

A demonstration in Quetta¹

Peter Bowbrick

I was in Quetta, a military town guarding Pakistan's borders with Iran and Afghanistan. It lies in a narrow valley surrounded by high mountains, rainless and arid. The air is cool and clear, but always dusty from the surrounding desert.

I was doing the first thing I do when I start looking at the market for food anywhere – I was walking round the bazaar to see what was on sale. Sometimes I am surprised at how little food is on sale or what a narrow range, but normally I am looking at the range of non-foods on sale, because this is the best indicator of the state of the economy. When I first visited Quetta in the early 1980s, the bazaar had had food, some basic tools, some kitchen implements and not a lot else. After the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, the Americans had pumped a lot of money into all the border areas. I could see the result; a lot of shops selling radios, televisions and even computers.

Suddenly, all the people in the bazaar pulled back to the pavements and stood looking at something going past. They raised their hands and shouted. I peered between their heads, and saw a demo coming round the corner, a march.

Only it was little boys marching. They must all have been less than ten or twelve. They waved their hands and held up banners with writing in Arabic script.

“It is better to have a demonstration with children,” said Mohammed, the civil servant I was working with. “The police do not beat them with lathis, and do not shoot them.”

¹ Copyright Peter Bowbrick, peter@bowbrick.eu 07772746759. The right of Peter Bowbrick to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act.

As the boys walked past us, one of the crowd shouted, and reached forward as though to grab a boy.

“He is one of the people who paid for the demonstration,” explained Mohammed. “He says ‘Why you not shout more? What do you think I pay you for.’”

I cannot imagine what a demo like that achieves in a country where even student union elections are fought with Kalashnikovs.

Kerala, in South India, has a very different culture. It is democratic and has never suffered under a military dictatorship. Power swings between the Communists and Congress, depending on who is seen to be more corrupt at any one time. Politics are important, and are open. Most times I went through Cochin I saw a demo against something or other.

At the end of my mission there, I went to the capital, Trivandrum, to debrief to the Minister. We were talking about costs, number of employees and the budget of a horticultural development project. As we talked, I heard the sound of drums, then of a marching band playing Indian music. I looked through the window behind him and saw a demo marching by – clearly demonstrating against his government if not him personally. He carried on speaking without faltering, without missing a syllable, and without looking round.

I found out why after the meeting. Just round the corner from the Residency were another four groups, each waiting its turn for its own protest march, each protesting against something different.

The Philippines has a very different approach to demos, strongly affected by fifty years as an American colony, followed by fifty years of American influence.

My team was in one of the southern islands, preparing an aid project, to help them market tropical fruit to Japan. At the end of our stay there, we called on the Governor for a wrap-up meeting. We drove through the gates into the Government compound, past a picket of thirty or so raggedly dressed men holding placards announcing that it was May Day.

The meeting went as well as any in the Philippines. There was lots of goodwill, lots of assurances of cooperation, lots of assurances that they wanted the aid money, and we were left wondering just how they would try to stab us in the back.

As we left the room, some came up to the Governor and told him that the police had shot three demonstrators outside the gate half an hour earlier. The Governor nodded and carried on talking to us. He insisted that we all accompany him to lunch, and we drove to a restaurant by the beach, with a thatched roof and tables and chairs made of sticks tied together. And there I had one of the best meals of my life – fresh fish and shellfish, oysters and that most wonderful of mussels, angel's wings. All washed down with the local San Miguel beer over three hours.

Nobody mentioned the shootings. Even that night my team members said nothing. Only I, it seemed, remembered that first May Day when six people on a demo were shot by the Chicago police.

Of course, in Britain, the Government handles the demos with spin. The countryside march was defused by spinning it as the superrich marching to defend foxhunting. It could have been dangerous if it was seen as all the workers and employers in a sector demonstrating about being bankrupted by a

Demos

disastrous economic policy. However, it was so safe that Government could exaggerate the number of people marching. This made it possible to exert another spin against the anti-war marchers the next week. Government said that only a third as many people were marching, instead of rather more. They also managed to convey the impression that most of the marchers were Islamic extremists rather than normal British people.

But then spin is so much more humane than shooting people.

Or is it?