

The media and security forces: Is a joint strategy possible?

P J Muller

GUERRILLA action is inherently political, and its main weapon is not bullets, but publicity. Terror is simply a callous continuation of this theme of embarrassment through bad publicity. One of the goals of terror is to receive maximum publicity for the activities of a political group. Because the intent of terror is to generate maximum publicity from it, it puts the authorities, the security forces and the media before a painful dilemma: when acts of terrorism are purposefully being suppressed, it causes unrest and unease within a democratic society. The media are continually struggling with this problem. How do you maintain credibility without contributing to symbolic and instrumental violence?

Publicity can hit harder than bullets

Acts of terror are increasingly becoming characteristic of the political wars of our time. Analysing terrorist incidents of the last two decades, one invariably comes to the conclusion that acts of terror are being meticulously planned to obtain maximum publicity.

This is also the reason why the media and the security forces very often find themselves on opposing sides: the media regard keeping the public informed as their principal task, whereas the security forces often feel they are being hampered by publicity.

Of course at the same time terrorist groups try to get as much publicity as possible for the political cause they are serving.



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This aspect is of great importance when discussing any form of modern political warfare – be it insurgency, terrorism or guerrilla warfare.

Although the word “guerrilla” is of Spanish origin, literally meaning “little war”, the technique of modern-day guerrilla warfare dates from the mid-20th century. Also it is less of a military strategy than another way of practicing politics.

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Make guerrilla warfare impossible

Without the kind of publicity modern mass communication systems can offer, guerrilla warfare is impossible. If the world isn't able to see what is going on, it becomes possible for the power against which the guerrillas are fighting to wipe out all of the rebellious population, or to destroy the land that feeds them.

This is the lesson the British learnt during the Anglo-Boer War – unless one is able to threaten all of the fighting population with total effacement, or unless one can totally disrupt their food production, it is very hard to win a war against guerrilla forces by way of military means.

Also, the techniques of guerrilla warfare need not necessarily be enforced with weapons. There are observers who believe that Soviet diplomacy is based on this approach. It is also theoretically possible for guerrilla fighters to bring a country to its knees merely by using publicity. Such an attack has for years been maintained against South Africa.

Radio and television are the guerrilla fighter's biggest allies and his most formidable weapons. In a world becoming increasingly sensitive to injustice or perceived injustice, the world community will no longer allow any single power to act with the force needed to quell a guerrilla uprising. The propaganda wing of the fighting forces need only to make out all harsh measures as senseless violence or genocide, and the world opinion will rise in protest. As no country can ever be truly self-sufficient, no-one can afford to become an outcast of the international community.

During the last couple of years the South African security forces have come to fully realise this aspect of the international opinion. Although the security forces decided some time ago that it would be more humane to use quirts rather than bird-shot in controlling rioting crowds, no-one apparently took into account the enormous impact quilt charges would have displayed on the television screens of the world.

The whip

In America especially, the whip is con-

sidered a symbol of slavery and every incident in South Africa involving quirts called to mind images from America's own past; and those images again were projected on the situation in South Africa. In a way the anger that arose in America at the way the South African security forces used their quirts to control crowds was a catharsis, expurgating America's own history of slavery.

The lesson South Africa has to learn here is that strategic decisions cannot be taken merely by taking local conditions into account, because emotional and political foreign reaction to particular kinds of actions is of equally great importance. No community is an island totally apart. What happens in one community is noticed by other communities and calls for reaction.

America learnt this lesson during the Vietnam war, when television broadcasts of battle-scenes at the front brought the war into every American home. The gruesomeness that invariable forms part of any war, could not be concealed from the civilians at home and pressure against American involvement in the war mounted to a point where it tore the American community apart.

The reverse of this is also true

Because the Soviet Union can effectively prevent war in Afganistan from becoming too prominent on her own television networks, she has thus far succeeded in keeping domestic pressure against her role as occupier and suppressor to a minimum.

Political groups very soon took advantage of this dilemma of Western democracies and today are very often masters in the art of provoking incidents where the authorities are forced to take harsh action against them and thereby creating an embarrassment.

The last Springbok rugby tour of Britain in 1969-70 was the first time political demonstrations against South Africa took place during a sporting event. Even before the South African team arrived, sporting administrators and the police knew they would have to deal with placard waving demonstrators, probably for the duration of the tour.

Everyone was under the impression though, that it would not pose a significant problem as sports lovers traditionally are people who do not like mixing sports and politics. Even British authorities initially took these demonstrations lightly.

The police were, at times, forced to act harshly against the demonstrators, but the scene soon changed. Every police action was shown in great detail on television. The firmer the police were forced to act, the bigger the political implications became.

The British government soon realised no democratic government could afford to lose votes at the polls. And when a government is forced to choose between a friend and self-interest, then time and again self-interest comes first.

The same thing happened during the last Springbok tour of New Zealand. At the outset, fierce political fighting about the coming of the Springboks broke out, but everyone hoped the fuss would calm down as soon as the teams started playing.

However, the demonstrators saw to it that the tour and the police protection needed for it to continue, increasingly became an embarrassment. Ultimately the New Zealand community became severely divided about the tour, with serious results for relations between South Africa and New Zealand.

SA an embarrassment

In this manner South Africa became an embarrassment for countries with which she previously had sporting links. In their own self-interest they no longer want South African teams on their sports fields. For South Africa's enemies however, this was only a practice run for an even bigger goal: to separate the country from her traditional trading partners. To achieve this, precisely the same technique is being used, and with remarkable success.

It is this possibility of considerable publicity and the resulting embarrassment which places so much power in the hands of small groups. It was not the bombs of Jewish fanatics that drove the British out of Palestine; it was the enormous embarrassment those bombs caused to the

British government. Neither was it Gen Grivas's band of terrorists that drove the British from Cyprus, but the bad publicity that made it not worthwhile to remain there.

Guerrilla action is thus inherently political, and its main weapon is not bullets, but publicity. In the onslaught against South Africa, the weapon of publicity is being used with merciless efficiency.

Terror is simply a callous continuation of this theme of embarrassment through bad publicity. Three goals are at once being pursued through acts of terror:

- Receiving maximum publicity for the activities of a political group. In these days of mass media and sensational news, political activists often find it necessary to make their acts of terror as gruesome as possible so that it cannot be ignored by the news media.
- Terror is also being committed to make it as unpleasant as possible for a country's political and trading partners to be associated with it. Even after the horror at the barbarousness of terrorist acts has died down, there often still remains a vague feeling of unease with a country's friends, which in turn strains relations with the country against which the terror is being aimed. The general reaction is often understandably human: any country which is able to evoke such gruesomeness from its political opponents definitely has a skeleton or two in its closet.
- Terror is also being committed to break down a population's resolve and to soften them for political agreements, simply to bring an end to the terror. In Rhodesia Bishop Abel Muzorewa humiliatingly lost a general election because the population had become convinced that he wouldn't be able to persuade the tough fighters in the bush to come to peace.

At the same time this method is being used to win recruits among the sympathetic section of the population towards support for the military and political struggle. This is one of the reasons the ANC commits acts of terrorism in South Africa: they have to maintain the attention and interest of the

local population by spectacular acts, otherwise they could be discounted as a political factor because people may begin to think they are not able to influence events in the country.

The Media

Because the intent of terror is to receive publicity from it, it puts the authorities, the security forces and the media before a painful dilemma: when acts of terrorism are purposefully being suppressed, it causes unrest and unease within the population.

No attempt to suppress news can be totally successful in a democratic society, and when the population is given the impression that news is being kept suppressed on purpose, they begin to wonder why it is necessary to do so.

Questions are then raised

Could it be because the government is losing its grip on the country? Isn't the influence of terrorist groups far greater than the authorities are prepared to admit? Aren't the authorities committing their own similar acts of terror against their opponents?

Such questions undermine the bond of trust that ought to exist between an authority and its citizens. By suppressing news an authority often plays into the hands of the terrorists because by doing so it creates a climate of fear and uncertainty.

The media are continually struggling with this problem. When they suppress or slant news to lighten the task of security forces, they are in fact undermining their own credibility, thereby turning them into an unreliable ally in the struggle against terror.

As the printed media are so much older than their electronic counterparts, they have through the years fortunately devised ways to report on acts of terror without necessarily benefiting terrorist groups in the process. Indeed, since the invention of printing, newspapers have been reporting on princes, popes and bandits.

When analysing the way in which newspapers have reported on terror in the country over the last decade, one comes to the conclusion that there is little or no reason for complaint about the way they

handle such news. The authorities and security forces will of course differ on this point, because the first instinct of a security force is usually to believe that no news is the best form of reporting.

But when one takes into account that newspapers have to strike a happy medium between the authorities point of view and the interests of their readers, any unbiased observer will admit that the press has acted responsibly.

The electronic media

The electronic media, such as radio and television, are of course facing a much bigger problem than the printed media. Both are young mediums which have not yet established the same traditions and protection mechanisms as the printed medium. Therefore they so often are victims of the authorities' furore.

For the same reason they are also the first media terrorists have in mind when planning acts of terror.

The problem with these media is that they are so dramatic and immediate. When a radio station wishes to have effective news coverage and to continuously keep its listeners up to date on, for example, what may be happening during a hostage drama in a bank, the danger indeed exists that its broadcasts can be received by the terrorists and used to their advantage. Such occurrences have, as a matter of fact, already happened in America.

Likewise, the television broadcasts by the big networks are so dramatic, it actually lends the impact to terror that is so desperately sought after by terrorist gangs.

It is also generally accepted that television broadcasts of scenes of unrest stimulates even more unrest, while the South African Police contends that the mere presence of television cameras in tense situations can lead to rioting.

One has to accept that there is a lot of truth in such a view: political agitators are very aware indeed of the wide impact of television, and probably would go out of their way to provoke incidents that may cause an embarrassment to the government.

The State President's proclamation that made photographic equipment in unrest areas illegal, was a direct result of this view.

Conclusion

When introducing measures as drastic as the above, it may of course be good to look at both sides of the coin. Such measures may, on the one hand, make controlling unrest situations a lot easier. On the other hand, it can very easily lead to a loss of confidence in the authorities and distrust at the way the political situation is being handled.

Unfortunately there is no happy balance which will achieve favourable results under all circumstances. When the authorities prohibit the publishing of news for whatever reason, they should bear in mind that they are taking a political decision which will have political consequences. As with all political decisions, the pros and cons will have to be carefully considered.

Solution

The best way to counter terrorist publicity, will of course be where the authorities and the security forces compete directly for publicity against their political counterparts. Where they manage to outwit terrorist groups by creating positive news themselves, cancel out the negative news created by their rivals.

Security forces are apparently hesitant to use this technique because it so radically differs from government tradition developed over centuries. But, by turning their backs on this possibility, they merely leave the field wide open to their rivals.

Where the authorities have enthusiastically and with conviction made use of this option, they obtained spectacular results, as was shown by the British campaign against the terrorist gangs of Malaya. This still remains a textbook example of how political insurgence can be countered by pro-active measures.

The security forces and the media can work together, but only once they accept one another's integrity and respect each other's objectives. What the news media do best is to gather and publish news, not to suppress or manipulate it.

Political insurgence and terror can in the last instance only be combatted effectively through political action. A security force which lacks the full support of its government in this regard, is to a great extent labouring in vain.

But when a security force also becomes a positive and pro-active news-maker, he will find that he will receive even more than his fair share of the positive attention of the news media.