

A call for comparative thinking

Crime, citizenship and security in the global South

VANESSA BAROLSKY AND SUREN PILLAY

Democracy and Governance, HSRC
Vbarolsky@hsrc.ac.za

This article argues for the importance of an international comparative perspective in terms of our analysis and response to violent crime. This is particularly important in the light of the fact that while an increasing number of countries in the global South' have achieved formal democracy, they continue to be plagued by high levels of violent crime. In fact, transitions from authoritarian to democratic governance around the world, from Eastern Europe to Latin America and Africa, have been accompanied by escalating violent crime rates. In this context, we have much to learn from an international comparative approach in terms of understanding why democratic transitions are so often accompanied by increases in violence, what the impact of this violence is on the ability of these societies to deepen democracy, and what the most appropriate interventions are in relatively new and often resource poor democracies.

The number of interstate wars between countries in the global South has declined over the last twenty years. The decline in wars has been accompanied by numerous important transitions from authoritarian rule to democratic governance, making democracy the norm rather than the exception. However, while war as the source of violence and insecurity in the global South has declined, violent crime has shown an alarming and steady increase in newly democratised states, becoming a major source of insecurity. It is imperative therefore to think of violent crime within the context of democratic transitions more broadly.

The promise offered by South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994 was that, with the

end of apartheid, levels of violence in South African society would drop significantly. However, various forms of social violence at all levels of society, ranging from armed robbery to sexual violence and murder, have remained at extremely high levels. Although the rate of murder has declined slightly from approximately 20 000 murders a year to about 18 000 last year, South Africa still has one of the highest per capita murder rates in the world. Therefore the right to life, one of the supreme rights in our Constitution and a fundamental prerequisite for all other rights, is significantly under threat.

The continuing high levels of violence in South African society have provoked what can be termed a 'radical problem of understanding'

among both ordinary citizens and the state itself, as indicated by the shifts in state security strategy over the last 14 years. However, this problem of understanding is premised on a normative belief that democracy inevitably brings an end to violence in society. On the other hand, as theorists such as David Apter² have argued, globalisation and democratisation can in fact create new forms of marginalisation and opportunities for violence, for example as a result of deepening economic inequality. In this framework, violence is in fact the *product* of the form many modern democracies are taking.

PLACING OURSELVES IN CONTEXT

In contrast to the assumption that democracy ends violence, the South African experience, taken in the international context, is neither entirely exceptional nor unique. This is where an international comparative perspective is critical, as it enables us to problematise the normative assumption that democracy ends violence, and clears the way for us to begin to understand *how* the processes of democracy and violence are in fact linked and how these dynamics have manifested themselves in other countries, particularly those societies with similar levels of violent crime and high levels of economic inequality.

An international comparative approach also allows us to unpack some of our assumptions about the causes of violent crime, to acknowledge the complexities of these assumed causal relations, and to develop a differentiated approach to the analysis of violence by taking into account international variations in the patterns of violence. In this light, writer Amartya Sen³ on a speaking tour in South Africa emphasised the need to avoid easy answers and rushed solutions to the problem of violence that tend to assume, rather than question, the causes of violence.

Just two examples of such assumptions will suffice to demonstrate the point: that there is inevitably a link between poverty and violence; and a link between a high number of guns and violence. As Amartya Sen points out, Calcutta, one of the

poorest cities in India, has one of the lowest crime levels in the country. On the other hand, while Canadians have more guns than Americans, their murder rates are much lower than in the USA. Not only does an international comparative perspective allow us to better understand violence, but it also helps us to understand the nature of contemporary democracy itself more systematically. To date scholars of democratisation have largely ignored the coincidence between processes of democratisation and violent crime. However, exploring the link between violence and democratisation enables us to begin to unpack why the form that democracy has taken in the global South in the new millennium has been characterised by continued violence in South Africa and elsewhere.⁴ It allows us to analyse and respond to the conditions that create new opportunities for violence in the democratic context, be they marginalisation, economic inequality, or, in the South African context, the historical legacy of apartheid.

An international comparative study also enables us to better understand the impact of violent crime on the consolidation of democracy. Examining other societies that have experienced the twin processes of democratisation and violence, it is clear that violent crime has a significantly fracturing effect on society. It impedes the state's ability to deepen and consolidate democracy, and undermines its legitimacy in the face of its perceived incapacity to respond effectively to violence. Violence also undermines the development of shared spaces of social citizenship, as citizens retreat in the face of violence to increasingly parochial forms of social organisation.

Lastly, and more pragmatically, drawing on insights from countries experiencing similar problems of violence and democratisation enables us to explore and compare, in the context of the resource constraints in the global South, the most appropriate interventions to respond to violent crime. Importantly, if we are seeking to deepen and consolidate democracy, we need to explore the most effective ways of responding to violence in a democratic environment that do not rely on a

return to authoritarian and violent modes of response, such as has occurred in Brazil,⁵ and hence significantly undermine the very processes of democratisation they are allegedly intended to defend.

CRIME AND TRANSITION

It has been widely noted that many societies that have experienced a transition from authoritarian to democratic rule, as was the case in South Africa, have experienced a rapid escalation in crime rates, including violent crime. Continents and countries that have since the 1970s experienced this correlation between democratisation and rising rates of crime and violence include Latin America, the former communist states of Eastern and Central Europe, as well as democratising states in Africa, most notably South Africa itself. Ironically, while more countries than ever before have attained democracy in the sense of constitutionalism and multiparty electoral competition, substantial evidence shows that global rates of violent crime have also surged. In a recent cross-national study of homicide victimisation rates in thirty-four countries, LaFree and Drass found that on average, homicide rates doubled during the last four decades of the twentieth century.

Another study of homicide levels in 44 countries for the period 1950-2000 shows that increases in violent crime have been especially pronounced in precisely those regions of the world in which democracy has recently taken hold, including Latin America, Eastern Europe, the 'breakaway' republics of the former Soviet Union, and Sub-Saharan Africa.⁶

The study further indicates that countries transitioning between autocratic and democratic regimes experienced a significant increase in homicide rates. In the former Soviet Union, homicide rates tripled between 1988 and 1994, after the collapse of the communist state. Critically, a significant proportion of this violence, as in South Africa, was interpersonal violence.

The authors of a study on the Soviet Union draw on Durkheim to explain these trends. They argue that, 'distinct from the effects on violence of rapid social change and anomie, Durkheim argued that during periods of acute political crisis, interpersonal violence will increase due to the threat to collective sentiments posed by the crisis.'⁷

Durkheim's modernisation theory is the most famous sociological theory explaining variation in homicide rates. The social and economic transformation a country goes through in the process of development and modernisation is seen as having important consequences for violent crime rates. Traditional forms of status relations, role allocations, social organisation and control are disrupted and ultimately destroyed as masses of people leave their rural homes and flood into the anonymous urban conglomerates. The resulting alienation of people, who are often faced with unemployment or under-employment and poverty, and the lack of social integration (so-called anomie) or social capital, leads to increased crime rates, including violent crime rates. Modernisation theory predicts that strong economic growth raises homicide rates as it disrupts traditional modes of social organisation and control.⁸

It is evident that this conception of modernisation theory underpins current understandings of violent crime in the South African context. There is increasing reference to the breakdown of social cohesion and social capital, which is perceived to have created an anomic context in which violent crime is likely to occur. Shaw notes in this vein, '[A]part from generating particular forms of criminality (most notably the organised variety), transitions also have important impacts on the social controls present in any society. In many instances a weakening of these provides an environment that may be more conducive to criminality.'⁹

It is in this context that we have seen over the past few years the increasing use of the concept of 'social cohesion' within the policy environment. It is argued that in order to reduce levels of violence, we need to transform the ways in which citizens relate to one another as citizens.

However, in South Africa and in postcolonial societies in general, this notion of ‘good citizens’ who police themselves in terms of a commonly held set of norms and values, runs aground in a context that has historically been characterised by multiple overlapping systems of social authority and normative regimes. As the Nigerian political scientist Ekeh and others have noted, the African colonial experience, and in particular the experience of indirect rule, creates multiple spaces of rights and obligations and ethical conduct that are not necessarily concordant with the juridical rights and obligations normatively articulated in a document such as the South African Constitution.

It is in this context that we see the impact of violent crime in creating forms of community that are at odds with unifying nation-building efforts of governments. The result is balkanised zones of governance and citizenship in the global South: in informal settlements, gated communities, vigilante groups and gangs.

Areas most affected by violent crime also tend to be the areas most affected by everyday or structural violence. In Brazil they are the *favelas*. The informal settlement of Kibera in Kenya is now the second largest area in Africa (after Soweto) described as a ‘slum’ by UN-Habitat.¹⁰ In South Africa, the areas most affected are black communities in mega-townships, mostly working class, with high levels of unemployment and poverty. In contexts of ongoing socio-economic deprivation, ‘community’ can thus become an identity that coheres around a notion of marginalisation and social exclusion. People identify themselves as victims of a lack of delivery and poor local government representation and service, and see themselves as a community in opposition to the state. In the South African context this has been most explicitly articulated in so-called ‘service delivery protests’. According to a study conducted by the Freedom of Expression Institute, by May 2007 fifteen recorded protests were being held *per day* somewhere in South Africa – excluding unrecorded protests.¹¹

In a survey of violent crime in the sprawling metropolis of Lagos, Nigeria, it was found that,

faced with high incidence and fear of crime, ‘many communities and individuals took several measures to reduce their feeling of vulnerability and minimise risk of victimisation. Eighty one percent of the respondents said that vigilantes existed in their communities, while seventy seven percent reported that the vigilantes were paid for their services.’¹² In South Africa there has also been an increasing emergence of vigilante groups across the country, both more formally organised groupings such as the People Against Gangsterism and Drugs in the Western Cape, and similar groups in KwaZulu-Natal that started out as community neighbourhood watches, some of which have taken on violent and racialised forms. ‘Community’ in the case of Pagad and the neighbourhood watches in Chatsworth speak to the recovery of a religious and racially hegemonic social morality fraying at the seams as a result of substance abuse, gangsterism and poverty.¹³

In less organised forms there have been sporadic violent outbursts of community action against criminals or those suspected of having committed crimes. Black South African townships, suffering the structural violence of poverty and unemployment, have also cohered around that which comes from outside and threatens, or is perceived to threaten or impede, the life chances of local citizens. Within this category of external threats are those who are seen to be taking prospective jobs and income generating opportunities, or undercutting local business people by selling staple goods at a cheaper price within townships and informal settlements. The target around which ‘community’ coheres in this particular instance becomes foreign Africans, designated colloquially as *Amakwerekwere*, who have become victims of xenophobic violence.

On the other hand, middle class residents are able to mobilise resources, information, technologies, and organisation in defence of their residential security. This has led to the proliferation of ‘gated communities’. Typically these have involved setting up access control around older neighbourhoods, and blocking off a street or blocks of streets, organised by residents within an

area. Private security guards are employed to regulate the inward and outward movement of people and vehicles within a neighbourhood.

VIOLENT CRIME AS A THREAT TO DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY

The lack of confidence in state agencies providing adequate levels of safety has led to an increasing 'privatisation' of security on a global scale, either through the formal security industry in middle class areas, or the alternative forms of social ordering that emerge in poorly resourced and badly policed townships, slum areas and informal settlements. In these contexts the perceived incapacity of the state to provide adequate security, as it either retreats from these spaces of insecurity or is seen to be an explicit part of the problem through corruption or violence, leads to the unravelling of 'one of the foundational myths of modern societies: namely that the sovereign state is capable of providing security, law and order, and crime control.'¹⁴ As Perez argues,

The failure to deepen democracy and rule of law and to extend citizenship rights across all social sectors shakes public confidence in the police and judicial system, weakens the rule of law, and increasingly undermines support for democracy.¹⁵

Democratic societies rule through consent rather than outright coercion, and therefore rely on the acceptance of the authority of the state. The authority of the state is dependent on the legitimacy of its rule, and this in turn requires a positive disposition towards it from citizens. One of the core responsibilities of a state, underpinned by a human rights approach, is the protection of the 'right to life'. The way in which the state protects this right can impact on its long term legitimacy and authority. High levels of violent crime, murder and assault indicate that the state might not be adequately creating the environment for a safe and secure community, therefore impacting on its capacity to govern effectively.

In this environment, the forms of 'community' that emerge are often mobilised against an 'other'

that increasingly fosters separation. In her study of spatial separation in Cape Town, Charlotte Lemansky observes that, based on the Latin American experience, 'walls and gates have reinforced a vicious cycle of poverty and exclusion by concentrating the poorest social groups in spaces with minimal economic and political leverage... Furthermore, enclaves do not just respond to difference and fear, but actually deepen segregation and reinforce fear by excluding difference and limiting social mixing, thus increasing paranoia and mistrust between groups.'¹⁶ In this study it became clear that the view of the middle class white area was that 'crime originated from outside the community'¹⁷ The community could therefore establish a level of 'trust' and social relations that bound them together in relation to an external threat. They could collectively keep a look out for this 'threat', and draw on and develop practices and technologies in order to do this. Similarly, in her study of gated communities in Sao Paulo, Caldiera noted that the 'withdrawal of the upper classes from public space into enclaves leads to the emergence of a discourse associating criminality and poverty, and generates stereotypical images of the poor as inherently "dangerous"'.¹⁸

These imaginaries of the poor, as those to be placed outside the spatial zones of safety, means relinquishing the shared social space of citizenship, and narrowing of conceptions of rights and obligations. In her work on Brazil, Scheper-Hughes noted the mutually determining relationship between the fate of the urban poor and the fears of the middle classes:

Meanwhile, the affluent and the powerful, tucked away in gated communities and in homes protected by armed guards and mechanical surveillance reminiscent of medieval fortresses safely imagine themselves as endangered rather than as endangering populations.¹⁹

Under siege, the middle classes do not see the proportion of wealth at their disposal as directly of consequence to the level of fear they live with in a society with stark material inequalities.

The residential spaces of safety of the middle classes are accompanied by fortified enclaves where work takes place, as well as consumption and leisure. These zones are connected by road and transport systems that favour the wealthy, creating an interlinked 'fortified network', which could eventually 'disembed' the city. The trend towards malls, highways, and transport systems like the Gautrain project, which favours the middle classes, may be indications of this trend in South Africa.

Thus the forms of social cohesion that violent crime is creating shows signs of being at odds with the forms of social cohesion envisioned and assumed by policies of the national government. While there are positive community formations to manage risk, poor communities are also showing signs of cohering around marginalisation, social exclusion, xenophobia, and susceptibility to gender and sexual violence. Violence, as experienced by middle class communities increasingly pessimistic about the state's capacity to provide safety, shows signs of creating enclave communities with privatised security, which could lead increasingly to cohesion around fear of 'the poor'.

If social cohesion continues in these fragmented and mutually exclusive spatial zones, social polarisation will continue to create racially separate 'publics', with different benefits, rights and obligations, and fragmented experiences of citizenship.

AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON VIOLENCE AND DEMOCRATISATION

Countries in Latin America and Africa are experiencing many similar processes as a result of globalisation, regional migration and the urbanisation of human settlements, which are impacting on citizenship and democratisation at local levels. As Smith argues, writing about the growth of vigilante violence in Nigeria 'in response to perceived failures of government'²⁰ since the inauguration of the country's first civilian government in 16 years in 1999:

public optimism that democracy would ensure economic growth and political growth has given way to frustration... perhaps nothing symbolises the disappointments of democracy more than the all-consuming public concern that crime is rampant and out of control. The intense sense of insecurity that pervades the country, expressed most clearly in concerns about violent crime, represents larger anxieties about economic deprivation and political insecurity. Crime is portrayed as both the cause and consequence of the nation's ills.²¹

In this context in Nigeria, 'vigilantism's popularity is a response to a widely shared sense that recent political and economic reforms have led to greater inequality and injustice...'²²

In Latin America similar concerns are evident, as Perez asserts: 'Across Latin America...fear of crime and perceptions of social disorder are widespread.'²³ The often coercive response of the state to the escalation of crime in these relatively recently democratised societies has, 'far from solving the problem... engender(ed) a spiral of corruption and violence which leads many citizens to opt for private measures, whether private security agencies or vigilantism.'²⁴ This has led to what some analysts have called 'uncivil' democracy. James Holsten argues in this vein that during what Samuel Huntington has characterised as a 'third wave' of democracy, the proportion of uncivil democracies to the total number of electoral democracies doubled:

In such uncivil democracies, violence, injustice, and impunity are norms. As a result, uncivil electoral democracies share significant features of citizenship. Their institutions of law and justice undergo delegitimization; violent crime and police abuse escalate: the poor and ethnically other are criminalized, dehumanized, and attacked; civility and civil protection in public spaces decline; people abandon the public to retreat behind private security; and illegal measures of control receive massive popular support. Across the nation-state, the civil components of citizenship are unevenly and irregularly distributed among citizens.²⁵

It is in this context that international comparative studies with a range of other countries that have undergone recent processes of democratisation, and are characterised by high levels of inequality, could help shed significant light on how we understand the processes and nature of violent crime in the South African context – which might be unique but is not exceptional. Secondly, an international perspective on the problem would also provide for the sharing and assessment of forms of intervention that could be most suitable. Thus, ‘a cross-national perspective holds important lessons in understanding not only the unique features of each society but also the degree to which similar processes of political, economic or social change produce similar outcomes in terms of crime levels and problems of police reform’.²⁶

NOTES

- 1 Africa, Central and Latin America, and most of Asia - collectively known as the global South - face great challenges and offer real opportunities. Political, social, and economic upheaval are prevalent in many of these nations; at the same time, the populations of the global South and their emerging markets offer immense hopes for economic growth, investment, and cultural contribution. The global South includes nearly 157 of a total of 184 recognised states in the world, and many have less developed or severely limited resources. Unfortunately, the people of these nations also bear the brunt of some of the greatest challenges facing the international community in the next millennium: poverty, environmental degradation, human and civil rights abuses, ethnic and regional conflicts, mass displacements of refugees, hunger, and disease.
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- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 P J Perez, Democratic legitimacy and public insecurity, 628.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid, 1.