

LegCo Panel on the Administration of Justice and Legal Services

**The applicability of the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance to the
“State” organs in Hong Kong**

At the 25 February meeting of the LegCo Panel on the Administration of Justice and Legal Services, members requested that on the review of the applicability of the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance to the “State” organs in the SAR, the Government should -

- (i) explain the reasons for commencing discussions with the Central People’s Government only a few weeks ago but not earlier, bearing in mind that the item was discussed by the Panel as early as September 1998;
- (ii) elaborate on the Administration’s advice that this Ordinance is more complicated, e.g. in what aspects; and
- (iii) advise the expected timing for completing the review.

2. This paper sets out the Administration’s response to the above points.

Discussions with the Central People’s Government and timing for the completion of the review

3. The Government provided information on the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance (PDPO) to the Central People’s Government mid last year. Subsequently, the Administration further elaborated and explained to the Central People’s Government the major provisions of the Ordinance. We have already started discussing the applicability of the Ordinance with the Central People’s Government. When we have completed our discussions and worked out our recommendations, we will report back to the Panel on the Administration of Justice and Legal Services.

Complexity of the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance

4. Unlike other Ordinances which contain specific rules on what are or are not permitted, at the heart of the PDPO are six data protection principles phrased in broad terms, i.e. the six principles in Schedule 1 of the PDPO.

5. These principles leave considerable room for interpretation. For example, they contain expressions such as “fair in the circumstances of the case” (principle 1(2)), “all practicable steps shall be taken” (principles 1(3), 2(1), 4 and 5) and “personal data shall not be kept longer than is necessary” (principle 2(2)). Therefore, in order to determine how the Ordinance affects a particular data user and whether his existing practices comply with the Ordinance, it is necessary to consider questions such as the nature of the personal data he has to hold, for what purposes he has to collect and hold the personal data, how he collects and safeguards the data, what are the practical constraints to take into consideration, etc.

6. Apart from the six data protection principles, the exemption provisions in Part VIII of the PDPO are also phrased in broad terms. These exemption provisions seek to strike a balance between the privacy rights of the individual in relation to personal data and various other public interests. One has to consider questions similar to those mentioned in the preceding paragraph in determining whether the exemptions apply to particular types of personal data held by a particular data user.

7. In order to provide guidance on how to comply with the Ordinance in general and the data protection principles in particular, the Ordinance empowers the Privacy Commissioner for Personal Data to issue codes of practice. So far, the PC has issued two such codes -

- (a) *Code of Practice on the Identity Card Number and other Personal Identifiers*; and
- (b) *Code of Practice on Consumer Credit Data*.

8. The former Code has impact on all data users, who will have to consider what changes, if any, are necessary to their existing practices in order to comply with the Code.

9. The statutory protection of privacy in relation to personal data is relatively new in Hong Kong and given the complexity of the PDPO as explained above, it is understandable that it takes more time to assess whether - and if so, how - a particular organisation's operation will be affected by the Ordinance.

Home Affairs Bureau

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