

# Reflections on Democracy and Violence

by Iftekhar Sayeed

...two women raped at gun-point in a hair salon; a bank robbed by five armed men; an elderly woman robbed at gun-point in her home; an unidentified dead body found in the street; security guards robbed by armed gunmen; two more security guards robbed at gun-point; one policeman shot dead; a man found murdered in his home; a couple robbed at gun-point in their home; a man robbed at gun-point; one dead body found; another dead body found in a park.

If this sounds like news from a Bangladeshi daily, guess again: these are (some) events in a day in the life of Johannesburg. But why the similarity?

The reason is not far to seek, and recent history provides the answer. A casual glance at the experiences of Latin American countries 'before' and 'after' democracy reveals an explosive growth in crime and violence under democratic governments. In Trinidad and Tobago, there was a 500 per cent increase in murder rates after the 30-year rule of the People's National Movement ended in 1986; in Peru, after military rule ended in 1980, the increase was 379 per cent; in Colombia, the end of the National Front's monopoly in 1974 resulted in a 336 per cent increase in the murder rate; in Panama, the figure had increased by 419% after the end of Torrijos' dictatorship; in Brazil, 7 per cent in Venezuela, 30 per cent (see Table-I). These variations in figures betray an ineluctable pattern: an increase in criminal violence after the introduction of democracy in Latin America in the late '80s.

The murder rate in South Africa was seven times that of the United States - 61 per 100,000 - in 1996. That means that every day, on average, 76 people were being murdered. And the rate is a third higher than the national average in Guatemala, the province centred on Johannesburg. Under pressure, whites at first migrated to the National Party-dominated Cape Town; then finally began to leave the country in droves. Ninety six per cent of South African emigrants are motivated to leave by the fear of violence, according to FSA/Contact, a market research group. Nearly 39,000 - a definite underestimate - left the country between 1994 and 1997. And those who leave are the cream of society - skilled personnel coveted by such nations as America, Australia and Canada. No country, let alone South Africa, can afford brain drain on such a scale.

The Russian experience closely mirrors that of South Africa - except here, crime is already highly organised (South Africa is getting there, but more on that later). Organised criminal activity, to an extent, predates the transition to democracy and capital-

ism. The Brezhnev era's incompetence bred two classes of deviant groups: a mafia that performed a useful social function by providing a black market in an otherwise centrally-planned economy; the other group was a throwback to the pre-Revolutionary gangster, the vory v zakone - thieves-in-law. There were 20 criminal 'brigades' controlling Moscow, named after their area of operation. But theirs was a stable underworld - until democracy arrived.

In 1992, when Russia turned democratic-capitalist, these criminal hordes had the capital to buy up the entire state. They were too disorganised to do that; instead they fought among themselves, and raised the level of criminal violence in Russia.

However, the trend towards consolidation was well under way. In 1994, there were 5,800 criminal gangs in Russia. Violent competition has been pushing them into union. One notorious example was that of Vladimir Potkin, in Khabarovsk, locally known as 'the poodle' (euphemistically?). A man who had spent 17 years in prison camps for criminal offences, has a firm grip on the city's economy, has his own political party and television station and even has a letter from the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church sanctioning his altruistic credentials!

The evolution of the term 'mafia' since Soviet days is highly informative. Then, it stood for someone with money and connections. Now, it denotes an entire hierarchy, with the local illegal retailer at the bottom, his extortionist in the next level, who works for 'Al Capone' type businessmen in the next tier, up to the state level. 'The Moscow city authorities are the most corrupt government that has ever existed', was the informed opinion of a clan-leader.

The judiciary is a carry-over from Soviet days; only now, their emancipation from the local party secretary, who had to be consulted before passing sentence, means that they are not accountable to anyone, and are free to take bribes. Those with grievances prefer razhorka (mafia-talk for rough justice) to the courts. As to the legislators, their favourite game is to stymie government at every step to prevent the passage of effective laws. The laws serve to lock up the innocent without trial indefinitely, and to let the guilty get away with it. The police? Thoroughly corrupt.

Life for the ordinary Russian, the man-in-the-street, has meant greater uncertainty and insecurity. Whatever he earns, he wants to stash abroad. A businessman was reported as saying that fear of the mob has stunted his aspirations: he will not advertise; he won't go into

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oil trading - too risky; he won't set up an attractive office lest he attract the wrong kind of people - 'the criminal and state mafia'. Things were different in Soviet days. The Economist acknowledges the fact that 'the rate of crime has risen fast in Russia, but from a low base'. The identical pattern emerges from Malawi to the Philippines. In the latter country, the death penalty had been abolished in 1986. It was re-introduced in 1995, and enthusiastically backed by judges as well as the Roman Catholic population. The new death penalty covers rape, incest, drug trafficking and murder. Several sexual murders created the momentum for its popular re-introduction. In Malawi,

donors forced the former dictator to call an election in 1994. Since then, mugging and violent crime has soared. Since the successful conclusion of 'Operation Restore Democracy' in 1994 by America in Haiti, the Americans' main concern has been less about democracy than the collapse of government, and with it, rising crime, violence, and - most relevantly for the Americans - re-export of drugs from Haiti to the United States. The 25-year-rule of Lynden O. Pindling ended in the Bahamas, and his Progressive Liberal party became the opposition, in 1992; in a move familiar in Bangladesh, he was accused of involving students in politics. Crime has become an election issue and the Bahamas - like

the Philippines - has started hanging people after a gap of 14 years. The murder rate in Brazil has soared since military rule ended (see Table-I). However, the average for Brazil conceals the violence of its major cities. The level of effective policing is so low that robbers and drug barons go on killing sprees with impunity. A study of 290 cases of fatal shootings of children and adolescents in 1991 by the Violence Studies Group of Sao Paulo University found that only five of these cases had led to conviction!

Increasingly, and inevitably, crime has become organised. We have seen how the Russian mafia has forged a symbiosis with the state. A survey by the World Economic Forum has found that Russia, Colombia and South Africa are in the bear hug of organised crime. The South African government roped in Meyer Kahn from the beer industry to run the police. Much of the crime, however, is organised, and there is little he can do about it. The ending of apartheid opened a crack in the edifice of the state, a crack that became an open door for organised gangs from as far afield as the world as China, Colombia and Nigeria - and Russia. The thug who robs people and their homes at gunpoint is at the bottom of a hierarchy. He delivers the goods, takes his cut and, after that, the big guys take over. In 1996, the police knew of 481 criminal syndicates that smuggled drugs, guns, diamonds, rhino horns and luxury cars.

The south of Florida has become a haven for organised crime. Gangs originate from Jamaica, Colombia, Italy and Russia. After a three-year investigation, the US Drug Enforcement Agency uncovered an alleged trafficking organisation that transported cocaine from Ecuador to St Petersburg in cargoes of iced shrimp. In 1997, they were on the verge of buying a Russian navy submarine to ferry cocaine up the west coast of the United States to San Francisco!

It is no coincidence that for the first time since 1983, crime in Argentina has become an electoral issue - 1983 was the year that rule by the military junta ended. Taxi-drivers rob passengers, burglars shoot people in their homes, and the education minister gets mugged. Eduardo Duhalde, the presidential candidate, has been promising 'zero tolerance' as enforced in New York, as well as - you guessed it - capital punishment. Martin Abregu, director of a human-rights group that monitors the police, observes that criminals have become obviously more violent. Regarding the quick-fix solutions on offer from politicians, Mario Ciafardini, national director of crime policy at the justice ministry, says: 'Issues of social strategy can't be resolved in a year. They require permanent effort.'

But perhaps there's a reason why politicians are uninterested in permanent effort. Although crime is more frequent than the statistics say - less than a third are reported, and of these only about 1 per cent cleared up - the police alone cannot take the blame. Politicians are expected to connive at prostitution, illegal gambling and the rest; whistle-blowers lose their jobs, or worse. The money is passed on to the top. Huge sums are involved. Judges covering a case revealed that six states raised over \$3m a month. There's a chain beginning from the man on the beat to his superiors and then to divisional superintendents. Does it stop here? Unlikely. A senior policeman observes, anonymously: 'At election time, the pressure to raise money increases.'

The economic costs are enormous. For Latin America, as a whole, its income would be 25 per cent higher if it had been like other regions in terms of safety, reckons the World Bank. According to Mauricio Rubio, an economist at Bogota's University of the Andes, violence costs Colombia 2 per cent points of growth per year in terms of lost tourist revenue and foregone investment. In Russia's case, one has only to

look at the size of foreign investment in Finland - used by entrepreneurs as a (much safer) point of entry into the Russian economy - to appreciate the staggering cost that violent crime imposes. Capital flight is taking place in South Africa - human capital. According to FSA/Contact, 11 per cent of the top managers and 6 per cent of the middle managers who resigned in 1997 did so to emigrate. That's a lot of talent for a poor country.

And then there's India - the world's biggest democracy. A biographical approach best illustrates the complex tangles of Indian politics and Indian crime. In 1981, Phoolan Devi and her cohorts were accused of slaughtering 22 upper-caste men, who, she claims, had gang-raped her, in the hamlet of Behmai in Uttar Pradesh. She denied the accusations, but agreed to surrender to the police in 1983 by agreeing to the 70 different counts of extortion, kidnapping and murder outstanding on condition that she spend only eight years in jail. In the event, she spent 11 - then the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh dropped the charges, and took her into his party! She went on to become MP. According to the police, of the 85 MPs from Uttar Pradesh, at least 28 had criminal records or serious charges against them in 1997. Indira Gandhi introduced goons to politics to get votes; since then, they have gone into politics for themselves. The connection between politicians and the Bombay underworld, for instance, is well known.

And yet Japan is also a democracy with some of the world's lowest figures for crime and highest for crime detection. The difference between Japan and India is that Japan has 'Asianised' democracy; the Liberal Democratic Party has been in power for nearly 50 years, and it is the bureaucrats who run the country. And these bureaucrats have been - barring a few major lapses - remarkably close to the people. True, Japan does have organised crime, but the level of violence is so low as to leave the average citizen feeling - and actually being - perfectly safe.

Japan has a conviction rate of 99.8 per cent despite the fact that, in 1990, 31 per cent of offenders were released after signing an apology. But these were for minor offences; for the major offences, the Japanese police only strike when they're absolutely certain. Most convictions are obtained by means of - unconstitutional - confessions. On the other hand, non-offenders love the police! The emphasis is on crime-prevention with policemen spread out across the country in boxes to offer help (including personal loans). In 1991, there were 188,000 requests for personal advice. A third related to crime-prevention, over a

quarter to family problems, and around a fifth to other matters, like personal finance. The number of articles returned to the police (4.1m) exceeded the number reported lost (2.9m). 18.5 billion yen (\$137 million) of lost cash were handed over by friendly citizens.

Why does democracy outside its civilisation of origin - Western Europe and the Anglo-Saxon countries - degenerate into violence? The answer lies in our experience of government. A thousand years separated the resurrection of the state in Western Europe from its collapse with the western Roman Empire. In this lacuna of government, all the later forces that would challenge the authority of a king - clergy, nobility, bourgeoisie - were formed. Such hiatus in government is unique to the western world. The rest of the world has never had to do without a centralised authority before the colonial conquerors introduced ideas of representative government. Democracy, in short, is alien to Asia. It is also alien to the Iberian 'civilisation' where first Muslim rulers, then absolutist Catholic ones, preserved the continuity of the state. Spain and Portugal were dictatorships until only the other day. In historic terms. Consequently, when the state loses its monopoly of power, and becomes parcelled into political parties, it begins to collapse.

The lesson for a country like Bangladesh - where headlines such as 'Cases of gang-rape on increase in rural areas' are sickeningly common nowadays - is clear. If we want a safe society we must abandon the democracy that has been foisted on us by foreign donors. In India's 50 years of democracy, crime has become firmly enmeshed into the fabric of the state, so much so that the — unelected — judges on the Supreme Court repeatedly find it necessary to order investigations of — elected — representatives of the people. Such a damning indictment of democracy holds invaluable insights. Crime has become accepted - and to that extent, legitimised. The legitimisation of crime is the most frightening aspect of democracy in the countries discussed here. Everywhere the feeling is: such things will be, and there's nothing we can do about them. A few determined groups try to do something about them - they are the vigilantes. That is why we also get headlines of another kind: 'Dacoit beaten to death in Sonagazi'. And self-redress has been springing up from South Africa to Russia, which is just another turn of the same screw.

The lesson to learn is that democracies must deal with crimes firmly and better. There are examples of that too, and those are the ones we must emulate.

Country	Murder rates per 100,000 population		Years	Government
	Late 70s - early 80s	Late 80s - early 90s		
Brazil	115	197	1964-1985	Military rule
Mexico	182	178	1929-present	Monopoly of power of Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)
Trinidad and Tobago	21	126	1966-1986	30-year rule of the People's National Movement
Peru	24	115	1968-1980	Military rule
Panama	21	109	1968-1978	Virtual dictatorship of Torrijos
Ecuador	64	103	1945-1979	Military rule
Argentina	39	48	1976-1983	Rule by military junta
Uruguay	26	4.4	1973-1985	Military rule
Paraguay	51	4	1955-1980	Alfredo Stroessner (president for 35 years) overthrown in coup by Gen. Rodriguez, later elected in 1982; ditto drug-traffickers
Chile	26	3	1973-1989	General Pinochet rules
Colombia	205	895	1967-1974	National Front's monopoly; voter apathy; threats military involvement; voters confident in 1982; ditto drug-traffickers
Venezuela	117	152	1969-present	Two-party democracy; oil-bonanza creates privileged elite - gluttonous economy till late 1980s; austerity leads to violence; constitutional rights suspended as armed forces restore order in 1990

Crimes in Russia per 100,000 people			
	1992	1993	1994*
Murders	15.5	19.7	18.4
Rapes	9.2	9.7	8.3
Aggravated Assault	20.4	27.0	20.8
Robbery	110.9	124.1	86.8
Bribery	2.2	3.0	3.5
Embezzlement	26.8	25.1	24.8
*First six months at annual rate			

## LETTER FROM EUROPE

### This is How the Hispano-Muslims used to Live in al-Andalus

by Chaklader Mahboob-ul Alam

**They, as Richard Ford reminds us in his *Gatherings from Spain*, were "fully sensible of the practical value of this element (water); they collected the best springs with greatest care, they dammed up narrow gorges into reservoirs, they constructed pools and underground cisterns, stemmed valleys with aqueducts that poured in rivers, and in a word exercised a magic influence over this element, which they guided and wielded at their will...."**

small towns there were mosques, fountains, public parks, baths, libraries and markets only in the central area, in large cities there were similar facilities in the suburbs as well. Cordoba at the height of its glory, had more than eight hundred fountains and six hundred public baths. The streets were narrow, noisy and full of hustle and bustle of the traffic and of the crowds doing their shopping.

Most of the major towns had underground sewage system. The public places, including the streets and market places were kept impeccably clean and were responsible for this function. In spite of the relative scarcity of water, every mosque had its ablution facility and every town had its public baths and fountains. Cleanliness was godliness for the Hispano-Muslims. No doubt, the religious obligation to clean oneself before every prayer must have been the basic reason for this passion for cleanliness. While the medieval Christians, according to Richard Ford (*Gatherings from Spain*), "considered physical dirt as the test of moral purity and true faith; and by dining and sleeping from year's end to year's end in the same unchanged woollen frock, arrived at the height of their ambition, according to their view of odour of sanctity, inasmuch that Ximenez (The Church), who was himself a Franciscan, induced Ferdinand and Isabella (the Catholic Kings), at the conquest of Granada, to close and abolish the Moorish baths. They forbade not only the Christians but also the Moors from using anything but holy water. Fire,

not water, became the grand element of inquisitorial purification."

In my recent trip to Torde-sillas (north of Spain), I visited the remnants of the Arab baths there, which have now been revamped for tourism. Like the swimming pools in modern Europe, at the entrance of Arab public baths, there were latrines and rooms with attendants to take care of clothes and personal belongings of the bathers. The real bath would start with a visit to the steam room whose floor was made of marble and its walls were covered with glazed tiles. After the steam room, the bather would proceed to a room, where he could bathe in warm water and finally finish it off with cold running water in another room. There were public baths for the middle class and the poor. The rich had their own elaborate bathing facilities at their mansions and palaces. The men could use the public baths in the mornings and the women in the afternoons. Besides the hygienic function, these baths also used to serve as meeting places to discuss politics, philosophy and history or merely to exchange gossip. At Torde-sillas Arab baths, there was a room behind lattice windows of the steam chamber, where the musicians used to play instruments for the relaxation of the bathers. After the bath, it was quite common among men and women to perfume their bodies with rose water and other essences.

One of the major architectural features of the urban houses in al-Andalus (where, in summer, the temperature could easily reach forty degrees Celsius) was the lack of porp

and adornments in its front part. Every house had a central courtyard (patio). This was the heart of the house, where most of the household activities used to take place. No efforts were spared to decorate the patio in such a manner that it was at once the coolest and most pleasant place to be in. The design and proportions were mathematically calculated to induce air currents for the purpose of bringing down the temperature by several degrees. Many of these patios had a well and/or alive (underground water tank) which collected the rain water for future use. In south and central Spain, many houses are still built according to this Arab architectural design and even today, in many modern urban complexes of Castile where water is scarce, many new houses have aljibes. Many urban houses were two-storied buildings made of stones and bricks. The upstairs rooms were used by women and had balconies overlooking the street. The balconies had lattice windows made of crossed strips of wood to block indiscreet looks from outside, while allowing the women to see what was going on outside.

The Hispano-Muslims did not clutter their homes with too much furniture. The rich decorated the walls of the patio with geometrically-patterned hand-painted azulejos (tiles). In my trip to North Africa, I found that the descendants of the Hispano-Muslims there still follow this tradition. What is even more interesting is the fact that in the south-western part of the United States, the wealthy Americans follow the same tradition, which no doubt, they

picked up from the Spaniards.

Al-Andalus was a prosperous country and as mentioned before had a highly urbanised society. While cereal sorghum and olive oil were the staple diet of the poor (this was occasionally supplemented by chicken or meat), fine wheat and meat were that of the wealthier people. In the Levant region, the people used to consume a lot of rice as well. With the development and success of irrigation agriculture, the introduction of new crops (apricot, artichoke, carob, rice, saffron, sugar, jujube, eggplant, pears, lemon, orange, grapefruit, carrot, dates etc.) and the growth of a sophisticated middle class, urban cuisine reached its excellence.

Food, besides being an item of necessity, had always played a vital role in ceremonial, ritual and social events. Now with increasing prosperity and refinement, the Hispano-Muslim gourmets turned food into an item of pleasure as well. Cookbooks containing hundreds of recipes to prepare meat (pork was not eaten), poultry, fish, vegetable dishes and pastry have come down to us (in spite of the inquisition) as living testimony to the high standard of the culinary tradition of al-Andalus. The cooks used all sorts of herbs and spices to give flavour and taste to the dishes. Both the hearth and the oven were used in wealthier homes.

The favourite drinks of the Hispano-Muslims were cold water, milk and fruit juices (sharab) of all nature, lemon and orange being the most common ones. Although many well-to-do Hispano-Muslims used to drink wine with meals, only the Christians and the

Jews were allowed to trade in it.

As far as the basic principles of Islam were concerned the Hispano-Muslims were an intensely religious and family-oriented people. They prayed five times a day, paid Zakat, fasted from dawn to dusk in the month of Ramadan and celebrated Eid ul Fitr and Eid ul Azha with fervour. On these occasions, (as in Bangladesh) they used to invite the poor to share their food and buy new clothes for their wives, children and other relatives. Depending on his financial situation, every Hispano-Muslim was expected to visit Mecca at least once in a lifetime. They built thousands of mosques (many of them were later converted into Christian churches) all over the country, from whose minarets the moazzins used to call the faithful (both men and women) to attend the prayers. The literacy rate among the Hispano-Muslims was very high because it was obligatory for all the children to learn how to read the Quran and recite verses from it.

In rural communities, besides small land-owning farmers there were also many sharecroppers. The European feudal system, under which the local lord had virtually absolute rights over the land and the workers was not prevalent in al-Andalus. The citizen owed his loyalty to the king and paid his taxes (which very often were moderate and equal to the Quranic tithe) directly to the central treasury. Under the Visigoths, the poor felt completely alienated from their rulers because of their arbitrary measures, which included a grinding tax system. This, no doubt, greatly facilitated the Arab conquest of Spain in such a short period of time. In many places, the local people welcomed the invading Arabs as their saviours and gradually converted to Islam. In spite of initial conflicts among the different ethnic groups which made up the Muslim community, they were eventually suc-

cessful in forging a homogenous identity. The fact that long after (more than a hundred years) the Muslim kings and princes had been militarily defeated by the Christians because of their constant internecine wars, the vast majority of the poor Muslims (the Mudejars and the Moriscos) preferred death and deportation to surrendering their faith and their way of life, should be proof enough of their loyalty to their community.

Each region's economy was largely self-sufficient. Since water was vital for their economic survival, they became experts in hydraulic technology. They, as Richard Ford reminds us in his *Gatherings from Spain*, were "fully sensible of the practical value of this element (water); they collected the best springs with greatest care, they dammed up narrow gorges into reservoirs, they constructed pools and underground cisterns, stemmed valleys with aqueducts that poured in rivers, and in a word exercised a magic influence over this element, which they guided and wielded at their will...." Of equal importance was the meticulous administrative system devised by them for the distribution of water rights among all the interested parties. No wonder, food production grew significantly in al-Andalus as a result of the introduction of irrigation.

Besides the farmers, peasants and sharecroppers, big villages there were many skilled craftsmen, who specialised in the ornamentation of wood and ivory, metalwork, ceramics, silk, textiles, pottery and tiles and who sold their products in the nearby city. It may be mentioned here, law and order situation was quite good except in times of war when the villagers used to take shelter in castles built on high grounds, which were owned and maintained by the village communities. Actually all sorts of legal evidences which are coming to light now suggest that the quality of life enjoyed by the land-owning peasants and skilled craftsmen in al-Andalus was much better than what was thought to be.

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