Mass shooting reveals dark side of Swiss society

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Just after 10am on September 28, Friedrich Leibacher made his way into the parliament building of the Swiss canton of Zug and unleashed a bloodbath. In total, 14 people were shot dead. Three of the seven members of the local Zug government were killed, and another was seriously wounded. Eleven of the 80 members of the canton council were shot dead and numerous others wounded. Two journalists were also badly injured.

The 57-year-old Leibacher entered the lakeside government building dressed in an army jacket bearing a "Police" insignia. Apart from a combat rifle, he was also armed with an SIG-Sauer pistol, as well as Remington and Smith & Wesson revolvers. He ran up the stairs to the council chamber and cried, "Attention! This is a police operation". He then shot three people standing in front of the room before bursting into the chamber, where he opened fire for about four minutes, shooting deputies, government members and journalists, cursing them the whole time. He fired over 90 shots in all.

A letter claiming responsibility for the deed and entitled "Day of Reckoning for the Zug Mafia" was left in his car. The farewell letter contained wild accusations against the authorities. It denounced the "whole Mafia judiciary of Zug" for adopting "illegal and criminal means" to victimise Leibacher.

One of the survivors, a 65-year-old journalist from the *Zuger Presse* newspaper reported, "The culprit was dressed as a policeman, but most of the time I could only see his boots. At first he aimed at the other side of the hall. But then he turned round and mounted the slightly raised platform where the government sits. There he shot at the assembled canton deputies and the president. Perhaps he'd already killed a few people before entering the hall. He shouted at us journalists from the platform that he'd finish us off, too, because we never report the way things really are. I don't know how long it all lasted."

Finally Leibacher left the hall, but turned back to fling an explosive device into the room. According to reports, he then shot himself in one of the corridors.

The gunman was apparently a criminal psychopath, who was obsessed with weapons. Leibacher was born in the canton of Zug in 1944, spending the last 30 years drifting restlessly around the world. He worked for a while as a clerical assistant in Zurich, where he drew an invalid pension for some months.

His dispute with the Zug authorities stemmed from an argument in a bar in October 1998. After getting into a quarrel with a bus driver drinking in the bar, Leibacher threatened him with revolver. The driver subsequently sued him, whereupon Leibacher embarked on six months of various legal proceedings against him, as well as complaints against sundry officials from the Zug canton, including a council member. At the end of this period and shortly before he ran amok, he was informed that the proceedings he had instigated would no longer be pursued.

Leibacher's first criminal offence was recorded in 1970, when he was 26. He was sentenced by the Zug criminal court to 18 months' detention for "repeated participation in organised theft, receipt of stolen goods, business fraud and a sexual offence against children". As a consequence, he was admitted into an institution for corrective behaviour.

Between 1976 and 1985, as well as a number of minor offences he was twice accused of "violating war materiel legislation" for illegally importing handguns into Switzerland. Leibacher was also sued for assault when, on September 15, 1982, after an innocuous verbal exchange, he attacked a passer-by and his female companion with a martial arts *nunchaku* (rice flail). During his short residence in the canton of Uri, he drew attention to himself by the violent threats he directed towards workers at the regional employment agency.

The succession of morbid and criminal deeds committed by Leibacher has led many commentators to conclude that when he ran amok in Zug this was just an isolated incident, to which no deeper political significance can be attached. This superficial assessment overlooks the fact that a particular political climate and environment are necessary before a manically aggressive person commits a bloody deed

on such a scale.

The incident constitutes the worst attack on Swiss politicians since 1890, when a number of radicals in the Italian-speaking canton of Ticiono brought down the conservative government and shot the canton's leader. However, cases of people running amok in Switzerland have been on the increase in recent times. In April 1986, Günther Tschanun, head of Zurich's building control department, shot dead four of his colleagues after tensions developed at work. In December 1999, a 37-year-old father in Marbach electrocuted his six-year-old daughter, his four-year-old son and himself. On the same morning as Leibacher terrorised the Zug canton council, a 49-year-old Swiss man in nearby Lucerne shot his 23-year-old stepson with a combat rifle and then turned the weapon on himself.

The accumulation of such bloody deeds throws light on the deep tensions underlying the tranquil, respectable and conservative facade of Swiss society. During the post-war period, Switzerland was regarded as the cream swimming atop the economic boom. Entrenched behind its wall of neutrality and banking secrecy, it profited from international financial flows and effected lucrative investments worldwide, without involving itself with world trade to any great extent-at least, on the surface. For a long time Switzerland headed the international table of per-capita incomes.

Nevertheless, this oasis of prosperity has always concealed deep contradictions: an underdeveloped social system; a backward agricultural sector with widespread poverty; and a population, including a large proportion of foreigners, who are subjected to social and political discrimination.

The consequences of globalisation and the formation of the European Union (EU) and the euro zone have undermined Switzerland's exceptional status. Social contradictions have intensified and for the first time unemployment is reaching significant levels. Entry into the EU, vigorously demanded by the economic elite, has till now foundered, owing to opposition from sections of the population. Left to its own devices, Switzerland is in danger of sinking in the sea of the global economy.

Accumulating corruption scandals and collapsing symbols of economic solidarity—like the recent demise of Swissair, the national airline—have deeply shaken the self-confidence of the economic elite. A discussion in the media about Switzerland's future perspectives has been underway for some time, and to some extent reminds one of a patient on the psychiatrist's couch. Together with the social crisis, this is producing the kind of tense emotional climate which—to extend the metaphor of the overstrained nervous system of a psychologically troubled individual—finally purged itself in the outburst of irrational violence in Zug.

The canton of Zug, situated near a small lake in the middle of Switzerland between Zurich and Lucerne, epitomises the mixture of idyll and conflict that mark Switzerland as a whole. A predominantly Catholic canton, it is only 240 square kilometres large and has 93,000 inhabitants. Two thousand of these are millionaires, primarily due to the generous taxation laws that have made Switzerland an oasis for tax evaders.

The tensions underlying Swiss society are further aggravated because of the lack of any real political outlet. Characterised by an excessive degree of federalism and inordinate reliance on referendums, the Swiss system of direct democracy certainly gives the elector the chance to wield influence in the smallest matters and ensures close contact between the population and politicians. (Up to now, government members can be seen doing their shopping or sitting in trams unaccompanied by bodyguards.) But there is no debate about the big questions of political and social orientation, let alone the right to vote on such issues.

Regardless of the results of parliamentary elections, the seven seats of government are shared out among the four major parties—the Liberals, the Social Democrats, the Christian Democrats and the right-wing Conservatives—according to a so-called "magic formula". The head of government is rotated by party each year. In this way, the most important political decisions are made by the closely connected coterie of the political elite.

It is also the case that labour disputes almost never occur in Switzerland. Under the threatening cloud of Nazi Germany in the 1930s, the trade unions and employers' associations agreed an industrial peace that has been extended every five years.

After the bloodbath in Zug, people have given vent to their concerns about political conditions in letters to the press, calling into question the competence of the state and the integrity of politicians. So far, politicians have only reacted with demands for "more security"—an issue that has stood at the top of the Swiss agenda since the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington.