

Editorial

2008 was a year of dramatic changes in South Africa. We saw the ousting of a President; the closure of the Scorpions; a major split in the ruling party; the establishment of a new political party comprising several former ANC heavyweights; a serious crisis in the judiciary brought about by allegations that a senior judge attempted to interfere in a decision of the Constitutional Court; and thousands of job losses on the back of the collapse of the world economy. We also watched with horror as South Africans demonstrated how quickly we can descend into violent conflict over resources. In this case, the violence was targeted at foreigners.

2008 also saw a somewhat less dramatic, but no less significant, shift in the way in which commentators, analysts and practitioners in the field of crime prevention talked about solutions to the high rate of violence and crime in the country. The emphasis shifted from the criminal justice system to social development as the key solution to high crime rates. While we have not heard anyone saying that a functional criminal justice system is not vitally important, there is an increasingly vocal group of specialists and ordinary citizens who argue that fixing the criminal justice system is not enough if the intention is really to impact on violent crime. This approach seems to be gathering momentum. The coming together of a large network of organisations and individuals under the banner of Action for a Safe South Africa (now chaired by Jayendra Naidoo), at the end of August, was evidence of the shifting discourse around crime.

At a more grassroots level we saw the establishment of the Social Justice Coalition (SJC). This movement has already held several large public gatherings in the Western Cape and is set to grow nationally during 2009. The SJC was established in June in response to the xenophobic violence. Since then it has developed into a movement that opposes the use of violence and wishes to see the strengthening of a rights-based approach to addressing crime and community safety.

This shift seems, however, to have escaped the notice of politicians, who appear to prefer to play to society's bloodlust and fears of crime (see the articles by Muntingh and Mashele in this edition). Certainly, the politicians are not altogether out of sync with the views of a large number of South Africans. The results of the 2007 ISS victimisation survey showed a significant hardening of attitudes towards crime and criminality between 2001 and 2007. In 2003, 39 per cent of respondents believed that greed was the motive for violent crimes. In 2007, the percentage of South Africans who believed that violent crimes were motivated by greed had increased to 44 per cent. Since 'greed' implies that the person being greedy wants more than they actually need to survive, it is not surprising that there was a corresponding decline in the number of South Africans who believe that investing in social development is the solution to reducing crime. Whereas in 2003 60 per cent of respondents felt that government should spend money on social development to make their areas safe from property crime, only 51 per cent believed that to be the solution in 2007. For violent crime the drop was far greater – from 62 per cent of people who felt that spending money on social development would make their area safer from crime, to 36 per cent. However, when one looks at the number of people who believe that punitive actions are the solution, it becomes clear that attitudes have hardened considerably. At least 13 per cent of those who had previously believed that social development was the solution would now rather see criminals being punished.

While it may be attractive for politicians to play to this hardening of attitudes in the run-up to the 2009 election, they should take note both of how quickly South Africans resorted to violence against those perceived to pose a threat to their access to resources, and to the apparent appetite for a more constructive, developmental approach to dealing with crime and social inequality. These are some of the complex issues that this edition deals with.

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