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Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that animate U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Amy Tarr (atarr@mit.edu, 617.253.1965).

Center for International Studies

Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Building E38-200
292 Main Street
Cambridge, MA 02139

T: 617.253.8093
F: 617.253.9330
cis-info@mit.edu

web.mit.edu/cis/
web.mit.edu/cis/acw.html

Violence and Insecurity: The Challenge in the Global South

Diane E. Davis

MIT Center for International Studies

MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning

It does not seem that long ago that optimism flowered about prospects for democracy and sustained economic development on a worldwide scale. But hopes for the future have dimmed over the last several years, as problems of violence, crime, and insecurity have emerged with a vengeance in many parts of the global south. Forget big ideas about democracy; forget the aspirations for a globally competitive development strategy. Growing numbers of citizens in the global south are turning to demands for basic needs and human rights, as reflected in the accelerating desire for security and a life without violent conflict.

The magnitude of the contemporary problems of violence, daily conflict, and insecurity is much broader and perhaps more insidious than the scattered but debilitating wars within and between ethnic regions, religions, and/or militias unleashed by the weakening of the nation-state in recent years. Nor are the problems directly related to post-Cold War politics, the break-up of competing empires, and a subsequent recalibration of enemies that sustains a new form of “civilizational” warfare.

Mafias as Mini-States

While these problems have generated insecurity and conflict all over the world, and have disproportionately affected peoples in the global south—think Afghanistan, Sudan, Lebanon, Iraq, Kosovo, for example—there exists yet another source and pattern conflict and insecurity that is growing in scale and magnitude and is equally dangerous for democracy and development aims. This is the more garden variety type of insecurity and conflict that is best seen in rising homicides, accelerating crime rates

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Diane E. Davis, Professor of Urban Sociology in MIT's Department of Urban Studies and Planning, is Associate Dean of MIT's School of Architecture and Planning.

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(despite a decline in reportage by victims), and unprecedented levels of police corruption and impunity. Such conditions in turn push citizens (and criminals) to take matters into their own hands, either through vigilante acts or, more commonly, through the hiring of private security guards. This in turn fuels the environment of fear, exclusion, and insecurity.

In many parts of the global south, mafias involved in all form of illegal activities, much of them fueled by the globalization of consumption (ranging from drugs and guns to knock-off designer products and CDs), are calling the shots. These forces often take on the functionally equivalent role of mini-states, by monopolizing the means of violence and providing protection and territorial governance in exchange for allegiance. They are difficult forces to be reckoned with, and most governments, democratic or not, have failed to keep these dangerous elements at bay.

Institutional Legacies

Development scholars have been slow to examine these changes, let alone theorize their origins and effects. This is especially surprising given the fact that violence and insecurity are intricately linked to democracy and developmental conditions. On one hand, these changes are traceable to the path-dependent consequences of past decisions about economic development, governance, state formation, and industrialization. At the same time, their intensification in recent years owes in no small part to the rupture with a protectionist or authoritarian past and the current embrace of liberalization, however paradoxical this may appear at the outset.

In prior decades, many governments were able to pursue industrialization projects because they counted on strong and/or authoritarian states that developed strong policing and military apparatuses to control labor and consolidate state power vis-à-vis agrarian interests on behalf of an emergent industrial class of manufacturers. These legacies empowered the late developmental state's coercive apparatuses so as to undermine the judicial system and facilitate corruption and impunity with the ranks of the police and the military (if not the state itself).

Over time, such abuses of power led to demands for democratization, to be sure. But regime democratization does not eliminate all prior institutions and practices. Even after democratic transition, many late developers still faced the political and economic future with the same old coercive networks intact, especially in the rank-and-file in the police and military. After years of working without effective institutional constraints—as part of the bargain with the elite to police the nation's political and economic "enemies," be they laborers, socialists and communists, street vendors, or agrarian rebels, so as to guarantee state power and economic progress—the coercive arms of the late developmental state became well-ensconced in a networked world of impunity, corruption, and crime. This is the institutional legacy bequeathed to many countries of the global south, and democracy has done little to reverse it.

This not to say that all late developers are saddled with the same legacies of violence and impunity, or that, even if they were, they all would face identical problems of insecurity. Nor is this to suggest that police and military are the only source of violence and contemporary disorder. Many countries did effectively purge their old police forces during the democratic transition, with South Africa being one of the few to successfully do so. Other late developers, like India, have been democratic for much longer, and do not face the legacies of police and military coercion. Still others, such as the East Asian tigers, have hosted authoritarian regimes but have eluded much of the violence and insecurity of most of their late developmental counterparts.

Thus it is important to recognize that the economic legacies of late development are also important in accounting for patterns and location of problems of insecurity in so many countries of the global south. Two factors linked to prior economic development models are key: the extent of informality in the national economy, and the extent of income and social polarization. Both trace their roots to past patterns of political and economic development.

In prior decades, most late developers tread a very rocky economic road in which formal employment in industry paled in comparison to informal employment in small-scale commerce and other petty services, with government employment generally taking up the slack. These sectoral imbalances were all too often ignored in much of the sociological work on late development, which focused primarily on the key actors of production (capital, labor, and the state) and the big-ticket strategies of growth (industrialization, either ISI or EOI), while ignoring the diversity of class identities and sectoral composition of economic activities that sustained late development. Yet these sectoral patterns have always been problematic. With the neo-liberal turn bringing a downsized state, and with expectations of greater global competitiveness driving many countries to reduce traditional sources of manufacturing and agriculture, these sectoral imbalances—and the burgeoning growth of services and informality—have become more extreme.

Exacerbating Factors

Part of the problem is that the two main sources of economic growth in today's world—export-led industrialization or the development of the high-end financial services linked to real estate development and the information economy—exacerbate social and income polarity. In both social and spatial terms, the polarization is extreme, and these patterns lie at the root of the current problems of violence and insecurity.

The issue, again, is not merely income inequality. It also has to do with what sectors of employment remain open as the largest source of work opportunities. With fewer available job prospects in manufacturing and many new employment opportunities beyond the educational reach of those laid off from factories in the drive to develop a more globally competitive IT service sector, more citizens are thrown into the informal sector than ever before. Such employment, which barely meets subsistence needs for many stuck within it, is becoming ever more “illegal” as protectionist barriers drop, as fewer domestic goods for sale are produced, and as the globalization of illicit goods trade picks up the slack.

As a result, much informal employment is physically and sectorally situated within an illicit world of violence and impunity, not just because of the sheer illegality of many of the goods traded, but also because big-money trade in guns, drugs, and other contraband products generally necessitates its own “armed forces” for protection. The effect is often the development of clandestine connections between local police, mafias, and the informal sector, as well as the isolation of certain territorial areas as locations for these activities.

This illicit network of reciprocities, and the territorial concentration of dangerous illegal activities in locations that function as “no man's lands” outside state control, further drives the problems of impunity, insecurity and violence. These dangerous areas proliferate in large cities and often sit nestled against old central business districts where local chambers of commerce face

a declining manufacturing base and are especially desperate to attract high-end corporate investors and financial services. This leads to a clash of forces and development models—and growing problems of insecurity—that can thwart the developmental aims of wannabe global cities as well as a national investor class desperate for a new way of generating global capital and visibility.

Avoiding Chaos

It is worth noting that among the few late developers that seem to have avoided this descent into chaos and the clash of development models, among whom stand the East Asian tigers, burgeoning informality is not a serious problem. Massive employment in export-led industrialization came early on in these countries—thereby allowing them to avoid the disruptive plant closings and attendant unemployment that came in the abrupt shift from ISI to EOI in most of the rest of the global south. Just as important, these are the same late developers that remained rural for much longer and in which high rates of urbanization came relatively late. Finally, even as they pursued export-led industrialization, these countries also fostered small-scale commercial and industrial production, and prioritized employment over capital intensity in commercial and industrial production, be it domestic or export-led. Thus their economies remain a vibrant source of both employment and growth. This combination of “historical advantages” set a clear cap on the growth of the informal sector, both in the past and in the present.

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Without the same well-entrenched social and political networks and traditions of informality that now grease the wheels of the global drug, guns, and contraband trade in Africa, Latin America, and South Asia, the East Asian tigers have avoided the contemporary constraints of insecurity and violence, and they remain primed to succeed in the next global stage of capitalist development, increasing their advantages vis-à-vis much of the rest of the global south. In fact, these very same historical advantages have given certain countries, like South Korea, a leading role as suppliers in the global network of (manufactured) contraband consumer goods, many of which are found on the streets of cities like Rio and Mexico City being sold by informal sector vendors.

Divisions Within

What we see is a small but significant group of late developers reaping the benefits of export-led industrialization once again, but doing so at the cost of rising illegality and violence among its less fortunate counterparts, whose problems stem from being on the wrong end of the same global supply chain. The result: a split among and within the global south, where the division is not so much the degree of formal democracy or the extent of global integration in trade, but rather, the extent of violence, insecurity, illegality, and unrule of law.

These are the constraints that will drive many parts of the global south deeper into distress. Unfortunately, the current political and economic models or solutions that scholars are peddling will do very little to reverse this trend.



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