

Migration Policy and Urban Governance: The Case of Karachi

Haris Gazdar
Collective for Social Science Research

Abstract

Karachi, with over 10 million residents, is the largest city of Pakistan. It accounts for over 7 per cent of the population, and for over 22 per cent of all people living in urban areas in the country. The city has recorded high rates of population growth over the last six decades. Its population increased nearly three-fold in the 1940s to over a million people in 1951, and has increased ten-fold since then. Migration has been a key determining factor in the growth of the city throughout its history, and transnational migration has been particularly important at critical junctures – in the 1940s and then again in the 1980s and 1990s.

As a harbour and an industrial and commercial hub, it is not surprising that the city has attracted migrants from within the country and beyond. It has also served as a transit point for people migrating onwards to destinations of greater economic opportunity abroad.

Karachi has been the site of violent political, social and ethnic conflict in the recent years. Some of the worst moments of the civil strife occurred between 1992 and 1996 when armed groups belonging to rival political factions battled with each other and with state agencies for control of the city. Although relative stability and civic peace have prevailed for a number of years, the city retains a reputation for ethnic tension and lawlessness.

Migration has been a key factor in the political and ethnic violence that overtook the city, as the main protagonists sought legitimacy for themselves as protectors of particular ethnic communities. Groups chose to portray their perceived rivals (migrants and non-migrants respectively) as transgressors against whom organized protection was required. In some ways, therefore, Karachi in the mid 1990s represented, *prima facie*, a failure of migration policy in the country and the city.

It has been argued that the main feature of migration policy was its relative passivity. At the national level, the state was open to transnational migration from a number of neighbouring countries of origin. The motivation for this openness might have been ideological, political as well as geo-strategic. At the same time, at the level of the city, the policy might be characterized as *laissez-faire*: city authorities absolved themselves of the responsibility for the pro-active supply of public goods and services, and allowed communities to rely heavily upon private entrepreneurs and self-provision. This characterization of national and city-level policies, obviously, requires critical appraisal and elaboration.

This paper will examine the Karachi experience with respect to national and city policies on transnational migration. It will provide a descriptive overview – both quantitative and qualitative – of historical patterns and recent trends. It will also identify gaps in secondary data. In addition to existing data sources, the paper will make use of primary qualitative research in selected communities in Karachi. The paper will attempt to draw lessons from Karachi both for future policy concerning the city itself, as well as for comparison with other large cities.