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## Knee-jerk responses

Given heightened security concerns after the Mumbai strikes, the clamour for new laws to protect the country is understandable. But the usual problem with laws drafted in such a context is that they are misused, or not used at all. Almost always, the government's tendency is to increase the power of the bureaucracy and the police while cutting back on defences available to citizens, without significantly adding to the public good or improving security. Three recent examples will serve to make the point.

One is the demand that a law like the Prevention of Terrorism Act (Pota) be re-enacted. This flies in the face of all evidence with regard to what purpose Pota served, for it mostly provided a cover for locking up all manner of people, innocent and guilty, many with no connection of any kind to terrorism. The experience with all laws that short-change civil liberties, dating back to the infamous Maintenance of Internal Security Act (Misa) of the 1970s, has been the same: misuse and non-use. Opinions will differ on the quality and adequacy of the government's response to the outrage in Mumbai, but the Prime Minister has done well to point out that terrorist attacks took place even when Pota was on the statute books.

Then, there is the newspaper report which says that all organisations, including those in the private sector, will be asked to get the ministry of external affairs' approval before inviting a foreign delegation or accepting an invitation from overseas! As industry chamber PHDCCI has pointed out, something like 50 per cent of India's GDP has an external dimension, so you can imagine the havoc that will be created if businessmen have to run to the government for permission every time. The illiberalism of the whole approach, the lack of practical sense and the belief that a scrutiny of hundreds of applications by a ministry will achieve some purpose, are all the hallmark of a system that believes all wisdom lies with the government and nothing can be left safely in the hands of anyone else.

A good example of what can go wrong with such an approach is provided

by the way in which the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) has been used. This was supposed to help monitor the inflow of funds to civil society organisations and the purposes for which these are used—goals that are unobjectionable. Yet, though every such contribution has to be vetted and cleared by the ministry of home affairs before the money can come in, it cannot be anyone's case that the end objective has been achieved. Anecdotal evidence suggests that officials have used their gate-keeping powers to extract rent for themselves.

Now the government is readying to start licensing telecom network managers/equipment suppliers. The argument is that Ericsson (which manages Airtel's network) is not under any obligation to provide intelligence agencies access to Airtel's network and may not cooperate with security agencies—which can be made a condition for a licence. But Airtel is already obligated to provide access to security firms and that should cover Ericsson as well. Another argument given is that dual purpose equipment produced/imported by such firms cannot be used in India in the event of sanctions, such as those imposed in the wake of India's nuclear testing; hence, the argument goes, conditions can be included in a licence to ensure that no item is subject to sanctions. But surely such a clause will only ensure these firms have nothing to do with India, since it is not up to them to guarantee supplies in all eventualities.

Another example of excessive security consciousness is the law that prevents telecom companies like Airtel from having their networks accessed overseas. Ericsson, for instance, manages Airtel's network, but cannot access it from abroad for maintenance or repair—something that security-conscious America allows, subject to certain security conditions; indeed, Nokia has shifted its global network operations centre to India and will monitor overseas networks from here! In short, a heightened security awareness is fine, but laws and rules also have to be sensible and practical.

## A stronger Russia

Even as the club of G-8 leaders meets in St Petersburg in a clear signal that they see (or would like) Russia as part of the western alliance, the fact is that the West looks with growing concern at Russia under President Putin breaking away from liberal values and democratic practices, and moving his country in the direction of a strictly managed democracy, without a free press, with the opposition muzzled, and with the business environment clouded by events such as the destruction of Yukos and the imprisonment of its owner. These concerns will almost certainly have played a role in the United States refusing over the week-end to go along with Russia's hoped-for entry into the World Trade Organisation, though the ostensible reasons have been stated to lie more in the realm of economics and such issues as protecting intellectual property rights. This is a setback and perhaps even a snub for Mr Putin, for whom a WTO announcement at St Petersburg would have been a heady prize. But that is unlikely to make him change course.

The Russian president's strength comes from the sterling performance of the Russian economy, which has been growing as fast as India's since 2000. This is only partly explained by high energy prices, though that has undoubtedly helped transform the external account of a country that defaulted on its international obligations as recently as

1998 and then devalued its currency. The big difference between Mr Putin and Mr Gorbachov is that the latter had no understanding of how to usher in a market economy or how to manage the government's finances, thereby bringing the economy to its knees, while Mr Putin has ensured good macro-economic management. Inflation has been brought down to single-digit levels, fiscal management has been sound, the foreign debt has been paid down, the days of international default are long forgotten, and the country even introduced capital account convertibility last month—all of it causing the Russian stock market to soar to undreamt-of heights.

Mr Putin is also different from his immediate predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, in that he maintains a strong hand on all the levers of power and is not particularly concerned about western approval of his methods of governance. Indeed, concern is now on the western side as European consumers worry about whether Russian gas supplies through pipelines are as secure as they would like them to be. In short, the chips are now on Mr Putin's side of the table, and will stay there until oil prices fall. Since that seems a distant prospect, expect Mr Putin to increasingly strike out on an independent path. Does that give India more diplomatic leverage, or would India now prefer to lay greater store by American friendship?



Illustration: BINAY SINHA

## The Putin enigma

Unlike Catherine and Peter, Putin is likely to be able to fulfil their imperial dream, says DEEPAK LAL

As an increasingly authoritarian President Putin hosts the G-8 summit of industrial democracies, a question I raised in an earlier column ("Whither Russia?" 28 April, 2004) is becoming more urgent. Is Putin another Pinocchio or a modern-day Peter the Great or Catherine the Great? I had argued that he was a modern version of his great Russian predecessors. Does this still hold, or is Russia descending into an authoritarian kleptocracy typical of so many other countries rich in natural resources?

To answer this, first consider the economy. On Putin's watch, the economy has more than recovered from the near meltdown in the late 1990s, largely because of the soaring prices of its primary commodity exports. Where as the privatisations of the Yeltsin era had led to much of these rents accruing to the oligarchs, Putin has succeeded in diverting a larger proportion to state coffers through both taxation and the covert nationalisation of previously privatised assets as in the notorious case of Yukos. Its assets, which were essentially stolen and put into a shell state company, Rosneft, run by the Kremlin, are now being put on international markets through an IPO in London and Russia. The

other natural resource behemoth Gazprom is also run by one of Putin's close associates. The remaining oligarchs have learnt the lesson of the Yukos affair and are unwilling to challenge the Kremlin. Despite the non-transparent nature of the companies traded on the stock exchange, Russian stocks are booming. But the economy is still largely dependent on natural resource rents.

To avoid the natural resource curse, which has bedevilled so many other countries, particularly in Latin America and Africa, Russia wisely took the advice of Putin's former economic advisor Andrei Illarionov and set up a stabilisation fund to place these rents, to mitigate the so-called Dutch disease effects of the resource windfall, and because of its transparency to make it less likely they will be stolen. These growing revenues have allowed Russia to pay off all its foreign debt, accumulate large foreign exchange reserves, and announce that it will soon be able to float the rouble. The public finances are in rude health, with a large budget surplus. The erosion of property rights and the de facto nationalisation of much of its natural resources, however, do not bode well for the badly needed diversification of its economy, which depends upon vigorous private entrepreneurs

finding new economic opportunities in a well-functioning market economy. The private oligarchs, for all the doubts about the process of privatisation, had succeeded in introducing productivity-enhancing efficiency into the state behemoths, not least Mikhail Khodorkovsky, now cooling his heels in a Siberian labour camp. So even though the recent performance of the Russian economy has been spectacular, it is doubtful if it can be sustained.

These doubts are strengthened by the grim demographic prospects. There has been an alarming and inexplicable fall in male life expectancy. The UN projects that the Russian population will decline from 146 million in 2000 to 102 million in 2050. With these likely adverse trends in the two sources of growth—productivity and labour supply—the prospects of continuing robust growth of the Russian economy are not bright.

Meanwhile, the rise in commodity prices, particularly of oil, has provided the Russians the material means to once again assert a role as a Great Power. As Putin's recent lament (that the collapse of the Soviet Union was one of the great tragedies of the last decades of the last century) shows, he still hankers after a Russian empire. It is worth remembering that it was the

waxing and waning of the oil price which largely determined the Soviet Union's foreign policy. When oil prices rose in the early 1970s, the Soviet Union flexed its muscles all around the globe—not least in India—as we know from the Mitrokhin archives. When they collapsed in the 1980s, and Reagan upped the ante with his Star Wars initiative, this was no longer possible and the Soviet empire was doomed. Now with another turn in the wheel of commodity prices, the Russians can once again dream of imperial glory. But will they succeed?

I think it unlikely as the economy for the above reasons remains fundamentally weak, and the demographics do not augur well for the manpower needed to project military might. But, it will remain in Russia's interest that the oil price remains high. This means it has an interest in keeping the pot boiling in the Middle East. Hence its courting of Hamas and reluctance to deal with the Iranian nuclear threat. But there is less likelihood of a Russia-China axis. For, the vast empty spaces of Russia's eastern domain—containing most of its natural resources—are increasingly being encroached upon by Chinese migrants. Given the Chinese hunger for primary commodities and its large, as compared with Russia's shrinking, population, conflict rather than comity is more likely in the future. It is even conceivable that with Putin's interest to follow Peter and Catherine in turning westwards, Russia might decide that like past Tsars, it may be best to sell its indefensible eastern domains to the Chinese, as was done with the sale of Alaska to the US.

Finally, it also appears that the initial Western hopes that with the collapse of the Soviet Union Russia would become a normal Western democracy are unlikely to be fulfilled. The growing fetters placed on the instruments of an incipient civil society—the press and NGOs—and the resurrection of central power—not least in the re-emergence of many of the practices of the KGB in its successor, the FSB—are signs of a Russia reverting to a gentler form of its past autocracy. But, to the extent that a democracy is supposed to represent the will of the people, despite liberal wailing, Putin's growing autocracy is widely popular amongst his people, not least because the chaotic Yeltsin period has led ordinary Russians to associate Western style democracy with disorder. Therefore, I would still view Putin as a modernising Tsar in the mould of his St Petersburg predecessors Catherine and Peter. But unlike them he is likely to be able to fulfil their imperial dream.

## The blasts: Cleaning up our act

A week after last Tuesday's terrorist attacks on the Mumbai suburban rail network, nobody knows for sure—despite contradicting and barely credible rhetoric about RDX, Lashkar modules, fedayeen and SIMI operatives—who was responsible for the attacks and how they were executed. What is shamefully clear is an incoherent response across government, driven almost entirely by the fear of opposition charges of being soft on terrorism and on Pakistan. Despite its initial inclination to go ahead with the foreign secretaries' meeting later this month, New Delhi eventually (and reluctantly) postponed the talks. The Prime Minister is now focusing on an anti-terrorism resolution from the G-8 countries in St Petersburg. And instead of cracking down on the organised crime and smuggling networks and the radicalised modules that translate mere malevolence into actual attacks, we have instead a cacophony of accusations against the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) and, incredibly, after a dubious phone call in Srinagar, the Big Al itself.

It would be a strategic blunder to allow politicised accusations from the opposition parties to entirely shape our response to the Mumbai bombings. National responses must be guided by the long-term national benefit, not by political point-scoring in the domestic and international arena. But while justifiably pointing to Pakistan as one of the global sources of *jehadi* ideological motivation there are no signs of what could be the only positive



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### BROADWORD

outcome of such attacks: putting our own house in order.

It is easy to rail at the convenient target of international Islamic terrorism. Far more productive, however, would be to examine which links in the chain of terror should be tackled with the greatest vigour—a chain that connects at one end the abstract idea of attacking the foundations of the Indian state, to the explosions that kill and maim at the other end. By now, even the most entrenched Lashkar-bashers admit that the bombs were physically planted and probably even assembled and timed by Indian nationals. Referring to them as "Lashkar modules" or " sleeper cells" cannot hide the simple fact that, just like in the 1993 bombings, Mumbai's citizens were killed by Mumbai's criminals using explosives brought into the country by Mumbai's smuggling network.

But while outrage is easily fanned against the LeT, Musharraf, the ISI and the Al Qaeda, there is little interrogation of our own policing and intelligence failures. Nor are there any notable calls for a crackdown on organised crime in Mumbai, one of the vital executive elements in organising last Tuesday's attacks. Does Indian anger only crystallise against identifiable anti-national figureheads like Da-

wood Ibrahim, who symbolise the Pakistan connection? In the absence of Dawood, the cosy symbiosis between the (now weakened) "bhai-log" and the Mumbai police continues unabated. It is these networks that radicalised groups tap into for executing terrorist strikes.

The BJP's response symbolises the opportunism that feeds every Indian tragedy. In demanding the re-enactment of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (Pota), which had been repealed by the UPA government in December

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2004, the BJP does not mention that most of that Act's teeth were transferred to a greatly beefed up Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, which was passed on the day Pota was repealed. In addition, the Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act, 1999 (MCOCA), gives ample powers to the Maharashtra police and intelligence agencies, were they inclined to act.

On Sunday, L K Advani said, "I personally advise Home Minister that to prevent incidents like the Mumbai Blasts, we need to revive Pota." Three

years of Pota (2001-2004) proved only one thing: that draconian anti-terrorist law simply does not cut down terrorism. Soon after the Ordinance was enacted in 2001, Parliament House was attacked by terrorists. Weeks after it passed into law in March 2002, the Kaluchak army base was attacked in Jammu (May 2002), followed by a string of terrorist strikes on the Akshardham Temple (September 2002) and the Raghunath Temple in Jammu (March and November 2002). And many reports indicate that Pota was used after the Gujarat riots to harass the Muslim community, pushing furious youngsters towards fighting the Indian state, creating disaffection rather than order.

Demands for installing surveillance cameras, metal and explosives detectors and inevitably sniffer dogs simply push us along a path of paranoia that brings to mind countries like Israel. India's greatest strength in battling separatism and terrorism is the attribute of a giant country: the ability to absorb bloody punishment without over-reacting or feeling seriously threatened. This week, Israel, that totem symbol for worshippers of the tough state, finds itself in far more dire straits than India, staring into the abyss of a regional conflict.

Let PM Manmohan Singh chivy along the anti-terrorist resolutions in St Petersburg. They will be passed and, like so many others, will change little in the short term in either Islamabad or Muridke. But our real battleground remains here in India, and the weapons: sharp intelligence, the wise use of legislation and effective investigations to crack down on domestic elements in the chain of terrorism.

Long before 9/11 unleashed a flood of novels about terror into a paranoid world, Don DeLillo spoke of the challenge before the writer: "Isolation, solitude, secret plotting. A novel is a secret a writer may keep for years before he lets it out of his room. Writers in hiding, writers in prison... For most writers in the West of course... the cells we live in are strictly personal constructions."

"Let's change the room slightly and imagine another kind of apartness. The outsider who builds a plot around his desperation. A self-watcher, a lonely young man, living in a fiction he hasn't bothered to put down on paper. But this doesn't mean he is unorganized, he organizes everything. This is how he keeps from disappearing. His head is filled with dangerous secrets, and

he may finally devise a way to come out of his room. He invents a false name, orders a gun through the mail, then looks around for someone famous he can shoot."

DeLillo had no way of knowing how compelling the figure of the terrorist, the underworld outlaw, the renegade gunman or even the war correspondent would become in this decade. One of the first, fractured but brilliant reactions to 9/11 came from a man with terrible expertise in war, terror and inhumanity. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* was a searing, unforgettable portrait of Nazi Germany, seen through the eyes of mice (the Jews), pigs (the Polish) and cats (the Germans). In his graphic novel, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Spiegelman drew frame after frame of an image that haunted him—"one that... still remains burned onto the inside of my



### SPEAKING VOLUMES

Nilanjana S Roy

eyelids several years later... the image of the looming north tower's glowing bones just before it vaporized."

To speak of the victims of terrorism is much easier than describing the agents of terror, as Don DeLillo hinted. His words came back to me when I read two starkly different novels—Kiran Nagarkar's ambitious *God's Little*

## The Hour of the Terrorist

*Soldier* and John Updike's *Terrorist*. Nagarkar's protagonist, Zia, is frighteningly plausible in his struggles with faith, his insistence on the reassuring fanaticism of absolute belief.

He reminded me of Hanif Kureishi's protagonist in the short story, 'My Son the Fanatic'. The problem that Zia and Kureishi's young fanatic posed was identical: they were part of the ordinary, superficially enlightened world, so how could they have been infected with the deadly virus of implacable belief? Nagarkar attempts to answer that question by turning Zia into a superhero, a mathematical genius who can survive training in Afghanistan

and play the part a Catholic priest. The more powerful Zia becomes, the less plausible he is as a character.

Nagarkar did a better job than Updike. In a scathing review of John Updike's *Terrorist*, Michiko Kakutani writes: "Unfortunately, the would-be terrorist in this novel turns out to be a completely unbelievable individual: more robot than human being and such a cliché that the reader cannot help suspecting that Mr Updike found the idea of such a person so incomprehensible that he at some point abandoned any earnest attempt to depict his inner life and settled instead for giving us a static, one-dimensional

stereotype."

Mohsin Hamid's second novel promises to be far more nuanced. The author of *Moth Smoke* has been working for several years on *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Hamid's protagonist is a young Muslim banker working in New York at the time of 9/11; when the world changes, the way he's seen also changes, and he must decide whether he can continue to live in New York or whether he must go back to Lahore. It should be interesting to read this alongside Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*, which juxtaposes the story of a cynical Bombay cop and a Bombay hitman against the background of the underworld. Despite their very different themes, Hamid and Chandra share a fascination for complex, multilayered characters, and for the ways in which power and prejudice work, wherever they

are found.

If fictions of terror have a future, though, it might just be with the graphic novel. At <http://smithmag.us/shootingwar/>, check out Anthony Lappe and Dan Goldman's *Shooting War*, which has a cult following online. The year is 2011, the war in Iraq is into its eighth year, and America is inured to repeated terrorist attacks. Anti-corporate blogger Jimmy Burns has his NYC apartment blown to bits in a bomb attack, records the footage and is promptly recruited by a TV company, Global News ("Your home for 24-hour-terror coverage!") to cover the situation in Iraq. The story becomes increasingly complex, the satire more savage, but one character sums it up: "It's prime time holy war." [nilanjanasroy@gmail.com](mailto:nilanjanasroy@gmail.com)