

Violence in Karachi; Is It Political, Ethnic or Religious Conflict?

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Introduction

In this paper, I will try to explore the main causes of ethnic conflicts in Pakistan. After defining the term, I will provide a brief review of the history, in the subsequent parts I will focus on main ethnic groups, the major issues in ethnic conflicts in Karachi, the tendency affecting changes in ethnic issues, and the implications of these changes for national integration in Pakistan.

. In the terms of Etymologically, the word 'ethnic' is derived from the Greek word "ethnikos"; which referred to major population groups who share common racial and cultural qualities; "Ethnicity designated to the group behavior of members in quest of a common heritage with inherent individual variations"¹. It is also an indication of one's own insight as the member of the particular group. According to the Prof. Dawa Norbu, "an ethnic group is discrete social organization within which mass mobilization and social communication may be affected. And ethnicity provided the potent raw material for nationalism that makes sense only to the members of that ethnic group. Its primary function is to differentiate the group members from the generalized others"². In other words, ethnicity provides the fundamentals of nationalism. Nationalism proves to be strong binding force in the nations, comprising of single ethnicity in majority.

According to a survey conducted in 1992, almost a dozen out of 132 countries which could be viewed as homogeneous, twenty five countries have single ethnic group comprising of ninety percent of the total population, whereas twenty five countries have a population comprising of 75 percent single ethnicity. A single ethnic group comprising of fifty to seventy-five percent of total population, resides in thirty one countries. Whereas, in 39 countries no single group exceeds half of the total population³. It means that a country could be resided by a single large ethnic group or many smaller ethnic groups.

Pakistan belong the third type of country which has a leading ethnic group comprising of fifty to seventy-five percent of the total population, the *Punjabis* are almost fifty-six percent of the total population. In Pakistan, the provincial assertion based on the ethnic distinctiveness became prominent in the decade of 90s. The problem of ethnic isolation has been boiling in Baluchistan and NWFP since the 70s. Likewise, the *Mohajirs* of Pakistan were rising as a distinctive ethnic group with the growth of Mohajir Qoumi Movement (MQM) since the 80s as a major force in urban areas of Sindh, especially in the biggest city of the country, Karachi, and in the adjacent city, Hyderabad.

The ruling class of Pakistan has always wanted to employ the ideology of Pakistani nationalism against the demands of different ethnic groups for enhanced provincial autonomy. The elite class always takes any such demand as a conspiracy to divide and disintegrate Pakistan, and this behavior has also led to assertion of many regional identities.

A Review of the History

Pakistan has been confronted with one of the gravest ethnic conflicts of her sixty-four years life. In 2010 alone, 1,247 people, as compared to 8012009, were killed in its major city, Karachi⁴. Ethnic divergence in the province of Sindh is almost complete, and in Baluchistan it has traumatized the traditional fraternity between different ethnic groups. The situation of law and order due to ethnic clashes have shattered economic activities in urban Sindh where there has been evidence of a transfer of capital to other regions and almost a complete halt on the part of foreign investment. Moreover billions of rupees are lost each year due to recurrent strikes.

The image of Pakistan emerging from its ethnic condition is revealed by its economic and political situation. Conventionally, Pakistan's ethnic multiplicity has been defined in terms of the existence of the four historical "ethnic groups," the Punjabis, the Sindhis, the Pushtoons and the Baloch, the Urdu-speaking people (*the mohajirs*), and many smaller ethnic/ linguistic groups. Recently, though, a political party representing the Urdu-speaking people in urban Sindh has insisted on the recognition of "nationality" status while there has been a constant demand from a part of the population in Punjab for the identification of "Siraiki-speaking people" as a distinct "nationality."

Violence in Karachi; Ethnic, Political or Religious?

Karachi was small village of fishermen surrounded by mud ramparts. It had two doors: towards Arabian Sea was situated the door of salted water (*kharadar*), and facing the Lyari river was the door of sweet water (*mithadar*). “The town of *kalachi-jo-goth* was founded in 1729, in the memory of a local fisherman”⁵. “Karachi’s port was an important knot in the regional ‘proto-globalized’ economy since the eighteenth century, linking Sindh and Punjab with the Persian Gulf and, further, with China and Africa”⁶. Between 1947 and 1951, the enormous migration of refugees (majority of them was Urdu speaking) from India, who also to be known as “Mohajirs”, “brought Karachi under intense demographic pressure but it also provided it with a highly competent workforce and an experienced bureaucracy”⁷. On the twenty-second of May, 1948, Karachi was formally made the capital of Pakistan.

To make the city a federally-administered area, the Constituent Assembly separated the Karachi from province of Sindh. This decision stimulate the resentment of Sindhi *ansars* (native) towards the *mohajirs* (migrants) whom they believe as “city-dwellers” full with jealousy for the “sons of the soil”. The ethnic frictions were thus started in Sindh, which would soon become a theatre of hostility for distressed “ethnic groups” constructing their identities through their confrontation with the others.

Karachi’s history is evident of an obvious economic success mitigate by violent ‘ethnic’ and ‘sectarian’ quarrels. However, such classification is deeply challenging mainly because “Karachi’s so-called ‘ethnic’ and ‘sectarian’ conflicts originally had little to do with ethnicity and religion. They were primarily ‘urban struggles’ between the opposing local groups for the control of the most affluent city in the country”⁸. These groups include different Mafias, land grabbers and criminals. They fight each other to grasp the control of different parts of the city. Many areas of the city have become ‘no go areas’ by these groups for rival groups. Residents of these areas are (reportedly) forced to pay ransom for the safety of their homes and businesses.

The Afghan *jihad* in 80s and ongoing war against terrorism in the northwestern parts of the country also brought to Karachi a flow of arms and drugs along with a heavy population influx from those part of the country. The situation produced a culture of violence in the city, especially in its youth “for whom Russian TT-pistols became the hottest commodity in town”⁹. Since the beginning of Afghan

jihad, in the 1990s, and after the fall of the 9/11, Karachi's ethnic conflicts appear to have been succeeded by "sectarian" conflicts.

Karachi witnessed anti-Ahmadi "riots" in the early 50s, anti-Pathan "riots" in 1965, anti-Ahmadi "riots" again from 1969 - 70 and Sindhi-Mohajir riots from 1972-73. However, the ethnic clashes which occurred in the second half of the 1980s in the city were unparalleled in their scale and brutality. Clashes have occurred between Pathans and Biharis in April 1985, again in October and December 1986, and in February to July 1987, between the Mohajirs and the Sindhis in May, September, and October 1988, and again in May - June 1990. Karachi's first key "ethnic riot" which claimed at least hundred lives took place in April of 1985 between Mohajirs and Pathan gunmen who were trying to extend their control to areas at the margins of their recently consolidated "territories."¹⁰

From 1987 to present day, "the MQM strongholds are located in the areas of District Central and District East, such as Azizabad, Federal B Area, Nazimabad, Liaqatabad, New Karachi and Gulshan-e Iqbal. District South has been under the influence of the PPP, which also has existence in the district of Malir. District West, has remained under the control of the ANP, which is particularly influential in the Baldia Pathan and Qasba colonies. Another political force in the city is a rebel faction of the MQM, the MQM (Haqiqi), which is not significant today, had converted the Landhi, Shah Faisal Colony and Lines Area into "no-go areas" for Altaf Hussain's supporters after the launching of Operation Clean-Up in 1992"¹¹.

The rise of the MQM in 1984, on the scene national politics was quite swift and remarkable. It is "an urban, youthful and organizationally well-knit party."¹² Its leadership and most of its members belongs to the lower middle class. Since the late 1980s, MQM has remained influential in the urban parts of Sindh. It has achieved significant electoral support in Karachi and Hyderabad, the two major cities of Sindh.

It is noteworthy that 'state' at the "non-policy level" which created a situation of ethnic outburst in urban parts of Sindh. "Various large-scale issues circling the conflicts between politicians and army, federalist and provincial forces, Islamist and secularist elements and, externally, India and Pakistan seriously circumscribed the state's capacity and will to pursue micro-level issues such as urban planning, educational and manpower strategies, as well as rural-urban and interprovincial migration"¹³. The state failed on various counts such as legal safety of citizen and protection of life and property. Ethnicity comes out as the new

source of identity formation, definition and categorization of interests. In the words of *Mohammad Waseem*, “it was not too much of the (Jacobin) state, as primordialists would have us believe, but rather too little of it which produced the mohajir ethnic movement”¹⁴.

Political Violence in the Form of Targeted Killings

Karachi has been experiencing periodical and uncontrollable violence, being struck by cruel, targeted killings. The most preferential method has been the “drive-by shootings”, where the killers, customarily remain untraced. “Incompatible political, sectarian and linguistic affiliations, marked by intense personal rivalries, are said to be a major cause of the blind murders”¹⁵. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan reports that in 2009, “the total number of killings was 747, while the number of target killings in Karachi totaled 291.” According to police documentation records published in a local newspaper 249 targeted killings took place in Karachi from month of January to August, 2010. In the first 24 days of the March, 2011 two hundred sixty seven people were killed targeted. These are certainly shocking figures from an economic point of view as well, keeping in view that “the city accounts for two-thirds of Pakistan’s trade and industry and almost half of its GDP”¹⁶.

The rising death toll gives the impression that the instability of Karachi has been gradually ascending. Violence in the city is in effect seems a “socio-ethnic phenomenon,” which is intensified by immense weaponization of the city. Efforts for de-weaponization in the past have produced only diverse results, due to variation in demand and supply of weapons.

Although, in the pre-Afghan war era, weapons made in northwestern area of the country were much in demand across the country, with the induction of a legacy of the Afghan war, the lethal assault rifle “Kalashnikov,” the law enforcement efforts suffered a serious setback. There is no lack of laws but what is needed is their enforcement in true sense. Secondly, as we discussed earlier, the influx of migrants into Karachi, served to further fuse the situation of group politics in the city (mainly consisting of the ethno-linguistic groups).

If the recent wave of violence and brutality is allowed to continue, peace will become more impossible; keeping in view that the Pakistani Taliban extremists are trying to bring a complete chaos to the country. Moreover, there has been an increase in “sectarian sensitivities” after the attack on the *Ashura Procession*. Interior Minister of Pakistan Mr. Rehman Malik has held that deployment of the army to control the situation is not desirable in Karachi because the government has give powers to the Rangers to deal with the situation. However, there are suspicions about this paramilitary forces’ ability to deal with the problem, mainly because the three parties (MQM, ANP and PPP) involved in the situation are in the ruling coalition government. Urgent countermeasures are needed against the elements that are leading these brutal killings. The government should put into effect a course of action without delay in order to restore peace in the city and call in the army if needed. At the same time, it should do long-standing arrangements to keep the state of affairs under control.

¹ Singh k. Sudhir, *Ethnicity and Regional Aspirations In Pakistan* <http://www.jammu-kashmir.com/insights/insight20020101d.html>) Retrieved online on 18th march,2011

² *ibid*

³ *ibid*

⁴ <http://tribune.com.pk/story/94219/2010-karachis-most-violent-year-since-1995/> Retrieved on 18th march,2011

⁵ Sohrab K.H. Katrak, *Karachi. That was the Capital of Sindh*, Lahore, 1963.

⁶ Laurent Gayer – A divided city. “Ethnic” and “religious” conflicts in Karachi, Pakistan retrieved online on 13th March, 2011. <http://www.ceri-sciences-po.org>

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Larrry Goodson, *The Talibanization of Pakistan*, New York/Basingstoke : Palgrave/Macmillan, 2002.

¹⁰ Laurent Gayer – A divided city. “Ethnic” and “religious” conflicts in Karachi, Pakistan retrieved online on 13th March, 2011. <http://www.ceri-sciences-po.org>

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *ibid*

¹³ MOHAMMAD WASEEM ,Ethnic Conflict in Pakistan: The Case of MQM, *The Pakistan Development Review* 35 : 4 Part II (Winter 1996) pp. 617—629

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ <http://pak-news.net/targeted-killings-in-karachi/>) retrieved online on 17th of March, 2011

¹⁶ <http://pak-news.net/targeted-killings-in-karachi/>) retrieved online on 17th of March, 2011