

More police reform required in Rajasthan

*by Maja Daruwala & Navaz Kotwal
Nerve News, 09 November 2008*

It's election time in Rajasthan again. Once more the hopefuls will make their promises. Once more the people will vote in the hope that this time the minimum guarantees of a peaceful life will come true. A good police system is central to making sure this happens. Making it happen has to be a bipartisan effort. What kind of policing is going to be in place over the next five years has to be central to election debates and promises.

Rajasthan has made a promising start to improving policing - at least in theory. Early this year the present government made a commendable effort to get serious about repairing the tainted image of the police. It came up with a five-year strategic plan for policing: the first ever in the country. It detailed not only what was wrong with the police but admitted that nothing would change unless there was a real attitudinal change in the force. It promised a clean and transparent police force.

It stressed the need for people-friendly policing and asked the people to participate in drawing up a charter for this. There would be zero tolerance for police misconduct and zero tolerance for dereliction of duty. Very rightly it laid great emphasis on the need for enhancement of manpower, infrastructure, technology and modernisation. Candidly admitting that there were lots wrong with training it promised a Rs.100 million budget to lift it out of its present state.

The state government has also been more obedient than most states to the Supreme Court's directives passed two years ago. The court identified the major causes of bad policing - too much illegitimate political interference and too little accountability for police non-performance and wrong-doing. The court directed all states to create 'buffer' bodies between the police and politicians, and also to create police complaints authorities that could independently look into people's complaints. The state has gone some way to making all this happen but it's early days and the beneficial effects of these improvements are still to be seen.

On the ground things remain much as they have been. Though the government's own orders say that police officers will have a fixed tenure, in the last five months as many as 591 officers have been transferred.

A quick glance at the crime statistics does not throw up a good picture. Over the last two years there has been an average six percent increase in crime. Of this, there is an eight percent increase in cases of murder and a whopping 32 percent increase in cases of robbery.

Women in the state are badly hit with a 23 percent increase in crimes against women over the last two years. Cases of rape have gone up by 25 percent; dowry deaths are up by 22 percent; abetment to dowry suicides have increased by almost 67 percent. Despite not being a state where women come forward to report rapes or where crimes are registered easily, still 935 rapes have been reported even before the year has ended.

Over the past two years crimes against the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes have also gone up 10 percent. Their women include victims of rape and abuse, with a 12 percent increase in cases of rape.

This strengthens the common perception of bias and is in keeping with the feeling that the men in khaki are comfortable wearing the colours of the ruling party. There has been little hesitation to round up Bangladeshis for alleged crimes. Muslims and Christians too have had short shrift. The poor almost everywhere have not seen the people-friendliness of the police.

So there is a long way to go before the police can rely on the public goodwill they need to establish themselves as an essential public service rather than a fearsome coercive force in the service of whoever is in power.

Little has been said about policing in the recent campaign. It should be a central issue and major priority for any incoming government. Any party aspiring to rule the state for the next five years must make it clear that the main objective of policing will change from merely 'maintaining law and order' to protecting and safeguarding people's liberty, rights and freedoms. Most of all, any new chief minister must ensure that the police are unbiased and accountable only to the law and must promise that no police person will ever get away with being disobedient to the law.

Some directions have been set. The danger is that it can all stop immediately if whoever comes to power next thinks that paper plans need not be taken forward or that because they were made by one political party the new leadership must of necessity unravel any good that was done. What the poor and vulnerable need is a police force that protects them because that is what they expect and that is what they are paying taxes for; and because police reform is too important to neglect and too urgent to delay.