

...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; another dead body found in a car.

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, 71 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 *vor* or *zakone* of 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 disorganized 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 Podiatid, 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 alturistic 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 extortions at the next level, who works for 'Al Capone' type businessmen in the next tier, up to the state. An estimated 30 per cent to 50 per cent of the Al Capone's earnings finds its way up to the state-level. The Moscow city authorities is 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 *razborka* (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

Reflections on Democracy and Violence

by Iftekhar Sayeed

In India's 50 years of democracy, crime has become firmly enmeshed into the fabric of the state, so much so that the — unselected — 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.

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 reintroduced 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 in 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 Lyndon 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 in-

evitably crime has become org-

anised. We have seen how the

Russian mafia has forged a

symbiosis with the state. A sur-

vey by the World Economic Forum has found that Russia, Colombia and South Africa are in the bear hug of organised

crime. The South African gov-

ernment 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

as far 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 smug-

gled 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 En-

forcement Agency uncovered an

alleged trafficking organisa-

tion 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 subma-

rine 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 Cialardini, 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. Policemen 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 stations raised over \$3m a month. There's a chain beginning from the man on the beat to his superior 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 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 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 parcelised into political parties, it begins to collapse.

The lesson for a country like Bangladesh — where headlines on 'Cases of gang-rape 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 — unselected — 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.

Table-I

Country	Murder rates per 100,000 population	Years	Government
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	1956-1986 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	1955-1990 Alfredo Stroessner (president for 35 years) overthrown in coup by Gen. Rodriguez, later elected on 1st May
Chile	26	3	1973-1989 General Pinochet rules
Colombia	205	85	1957-1974 National Front's monopoly; voter apathy threatens military involvement; voters confident in 1982 - ditto drug-traffickers
Venezuela	117	152	1969-present Two-party democracy; oil-boom creates privileged elite - glut stagnates economy till late 1980s; austerity leads to violence; constitutional rights suspended as armed forces restore order in 1990

Table-II

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