

# People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (Pagad)

Reviewing the activities of People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (Pagad) for a one-year period presents particular difficulties which arise from the organisation's range of engagements, its swift changes in strategy, its many public pronouncements and its equally numerous leadership changes. But if this group's mercurial rise and shifting tactics are hard to pin down, the cause of its emergence – crime and drug-peddling – is less difficult to track and judge. Serious crime and police corruption and incompetence were in constant view during 1997 because of their direct and brutal impact on the lives of the ordinary citizens.

Crime statistics showed no improvement over previous years. The country's murder rate remained among the highest in the world (45 per 100 000 in SA compared with an international average of 5,5 per 100 000), and its rate of recorded crime way above the international average. If unreported crime were included, these figures would be even higher. Such minor positive changes as did occur had no impact on the quality of life or experience of ordinary people, particularly the poor in low-income housing projects.

Operation Recoil, launched in October by police and related services in the Western Cape, had some effect in its early stages but did not decisively reduce overall gang activity and drug-trafficking. Police presence is still too low in the communities of the Western Cape. Furthermore, fear of crime played as much a role as actual crime in creating panic, uncertainty and a siege atmosphere in the country. More seriously, gang organisation continued to operate on a secure basis throughout the Western Cape, especially in the working-class areas of the Cape Flats. According to the police Gang Investigation Unit, over 130 gangs are operating in the region, with anything between 30 000 and 80 000 active gang members. These may be conservative figures.

Problems in policing, such as corruption, poor management, inadequate security at prisons, and ill-conceived attempts to deal with Pagad (such as the gratuitous detention of Abieda Roberts in December) continued as before. The National Crime Prevention Strategy, launched in May 1996, was the broad framework within which the South African Police Services operated. Community policing forums linking local communities and the police in co-operative crime-prevention measures are an integral part of this evolving strategy, and the Western Cape forum has been highly critical of Pagad for its apparent refusal to co-operate with the established forces of law and order.

The year 1997 opened with press statements from influential sections of the Muslim public criticising the methods of Pagad, which was then barely six-months old but had a very visible public profile. The first statement came in January from an independent cross-religious group, followed by a press release from the Muslim Judicial Council.

The radio station most supportive of the group, Radio 786, claimed to be non-partisan and was involved in an Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) hearing in April over its bias in favour of Pagad. Without extensive use of the newly democratised airwaves, and the backing of Radio 786 in particular, Pagad would have had much less access to the Muslim public. In contrast to the popular mobilisation of the 1980s, there has been a dearth of printed matter. Posters and pamphlets issued in the name of the organisation are rare. Announcements on the radio, debates over the air, and general propaganda – including a passage from the Qurʾān turned into a catchy tune – have been the fashion.

Pagad's relationship with other media, particularly Cape Town newspapers, has been less cordial. Newspapers were periodically accused of misrepresenting the aims and methods of the organisation, and journalists were harassed at Pagad meetings and marches. However, the media did give plenty of space to Pagad, at times constructing a more extreme picture than the reality prevailing on the ground. Sensationalist language and images tended at times to produce an

effect rather than capture the situation objectively. For example, around late August, the anniversary of Rashard Staggie's death, the papers were predicting a long period of mayhem and slaughter. Similarly, before the Ramadan of December 1997 to January 1998, news reports forecast a bloody month of fasting.

Pagad continued to labour under the accusation that it was essentially a Muslim front motivated by Islamic sentiment rather than general community interests, despite its inclusion of a high-profile Catholic priest, among others. Earlier in the year, Pan Africanist Congress MP Patricia de Lille addressed a Pagad rally and there was brief talk of a possible PAC-Pagad alliance. The PAC soon withdrew from this flirtation, however, apparently fearing that such collaboration could cause further alienation of the party from the broader populace.

It is fair to say that the rise of Pagad gave birth to new levels of violence and different kinds of terror on the Cape Flats. While internecine gang conflict subsided for a while, partly due to the formation of the Community Outreach Forum (CORE) and the Firm which attempted to control gang conflict in the interests of their larger and collective subterranean economic interests, ordinary people normally outside the regular circuits of Flats violence were afflicted. On the one hand, there were Muslim victims assumed to be supporters of Pagad and on the other hand, persons – Muslim and non-Muslim – presumed to be connected to drug-peddling.

During August, the anniversary month of the public slaying of Rashard Staggie, supporters rallied for memorials marked by much bellicose talk. A new round of violence reached dangerous levels in late September and early October.

There were sporadic bombings and shootings throughout the year but a more systematic spate of killings, apparently focused on Muslim businessmen and professionals, began in September. Mosques were also threatened and, indeed, petrol-bombs were hurled at mosques in Kensington and Mountview, for instance. Warnings from Pagad that Muslims, their religious symbols and property, were in danger thus proved to have a material basis. However, the organisation's stated intention of providing security at all the mosques of greater Cape Town came to naught. Instead, the Muslim Judicial Council and an alliance of Muslim groups formed the Western Cape Security Forum, which met with the relevant police authorities about establishing security arrangements at mosques late in the year.

In October, a process of mediation and negotiation began between Pagad and the police. Aimed at putting an end to escalating conflict, the process was facilitated by the Centre for Conflict Resolution based at the University of Cape Town. However, as in the case of meetings between Pagad and senior government officials which took place late in 1996, Pagad was dissatisfied with the process and withdrew.

Pagad denied involvement in attacks on the houses of drug dealers, although it admitted participating in marches on such houses. It then emerged that police had been using informers (at least one was named) who were linked to certain attacks in which grenades had been used. Pagad also claimed that a "Third Force" was operating in the region, a view shared by the Minister of Justice who said that he had evidence to support such claims. The Third Force was said to be located in the police services and comprised of senior right-wing officers. One of the allegations was that prisoners were released from jail overnight to conduct killings on the Flats.

Pagad suffered a major blow when its "legal adviser", University of the Western Cape law student Shariff Khan, was killed outside a Lansdowne mosque in July. His alleged killer was a fellow Muslim angered by Pagad's harassment of his family, who had opposed the organisation. However, Khan's death and funeral provided an opportunity for Pagad to regroup.

Three months later, in November, Pagad "Chief Commander" Aslam Toefy announced his resignation, which was quietly if uncomfortably accepted by the organisation. What was striking was the similarity of the language used by Toefy and that characterising the statements issued at the beginning of the year by Muslim and other religious leaders. As Pagad's man and voice, Toefy had virulently attacked those statements of censure and criticism. On his withdrawal from the organisation, a softer, gentler Toefy seemed to echo the sentiments of Muslim critics of the

group, although he was silent on the issue of any fissures inside the organisation that might have led to his resignation.

Pagad is one among a number of groups in civil society attempting to address a significant and highly emotional issue which is of great concern to respectable people, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. It is a problem with deep roots and a myriad offshoots. Pagad has been bold and brave, if often reckless, in its intense commitment to putting an end to the social ravages caused by gangsterism, crime and the drug trade. From its inception, however, its methods have prevented it from developing a genuinely multi-religious, cross-class, ethnically mixed and diverse base.

Even within the Muslim community, there is no consensus on Pagad. Extreme tactics, such as marching into the Muir Street Mosque in Ramadan of January to February 1997, bellicose rhetoric, and a tendency – apparently subsiding – to label all critics and dissenters *munaʿfiqs* (hypocrites), have reduced the legitimacy and attraction of the group.

However, lack of consensus is not necessarily negative, particularly in a community that historically has been deeply split. The diversity, dissent and dissonance inherent in the community should be acknowledged and valued for the role they can play in sparking and sustaining political and social movements that lead to positive and progressive change.

#### **Sources**

The Cape Argus, The Cape Times, The Sunday Times, The Mail and Guardian, Survey of Race Relations 96/97.