

Political Assassinations Show Russia's Weakness

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More than month has passed since the death of Boris Nemtsov and investigators are no closer to solving the case. The public still does not know who ordered the brazen murder or why. In the absence of hard evidence, the social sciences might offer a clue.

Which factors are associated with the start or the increase in political assassinations? In his book "The Use of Assassination as a Tool of State Policy: South Africa's Counter-Revolutionary Strategy 1979-92," Kevin O'Brien defines political assassination as the "selective and premeditated murder of a person for political purposes in time of peace."

Although political scientists have studied repression extensively, they have given little attention to the reasons for the premeditated murder of opposition leaders. Scholars typically analyze such murders according to psychological motivation, simply describing the killers as deeply unhealthy people without making any attempt to place the killings in a social and political context.

The assassinations of prominent public figures are of two types: 1) those carried out at the initiative of individuals and groups without direct ties to the authorities, and 2) those ordered by government officials.

The first category includes murders carried out by terrorist groups and individuals. In a study of terrorism and political assassinations that he published in 1982, Thomas Snitch identified 721 assassination attempts in 123 countries from 1968 to 1980.

He found that such killings often trigger waves of violence and tend to strengthen the hand of the perpetrators. "A campaign of terror often begins with a murder and can take the form of a continuous series of violent attacks. It receives media coverage, thus acquainting the public with the philosophy of the terrorists. Hence, in trying to fight back, the state actually gives them temporary legitimacy."

Snitch notes that, while heads of state remain the primary targets of terrorist attacks, the number of assassination attempts against political leaders fell in the second half of the 20th century, while the number of attacks against the heads of international corporations and members of the diplomatic corps increased.

This is possibly because the number of terrorist groups fighting global capitalism in Africa and South America has increased. Snitch also pointed out that most of the attacks occurred in countries with medium or higher-than-average per capita incomes.

In their work "Assassination in the United States: An Operational Study of Recent Assassins, Attackers, and Near-Lethal Approachers," Robert Fein and Bryan Vossekuil analyzed 74 political assassination attempts in the United States from 1949 to 1996.

The overwhelming majority, 25, were assassination attempts against the president, followed by 14 attacks against other important individuals guarded by U.S. intelligence agencies, five against members of Congress, four aimed at federal judges and two that targeted local officials.

The great majority, 81 percent, were carried out using firearms, while 15 percent involved knives and 8 percent employed explosives. As a rule, the assassins and attackers were motivated by a combination of political goals — such as vengeance for unwanted policies, the desire to draw attention to an important social problem or the belief that they were saving the country by eliminating the leader — as well as personal goals, such as the desire for notoriety.

The authors found no direct connection between death threats and assassinations: the killers were generally not inclined to warn their victims about the impending attack.

The authors point out that it makes little sense to assassinate the president of a U.S.-style constitutional democracy because the killing of one political leader cannot have a serious impact on the entire system. However, the situation is different in a non-democratic system. As Benjamin Jones and Benjamin Olken show in their well-known work "Hit or Miss? The Effect of Assassinations on Institutions and War," the assassination of a dictator can have enormous influence on a country.

After analyzing 298 assassination attempts on national leaders — of which 251 were serious attempts and 59 led to the death of the leader — they found that the murder of autocrats led to institutional changes in their respective countries. The successful assassination of a dictator increased the likelihood of democratization by 13 to 19 percentage points, as compared with failed attempts.

When the authorities carry out the selective and targeted killing of opposition leaders, what is interesting is not that it necessarily marks the beginning of mass repressions, but that the government attempts to conceal its direct involvement in the crime — as compared to mass repressions, in which the role of the state is obvious.

Apparently, the main reason for such killings is that the ruling regime feels vulnerable and fears losing power. As Daniel Premo shows in his study "Political Assassinations in Guatemala: A Case of Institutionalized Terror," political uncertainty was a major factor behind the repression in Guatemala in the 1980s. Guatemalan authorities and military officials were convinced there was an international communist plot to foment guerrilla warfare and overthrow the Guatemalan regime.

The Guatemalan authorities therefore assassinated specific opposition leaders in an attempt to paralyze the activities of all political opponents. And to some extent, the authorities managed to create an atmosphere of fear among key groups that sympathized with the opposition — including, of course, opposition leaders themselves, as well as trade unions, university professors and students, peasants and even the clergy.

O'Brien notes that during apartheid, the South African government responded to growing popular discontent by developing a "comprehensive national strategy" and publishing its "White Paper on Defense" in 1975. The ruling regime presented these documents as its answer to the growing evil of the revolutionary liberation opposition forces it faced on the domestic and international fronts.

The logic of that document is very similar to Russia's recent Military Doctrine published in 2014 that mentions the fomenting of "color revolutions" as one of the possible forms of foreign invasion. The South African regime systematically implemented a counter-revolutionary program in 1986, not long before apartheid finally ended.

Toward that end, the country's security forces created highly specialized units within security structures that were tasked with actively using any means possible to eliminate opponents of apartheid.

This secret structure was named the "Third Force." Third Force units were "cut off from sources of intelligence and control and their main task was to identify and eliminate 'political targets'" — that is, political opponents — and conduct military operations against guerrilla groups.

In the short term, the decision by the ruling regimes in Guatemala and South Africa to assassinate specific political opponents probably did prolong their hold on power. However, it did not change their fate over the long term. Growing social tensions and social polarization, coupled with the lack of significant reforms, ultimately undermined the foundations of both systems.

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