

Karachi Battles

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Political and ethnic violence in Karachi has emerged as a third major source of the current internal conflict in Pakistan after the jihadist insurgency and the nationalist uprising in Balochistan. The violence could be reduced through negotiation between political parties which have much to lose from its continuation or further escalation.

According to data compiled by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), over 1,100 people were killed in Karachi during the first six months of 2011, of whom 490 fell victim to political conflict. The Citizen's Police Liaison Committee (CPLC), a semi-official body that works with the police force, has reported that there have been 1,200 killings in Karachi between January and July 2011, compared with 1,339 such killings in all of 2010. The 2010 figure itself represented a 10-fold increase over a five-year period, with steep rises in every year in between.

Although the CPLC data, based on public sources, do not separately identify politically-motivated killings, it is widely understood that there is a close correlation between political and general violence in the city. The Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, which also relies on public sources and reports casualties due to various forms of political violence across the country, found that ethno-political violence in Karachi claimed 636 lives in 2010, compared with 600 lives lost in the Balochistan uprising and 2,300 deaths due to the jihadist insurgency. On current trends, Karachi's political violence is likely to have become comparable, in terms of lives

lost, with the war with the Taliban and related jihadists in the north of Pakistan.

The period since the end of June has been particularly unstable. That was when the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) which is the largest political party of the city walked out of the coalition government in the Sindh province in which it had partnered with the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Awami National Party (ANP), the other two parties with significant political support in Karachi. Over 100 people were killed through targeted assassinations and politically-motivated ethnic killings in early July, mostly in the western quarters of the city. The situation calmed down briefly before flaring up again in mid-August, this time with much of the violence being centred in the city's south.

There have been targeted assassinations of local leaders or supporters of various parties. The killing of a party functionary is quickly followed up by the aggrieved group naming a rival political party as the perpetrator. This often leads to a strike call by the aggrieved group which is enforced by its armed supporters often resulting in the killing of random individuals belonging to the ethnic support base of the rival party. There have also been increasing cases of abduction, torture and murder of people suspected of being rival political supporters or of simply belonging to a rival ethnic group. This is reminiscent of the 1990s when trussed-up bodies bearing torture marks turned up in gunny bags, sometimes with pieces of

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paper bearing gruesome messages of vendetta. Besides killings of political and ethnic rivals, extortion has become particularly vicious with several cases of grenade attacks on non-compliant business premises. Ominously, casualties have recently included a number of Sindh police personnel killed or wounded while intervening in armed clashes between rival groups.

While many commentators have begun to demand the army's direct intervention to rid the city of "target killers" and "extortion mafia", the PPP-led federal government is wary of providing an opening to the military leadership which will be used to undermine civilian authority. The main opposition party in the centre, the Pakistan Muslim League led by Nawaz Sharif (PML-N) appears to agree, at least for now. By the end of August the PPP's federal minister of the interior Rehman Malik, who has been President Zardari's trouble-shooter with the MQM, had arrived in Karachi to put his own imprimatur on a security operation nominally directed by the Sindh provincial government. In the meanwhile in a major personal blow, Zardari's trusted ally and senior PPP leader Zulfikar Mirza has publicly fallen out with his childhood friend and is rallying the PPP support base against the government's efforts of reconciliation with the MQM, and calling for military intervention.

Ethnic Demography and City Politics

Karachi is not only Pakistan's largest city it is also its most diverse in terms of its ethnic demography. In the last census carried out in 1998, under half of its residents reported their mother tongue as Urdu. They are mostly Partition migrants from northern India and their descendants, who may also refer to themselves as Mohajir. Sindhi and Balochi speakers who were the overwhelming majority in 1947, accounted for 7% and 4% respectively in 1998. Punjabi speakers counted in as the second largest linguistic group at 14%, with 11% reporting their mother tongue as Pashto. Over 12% of the population had "other" mother tongues including Kachhi and Gujarati speakers many of whom are also descendants of Partition migrants, but not always self-classified as Mohajir.

The political preferences of the city's ethnic groups were distinguishable as early

as the 1970s, when most Partition migrants held out for Islamist parties, while the Sindhis, Baloch and other pre-1947 communities opted for the PPP. In the mid-1980s during the military government of general Zia ul Haq, the city's politics became overtly ethnicised with the emergence of the MQM which claimed that the Partition migrants and their descendants formed a distinct ethnic group. The PPP retained its support in its traditional voting base, and religious parties were virtually eliminated as serious contenders in the city.

Since the mid-2000s a new entrant has been the Pashtun nationalist ANP which has made inroads in the large and rising Pashto-speaking population, and in 2008 won two provincial assembly seats in electoral alliance with the PPP. Although the MQM changed its name from Mohajir to Muttahida to reflect its formal disavowal of ethnic nationalism, it remains strongly associated with Urdu-speakers. At moments of conflict MQM and ANP party cadres assume that they can deliver messages to one another by targeting ordinary Pashtuns and Mohajirs, respectively. In the case of the PPP, which has a more ethnically diverse support base, it is also assumed that Baloch and Sindhi populations of particular localities are "their people".

The rapid early successes of the MQM in the 1980s and its highly centralised, even militarised, form of organisation contributed to a hegemonic attitude towards governance in its top leadership. There is little room for dissent within the party and partnerships with other parties have been difficult to manage for the same reason. The party's sense of entitlement over Karachi has little correspondence with the actual size of its support base in the city. The overreach provoked a sharp response from the State in the 1990s when the MQM was literally cut down to size amid credible allegations of serious human rights violations. The party revived through its alliance with gen Pervez Musharraf, and between 2002 and 2008 got the run not just of Karachi but of the provincial government of Sindh. The system of local governance constructed by Musharraf consolidated Karachi into a single city district, and concentrated extraordinary powers in the hands of the head of the city government. During this period, particularly

between 2005 and 2008, the MQM not only controlled municipal functions, but also began to exercise de facto authority over state-owned land around the city which formally comes under the jurisdiction of the provincial government.

At this time the MQM began to refashion its public image from Mohajir militancy into two complementary directions: liberal secularism and the megacity dream. It sought international acceptance as a voice of liberal secularism particularly after 9/11, and was able to build upon its own past struggles against Islamist parties in Karachi while doing so. On urban issues it became a proponent of visible large-scale projects such as flyovers and express roads. But migration into the city was continued to be read by the MQM through the prism of Mohajir fears of losing ethnic predominance over the city. Most poor migrants from rural areas settle in irregular settlements inside the city, or in newly emerging unplanned localities on its outskirts. The megacity vision came into conflict with these very communities who were put under pressure to make way for large projects. The MQM was also willing to deploy its liberal secular platform to propagate fear about migrant communities such as the Pashtuns who were portrayed as a threat.

In short, the MQM was unable to make a transition to non-ethnic politics at a time when it enjoyed virtually unchallenged authority in the city and beyond. Its attempts at turning political advantage into hegemonic control provoked a backlash which opened the door for the PPP and the ANP to win or win back supporters in the poorer irregular settlements populated by the pre-1947 communities or migrants from other parts of Pakistan. While the MQM won 17 out of the 20 national assembly seats in Karachi

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EPW would like to acknowledge the help of the staff of the library of the Indira Gandhi Institute for Development Research, Mumbai, in preparing the index under a project supported by the RD Tata Trust.

in 2008, with the PPP taking the other three, it did so under the cloud of credible allegations of vote-rigging. Most of the non-Mohajir areas, particularly the densely populated and rapidly growing irregular settlements became visible centres of resistance to the party. Future political contests in the city pose a serious challenge to the MQM as the relative size of “its community” shrinks, and other parties adopt rival ethnic, class-based and territorial constituencies.

Political and Militant Wings

The day 12 May 2007 was a turning point of sorts in Karachi’s politics. It was a day when armed MQM cadres attempted to control the streets to prevent demonstrations by political parties and lawyers organisations that had united against Musharraf’s regime. The MQM, being Musharraf allies, were bound to stand up for him. But the method of support that was chosen was driven by the organisation’s own internal imperatives. It was decided that the city “belonged” to the MQM and others would not be allowed to occupy the streets. In place of the usual recourse to state security agencies, however, matters were taken to hand and the party was going to assert its control by the force of its own arms. Eventually, while the MQM succeeded in thwarting opposition political rallies it was surprised at the armed force mustered by other parties. Control was ceded on that day over large parts of the city.

When asked to comment on the way forward following the events of 12 May, Benazir Bhutto remarked that the MQM consisted of a political wing and a militant wing. She was of the view that the political wing had to gain ascendancy over the militant wing, and ought to enter the national mainstream. This dual character of the MQM has become a common way of understanding the organisation. MQM detractors argue that there is no duality, and that the political wing is merely a smokescreen for the militant wing which is the real power centre. Even if this assertion were empirically correct, it would leave little room for contemplating political negotiation with a party that does enjoy genuine support in its constituency.

In the meanwhile, other parties operating in Karachi have developed similar dualities. The ANP’s supporters include

well-armed men who are able to mobilise quickly. The fact that arms are produced and easily available in Pashtun areas of northern Pakistan, makes the Karachi chapter of ANP a particularly formidable force in this regard. The PPP which has historically shunned arming its cadres also works somewhat differently in Karachi. Criminal gangs operating in its Baloch power base in the old city quarter of Lyari in the south of the Karachi had squeezed the space for political activism during the Musharraf period. Individual PPP leaders began to patronise some gang leaders, bringing them into the political mainstream not only to retain control over their constituencies, but also to foil MQM “encroachments”.

While MQM’s militant wing might be the largest and the most organised, it no longer enjoys a monopoly in the city. Other parties have caught up, and in the process lost some of the moral high ground. Besides these parties there are several other organisations that are militant wings without political counterparts. These were created at one time or another by the State’s secret agencies for particular purposes but in their association with extortion rackets and organised crime are little different from MQM militants, ANP supporters, and PPP turned gang members. Some of the most profitable ventures are in the burgeoning real estate sector in the city’s outskirts where contested property rights in irregular settlements creates lucrative openings for groups that can combine armed force with political connections.

The fact is that the technology for violence is now widely shared, with attempts at monopoly having failed for the MQM, let alone the formal institutions of the State. Frequently cited “solutions” such as “neutral” army action against all armed groups and deweaponisation are hopelessly naïve and ahistorical. The army’s preferred modus operandi is to create yet more armed groups that are in its control to begin with, but might morph into militant wings of political organisations. Karachi’s “de-weaponisation” is only possible when there is general de-weaponisation of Pakistan, which will become even less likely with a military intervention. But the silver lining is that political parties can realistically negotiate to reduce the levels of violence.

Back to the Big Picture

Despite their bitter rivalries in Karachi, there were sound reasons for the PPP (and its ANP allies) to enter political partnership with the MQM in Sindh after the 2008 elections which saw off Musharraf’s military government. Although the PPP enjoyed a simple majority in the Sindh assembly it needed a broader coalition in the centre where it had a plurality. The PPP leadership was also aware that MQM retained the capacity to disrupt security in Karachi, thus making Sindh virtually ungovernable. The MQM, for its part, stood isolated in national politics due to its close alliance with Musharraf, and welcomed the opportunity of coming back in from the cold and also retaining some power. Perhaps most importantly, the PPP, ANP and MQM shared an opposition to Islamist nationalism, particularly its jihadist variety. These parties were most likely encouraged to work together by foreign powers such as the US and Britain which had played a key role in negotiating the transition from military to civilian government.

The accord between these parties was clearly unstable given that according to CPLC data, killings doubled in Karachi in the year of transition in 2008. The fact that violence continued to increase while these parties remained partners in government suggests at least a tacit understanding that not all local level violence would be controlled. Those blaming the MQM for the escalation could argue that the party could not get used to sharing power in the city, while those defending it might say that the PPP and ANP were taking advantage of their position to muscle in on MQM turf. Both sides might have a point.

The big picture still favours an accord between the PPP (and ANP) and the MQM. The PPP cannot allow the military to use Karachi to undermine its rule not just in Sindh but nationally. The MQM should know that a “neutral” army operation means a crackdown on the MQM, sooner rather than later. The ANP might also be aware that its hard-won position in its home region would collapse if the jihadists regain initiative with the break-up of the secular coalition. All three should know that the most powerful militant wing belongs to the military itself, which must not be tempted into seeing an opportunity where none exists.