwide, with the reform initiative for the police in Northern Ireland being a fitting

example³. Noteworthy within this initiative were the agendas for community policing and a central police board: the community policing suggestions centered around operationalizing community members in problem-solving mechanisms, local patrols. This initiative would go hand in hand with revamped training for police officers to be more sensitively trained to work with citizens from different backgrounds. In addition, the central police board would act as an overseeing body that would hold the police accountable to their mandate and expectations of citizen-friendly policing. The example of Northern Ireland, out of many, serves as testament of the feasibility and rationality behind such a reform project. Our suggestion for a democratic police are grounded in the same ethos, but synthesized with the practicalities of the Bangladeshi context, and illustrated with empirical data from our field work. The sections below discuss the specifics of the police committee we are proposing, external mechanisms that will play a key role in the functioning of the committee, and also some potential challenges the committee may face in its operation.

3.1. Responsibilities of the Committee

- The main task of this committee will be to hold the police accountable to the public for their work. To this end, the committee will organize four meetings with the police each year.
- To assist the police in maintaining peace and order in the area in various ways and to immediately inform the police in case of any violation of law and order.
- To raise awareness among the public about police rules, regulations, and their legal rights. This can be done through various

² Michelle D. Bonner, “What Democratic Policing Is ... and Is Not,” *Policing and Society* 30, no. 9 (October 20, 2020): 1044–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2019.1649405>; Trevor Jones, Tim Newburn, and David J. Smith, “Policing and the Idea of Democracy,” *The British Journal of Criminology* 36, no. 2 (March 1, 1996): 182–98, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.bjc.a014081>.

³ Aogán Mulcahy, “Community Policing in Contested Settings: The Patten Report and Police Reform in Northern Ireland,” in *The Handbook of Knowledge-Based Policing*, ed. Tom Williamson, 1st ed. (Wiley, 2008), 117–37, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470773215.ch5>.

means, such as open discussions, posters, leaflets, public announcements (miking), street plays, etc.

- To listen to the public through regular meetings, collect their views, and inform the concerned authorities.
- To directly and indirectly observe police activities and prepare evaluation reports at regular intervals.
- To properly evaluate the reports submitted by the police at regular intervals (every three months).

3.2. Formation and Scope of the Committee

The base of this committee will be the Thana. The committee will be formed at the Thana level and will operate within the same geographical jurisdiction as the local police. Although the committee will be formed at the Thana level, representatives from each union under the relevant Thana/Upazila can be included as members. The committee will have direct contact with the central police commission, which will provide guidance to the Thana Committee and hold it accountable.

3.3. Committee Members

The number of committee members will be limited to a maximum of 10–15 people. In forming the committee, care should be taken to ensure it is as inclusive as possible, representing diverse groups such as the poor, wealthy, Hindus, Christians, women, ethnic groups, students, etc. Members can be included on a proportional basis to reflect this diversity. The chairperson of the committee will be a member of the general public (i.e., not an active police officer, government employee, or elected public representative). General members may include teachers, socially influential individuals, student leaders, non-governmental organization (NGO) workers, retired government officials, and union

chairmen. At the same time, for this cooperative model to function as truly cooperative, the committee should also include partisan individuals from the local community. This ensures that political participation happens at the citizen level without risking capture by political elites—a pattern historically emblematic of police structures.

Since the committee's function is to work with the police, ensuring the participation of police officials is also essential. The officer-in-charge (OC) of the Thana will serve as an ex officio member, acting as the member secretary of the committee. The OC will be responsible for convening and organizing meetings at regular intervals (every three months). All meeting expenses will be covered by the police station authorities. Committee meetings may be held on the premises of the police station. The chairpersons of all union parishads under the jurisdiction of the police station will serve as members of the committee on a rotational basis. Their participation will help make the committee more inclusive and representative. We also suggest that committee members be selected through deliberative community elections—a discussion-based process rather than a vote-based one. This approach can help prevent abuse of power within the committee, as other elected members will serve as a counterbalance to any dominant interests.

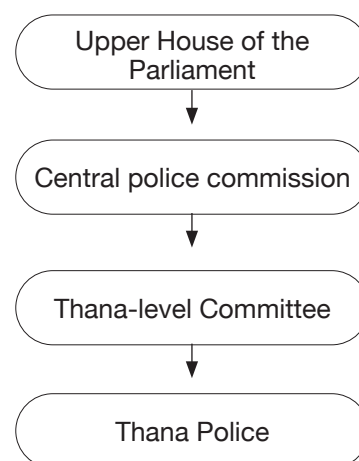


Figure 3.1. Structure of Community Policing

3.4. Selection Process and Tenure

Many respondents believed that open discussions within the community represent the best selection process. They expressed strong reservations about the traditional election system, as it often fails to prevent the selection of unqualified candidates. Therefore, we suggest committing to a discussion-based selection process, even if multiple rounds of discussion are required to finalize the selection. The tenure of the committee will be half the tenure of the central government (2–2.5 years) to reduce the likelihood of the committee becoming subservient to the regime in power.

3.5. Some Prerequisites for the Committee

People believe that merely forming a committee will not ensure its proper functioning unless a conducive environment is created. In this regard, several prerequisites were emphasized. Firstly, The committee must have a legal foundation; without legal legitimacy, it will struggle to earn public trust. Secondly, both administrative and social recognition are crucial for the effective functioning of the committee. Thirdly, the committee must have some degree of authority and the ability to enforce its decisions. And finally, mechanisms such as capacity-building initiatives and transparency measures are needed to ensure the committee remains effective and corruption-free. In this regard, one interviewee noted, “The committee member may be corrupt or biased, and there should be mechanisms to stop it.” This concern for accountability is a valid one and was echoed by several other respondents.

Drawing loosely from proposed reforms, there is scope to implement such mechanisms. In the reform report, there are vague references to an independent commission free from external influence. While the structure and function of this commission remain unclear, we suggest a parliament-centric measure of accountability. Until now, the police have been held accountable primarily by the party in power.

We propose an alternative system, where a central police commission reports both to the public and to parliament. As illustrated in Figure 1 above, this model establishes a clear chain of accountability. We specifically recommend that the upper house of parliament serve as the oversight body for the central commission, as it is proposed to include citizen participation. This composition offers a potential check-and-balance mechanism for police accountability.

3.6. Motivation of the Committee

Committee participation and work should ideally be voluntary. However, public opinion is divided regarding the provision of financial support. While most respondents believed that money is not essential, some argued that even a small amount of financial support would be necessary. Nonetheless, there was overwhelming agreement that social recognition would be more motivating for committee members than financial incentives. Symbolic forms of recognition—such as crests or certificates—were suggested as effective motivators for voluntary work. Furthermore, as these committees will operate within local communities, community-building activities—such as shared meals, celebration events, and other forms of engagement—can help build a relationship of trust and cooperation between the police and the public.

3.7. Challenges of the Committee

While the formation of such a committee is likely to gain quick support and legitimacy among communities, it is also likely to face some resistance. For example, local political leaders may interfere, impeding the committee’s decision-making processes and attempting to exert coercive pressure—particularly since the committee’s formation challenges a long-standing tradition: he who rules the state rules the police. In addition, since committee members are residents of the concerned area, nepotism and kinship networks may interfere with

decision-making, especially when decisions directly and immediately affect a local resident. Furthermore, the very concept of holding the police accountable to the people is unfamiliar to many citizens. Being

accountable to the public may also be a difficult adjustment for the police, who have long been accustomed to wielding coercive power over citizens.

4. Conclusion

While these challenges are inevitable due to the historical legitimization of an undemocratic, coercive police force, we remain optimistic about a shift toward people-centred policing. This optimism is rooted in both the public's general support for reform and the specific interest in police reform expressed by participants in our fieldwork. This paper outlines why a citizen-led committee is essential and how it can

function. While advocating for the transformative potential of such a reform initiative, we also address several challenges the committee may face. However, with a strong legal foundation and institutional state support through the parliament, this committee could serve as the critical spark for launching a truly democratic and people-centric police reform agenda for the nation.



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