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The Open City: Social Networks and Violence in Karachi

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List of Acronyms

APMSO	All Pakistan Muhajir Students Organization
ANP	Awami National Party
CDGK	City District Government Karachi
CPLC	Citizen Police Liaison Committee
HRCP	Human Rights Commission of Pakistan
IJT	Islami Jamiat Talaba
JM	Jaish-e-Mohammad
LJ	Lashkar-e-Jhangvi
MQM	Muttahida Quami Movement (previously Muhajir Quami Movement)
NSF	National Students Federation
PNA	Pakistan National Alliance
PPP	Pakistan Peoples Party
SSP	Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan

Introduction

Karachi is not only the largest metropolis of Pakistan and its commercial hub, it is also known as a “mini-Pakistan”. This is a reference to the ethnic and religious diversity of Karachi’s population. It has been a city of migrants for as long ago as anyone cares to remember. Until the 1980s it also shared, alongwith Lahore, the status of the political pulse of the country, or at least of the urban parts of Pakistan. To succeed nationally, movements had to make a mark on the city, and currents that emerged in Karachi frequently influenced the national mainstream.

The very features of Pakistani society that are represented so prominently in Karachi are the ones that are often thought to challenge the coherence and stability of the nation-state. Foremost, of course, are ethnic and religious sectarian heterogeneity. But there is also political fragmentation, economic disparity, demographic pressures, steady erosion of the state’s institutional capacity, and the heavy footprint of international conflict. This paper is based on the premise that even as Karachi’s politics were cut off from the national mainstream, the city became a vantage point on the crisis of the nation-state in Pakistan.

In fact, the city’s exceptionalism since the mid-1980s could be seen as part of a wider process of political disarticulation in Pakistan -- a disarticulation which at times threatens the basic make-up of the state. Yet the state has managed to pull back from the brink on several occasions, and so has the city. A closer look at the city and its own “experiments” with the limits of institutional elasticity hold lessons for an understanding of the precarious resilience that has characterised the nation-state itself in Pakistan. The aim of this paper is to provide a perspective to the institutional breakdown in Karachi. The prevalence of conflict and violence – particularly of the civil and civil variety – is taken as an index of breakdown.

The paper begins (Section 1) with a description of the conflict and violence that has become associated with Karachi. Trends and patterns in conflict and non-state violence are identified here, as outcomes that require explanation. Section 2 provides relevant background information on the city’s placement within the national polity and economy. Some of the main explanations of Karachi’s trends and patterns of conflict and violence are reviewed in Section 3. These explanations are around ethnic identity, organizations, economic frustration, and political conspiracies. The role of external factors such as migration and the influences of the war in Afghanistan are also highlighted.

An alternative approach focusing on two incontrovertible aspects of Karachi’s urbanity – migration and informality -- is outlined in Section 4. It is proposed here that the analysis of conflict and violence in Karachi can benefit from an understanding of the very processes that made Karachi an open city in the first instance. The high rate of migration was correlated with an erosion of the formal sector’s capacity for supplying basic infrastructure or regulating the use of existing infrastructure. This resulted in the mushrooming of an informal response, which was in turn aided and abetted by state organizations. The informalization of public provisioning, however, was premised on two institutional deviations. First, the large-scale legitimisation of private non-state arrangements for contract enforcement, and second, the

strengthening of existing or nascent social networks based on bonds of family, ethnicity, and religious and sectarian identity. Qualitative accounts of the histories of land use in six very different localities of the city (Sections 5 and 6) are interpreted using this alternative approach. Finally, in Section 7, it is argued that this alternative approach offers a way of understanding not just the breakdown but also recovery or the prospects of a return to political negotiation.

1. Conflict and violence

Current patterns of non-state violence

Karachi is a busy city that provides sustenance to its 15 million residents through industry, trade, commerce, services and charity. It is also a violent city – probably the most violent city of comparable size in South Asia. In 2001, the murder rate in Karachi was 4.04 per 100,000 people compared with 1.67 in Mumbai and 3.79 in Delhi¹. Between 1994 and 2004, there were 8,816 casualties reported through incidents of violence including murders, torture by non-state actors, kidnappings for ransom, vigilante reprisals, bombings, and suicide attacks.² There are estimated to be a significant number of lethal weapons, many of the unlicensed and illegally held, in private hands in Karachi.³

These statistics, however, do not fully convey many of the paradoxes of Karachi's non-state violence. The capacity for violent disruption that lurks just beneath the surface manifests itself at rare instances when the city is brought to a grinding halt by one of its several claimants. Otherwise it is business as usual, with traffic jams, bustling markets, late night shopping and dining, drives by the sea-front, and an infectious resilient air of the devil-may-care. There are few “no-go” areas in the city, and hardly any neighbourhoods that are normally “closed” to the entry of ethnic or religious outsiders. Yet it takes only a rumour for the shutters to go down, and for any locality to turn inwards on those occasions when the situation turns abnormal. There have been days when pitched battles have raged between armed groups – divided along party-political, ethnic, or gang lines – throwing up temporary fronts across otherwise invisible and well-traversed boundaries. Those days are not common, but everyone seems to know that they could come at short notice.

Specifically, there are currently several identifiable proximate sources of non-state violence in Karachi. First, a number of political parties operating in the city maintain armed cadres who are organized and trained in the use of lethal weapons. Inter-party violence has tended to flare up around particular events such as public meetings, rallies, and elections. There are also underlying tensions between political groups that are blamed for targeted killings of rival members and armed cadres. These groups are discussed in greater detail further below, but it needs to be noted that their activities are not directly linked to *jihadi* forms of religious extremism.

¹ CPLC website: <http://www.cplc.org.pk/content.php?page=33>

² Authors' estimates based on annual reports of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP, various).

³ Between 1993 and 1996, firearms were the agent of injury/death for 3,392 victims (Chotani, Razzak and Luby, 2002)

Second, the use of firearms is common in a range of crimes including robberies, carjackings, vehicle thefts, burglaries, drugs trafficking, protection rackets and kidnappings for ransom. It is presumed that all of these types of crimes involve some level of organization and networks. There are allegedly close connections between criminal and party-political networks. In some parts of the metropolis such as the old city quarter of Lyari rival gang leaders have had relations with various party factions. In other cases it is alleged that the local armed cadres of some parties are directly involved in organizing crimes and protecting petty criminals. Some conspicuous cases of kidnapping for ransom have been linked with powerful rural patrons.

Third, there have been acts of violence that are thought to be linked to *jihād* and religious extremism.⁴ Most of the known groups connected with *jihadi* violence belong to the Sunni Deobandi sect – even though there are many Sunni Deobandi clerics and organizations that do not support *jihadi* violence within Pakistan. There have been several suicide bomb attacks on local and foreign targets that have claimed the lives of many civilians since 2001. Many of the now-proscribed *jihadi* groups that have been declared terrorist organizations have had a presence in Karachi.⁵ It is alleged that the US journalist Daniel Pearl was abducted and murdered by an Al-Qaeda cell operating in the city, and it is possible that there are other such cells that remain hidden. Before 2001 the main public activity of the religious extremists groups in the city was to raise funds and to recruit members through the many mosques and seminaries. These groups were also alleged to have carried out bombing and assassination campaigns against the Shia Muslim community that is present in large numbers in Karachi.⁶

A brief chronology

There was a steady escalation in violence in Karachi – led by political violence – since the early 1970s. Up until then political, student and trade union activity was largely peaceful and violence was limited to isolated brawls that rarely led to a casualty. The main source of violence during such movements was the police, and on rare occasions the military that were called to quell dissent. Sectarian religious violence between Sunni and Shia mobs did take place occasionally, but this posed a security challenge only particular days in the year when religious marches of rival sects happened to cross each other's paths. Much earlier in the late 1940s the city had witnessed communal violence against the minority Hindu community most of whose members were forced to flee to India.⁷

The first political movement during which non-state actors – mostly mobs of youths – used any significant amount of violence was in the early 1970s when the newly-elected provincial assembly of Sindh passed a law requiring the teaching of the Sindhi language in all educational institutes.⁸ This was seen by many members of the Urdu-speaking majority of Karachi as an assault on their cultural and political position in

⁴ The word *jihād* literally means struggle in Arabic. In Pakistan it has come to connote combat in the cause of Islam. It is in this sense that the term *jihād* is used here.

⁵ Ansari, 2003

⁶ Ansari, 2002

⁷ Khuhro, 1998

⁸ Pakistan Forum, 1992

the province and the city.⁹ There were cases of ethnic violence as well as other acts of mob violence, but the situation was quickly brought under control through enforcement and political negotiation.¹⁰

Sustained mobilisation followed elections in 1977 which the opposition claimed were rigged by the government of the populist Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The PNA movement – so named after the opposition Pakistan National Alliance – gained support in Karachi. As the government responded with repression the movement in Karachi turned violent with mob attacks, arson and targeting of the government’s political sympathisers and supporters¹¹. The PNA movement was, arguably, the last major movement in which Karachi was part of, or even led, the national mainstream. In Karachi the PNA movement was headed by right-wing Islamic religious parties that had become implacable foes of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s left-of-centre Pakistan People’s Party (PPP).

The PNA movement became the pretext for a military coup led by General Zia-ul-Haq, and he imposed a highly repressive martial law regime than banned political activity. General Zia’s regime faced considerable resistance and he made alliances with religious groups to implement Islamic Sharia law. In Karachi where opposition to Zia had considerable support on college campuses, pro-Zia Islamist groups began to receive weapons and training from state agencies. This was the beginning of the war between Soviet forces in Afghanistan and their *mujahideen* opponents. Pakistan military’s support for the Afghan *jihad* had two immediate implications for Karachi. The Islamist groups, particularly the student-based Islami Jamiat-e-Tulaba (IJT) became militarized due to its involvement with the Afghan *mujahideen*, and there was a proliferation of small arms in private hands as weapons destined for the Afghan *jihad* found their way to unregulated arms markets.¹²

Campus opposition to General Zia and the IJT in Karachi took several forms. Besides leftists groups such as various factions of the National Students Federation (NSF) there were a number of ethnic-based groups, some of them also with leftist rhetoric, among the Baloch, Pashtun Sindhi and other ethnic minorities. These latter groups saw the Zia regime as a manifestation of Punjabi ethnic domination in the country. Their connections with the rural hinterland, particularly in the Pashtun tribal areas allowed the ethnic groups to also acquire weapons in order to stand up to the IJT on the campuses. The formation of an ethnic-based group claiming to represent the interests of Karachi’s Urdu-speaking “Muhajir” community completed the picture.

The All Pakistan Muhajir Students’ Organization (APMSO), which was to give birth to the Muhajir Quami Movement (MQM) or the Muhajir national movement, was founded as a rival to the IJT. Although IJT was ethnically diverse, its parent party the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) had a strong reserve of support in the Urdu-speaking population of Karachi. Many of the founders of the APMSO were disaffected IJT members, who wanted to replace Islamic solidarity with a call to the distinct ethnic identity of the Muhajirs. The APMSO quickly challenged the IJT and seriously undermined the

⁹ Rashid and Shaheed, 1993

¹⁰ Rahman, 1995

¹¹ Weinbaum, 1977

¹² Tully, 1995

latter by weaning away many of its potential supporters among the Muhajirs. It also followed in the pattern set by the IJT and ethnic student federations in acquiring arms. Campus politics had been steadily militarized, and by the mid-1980s it was virtually impossible for unarmed student groups to physically survive in the city's colleges and universities.

The emergence of the MQM from the APMSO meant that the politics of armed cadres left the confines of the campuses and entered the communities. The party had disproportionate support among the Muhajir youth, many of whom were attracted to its militant and macho reputation. The idea that the Muhajirs formed a distinct ethnic group – like the Sindhis, Punjabis, Balochis and the Pashtuns – became a rallying point. The organization took full advantage of simmering ethnic resentments among Muhajirs – many of whom felt disenfranchised in “their own” city. In a series of violent encounters with other ethnic groups, particularly the Pashtuns, the MQM established a reputation for militancy.¹³

The first major ethnic confrontations took place over seemingly innocuous issues. A hit and run incident involving a Pashtun-owned bus and a Muhajir schoolgirl led to widespread riots in which large numbers of buses were set alight. Another incident was sparked off by alleged sniper fire on an MQM procession from an Afghan refugee neighbourhood. This also led to large-scale rioting in which many people lost their lives and homes were destroyed. The next to flare up was the working class neighbourhood of Orangi where Muhajirs and Pashtuns lived in close proximity. Automatic weapons were used by both sides, and there were a number of horrific incidents of people being burnt alive in their homes.¹⁴ These events marked a qualitative shift in the nature and scale of violence in Karachi: during 1985, the Karachi police recorded 608 cases of rioting which claimed 56 lives.¹⁵

By 1987 the MQM was ready to contest local elections, and in the national elections that followed in 1988, it emerged as an overwhelming victor in Karachi. Political representation did not lead to an abatement of political violence. On the eve of the 1988 elections there was a massacre of Urdu-speaking Muhajirs in a series of random drive-by shootings in the city of Hyderabad. Extreme Sindhi ethnic nationalist groups were widely suspected of carrying out this crime. There was virtually-immediate retaliation against Sindhis in Karachi for which the MQM was blamed. Ethnic tensions between Sindhis and Muhajirs remained high even after the elections, despite the fact that the MQM and the Sindhi-dominated PPP were coalition partners. The MQM left the coalition in 1989 and this was followed by a period of unrelenting political and ethnic violence in Karachi. A new factor in this phase of violence was the abduction of political and ethnic rivals. Parts of the city started to become “no-go” areas for the police and security services, and it was reported that parties operated detention centres where victims would be tortured and even executed.¹⁶

From 1990 onwards there were sporadic attempts on the part of the security services to confront armed ethnic groups in Karachi, particularly the MQM. Police action was

¹³ Gayer, 2002

¹⁴ Karim, 1995

¹⁵ Richards, 2007

¹⁶ HRCP 1992

launched in 1990 but was aborted after the military backed away.¹⁷ Another operation, this one led by the military itself was started in 1992 under the cover of a bloody split in the ranks of the MQM but this too got bogged down, apparently due to the lack of good intelligence. From 1993 till 1996 there was an intelligence-led campaign with cooperation between police, paramilitary forces and the army to seriously disable the military capacity of the MQM. The state's action led to mass arrests of MQM members, supporters and their family members. Large number of youths – estimates range between several hundreds and several thousands – were killed in actual or faked encounters with the security services.¹⁸ Many young men escaped and took refuge in rural areas – paradoxically among ethnic communities that had themselves been targets of ethnic violence in Karachi. Others fled abroad to the US, UK, South Africa and Malaysia.

MQM resistance was also fierce. During the early period of the security operations there were retaliatory attacks on state security personnel and on other ethnic groups. It was common to find trussed up dead bodies in gunny sacks with torture marks. Many of these were alleged police informers.¹⁹ The party also retained the ability during that time of calling and enforcing general strikes in the city causing serious economic disruption and losses. Many parts of the city witnessed internal displacement as people from the “wrong” ethnic group were forced to shift to safer neighbourhoods.²⁰ It is estimated that hundreds of families of MQM members and supporters – especially those families who had lost a member in a police encounter – were forced to go into hiding. They were unable to return to their homes because of fears of police harassment. There were also demographic shifts within the city as people moved to neighbourhoods in the southern districts of the city that were relatively less disrupted by strikes and riots.

It can be argued that the 1993-1996 marked a peak in ethnic violence and political violence of certain types in Karachi.²¹ Chottani, Razak, and Luby (2002) estimate the rate of violent injuries to be 23 per 100,000, and the rate of violent deaths to be 13 per 100,000 between 1993 and 1996.²² Since that period the MQM and other ethnic parties have regrouped, re-armed and revived themselves. They have also displayed, very occasionally, the ability to repeat the excesses of the 1990s. The most notable such event was the violence on 12 May 2007 which is discussed further below. But there are also important changes. The MQM, for example, formally changed its name from Muhajir Quami Movement to the Muttahida Quami Movement (united national

¹⁷ Ziring, 1991

¹⁸ HRCP annual reports from 1992 to 2007

¹⁹ HRCP 1996

²⁰ Ayesha Khan, 2003

²¹ According to authors' calculations from HRCP annual reports, 4,642 people were killed in shootings, encounters and political violence between 1994 and 1996. These calculations are reported in greater detail in Annex 1

²² The authors also determine the nature of violence as being ethnic and politically motivated through gathering data from ambulance services logbooks. They found that the number of casualties and injuries increased during periods of strikes. Moreover, they discovered that casualties were disproportionately high (in contrast with population) in Korangi (22% of all homicides), Malir (8%), Nazimabad (8%) and Orangi (8%). The Urdu Speaking are a majority in Orangi and Nazimabad, while Malir and Korangi are multi-ethnic.

movement). Dropping the “Muhajir” label was seen as an important act of symbolism because it allowed the party to claim to be a national rather than ethnic party.²³

The lowering of ethnic political violence since the late 1990s does not mean that such violence has disappeared altogether. There have been periods when inter-party rivalries have led to targeted assassinations of party cadres and supporters. The link between lower level party cadres and criminal elements has also thrived. Fighting between youth cadres of parties is sometimes indistinguishable from gang warfare.

Even though ethnic violence might have abated for now, other forms of violence have emerged in the recent years. Between 1994 and 2006 sectarian extremist Sunni militants waged a campaign of bomb attacks and assassinations against the city’s Shia minority.²⁴ A number of mosques and congregations were bombed. There was a systematic campaign to target educated professionals within the Shia community – presumably in the expectation that this would lower the community’s morale and encourage its members to seek emigration.²⁵ It is estimated that 26 doctors were assassinated.²⁶ The recent pattern of sectarian violence is very different from the Shia-Sunni violence that occurred till the 1980s when rival religious processions might break out into mob attacks and riots.

There is known to be much overlap between groups that target Shias and those who have undertaken or supported terrorist attacks on foreign and national targets since 2001. Targeted assassinations thought to be carried out by *jihadi* groups actually predate 9/11 and the US-led war against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Militant Sunni organizations such as the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LJ) are known to have had close ideological and operational links with *jihadi* groups such as Jaish-e-Mohammad (JM).²⁷

The war in Afghanistan and the Pakistan government’s support for the US-led coalition produced an angry response in some of the religious circles in Karachi. There were calls for recruitment for *jihad* and many young men – mostly but not exclusively from ethnic Pashtun localities – volunteered to fight alongside the Taliban. A new dimension was added to the pattern of violence in city, with attacks on foreign and national high value targets. US consular personnel and premises were targeted on several occasions by suicide bombers. There was a suicide bomb attack on French naval engineers that killed over a dozen people.²⁸ There were unsuccessful assassination attempts on important Pakistani officials such as President Musharraf and the army commander of Karachi.

There were also two major bomb attacks on public rallies that claimed the lives of hundreds of people. The first was an explosion at a Barelvi Sunni religious gathering that eliminated the entire leadership of the Sunni Tehreek (Sunni movement). This organization claims to represent the Barelvi Sunnis who distinguish themselves from

²³ Richards, 2007

²⁴ Abbas, 2001

²⁵ Korejo, 2002

²⁶ Authors calculations from HRCP annual reports

²⁷ Rana 2004

²⁸ Ibid

the Deobandi Sunnis. The former focus on ritual and devotion in contrast with the latter who are highly doctrinaire. While the Sunni Tehreek is a militant organization – with armed cadres – it opposes and is opposed by the *jihadi* groups who are mostly Deobandi Sunni²⁹. On the streets the Sunni Tehreek’s main rivalry, however, is not with the *jihadi* groups but with the nominally secular MQM. This is because many of the Sunni Tehreek cadres are former MQM members who split off or were expelled due to infighting³⁰. The vendetta has been carried over into the new organization. There were no claims of responsibility on the Sunni Tehreek rally, but there was a war of words between the MQM and the supporters of *jihadi* groups, with each shifting the blame on the other.

The other major bomb attack was on the public reception for Benazir Bhutto’s return to Pakistan from her 10-year exile. The attack on Bhutto’s rally which she survived, killed over 130 people and maimed several hundred others. The attack was blamed variously on *jihadi* groups, Al-Qaeda, Taliban, and elements within Pakistan’s security apparatus opposed to her policies.³¹ In this case too there was no admission of responsibility.

Summary of trends and patterns

It is useful to summarize the main trends and patterns of conflict and violence in Karachi. The above review has shown that the mid-1980s marked a turning point both in terms of the extent and the nature of political violence. Whereas before, political violence had been exceptional and connected to specific policies and actions, now it became widespread and systemic. Political organizations and entire communities became militarized. Ethnicity was a salient line of division, but so was party-political affiliation. There was a blurring of boundaries between political cadres and protection rackets, with the consequence that criminal and political violence became indistinguishable. Organizations acquired the capacity to enforce city-wide shut-downs and strikes, and state security agencies lost their overwhelming superiority in the exercise of coercive power.

There are inter-connections between the three broad sources of violence – ethnic/party-political conflict, criminal violence and the *jihadi* threat – identified above. But there are also distinctive features. The *jihadi* violence has recently consisted of sectarian or high profile targeted assassinations, and bomb attacks including suicide bombs. Ethnic/party-political conflicts sometimes take the form of targeted killings but do not involve bomb attacks. These conflicts can and do involve “mass” actions such as shut-downs and strikes, mob violence and even territorial battles. The *jihadi* violence does not include “mass” or open action, but it can include sporadic attempts at enforcing Taliban-style restrictions on music and dress codes in selected pockets of the city.

This paper takes that view that although *jihadi* violence is a more urgent threat to state security and stability, ethnic/party political and criminal violence, which are inter-connected, are more important sources of insecurity and the danger of

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Shah, 2002

³¹ <http://www.dawn.com/2007/10/19/rss.htm>

breakdown in Karachi. The weaponisation of the city, the emergence of identity-based politics, and the weakening of state institutions are key shifts since the mid-1980s. Some of these conditions are the same ones that also make Karachi vulnerable to *jihadi* violence.

Recent city-wide violence

This chronological review will be incomplete without reference to two recent city-wide acts of political violence that revealed the geographical contours of the emerging contest in Karachi. The first was what has come to be known simply as “May 12”. There was widespread fighting on that day in 2007 when rallies from different parts of the city heading to the airport to receive the deposed chief justice of the country came under attack. The ensuing violence claimed over fifty lives in different parts of the city and left many people injured. There was a virtual shutdown for three days, and a serious danger of the situation escalating into an open ethnic conflict. The second instance was the reaction in Karachi to the news of the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in Rawalpindi in northern Pakistan. Widespread rioting engulfed the city there were several deaths. About 13 banks were burnt or robbed, 15 factories, 10 petrol pumps, and more than 700 vehicles were torched (Perwaiz, 2007).³²

The then-ruling MQM was widely held responsible for the May 12 events. The party had clearly stated its opposition to the deposed chief justice’s visit to Karachi, and to the lawyer’s movement against the Musharraf regime in general. Opposition parties which then included the PPP and the ethnic Pashtun Awami National Party (ANP) were supporting the lawyer’s movement, and planned to turn out in large numbers to greet the defiant judge. The night before the judge’s visit MQM cadres were seen setting up road-blocks and barricades shutting off access to the proposed route of chief justice’s reception processions. The city had been divided geographically between a central corridor along a north-south axis, and the periphery.

On the day itself all state security forces – police, paramilitaries and army – were conspicuous by their absence. At around midday, the time when the chief justice’s plane landed there were sniper attacks on opposition rallies that been stopped at barricades at different points in the city. Many opposition supporters were also armed and there were pitched gun battles across the city. The MQM managed to stop the chief justice’s welcome, thus forcing him to return to Islamabad after waiting within the airport for several hours. Ambushes and attacks on rallies were well-planned and eyewitness accounts suggest that many of the attackers organized into military-style units acting in concert. In addition to sniping and gun-battles there were a number of instances of abduction many of which led to execution-style killings.³³

Although the MQM had an upper hand in terms of scale and organization of combat, the opposition also managed to put up sustained resistance on the streets. The violence quickly spread from the rallies to neighbourhoods along a notional front-line that roughly corresponded with the boundary between central and outer districts

³² Salis bin Perwaiz, 2008 http://thenews.jang.com.pk/top_story_detail.asp?Id=11969 accessed on 5th August 2008

³³ HRCP, 2007

around the city. MQM offices were set alight in the outer districts as well as in cities across the country.

Benazir Bhutto's assassination on 27 December 2007 provoked an angry response in Karachi and other cities of Sindh. Gangs of youth, many of them armed, spread out from working class neighbourhoods within the city and in the outer districts and there was widespread rioting and arson.³⁴ On this occasion too the state security forces were withdrawn from the streets. Petrol pumps were early targets and they remained shut for several days, thus paralyzing traffic in the city. Although many of the central districts of the city were also affected by rioting – and thus remained closed for several days – there was a sense of a centre-periphery geographic division. All of the main entry and exit routes serving the city were effectively blockaded, including routes leading to the harbour area.

The differences between the two recent city-wide acts of violence are obvious. The first was planned, involved direct confrontation between armed groups, and resulted in high levels of casualties but relatively little damage to property. The second, by contrast, was spontaneous, and there was extensive looting and damage to property. The similarities, however, are instructive. In both cases the main protagonists, at least on the surface, were political parties. State security forces were absent or withdrew, and order was quickly restored when they reappeared. There was a geographic division of the city between the centre and the periphery. On both occasions there was a danger that the violence will escalate along ethnic lines, but this danger was quickly ameliorated by political parties and leaders through public gestures of reconciliation.

Finally, it is striking that the political backdrop of both cases of recent city-wide violence were events relating to the national mainstream. Karachi's violent response in turn had an influence on national politics. The May 12 violence resulted from MQM's decision to not allow the opposition movement which had received public support in other parts of the country, notably north-central Punjab, to encroach into what the party regarded as its territory. The violence had the opposite effect. The resistance in Karachi and the casualties raised the pitch of the opposition movement and made the government's position harder to defend. The post-Benazir violence was also a response to an event in national politics. The PPP had been minor player in the city with its support concentrated in the rural areas and smaller towns of Sindh and Punjab. The scale and spread of violence suggested that something might have changed. Karachi was back in the national mainstream after decades, and now in its own violent manner.

Pulling away from the brink?

The remainder of this paper is not about conflict and violence, but about understanding the conditions which may have led to a qualitative change in Karachi's security environment and its isolation from the national mainstream in the mid-1980s. Karachi's experience suggests another paradox, and thus a potential source of insight. There are a number of instances – some drawn-out and others rapid – when a clear danger of escalation of violence and breakdown has been reversed. The ten-year

³⁴ Salis bin Perwaiz, 2008

period from the late 1980s to the late 1990s saw dramatic changes in the fortunes and military capacity of the MQM. There have been other periods still when criminal violence has peaked and then declined. The two recent cases of city-wide violence offer dramatic windows on instances when escalation was seen as a palpable threat and the situation was rapidly brought under control. Any understanding of Karachi's drift into conflict and non-state violence, therefore, also needs to be able to explain the tendency thus far of pulling back from the brink.

2. Wider context in time and space

City, province and state

Karachi was a small port with a natural harbour that was attacked and occupied by British troops in 1839. The Governor of the Talpur Mir rulers of Sindh formally surrendered the defences of the city to the East India Company for the purposes setting up a military base.

Within four years the British used Karachi as a staging post to defeat the Talpurs and by 1843 had annexed Sindh to the Bombay Presidency. Karachi was now administratively rejoined with Sindh as its colonial headquarters.³⁵

In 1936, following a concerted political campaign by the Muslim leadership of Sindh, the region was separated from the Bombay Presidency and made into a province of British India, with Karachi as its headquarters. The city was already a centre of Sindh's political activities and now hosted the provincial legislature and high court. There was rapid growth in economic activity as a result of the separation from Bombay. During the two world wars, the city also expanded to accommodate soldiers belonging to allied forces to set up bases in Karachi, and used the sea and airports for supplies.³⁶

The city hosted an intricate and detailed administrative system, and this influenced Jinnah's decision in 1947 to choose Karachi as the first capital of Pakistan. Between 1947 to 1954, close to 1 million of Urdu speaking Muslims followed Jinnah to Karachi to make it their home in Pakistan³⁷. When Karachi was officially declared as the capital of Pakistan, the Constituent Assembly decided to separate it from Sindh to make it a federally-administered area – move that was resisted by the Sindhi members of the assembly who feared the alienation of an important historic heritage and economic resource from their constituencies.³⁸ Karachi hence became Pakistan's first Federal Capital Territory.

In 1955, Sindh, Balochistan, Punjab, NWFP and tribal areas were combined to form One Unit, i.e. West Pakistan. Lahore was declared as the provincial capital of West Pakistan, while Karachi remained the Federal Capital. In 1958, the federal government decided to move the Federal Capital to Islamabad.³⁹ Following

³⁵ Rustomji and Katrak, 2007.

³⁶ Rustomji and Katrak, 2007.

³⁷ Ahmed, 1998.

³⁸ Ahmed, 1998.

³⁹ Ansari, 2005.

opposition protests, the One Unit was dissolved in 1969, and Karachi was once again designated as the capital of the newly-revived Sindh province.

Until 2001 Karachi was an administrative division consisting of several districts, the urban segments of which were part of a municipal corporation. Reforms of local government systems in Pakistan, popularly known as the Devolution Plan, amalgamated the entire territory of the former Karachi division into the City District Government of Karachi (CDGK). The formal distinction between urban and rural areas was removed. The city is divided into eighteen towns. The lowest administrative unit is the union council of which there are 178 in Karachi.

Economic hub

Today, Karachi is spread over 3,530 square kilometers and is the largest city (by scale and population) in Pakistan.⁴⁰ In 2007 its per capita output exceeded the country's by 50 per cent and the province's by around 80 per cent. The city accounts for a third of the total national output in large-scale manufacturing, and 24 and 20 per cent in finance and insurance, and transport, storage and communications respectively.⁴¹

Karachi is also valued for government revenue generation. While it accounted for 14.5 per cent of domestic output, approximately 54 percent of all central government tax revenues were collected here. The city's monopoly over sea-bound trade makes it a prime site for the collection of custom duties. Moreover, being the point of import/manufacture of a large proportion of the goods that attract sales tax, Karachi is a high contributor to national sales tax. Finally hosting the largest population employed in the manufacturing, retail trading and services sector, Karachi is also the highest contributor to the central government's income tax revenue.

In some ways the relationship between Karachi and the rest of Pakistan can be regarded as a version of the classical dual economy. The city has a high concentration of the secondary and tertiary sectors, draws labour and raw materials from the rest of the country, and acts as the conduit for modern economic services. Urban Sindh (taken as a proxy for Karachi) has around twice the proportion of workers in service sectors (wholesale and retail trade) and manufacturing compared with Pakistan as a whole. It has three times the proportion of its workforce in finance and insurance. A third of all workers in urban Sindh were in the formal sector compared with a sixth in Pakistan, and three-fifths of the workers were employees compared with just 37 per cent in Pakistan as a whole⁴². With the rest of Sindh this relationship is even more salient, as the province is mostly rural and primary-producing.

As demonstrated above, smooth running of business and industrial activities in Karachi are critical for Pakistan's economy. The violence and ensuing mayhem in the city often paralyzes commercial activity, and this causes heavy economic losses to the national economy. For example, when violence peaked in 1995, leading to 31 days of

⁴⁰ CDGK website: www.cdgk.gov.pk

⁴¹ Authors' compilations from calculations and statistics available in the Pakistan Economic Survey 2006-2007, World Bank 2006, Sindh Economic Report 2007

⁴² Pakistan Economic Survey 2007, Sindh Economic Report 2007

strike and 3137 casualties in that year, the Karachi Chamber of Commerce estimated the economic cost of strikes in Karachi to be \$5 billion.⁴³ Similarly, following Benazir Bhutto's assassination in 2007, the Karachi Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI) estimated losses in Karachi and Sindh at about \$1.3 billion.⁴⁴

In the late 1980s and mid 1990s Karachi's susceptibility to political violence, organised crime, extortion and kidnapping (the latter targeting wealthy business families) resulted in a flight of capital and relocation of business to Punjab and Industrial Sites in NWFP. The business elite lobbied for protection and dissatisfied with the performance of the police, set up a citizen-police liaison committee (CPLC) with the cooperation of the provincial governor in 1993.⁴⁵

Growth and migration

Table 1: Population and Growth Rate (1931-2008)

Years	Population	Growth Rate (per cent)
1931	247,791	2.08
1941	359,492	3.79
1951	1,006,400	10.84
1961	2,044,044	7.34
1972	3,606,746	5.24
1981	5,437,984	4.62
1998	9,856,318	3.02
2008 ⁴⁶	13,246,067	3.00

Source: Population Census Data

Karachi demography underwent dramatic changes (Table 1), and migration played a key role in these changes. The city attracted migrants from all over South Asia in search for refuge and livelihoods. Between 1941 and 1951, the surge in population can be attributed to the creation of Pakistan in 1947, and the declaration of Karachi as the capital of the new state. Muslim refugees arrived here in large numbers, and a majority of Karachi's Hindu population fled to India. Internal migration, particularly from Punjab and NWFP accelerated in the 1950s and 1960s. Internal migration from other cities and rural areas from across the country continues to be an important factor in Karachi's growth, and over time migrants from virtually every corner of Pakistan have found a home in the city.

Sovereign and civil conflict in the region was once again the source of international migration to Karachi in the 1970s and 1980s. Following the secession of East Pakistan in 1971 there was a flow of ethnic Bihari refugees who claimed to be

⁴³ This is in 2008 prices. The original estimate was 85 billion rupees was reported in HRCP 1995.

⁴⁴ January 10 2008, "KARACHI: Long-term impact of riots on city's economy" Dawn Newspaper <http://www.dawn.com/2008/01/10/local18.htm> accessed August 5, 2008

⁴⁵ Authors' interview with Mr Sharfuddin Memon, head of CPLC. It is significant that the governor is an unelected appointee of the federal government, while the elected government is headed by a chief minister.

⁴⁶ Estimate for 2008 derived from growth rate

“stranded Pakistanis” facing discrimination in the newly liberated Bangladesh. Muslim migrants from Burma sought refuge on the grounds of religious repression at the hands of the military government there.⁴⁷ The war in Afghanistan was the source of another major wave of migration in the 1980s.⁴⁸

These successive waves of migration played their part in changing the ethnic, religious and lingual demographics of Karachi. In 1941, Hindus, Sikhs and Jains made up 53 per cent while Muslims accounted for 42 percent of the population. In the 1951 census, Muslims were 98 percent of the population and Hindus were a mere 1.5 percent. In 1947 Sindhi-speakers had made up three-fifths of the population. With the influx of multiethnic migrants into the city, the Sindhi population in Karachi has become linguistically and culturally marginalized. Migrants from India, also known as Mohajirs, were mostly Urdu-speaking, and over the years evolved their lingual identity and migrant status into a political identity.⁴⁹ A key feature of Karachi’s ethnic demography is that its largest single group (Urdu-speakers) is virtually unrepresented in the rest of the country.⁵⁰

Table 2: Number and Size of Population by Language

Language	1951 (%)	1981 (%)	1998 (%)
Urdu	51.45	54.34	48.52
Sindhi	14.32	6.29	7.22
Gujarati ⁵¹	11.60	-	-
Punjabi	9.05	13.64	13.94
Balochi	8.87	4.39	4.34
Pushto	3.39	8.71	11.42
Others	1.32	12.57	14.51

Source: Population Census Data

With internal migration (mostly from Punjab and NWFP), the number of Punjabi and Pushto-speakers also increased in Karachi, making Balochi and Sindhi minority languages in Karachi (Table 2). The later changes in the ethnic composition of the city are relevant to the political developments since the 1980s. The period between the 1981 and 1998 rounds of the population census indicates a substantial decline the proportion of Urdu-speakers (from 54 to 49 per cent), and corresponding increases in the proportions of Pashtuns, Sindhis and “Others”.⁵²

⁴⁷ Gazdar, Mallah and Memon, 2005

⁴⁸ Gizewski and Homer-Dixon, 1995

⁴⁹ The term Mohajir that later acquired political connotations evokes the Islamic tradition of Hijrat or migration in the face of religious persecution. The term appeared in official documents of the Pakistan government such as the population census to define the Muslim refugees from India.

⁵⁰ There are concentrations of Urdu-speakers other cities of southern Sindh.

⁵¹ Gujarati, which remains an important language in Karachi, was reclassified under “others” in the later rounds of the census.

⁵² “Others” include diverse ethnic communities for whom data are not reported separately. The increase in “Others” may be due to the migration of Bengali, Burmese and non-Pashtun Afghans, though some informal reports suggest that these irregular international migrants were not enumerated in the census.

There are geographic dimensions to the ethnic diversity found in the city. Data on language have been reported only at the district level, but these too are indicative. They show that Urdu-speakers constitute an overwhelming majority only in the central district. Other districts are more heterogeneous.⁵³

Politics

Karachi's position in national politics has been shaped by three sets of relationships – between Karachi and the national mainstream, between Karachi and the rest of Sindh province, Sindh province and the Pakistani federation.

National electoral politics have been dominated by two large parties – the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and various factions of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) – that have alternated in power since the late 1980s. The PPP has a strong base in Sindh with the exception of Karachi, where it has historically managed to win a few seats only.⁵⁴ The MQM has been an important contender from Karachi and has won a majority of seats in the city in all elections that it has contested since 1988. Since then the party has been in coalition government with the PPP (1988 and 2008), and the PML (1990, 1997, and 2002) at the provincial or national levels. The MQM's partnership ended prematurely in all cases except for the government that it led in 2002. During the periods out of power in the 1990s MQM faced state persecution aimed at reducing its militant capability. This was the period when the party became a key ally of the military regime of General Pervez Musharraf.

Following the Devolution Plan in 2001, there have been two elections for forming the City District Government Karachi (CDGK). The MQM boycotted the first elections in 2001 with the result a coalition of religious parties won the mayor's office. However, in the next election in 2005, the MQM secured a landslide victory amid allegations of vote-rigging. At that time, the party also controlled the provincial government and was represented in the federal government. Following the 2008 national elections, the PPP gained power at the provincial and national government.⁵⁵ There were high profile attempts between leaders of the MQM and PPP, who had remained bitter rivals till then, to improve relations and to find some level of mutual accommodation. The MQM has remained in the provincial government as a junior partner in an uneasy coalition with the PPP. There has been considerable strain between the CDGK and the province as the two levels of government try to assert their authority in overlapping areas of jurisdiction.⁵⁶

Global dimension

Hosting Pakistan's key ports, and being the industrial and financial centre of the country, Karachi attracts a significant proportion of foreign investment entering

⁵³ See table on Ethnic Overtones in Support for Political Parties, Annex 2

⁵⁴ In the recent 2008 elections, the PPP won over a quarter of the popular vote in Karachi, but only 3 out of the 20 national assembly seats in the city (Cheema et al, 2008).

⁵⁵ Refer Section II Annex, Table on Political Parties in Power at the Local, Provincial and National Level

⁵⁶ Dawn News reports: <http://www.dawn.com/2008/06/30/local1.htm>, <http://www.dawn.com/2008/06/13/local1.htm> and <http://www.dawn.com/2008/07/06/local1.htm>

Pakistan. In recent years, the city has attracted hefty foreign investments in real estate and infrastructure development from real estate developers in UAE.⁵⁷ Investments in the stock exchange and real estate are propelled by the government's promises of providing security and stabilization and also the cordial relations between the Pakistani politicians and UAE government and investors.

Having a strategic geopolitical relevance, Karachi has also attracted promises of investment for urban and infrastructural development from the US.⁵⁸ In a recent visit to Karachi, Senator Casey visited Port Qasim and remarked that the port facility was a preventive tool in the global war on terror, and that it will make "our borders safer and will also increase the economic efficiency of Pakistani exports".⁵⁹ Karachi's ports are key links to US-led military effort in Afghanistan.

Foreign governments have developed unusual stakes in the city's politics. The leader of Karachi's largest party MQM has resided in London since 1992, and has acquired UK citizenship. Many of his trusted lieutenants also reside in London. The leader of the PPP Benazir Bhutto and her family split their years of exile between Dubai and London. It is known that the UK and UAE governments played an important role in political negotiations between the PPP and the military government in Pakistan. It is possible that similar efforts at intermediation might have been undertaken with respect to maintaining the peace in Karachi.

3. Received explanations

Existing explanations for Karachi's descent into conflict and violence have focused on five main themes: (a) ethnicity and ethnic identity, (b) organizations, (c) political conspiracies, (d) economic frustration, and (e) external events. There is, of course, a great deal of overlap between these various lines of thought. Here they are examined separately in order to draw out some salient features of the received argument.

Ethnic identity

A great deal of attention has been drawn, understandably, to ethnic identity. Muhajir ethnic identity in particular has proved to be particularly absorbing to researchers and commentators alike, who were fascinated by efforts of disparate groups migrants to reconstitute themselves into a distinct ethnic and even "national" community.⁶⁰ The tendency to view Karachi's conflict and violence in terms of ethnicity is partly a response to the openly expressed opinions of the main protagonists. The MQM did, after all, start its campaign on the slogan of representing an embattled and marginalized "Muhajir" community, and the necessity of armed resistance for the protection of that community.

⁵⁷ The News, 2008. website: http://www.thenews.com.pk/daily_detail.asp?id=92223 accessed August 7, 2008

⁵⁸ Business Recorder, 2008 website: <http://www.brecorder.com/index.php?id=738056&currPageNo=1&query=&search=&term=&supDate> = accessed August 7, 2008

⁵⁹ US embassy Press Release May 2008. website: <http://karachi.usconsulate.gov/k-08052701.html>

⁶⁰ Baig 2005

The simplistic view is that Karachi is an artificial amalgam of diverse ethnic groups, and it is but natural that there will be turf battles or worse between them. A more sophisticated rendering recalls that while identity politics offer a natural mode of mobilisation to certain classes, group identity can be very fluid in South Asia, and the salience of any particular identity often depends on the precise political context.⁶¹ The conflict between Muhajirs and Pashtuns or Muhajirs and Sindhis represent economic contests over resources, and these contests are typical within classes that subsist on public resources.⁶²

Some ethnic explanations focus on the relative decline in the Muhajirs' political and economic position as they lost out to other groups, having started with a major advantage.⁶³ It has been argued that in the beginning, Urdu-speaking migrants from India were more educated and therefore better-placed to access government jobs and private sector business opportunities. Over time Punjabis challenged their domination of top government positions, and this process was accelerated when the civil bureaucracy lost out to the military in its control over the state. There were further losses when the revived process of political representation in the 1970s reduced the Urdu-speaking community to the status of a political and ethnic minority in its adopted province of Sindh. The relative decline, yet absolute advantage, in economic and political fortunes is thought to have given rise to feelings of alienation, thus spurring on support for a clear articulation of Muhajir identity. Some commentators have gone as far as to claim that there is historical continuity between the Muslim sense of relative decline in India and Muhajir nationalism.

Organizations

Another popular approach is to understand conflict and violence in Karachi with reference to the internal workings of organizations that operate there. The MQM, again, is not an unsurprising candidate for analysis. Organizational analysis, however, also applies to state organizations such as different levels of government and public agencies. The focus on criminal gangs and their connections with political parties also properly comes under this heading.

Government failures of various types are often held responsible for conflict and violence in Karachi. The most fundamental government failure is the imbalance between elected and unelected organs of the state itself. Frequent disruptions in the democratic process are held responsible for the rise of extremist ideologies and organizations.⁶⁴ Other conspicuous government failures are to do with bad governance and rent-seeking behaviour on the part of the police and security services, and links between security personnel and criminals.⁶⁵ The existence of multiple governmental stakeholders in Karachi is seen as yet another organizational failure that leads to conflict and violence.

⁶¹ Alavi & Harris 1989; Haq 1995

⁶² Rashid & Shaheed 1993; Sahadevan 1999

⁶³ Waseem 1996

⁶⁴ Hasan 2002

⁶⁵ Suddle 2003

The internal workings of political parties, particularly the MQM, are thought to be proximate determinants of violence. It has been argued, for example, that the MQM and some other parties function as totalitarian entities that are premised on the application of violence within and outside.⁶⁶ Violence, therefore, is but a natural outcome of the organization model that has evolved in Karachi. Analyses that focus on the interaction of organizations with forms of youth culture fall in the same category.⁶⁷ The changing dynamics of the relationship between political parties and student groups is another strand in organizational analysis. The conventional pattern of parties forming their student wings is thought to have been reversed in the case of MQM which itself emerged out of the APMSO. This is thought to have had implications for the types of political activity that were prioritized by the party.⁶⁸

Political conspiracies

Popular discourse sees conflict and violence as part of wider conspiracies that are directed to achieve political goals. There is, of course, a great deal of hard and anecdotal evidence that connects particular violent events with deliberate but hidden policy actions. The role of state secret agencies in nurturing various ethnic and sectarian organizations, engineering splits, providing arms and training, and even instigating acts of political violence have been widely discussed in Pakistan. Investigative reporting has yielded some useful information and insight. The provenance of a large number of organizations including the Jamaat-e-Islami, the MQM and its factions, various other ethnic groups, sectarian groups such as the anti-Shia SSP, the Sunni Tehreek (ST), *jihadi* organizations, and criminal gangs has been traced back powerful secret agencies. There are also frequent allegations that various organizations have worked for foreign intelligence organizations⁶⁹.

Wider political conspiracies relate to machinations of particular governments to influence the ethnic demographic make-up of particular regions in order to gain firmer control over them, or fomenting violence in order to sabotage the economic potential of a city in order to put an alternate city in a position of advantage. There is a further idea that violent ethnic and sectarian politics are deliberately promoted at times in order to prop up dictators and to subvert democratic movements. Many of these explanations of violence are tenable, given that key actors in the state are caught expressing opinions that are consistent with such conspiracies. An important consequence of the political conspiracy theories of all hues is that they erase the distinction between state and non-state violence.

Economic frustration

Economic frustration, particularly youth unemployment, is often used as a way of understanding the rise in violent crime. Party-political rhetoric has sometimes played upon feelings of economic frustration in order to solidify support for identity-based mobilisation. The rising tide of consumerism coupled with low rates of job growth is thought to have fuelled street crime and other violent misdemeanours. Explanations

⁶⁶ HRCP 2007; Korejo 2002

⁶⁷ Verkaaik 2004; Khan 2007

⁶⁸ Ahmar 1996; Haq 1995; Kennedy 1991

⁶⁹ Shah, not dated

concerned with demographic and inter-generational dynamics also focus on economic frustration as a determinant of violence.

Some of the arguments for ethnic solidarity are based on rivalry between groups in access to limited public sector jobs or educational opportunities.⁷⁰ Alavi's salariat framework provides a good entry point into this discussion. It has also been argued that violent organizations have offered young men from poor families with a sense of empowerment over older generations, as well as the more affluent classes.⁷¹

External factors

Finally, factors external to the city are thought to have played an important role in pushing Karachi towards conflict and violence. The growth of the city was itself a consequence of larger political events – notably the partition of India and related demographic changes. Other regional conflicts too had a major impact. The civil war in East Pakistan and the liberation of Bangladesh brought new refugees, and led to further anxieties concerning ethnic demographic balances.

The war in Afghanistan affected Pakistan in general and Karachi too in specific ways. There was an influx of Afghan refugees that added a new dimension to the trajectory of migration in the city. The war in Afghanistan was also associated with the breakdown of many established systems of governance. The Pakistan government became an active participant in the war while maintaining a public posture of non-interference. This required the development of a parallel institutional infrastructure and the loosening of formal controls over illicit trade and unregulated currency movements.

The proliferation of unregulated weapons markets is thought to have led to a rapid increase in the availability of sophisticated armaments to non-state actors. The conduct of the war in Afghanistan had already resulted in a blurring of the boundaries between state and non-state actors in the first instance. Small arms including automatic assault rifles, handguns and rocket launchers were readily available on the black market and found their way in the hands of various student groups and political parties.

4. Openness and informality

The five themes outlined above encompass much of the existing discussion – scholarly, political and policy-oriented – on conflict and violence in Karachi. Taken together these five themes provide a convincing account of the qualitative and quantitative changes in the city over the decades, particularly since the mid-1980s. There are, of course, gaps and limitations, but none that are insurmountable to research. For example, the ethnic identity approach can be developed further to include issues of economic class and their interaction with ethnicity. The acknowledged fluidity of identity preferences can also be operationalized further to

⁷⁰ The tension between Muhajirs and Sindhis is often dated back to the introduction of separate urban and rural quotas for government jobs and higher education places. See Kennedy 1984.

⁷¹ Alavi & Harris 1989

understand the dynamics of ethnic identity construction over other forms. There is, clearly, scope for empirical work on the relationship between economic conditions and criminal and political violence. Likewise, archival and interview-based research can reveal yet more insights into “political conspiracies” affecting various stakeholders.

While accepting the need to deepen research in all of these areas, this paper proposes a complementary institutional approach that focuses on two outstanding and incontrovertible aspects of Karachi’s urbanity – migration and informality. It draws on an impressive body of work done by heterodox urban planners and analysts that has placed informal public provisioning at the core of Karachi’s growth experience.⁷² This perspective on Karachi can be viewed, of course, in the broader context of scholarly work on the informal urban sector in developing countries.⁷³ The point of departure of the thesis pursued here is the inductive premise that an understanding of Karachi’s experience with conflict and violence should be informed by the specific (and much analyzed) trajectory of urbanisation here.

It is proposed here that the growth of political violence in Karachi was an outcome of the very processes that made Karachi an open city in the first instance. The high rate of migration coincided with an erosion of the formal sector’s capacity for supplying basic infrastructure or regulating the use of existing infrastructure. This resulted in the mushrooming of an informal response, which was in turn aided and abetted by state organizations and personnel.⁷⁴ It is estimated, for example, that 50 per cent of the city’s population resides in localities which settled informally.⁷⁵ Informality is taken to mean that the land was illegally or irregularly acquired, or there were gross violations of existing regulations concerning land use. About 47 per cent of the city’s water needs were supplied using water tankers, a majority of whom withdrew water from hydrants managed by the water utility.⁷⁶ Public transport systems were dominated by private contractors who informally managed bus routes, ran unregistered bus stands, and charged and enforced user fees from individual bus operators. In all of these activities state organizations and their personnel were active participants and colluders, and charged systematic bribes.⁷⁷ The heterodox view in urban planning is that the informal sector was an effective provider of public goods and services particularly to the poor.

The informalization of public provisioning, however, was premised on two institutional deviations. First, the large-scale legitimisation of private non-state arrangements for contract enforcement, and second, the strengthening of existing or nascent social networks based on bonds of family, ethnicity, and religious and sectarian identity. For the large segments of the economy that operated informally, the formal policing, legal and judicial systems were unlikely to help in contract enforcement and dispute arbitration. These two institutional deviations – non-state

⁷² Arif Hasan, Tasneem Siddiqi and Perween Rahman leading proponents of this viewpoint, worked alongside Akhtar Hameed Khan who was a pioneering teacher-activist on the process of urban community development. See Hasan 2002.

⁷³ De Soto 2000.

⁷⁴ Linden, 1991.

⁷⁵ Hasan & Mohib, not dated

⁷⁶ Rahman 2008

⁷⁷ Ismail, 2002

enforcement, and salience of social networks based on prior notions of solidarity -- which were necessary for the expansion of the informal sector, also became conspicuous features of the city's politics. The next section presents case studies of six disparate low income localities in Karachi in order to gain a micro-level view of informality, regularization and enforcement.

5. Land and housing

This section presents brief case studies of six localities across Karachi, that were established at different stages in the city's development. The case studies are based on qualitative data collected by the authors in these localities over the last five years. These data consist mostly of interviews with local residents, including political representatives and community leaders, and direct observations. The six localities were all considered to be relatively low income areas and had undergone various processes of regularization over time. One consideration in selecting these six localities was to ensure that taken together they provide a reasonable representation of the city's ethnic heterogeneity.

The case studies presented here focus on the issue of land and housing. As noted above, the reliance on and proliferation of informal provisioning of public goods and services has been a conspicuous feature of Karachi's growth. Nearly all of the case studies are stories of displacement, migration, encroachment and stage-wise regularization. Questions about dispute resolution, contract enforcement and collective action were also addressed, and some of the narratives from these localities are summarized here. Some details of the settlements, socio-economic data from secondary sources, and an inventory of public services are provided in Annex 3.

Natha Khan Goth

The oldest inhabitants of the Natha Khan Goth are a cluster of ethnic Sindhi families of the Panhwar tribe. The Panhwars are thought to be among the oldest inhabitants inland of Karachi, and their presence here was recorded in the early colonial documents of the mid-19th century. The original Natha Khan Goth or village was named after their ancestor who held over a hundred acres of land in an area that is currently part of a military cantonment. Natha Khan was a farmer and cattle-herder who became rich through supplying fresh vegetables and dairy to the fast-growing city of Karachi in the early part of the 20th century. In 1907 the British colonial government required more land to expand its military facilities in Karachi. The Natha Khan village was evicted and in compensation the family was allotted around 17 acres of undeveloped land further away from the city centre. This is the location of the present-day Natha Khan Goth.

After independence there was a steady wave of migration from the northern regions of Pakistan, and ethnic Pashtun migrants from various districts of the North-West Frontier Province began to arrive in Natha Khan. There was plenty of land then, and the Sindhi landowners began to charge rents from the Pashtun migrants for putting up make-shift huts on their land. A fight broke out over the payment of rents which developed into a feud between the Sindhis and the Pashtuns, lasting several years and causing six deaths. Sindhis claimed that the Pashtuns were emboldened by their

rising numbers and the tacit support they received from fellow Pashtun state personnel. Pashtun hold that the land actually did not belong to the Sindhis in any case, and that they used to demand rent in the early years due to their sheer numerical and political strength. There is agreement, however, that before the 1960s the Pashtuns were few in number and paid rent to Natha Khan, whereas from the 1960s they began to constitute an overwhelming majority and stopped paying rent.

There were other important stakeholders too. They included state organizations including the military, the railways, and the civil aviation authority. Natha Khan's descendents claim that they were the original owners of the land at the present site of the village or at its original location closer to the city centre, were not accepted by the state authorities. The relevant agency in this case was the cantonment board that claimed to have acquired the land from the provincial government for defence purposes. Natha Khan was not the owner but had been allowed use of the land for farming and raising dairy cattle. It is quite possible, of course, that Natha Khan's family were the original but unregistered owners of the land even before the cantonment board acquired it from the provincial government. In any case, the fact that Ghancha Gul who emerged as a key protagonist and leader on the Pashtun side was an employee of the cantonment board, fuelled Sindhi suspicions that the cantonment board and other state authorities had become partial to the Pashtuns. The Sindhis linked this suspicion with their reading of national politics that the 1960s military government was led by Pashtun officers.

In the 1980s there was an opening for people living in irregular settlements to get their settlements officially notified and to obtain lease documents from the government. The authorities accepted the claims of the Pashtun neighbourhoods for regularization. The few Sindhi families did not apply for regularization because they argued that they already held the title not only to their own part of Natha Khan Goth but also to the land on which the Pashtun neighbourhoods had been settled.

Informal community organizations were active in the Pashtun neighbourhoods. These were based on the district of origin of the various migrants who were settled in distinct quarters within Natha Khan. These quarters were named after the place of origin – such as Swabi, Mardan and Kohat – in the NWFP. One of the main functions of the community organizations was that they acted as funeral insurance clubs. Members contributed a small annual fee, and were ensured that in case of death the organization will make arrangements for transporting the body for burial in the district of origin.

Lines Area

The (British Indian) military controlled large tracts of land in the city centre and in one part of this land barracks and houses had been constructed for troops and officers based in Karachi during the Second World War. At the time of independence and partition displaced people flooded into Karachi from western and northern provinces of India - particularly Uttar Pradesh (then United Provinces), Bihar, Madhya Pradesh (then Central Provinces), Rajasthan (then Rajputana) and Gujarat (then Bombay). These mostly Urdu-speaking migrants and their descendants are also known as Muhajir (refugee). The barracks and houses near the city centre were named after campaigns and officers of the British Indian army and came to be known collectively as

the Lines Area. The Lines Area consists of the Jacob, Jutland, Tunisia, and Abyssinia Lines as well as a number of adjoining settlements that started life as encroachments on military land.

When Karachi started receiving large numbers of displaced people the government decided to allow refugee camps to spring up on unused public and private land in and around the city. The city was also the capital of the newly formed state and a majority of the central government employees were Muslim officers and staff who had “opted” for Pakistan at the time of the partition. There was a serious housing crisis for government employees of all ranks arriving from India, and the unused military housing of the Lines Area were handed over to them as a temporary measure. Publicly-owned open space around the Lines Area became a vast refugee camp. After a few years the refugees were still there, and had converted their tents into more durable dwellings, but with minimal public infrastructure.

Some ten years after independence and the arrival of the first refugees the central government, which was still in charge of Karachi by the virtue of being the national capital, began an eviction drive in the city centre. Around the Lines Area the main focus of the eviction drive was to clear the main thoroughfares and to create a large public park to house the mausoleum of the state’s founding father who had died in 1948. Work on the mausoleum and the evictions started in earnest in 1958 with the coming into power of the military regime of Ayub Khan. It was felt by some that the civilian governments of the 1950s had been reluctant to forcibly evict the refugees due to political compulsions. Leading Muslim politicians who had migrated to Pakistan from India did not have support bases in the country and localities such as the Lines area and surrounding refugee camps offered the possibility of developing territorial constituencies. The military government had no such constraints and many refugees from the city centre were relocated to new localities several kilometres in the suburbs. The Lines Area as it is known today consists of old military quarters, and the irregular settlements that survived the eviction drives of the 1950s and the 1960s.

There were two types of quarters in the Lines Area – the former military houses under the possession of post-independence government employees, and the refugee camps turned into irregular settlements. The latter were clearly the more vulnerable to the threat of eviction, as had been demonstrated from time to time, but the former too carried uncertain rights of tenure.

The election of a civilian government in the 1970s brought greater security to the Lines Area. The new populist government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s PPP announced that it was going to regularize irregular settlements. This won the party some support in the area, and residents of one of the irregular settlements within the Lines Area renamed their locality Shahnawaz Bhutto Colony after the father of the prime minister. There was also an understanding that those government employees who had been housed in the former military houses would retain their homes even if the left government service or retired. In the event there was no formalization of property rights, even though rights of possession became secure and were transacted. Government departments began to supply services such as electricity, water and sanitation even to the irregular settlements in the Lines Area.

One of the local leaders who emerged in the late 1970s was Zahoor Bhopali who campaigned against evictions and for infrastructure development. He was from a better-off part of the Lines Area and was known as an educated and literary man. Bhopali began his political career as an activist of a moderate Islamic party. After the military coup against Bhutto's government Bhopali was befriended by the army chief Zia-ul-Haq. He used his connection with Zia to gain further concessions for the Lines Area. Bhopali based his local mobilization on ethnic grounds - he broke with the Islamic party and set up a local group that paid explicit attention to the conditions of the Muhajirs. He was assassinated by unknown persons in 1980.

Soon after the MQM began to mobilize young Muhajirs also on ethnic grounds. The founding leader of the MQM Altaf Hussain was a former resident of the Lines Area, and he was able to gain influence there quickly. While Bhopali had been seen as an educated and cultured notable, the MQM political model was based on youth mobilization, irreverence, and armed force. In the late 1980s MQM cadres were involved in conflicts with non-Muhajir residents of Lines Area and in one incident several houses belonging to ethnic Pashtuns were set alight. They and many other non-Muhajirs including ethnic Punjabis and Sindhis were forced to leave the neighbourhood. In the 1990s the Lines Area was a major site of conflict between rival MQM factions, and MQM factions and the police. Some well-known MQM armed cadres were from this area and a number of them were killed in clashes with the security forces.

Akhtar Colony

Akhtar Colony came up in the 1960s as a result of eviction. Its residents originally occupied a stretch of land close to a railway line, and had to move when the military authorities acquired that area to construct a hospital. Most of the residents were migrant from Punjab who were employed in menial jobs in various government departments. Job opportunities had opened up when the provinces of West Pakistan were merged into one unit in 1955, making residents of Punjab and NWFP eligible for provincial government employment in Karachi. Many were civilian employees of the military. When they were evicted from their original place of settlement they moved a little further away beyond the perimeter of a planned upper-class housing society for military officers. The area was not designated for formal development because it was close to a seasonal river and was low-lying and flood prone.

The retired army commander for Karachi - a General Akhtar Pagganwala – helped these migrants to acquire secure tenurial rights to their plots as well as basic physical infrastructure. He was one among several senior military and civil officers who went out of their way to establish migrants' settlements in or around government or cantonment land. The colony named after its benefactor. Akhtar Colony developed into a middle class locality, and property prices in some of its segments are comparable with the rates prevailing in the neighbouring upper-class military officers' housing society. The colony remains predominantly ethnic Punjabi.

Kausar Niazi Colony

Kausar Niazi Colony is in the north-central part of the city in an area that was developed for formal housing schemes in the mid-1970s. Nawaz Khan was an ethnic Pashtun migrant worker from NWFP who came to Karachi in the 1960s. Like many other ethnic Pashtuns he started work as a travelling salesman, selling foreign-manufactured smuggled cloth fabric. As his business developed he moved to an undeveloped area close to a seasonal river. He first asked some families of Afghan nomads to set up camp in the area. He knew them through his trade – as they too brought smuggled cloth to sell in Karachi. Quite soon some 80 Afghan families arrived with their tents and started living here. Nawaz also approached other labourers to come and set up their makeshift huts. By 1970 there were some 200 families living in the area.

In the meanwhile the PPP had emerged as a new political party and Nawaz who had become visible as a community leader was invited to join it and become its local representative. The area was undeveloped and there was hardly any population at the time. In a few years Nawaz had developed links with a number of PPP leaders including Kausar Niazi, a minister in the cabinet of Zulfikar Bhutto. According to Nawaz, Niazi encouraged him to get more people to move to the area and to develop a political base for future elections. Nawaz named the settled after Kausar Niazi.

More migrants from NWFP, Punjab and other parts of the country started to arrive and settle in Kausar Niazi Colony. Nawaz was regarded as the *de facto* owner of the land, and he marked out individual plots of various sizes and sold them to the migrants. His connections with Kausar Niazi meant that the police and the city authorities were inhibited from demolishing the houses or evicting the settlement. As formal sector housing developed in the area, several stakeholders emerged claiming ownership of the land. The Karachi Development Authority (KDA) argued that it owned the land. Two private sector developers claimed that they had been allotted the land to develop formal sector housing. Nawaz was able to mobilize the residents to effectively resist attempts at demolition and eviction. There were clashes with the police in which several people were injured. A new law for regularizing irregular settlements was enacted in 1985, and this allowed Nawaz and other residents to get their settlement registered and regularized.

Noor-us-Sabeeh Mohalla

Noor-us-Sabeeh Mohalla is a quarter of a large informal settlement called Machhar Colony (mosquito colony) in the south of the city, close to the harbour. All of Machhar Colony including Noor-us-Sabeeh Mohalla is on land reclaimed from swamps and mangroves that used to get inundated by tidal flows. Officially the area comes under the jurisdiction of the Karachi Port Trust (KPT) which is a government-run authority for managing the Karachi port. Noor-us-Sabeeh Mohalla gets its name from a local ethnic Bengali community leader who first moved into his quarter of Machhar Colony.

Machhar Colony started to be colonized in the 1980s as migrant workers arrived from various places – including ethnic Pashtuns from the NWFP and ethnic Bengalis from Bangladesh and from other parts of the city. The colony started developing on low-lying swamp land close to the old city quarters of Lyari, which is dominated by the

ethnic Baloch and Kachhi communities. The Lyari Baloch dominated port labour and transport, and the Kachhis were traditionally a seafaring community. The new migrants too were engaged in these same sectors.

Noor-us-Sabeeh Mohalla was an extension of Machhar Colony into its farthest corner. Ethnic Pashtun land suppliers had first marked out plots of land with stone markings in the mid-1990s. They carried out some reclamation work later by bringing lorry-loads of earth fill to stem the tidal flow. The plots had already exchanged hands several times by the time the area was ready to be used. The sale would be recorded on stamp paper as a civil contract between the Pashtun land supplier and the buyer. It was not possible to conduct a proper land transaction, of course, because the land suppliers himself did not possess title. Noor-us-Sabeeh arrived here along with a number of other ethnic Bengali families from a more settled part of Machhar Colony in 2001. They bought the plots and continued with the reclamation work. Within a few years much of the area had been bought and settled, with the buyers constructing concrete structures.

Officials of the Karachi Port Trust (KPT) frequented the area and demanded bribes from the local residents as fees from protection against demolition and eviction. They also enforced informal regulation regarding housing size and structures. If, for example, a person raised an extra storey, the KPT officials had to be paid an additional fee. Police officers also came to the area to demand bribes against the threat of eviction and arrest. Since most of the ethnic Bengalis were irregular migrants from Bangladesh, they felt vulnerable to for the violation of immigration laws. Most of the houses in Noor-us-Sabeeh had electricity, and many of them had their own electric meters. In the records of the electricity company these meters were supposed to be located elsewhere, in a regularized part of the settlement. Electricity company officials took bribes from the local residents in order to fudge the record. There was no regular system of water supply in the quarter, though other parts of Machhar Colony did have piped water supply. Noor-us-Sabeeh residents maintained their own storage tanks and bought water from water-sellers.

In the initial period of the settlement the Pashtun land supplier had mediated relations with the police and KPT officials. As the settlement became more durable – through the arrival of more residents, the construction of concrete buildings, and the acquisition of electricity supply – the role of the Pashtun land supplier diminished. The residents dealt with the KPT and police officials themselves, or through Noor-us-Sabeeh. The Bengalis had brought with them a model of community known as the “Shamas” which consisted of a group of families that regarded themselves as a common entity with one leader. Noor-us-Sabeeh headed the Shamas and was looked upon to arbitrate internal disputes. This model though different from the kinship and tribe-based collective action common among other ethnic groups in Karachi served the same functions.

The ethnic Bengalis had developed close connections with the ethnic Baloch – many of whom were captains or owners of fishing vessels on which the Bengalis worked – and had migrated as far as Balochistan and Iran through Baloch social networks. The Bengalis received some measure of protection through their connection with the Baloch, who had greater access to political parties and leaders. Since around 2003

some Bengali youth had started working with the MQM. They had been supplied with handguns, and were sometimes called on to support party activities in other parts of the city.

Ghazi Goth

There is a stretch of high rocky ground in the north-east of the city which is surrounded by land designated by the city authorities for educational and recreational purposes. Some residents claim that the rocks are an ancient site of pilgrimage for local Hindus. In the mid-1990s the area now known as Ghazi Goth or Ghazi village had only a dozen or so households living in makeshift huts, and without any public utilities. They consisted of some Afghan nomadic families and handful of Bagris households from rural Sindh. The Bagris are a marginalized caste in the Hindu hierarchy, and are regarded as untouchable by high caste Hindus and Muslims alike. The Afghans and the Bagris were both involved marginalized economic activities such as rag-picking, begging and selling flowers at traffic junctions.

Ghazi Abdullah is a cleric who heads his own small Madrassa (religious school) which he starting building on state land in this area in the late 1990s. He is an ethnic Punjabi but lived in rural Sindh before moving to Karachi. He is known to have connections in the police and the administration. As Ghazi was developing his Madrassa he was introduced to Babra – a Hijra⁷⁸ through a mutual Sindhi acquaintance. Ghazi asked Babra to arrange to bring more people to live on the land surrounding his Madrassa. He was aware that Babra had many connections among the poor and marginalized groups and would be able to bring them to Ghazi Goth. At the time there were also evictions from a number of makeshift settlements that were mostly made up of poor migrants from southern Punjab and NWFP. Ghazi contacted the evicted families and asked them to settle in “his” village. Currently Ghazi Goth consists of over 300 households including Bagris, ethnic Seraikis from southern Punjab, Afghans, and Hijras. The common feature among all of them is that they are from socially marginalized groups and engaged in low status economic activities.

The land on which Ghazi Goth is settled belongs to the city authorities. Although there is no immediate private claimant – perhaps because the land is rocky and hard to develop for commercial purposes – the authorities regularly raid and demolish the huts. Most of the houses are still makeshift. There have been several occasions when the settlement was raised and the residents detained. Most of them have returned and rebuilt their huts. There has never been any attempt at demolishing the Ghazi’s Madrassa. There are no public utilities, although some Muslim families are allowed to take electricity from the Madrassa which does have a connection. There is a water mains that passes close by the settlement and residents have tapped into it. There are no drains and therefore no proper toilets. The residents have not paid anything to live here, and there has been no transaction of a possession. The only formal recognition of the existence of the settlement is that many residents have given Ghazi Goth as

⁷⁸ The Hijra or Khusra are a marginalized but socially accepted community of transvestite and transsexual men. Some homosexual and bisexual men also associate themselves with this community. The Hijras have well-defined community structures, and traditionally receive alms on special life cycle events such as weddings and births. Many of them work as beggars and some are engaged in sex work.

their residential address for their national identity cards, and this address has been accepted by the citizenship registration system.

6. Non-state violence and social networks

Karachi's phenomenal demographic growth was premised on large-scale migration from neighbouring states and other districts and provinces within Pakistan. The proliferation of irregular settlements, moreover, was a necessary condition for this migration. The city could not grow without an influx of labour. Nearly all formal sector housing developments, however, were designed for the upper and middle classes. In fact, given the excess demand for housing, any formal development was bound to end up as a middle or upper class locality. After all, secure title and property rights in land exist only in land that has been brought under specific formal sector housing schemes.

The rest of the land is subject to great variation and uncertainty in title and property rights. There is multiplicity of claimants, starting from "indigenous" communities (such as the Panhwar Sindhis of Natha Khan), the provincial government, city authorities, cantonment and military authorities, para-statal organizations (such as the port authority in Noor-us-Sabeeh), as well as various regular and irregular settlers.

For a poor migrant the informal sector would always be the natural destination, given that he or she would always be willing to trade in tenurial security for a price discount. The absence of clear title and property rights has not altogether prevented transactions from taking place. Informal institutions – the most important one being the commodification of possession – have led to a thriving market in low-cost housing. The cases of Kausar Niazi Colony and Noor-us-Sabeeh are obvious ones. The stage-wise development residential housing in these two localities shows that transactors do not wait for regularization before they start buying, selling and renting.

Each successive transaction can add value in the process by incrementally strengthening the security of the right to possession. The proliferation of informal transactions does not mean that these transactions are secure -- only that a risk discount is incorporated into the price. There are, of course, cases like Ghazi Goth where the political weakness of the resident communities ensures that the settlements never successfully climb the ladder of regularization. Ghazi Goth residents are the most marginalized segments of Pakistani society – due to caste, religion and profession. In fact, it is quite likely that they will have to leave to make room for slightly better off people if the patron of Ghazi Goth manages to secure his own position. His reason for inviting beggars to come and settle on the land were not very different for the reasons that Afghan nomads have been used by Pakistani Pashtun patrons, as in Kausar Niazi Colony – these are precisely the groups who will put up with the extremely insecure tenure that the early stages of land development have to offer.

The informal sector does not operate in isolation from formal state agencies and service providers. The regularization of land title or the right to possession is only one conspicuous interface between the formal and the informal. The entire process of

informal housing development is premised on frequent transactions between private parties and state personnel. Sometimes the intervention is in the form of patronage – as in the cases of Akhtar Colony and possibly Natha Khan – where state officials acted as protectors of irregular settlements. In other cases the relationship is electoral – as in the Lines Area and Kausar Niazi Colony in the 1970s. In many instances, particularly the more recent ones, the interaction appears to be a purely commercial one. This is vividly illustrated in Noor-us-Sabeeh (Machhar Colony) where officials of the port authority allow residents to remain on land owned by the authority on the payment of bribes. In fact, numerous smaller transactions that contribute to the incremental regularization of a settlement involve bribes to local government officials, police, and agents of public utilities such as electricity, gas and water supply.

Violence and the threat of violence were recurrent methods for enabling transactions and the process of settlement and regularization. Forced eviction on the part of state authorities was a common feature in nearly all migration stories, at least in the beginning. The ability to inflict or withstand violence was an important characteristic of individuals and groups that first occupied state-owned land for development. Collective action, too, was a critically important feature in negotiating and re-negotiating property rights in an environment of institutional fluidity. Prior kinship and ethnic networks were conspicuous in both the story of migration, as well as the story of settlement and regularization. The presence of ethnic Pashtun land suppliers was particularly conspicuous. Their comparative advantage lay in their ability to credibly threaten the use of force⁷⁹, and to quickly mobilize large numbers of men on grounds of kinship and ethnic solidarity. Punjabi migrants, on the other hand, appeared to have relied more effectively on their social connections with state personnel, particularly in the military.

The case of the Lines Area shows that the formal recognition of tenurial security were not sufficient by themselves for ensuring effective security. Although a populist government had announced in 1975 that the residents would be awarded property rights, it was still many years later that public infrastructure followed. In the event formal individual titles were not granted even three decades and several policies later, even though it became increasingly difficult to evict the occupants. The Lines Area also provides an insight into the change in the nature of negotiation in the 1980s following the demise of Bhopali – who believed in petitioning the authorities – and the arrival of the MQM which took direct armed action to confront the authorities as well as other ethnic groups.

The rise of the MQM and other violent ethnic-based groups in the 1980s happened in a context where formal institutions of the state offered little contractual security to poor communities in the most fundamental sector – housing. There was a history of evictions, but also successful mobilization for resisting eviction, changing or bending land use regulations, and accessing public infrastructure. State personnel had every incentive to persist with irregularity as it became a major source of private income for the regulators. It was also clear that group-based mobilizations of various forms – mostly around kinship and ethnicity – yielded positive outcomes. Ethnic solidarity

⁷⁹ This was possible, partly due to reputation effects, and partly because wanted men could easily escape to their home districts after committing crimes.

had proved to pay high dividends – either through patronage of powerful individuals and organizations within the state, or through numerical mobilization.

As its cadres returned from the campuses to their low to middle-income communities, the MQM had little difficulty persuading fellow Muhajirs (and not only the youth) that they were surrounded by ethnic groups that enjoyed a high sense of kinship based solidarity and articulation. These other groups – particularly the ethnic Pashtuns – were also known for their ability to inflict and withstand violence. The Muhajirs, therefore, needed to counter the kinship-based solidarity internal to other ethnic groups through the formation of a dedicated and ideologically motivated organization. Moreover, this organization needed to be armed.

In fact, the MQM youth began to mimic many of the functions of ethnic communities they despised as being uncultured and unschooled. The focus shifted away from political issues to contract enforcement, dispute arbitration and policing within the Muhajir communities – and the collection of “donations” in order to finance the organizations’ activities. This form of self-governance had been common among many other ethnic groups with traditional forms of solidarity and leadership. Internal group sovereignty from state institutions was seen as a positive attribute at a time when state functionaries were seen as parasitic rent-seekers. The MQM attempted to transform the “Muhajir community” – whose numerous constituents had shed many of their parochial identities and traditional hierarchies at the moment of displacement in favour of a citizen-based identity -- into the largest and most powerful solidarity network in Karachi.

Informality in land ownership, but not just in land, offers a vast arena for the continuous negotiation and renegotiation of economic rents. This can be seen clearly if we compare the descriptions provided above with an alternate hypothetical scenario of land development. In fact, the development of upper class housing schemes such as the Defence Housing Authority can serve as an alternate model.⁸⁰ The DHA acquired land from the provincial government – which is the residual claimant to all land – for the purpose of allotting residential and commercial plots to retired military officers as rewards of service. It was assumed that the land did belong to the provincial government in the first instance. Rival claims of ownership on the part of the “indigenous” residents were brushed aside. The DHA being under the direct control of the local army commander, was able to impose a very low nominal transfer price with the provincial government.

The DHA developed the land and allotted it to military officers at prices that only covered the cost of development. Military officers promptly sell the plots on the market earning profits in the range of 200-300 per cent of the initial investment. DHA land is thought to be securely held, with a high level of trust in the legal title. There are strong checks against fraud and rival claims. The margin earned by the military officers represents an economic rent on the use-value of the land, but also includes a premium on the security of the title. The economic rent incorporates the military authorities’ ability to effect and enforce an initial transaction with the provincial government, and to enforce subsequent contracts. It also incorporates the expectation that the military authorities will not themselves act in predatory manner with respect

⁸⁰ The description of DHA land processes draws on Siddiqa (2007).

to owners in the DHA. This latter expectation is partly based on a self-fulfilling prophecy – since most buyers and residents in DHA are themselves wealthy and powerfully-connected individuals. The economic rent, in any case, is virtually all concentrated in the first transaction whose beneficiary is the individual military officer.

By contrast, the cases of low to middle income settlements in Karachi have shown that there is a steady process of economic rent creation and appropriation, as land changes possession and use. The process is punctuated by political mobilization, collective action, and violent conflict. There is no binary division, therefore, between the formal and informal sectors. Rather, there is a continuous process of formalization – not always linear – in which economic rents are created and appropriated (sometimes destroyed) through political means. The DHA case is also, of course, one of the political appropriation of rents, but the political mobilization and the rent appropriation are both concentrated at one point. In Kausar Niazi colony, by contrast, there were multiple stakeholders that sequentially participated in and benefited from the accretion of economic rents.

7. Negotiation and renegotiation of rents

The institutional approach to understanding conflict and violence in Karachi suggests a strong underlying willingness and ability on the part of agents to conduct economic transactions that might be illegal but are considered to be socially legitimate. It might be argued, in the spirit of de Soto (2000), that the formalization of private property rights in land (and the reduction of unnecessary and rent-creating regulation), will undermine the legitimacy of non-state violence and informal social networks. Our case studies from Karachi suggest, however, that the assignment of property rights in land will itself generate conflict and violence, because of the high degree of contestation over claims. Moreover, the process of regularization creates new economic rents that are contested, negotiated and renegotiated.

Karachi's disarticulation from the national political mainstream was driven only in part by the ideology and organizational characteristics of the MQM. In reality, political life in the city was already dominated by local contests over economic rents. As the city grew without corresponding increases in investments in infrastructure and public services, the informal sector grew disproportionately. The city was open for migrants and displaced people – all they had to figure out was which rung of the socio-economic ladder was theirs to start with.

There was nothing inevitable about Muhajir ethnic mobilisation, or the nature of the organization that emerged as the self-proclaimed protector of the city's largest "ethnic" group. But the notion of a citizenship-based urban community with claims on the state, pursued through formal administrative, political and legal routes was already long in disrepair by the 1980s. Migrants from India had once been the most prominent candidates for non-parochial modern citizenship in Pakistan – due to their urbanity, loosening of traditional hierarchies, and relatively high reliance on formal sector economic opportunities. It was ironic that they gave birth to an organization

that took non-state violence and ethnic solidarity to hitherto unknown levels in Karachi.

It was not just about the MQM. Other groups and factions, many of them much smaller than the MQM, followed similar methods and technologies. The breakaway MQM-Haqiqi faction which emerged under official patronage during periods of state suppression of the mainstream MQM was little different in attempting to assume the role of local enforcement. Various religious groups too operated in similar manner, often with state support. In many of the tougher neighbourhoods there was little difference between criminal gangs and the youth cadre of political and religious factions.

The escalation in violence in the late 1980s and early 1990s was triggered by party-political conflict with ethnic overtones. There was also a trajectory, however, of organizations (predominantly MQM factions at that time) expanding their bases and projecting power within low and middle-income localities. In other words, as student activists-turned political cadres became successful in challenging existing non-state enforcers, particularly those from other ethnic groups, they were encouraged to expand the scope of their actions and violence. Rents had been renegotiated and for the players involved there were few apparent hurdles to further expansion.

The checks, when they did come, originated not from rival ethnic parties or non-state actors that had lost rank to the MQM, but the state itself. The successive state campaigns to curb the activities of the MQM in the 1990s were initiated with the explicit purpose of limiting the challenge the organization was perceived to have posed to the coercive superiority of the state apparatus. The coalition of forces that acted against the MQM in the 1990s included important segments of the state security apparatus, national and provincial political parties, and the industrial and business elite.

These three groups had quite disparate motives, but were all clear that the MQM's brand of politics had finally reached its natural limits. The city's business elite which had once voluntarily financed the MQM's rise from low and middle income communities into provincial and national politics – as a counter to its perceived political disadvantage vis-à-vis Punjab-based business – was now desperate for state protection from the MQM. Voluntary donations had turned into extortion, frequent city-wide strikes raised costs and uncertainty, and the rise in violent crime had become a physical threat to the business elite and their families. For the mainstream political parties – the PPP and the Muslim League, particularly the former – the MQM was a maverick and unreliable bloc that negotiated irrationally, and destabilised elected national and provincial governments. The state institutions that had, like the business elite, once encouraged the rise of MQM to reduce the influence of mainstream political parties, now perceived a security threat in the organization. The fact that Karachi was a conduit for much of the country's foreign trade, and a source of the greater proportion of tax revenue collection, meant that it could not be simply handed over to any one political organization.

The MQM itself had enjoyed such rapid success in imposing its will in the communities where it had emerged, that it was barely conscious of the fact that it had

crossed a line. The incoherent and equivocal law enforcement efforts from around 1989 onwards might have encouraged MQM leaders and supporters to doubt the state's resolve and ability in challenging the party's rise. In the event the crackdown between 1993 and 1996 was severe and determined. MQM's top leadership fled the country and many of its key militant activists as well as ordinary members and supporters were killed. The stranglehold had been broken, and apart from human rights activists there were few voices in the political and civil society that objected to the repression. There were signs of disaffection even in the MQM's core constituency among Karachi's Muhajir communities. Frequent strikes and shut downs, rising crime, and the transformation of voluntary donations into extortion had taken the gloss off the party's image.

The resuscitation of the party in the late 1990s, and then its revival and rehabilitation in 2002 were premised on a conspicuous change in nomenclature. In 1997 after a period of intense struggle in which it lost many of its cadres – and inflicted heavy casualties on police and civilians alike – the MQM changed its name from Muhajir to Muttahida Quami Movement (united national movement).⁸¹ It abandoned the cause of “Muhajir nationalism” in favour of a broader cross-ethnic base. This change, even though it was suspected by some MQM detractors as superficial and tactical, did represent a significant rhetorical retreat from the days when MQM leaders had encouraged talk of the “Muhajir nation” creating its own nation-state. When the party was finally brought back from the cold into government in 2002, it made a concerted effort to cultivate sources of funding that were less visible to its political constituency than door-to-door extortion visits.

Interestingly, rival parties that had been marginalized through the use of force, including assassination of cadres, and violent disruption of political activities, were able to revive their political positions in Karachi during the very period when the MQM had complete monopoly over the government machinery. Between 2005 and 2007 the city government and the Sindh provincial government was controlled by the party, which was also a key stakeholder in the national government. The May 12 2007 events are regarded as a watershed in this regard, when MQM rivals (particularly the PPP and the ANP) showed their ability to resist an all-out attempt on the part of the MQM to control the streets. Other events, such as the city-wide shutdown in the aftermath of Benazir Bhutto's assassination also demonstrated that parties other than the MQM could make their presence felt powerfully. The geography of these recent events – in which the city was roughly divided between the centre and the periphery – suggests an explanation.

The pace of land acquisition, changes in land use, and regularization in and around Karachi has quickened significantly since around 2001. Some of the factors as exogenous ones, including the rise in property prices, increases in the supply of cash, and the virtual integration of Karachi and the rest of Pakistan with the global real estate market. Domestically, the revival of the national economy through post-9/11 foreign assistance following a period of stagnation released pent-up domestic demand for housing. In Karachi the increased demand for land and housing – or for targets of speculative investment in real estate – coincided with the consolidation of city

⁸¹ It has been suggested that this change was demanded by powerful players within the state including the military and the secret agencies as a precondition for protecting party leaders from persecution.

governance into the City District Government of Karachi.⁸² Another related development was the pushing through of a large highway project within the city leading to the displacement of some 20,000 homes in irregular settlements.⁸³

Land acquisition on the part of the government and private developers meant pressure on irregular settlements across the city. The inclusion of outlying areas of Karachi into municipal jurisdiction meant that this pressure now extended to old villages some of them claiming ancestral ownership of land, often without legal title – much in the way of the ethnic Sindhis of Natha Khan in the case studies of Section 5. The existing stakeholders and transactors in the informal sector include entrepreneurs like Nawaz Khan of Kausar Niazi Colony, and ethnic Pashtun land suppliers of Machhar Colony. The MQM, in the meanwhile, appeared on the scene both in the shape of the city government, and despite its change of nomenclature, as an ethnic party promoting the interests of “its community”. The resulting contest – which like the processes of regularisation described in Section 5 – was one about economic rents and acquired ethnic-political overtones. The ethnic Sindhis, Baloch, and Pashtuns in the existing irregular settlements within the city, and in the expanding areas in the city’s periphery were ready support bases for the return of major political parties such as the PPP and the ANP.⁸⁴ These parties consolidated the anti-MQM sentiment (and vote) in the non-Muhajir irregular settlements within the city, and in the rural/irregular settlements around the periphery.

The factors which had provided an easy entry point to the entry to the MQM in many low and middle income areas in Karachi in the 1980s, now worked to the advantage of rival parties in other areas. These parties whose mobilisation in the past used to be focused on broader provincial and national political issues – even if they did invoke regional and ethnic identities – had taken MQM’s lead of involving themselves in the internal politics of irregular settlements and regularization.⁸⁵ The active interface between internal community politics of regularization and national and provincial parties like the PPP and ANP meant, paradoxically, that Karachi’s political life was once again making an entry into the national mainstream. Unlike the MQM, these other parties had wider ethnic bases that were not limited to Karachi. Whether, and to what extent, the emerging political situation will take Karachi back towards violent political and ethnic conflict remains to be seen.

Finally, it is pertinent to ask if the institutional approach to understanding conflict and violence in Karachi has anything to say about the process of pulling away from the brink. If non-state violence and informal social networks are legitimized because they

⁸² Authors’ interview with Ms Perween Rahman, director of OPP-RTI.

⁸³ Hasan 2008

⁸⁴ Among the early signs, well before the May 12 events, was a city-wide peaceful strike on XXXX called by a coalition of ethnic Sindhi and Pashtun organizations to protest against eviction drives of the city government. The mobilization for this strike portrayed city government actions as attacks on the position of particular ethnic communities.

⁸⁵ Although the PPP was mentioned as a player in the regularization of the Lines Area and Kausar Niazi Colony (Section 5) its role was a relatively distant one. Local land suppliers or community leaders had used their connections with the PPP leadership, and even more remotely, the government had taken the populist decision to announce regularization. The micro-process of regularization, however, had not then been owned by the party. The anti-MQM consolidation of the recent years, therefore, was a new development.

facilitate informal economic transactions, is there a counter process of delegitimization of actions that disrupt economic activity?

There is a sense that this is what happened in the 1990s when the MQM was seen to have gone too far. Former supporters in the state apparatus and in the business elite backed away when the renegotiation of economic rents threatened to damage the very basis of economic activity in the city. Supportive communities too appeared unwilling to sustain economic disruption. The social acceptance of non-state violence was easier to justify as long as it was based on the facilitation of illegal yet legitimate economic transactions. Similar pressures appeared to operate on the political leaderships on all sides during recent instances of city-wide violence which were brought under control before they could escalate into wider political or ethnic conflict.

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Annex 1: Statistics on Violence in Karachi

Killings in Karachi 1994-2004

YEAR	CPLC Karachi KILLINGS	HRCP Karachi KILLINGS
1994	813	1105
1995	1742	3137
1996	166	400
1997	396	856
1998	667	1178
1999	85	546
2000	84	452
2001	107	86+203
2002	87	60+90
2003	76	364
2004	163	339

Source: Unpublished data provided to the authors by the Citizens Police Liaison Committee (CPLC), and authors' compilation from annual reports of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

HRCP annual reports Data for Sectarian Violence

Year	Killed in Sectarian Violence	Shia
1994	57	49
1995	74	56
1996	14	
1997	165	95 (6 doctors)
1998	6	
1999	110	68 (3 doctors)
2000	18	(8 doctors)
2001	86	
2002	90	9 doctors
2003	22	
2004	50	

Source: Authors' compilation from annual reports of the HRCP

Breakdown of Killings (in Karachi) compiled from HRCP reports

Breakdown of killings	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Killed in sniper firing	441	587	155		142	
Target killings					48	30
Torture inflicted by non state actors	162	238	130			
Police Encounters	44	76	89			36
Staged Encounters	19	NA	57			
Death in police custody	22	36	NA			
Others killed (bomb blasts etc)		34	44		13	
Law enforcing personnel killed		65	30			
Women and Children		144	98			

Total	682	1178	546	452	203	66
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Source: Authors' compilation from annual reports of the HRCP

Annex 2: Election Outcomes in Karachi, Sindh and Pakistan

Ethnic Overtones in Support for Political Parties

	Central	East	Malir	South	West	Total
Language prevalence (1998 census)	Urdu 73.6%	Urdu 60%	Urdu 48.5%, Sindhi 7.22%, Pashto 11.42%	Urdu 15.9%, Sindhi 25.1%, Pashto 20.7%	Urdu 39.6%, Sindhi 6%, Pashto 5.95%	Urdu 48.5%, Sindhi 7.22%, Pashto 11.42%
National assembly elections 2008:						
Party seats						
MQM	5	5	1	3	3	17
PPP	0	0	1	1	1	3
Total	5	5	2	4	4	20
Vote share (per cent)						
MQM	91.6	77.1	42.1	47.4	60.1	69.5
PPP	7.3	18.3	50.9	39.0	27.8	23.9
Provincial assembly elections 2008:						
Party seats						
ANP			1		1	2
MQM	10	12	1	5	6	34
PPP			2	2	2	6
Total	10	12	4	7	9	42
Vote share (per cent)						
ANP	0.0	0.0	9.2	0.1	6.1	2.2
MQM	82.1	80.8	31.8	41.6	59.3	66.2
PPP	5.7	12.6	48.4	43.4	26.5	21.6

Source: Authors' calculations

Political Parties in Power at the Local, Provincial and National Level

Year	Karachi	Sindh	Pakistan
2001	Jamat e Islami	Military Govt.	Military Govt.
2002	Jamat e Islami	PML and MQM	PML
2003	Jamat e Islami	PML and MQM	PML
2004	Jamat e Islami	PML and MQM	PML
2005	MQM	PML and MQM	PML and MQM
2006	MQM	PML and MQM	PML and MQM
2007	MQM	PML and MQM	PML and MQM
2008	MQM	PPP, ANP, MQM	PPP, PML, ANP

Annex 3: Details on Fieldwork Localities

	Electricity	Gas	Water	Sewerage
Natha Khan	1980	1990	Tap, boring	Underground local drains, discharge into open main drain
Lines Area	1975	Supplied in 1975, formalized in 1993	1975	Fully serviced
Akhtar Colony	Irregular connections 1970, formalized 1993	Fully serviced	Pre 1970, poor quality	Fully serviced
Kausar Niazi Colony	1988	1990	Illegal connections from main line	Underground local drains, discharge into open main drain
Noor-us-Sabeeh	Semi-legal metered supply	No	Water tankers	Open soak pits
Ghazi Goth	Private supply to some	No	Illegal excavation of main line, private supplier	No arrangement

Source: Authors' fieldwork

Data on fieldwork localities and corresponding census localities, towns and districts

Fieldwork locality	Corresponding census locality	Census locality	Census locality	Town	District	Fieldwork locality	Fieldwork locality
		Population	Literacy rate	Literacy rate	Predominant ethnic groups	Predominant ethnic groups	Date of first settlement
Natha Khan	Natha Khan	28,562	61.5	78.5	Urdu (61), Punjabi (15), Pashto (6), Sindhi (4)	Pashto, Sindhi	Pre-1930s
Lines Area	Lines Area	53,011	71.7	74.5	Urdu (61), Punjabi (15), Pashto (6), Sindhi (4)	Urdu	1940s
Akhtar Colony	Akhtar Colony	29,559	74.0	74.5	Urdu (26), Punjabi (18), Sindhi (11), Balochi (10)	Punjabi	1960s

Kausar Niazi Colony	Kausar Niazi Colony	21,059	50.0	80.2	Urdu (74), Punjabi (9), Pashto (5)	Pashto	1970s
Noor-us-Sabeeh	Machhar Colony	40,637	28.5	45.3	Urdu (40), Pushto (25), Punjabi (13)	Bengali	1980s
Ghazi Goth	Gulistan-e-Jauhar	25,847	66.0	72.5	Urdu (61), Punjabi (15), Pashto (6), Sindhi (4)	Seraiki, Sindhi	1990s

Source: Population Census 1998 and authors' fieldwork

Poverty, Migration, Protection and Conflict

Name of settlement	Socio-economic class	Place of origin	Contract enforcement and protection	Insecurity and conflict
Natha Khan Goth	Moderately poor	Indigenou s, NWFP	Informal ethnic organization, political groups, traditional elder	Conflict over land, ethnic conflict
Lines Area	Moderately poor	India	MQM factions	Party factional conflict
Akhtar Colony	Non-poor	Punjab, NWFP	UC Nazim, formerly military officer	No conspicuous conflict
Kausar Niazi Colony	Moderately poor	NWFP, others	UC Nazim, informal ethnic organization	Occasional ethnic violence
Noor-us-Sabeeh Mohalla	Poor	Banglade sh	Informal land supplier, KPT, MQM, Shamas	Threats of displacement, KPT/police extortion
Ghazi Goth	Very poor	Rural Sindh, southern Punjab	Cleric	Displacement by authorities

Source: Authors' fieldwork