

CENTER FOR RESEARCH AND SECURITY STUDIES, ISLAMABAD

# **Karachi Seething under Violence and Terror**

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The Center for Research and Security studies examines the major factors marring the social, political and economic life of Pakistan's largest city, Karachi. The city is also the backbone of Pakistan's economy but has been in the grip of turmoil and violence over two decades.

## **1. BACKGROUND:**

One of the three largest cities in the world, and the largest one in Pakistan, Karachi has a multi-ethnic population of 17 million people. During the last couple of years, Karachi has seen recurrent outbreaks of violence which have claimed hundreds of lives. Despite repeated claims by the government of having wiped out the miscreants, the return to normalcy has always been short-lived. Some of the most heinous episodes of violence in Karachi were witnessed during 2010. In fact, the number of people who fell prey to target killings in Karachi during 2010 was higher than those who lost their lives in terrorist attacks across the country during the same year. According to the statistics, 49 suicide attacks killed 1138 people during 2010 across the country, while the number of politically-motivated target killings only in Karachi stood at 1510.<sup>1</sup>

Such frequent relapse into deadly violence by the country's commercial hub is bound to have huge economic costs for the country. In fact, controlling violence has been an overriding concern for all humanitarian societies since ever because a good law and order situation is imperative for the proper functioning of the society as well as for sustained economic growth. In a society where violence is rife and the state does not enjoy monopoly over it, normal functioning of the economy is seriously hindered, creating many a socio-economic problems which in turn cause further violence. It is therefore imperative that the state apparatus be trained, equipped and empowered in such a way that it is able to weed out this menace from the society.

Some brief comments highlighting the commercial salience of Karachi underline the significance of the aforesaid argument. Karachi is regarded as the commercial nerve center and the financial capital of Pakistan. The tax collected in Karachi makes up over 50% of the total revenue collected by the Federal Board of Revenue. It produces a major chunk of value added goods in large-scale manufacturing and other industries and accounts for about 20% of the total GDP of Pakistan. According to a study conducted by Pricewaterhouse Coopers in 2007, Karachi's GDP (Currently \$55 billion) is expected to touch \$120 billion mark by 2020 at a growth rate of 5.9%. This high GDP is mainly attributed to the concentration of main centers of financial sector and mega industrial base in the city. Textile, cement, steel, heavy machinery, chemicals, food, banking, insurance are the major sectors functioning in the city.<sup>2</sup> Its port handles a large portion of imports meant for the NATO troops in Afghanistan.

In February 2007, the World Bank identified Karachi as the most business-friendly city in Pakistan. However, since the recent wave of violence, Karachi's economic potential has been seriously jeopardized as it has resulted in a flight of capital from the city. The hugely devastating repercussions of the violence happening in Karachi for the nation's economy make it all the more important to comprehend the causes of this violence in order to curtail it. The interplay of a number of political, social and religious factors explains Karachi's frequent descent into chaos.

## **2. POLITICAL FACTOR:**

Politics, unfortunately, lies at the root of much of the violence that has befallen Karachi in recent months, with other factors such as ethnic and sectarian polarization and the activities of

criminal elements coming into play only as a result of the mayhem caused by the brutal acts of the political actors. The dynamics of political violence revolve mainly around political turf wars between the various stakeholders of the city.<sup>3</sup> The above observation is corroborated by the fact that most of the victims of these target killings had obvious political affiliation. The political component of the violence is so pronounced that the Sindh Home Minister exclaimed on the floor of the house that had he been given a free hand without having to cater to the dictates of political expediency, he would have eradicated the perpetrators of deadly violence, most of whom, he alleged, enjoyed the backing of political parties. The irony of the matter is the sudden end to all such violence as soon as the Federal Interior Minister flies to Karachi and holds meetings with the MQM and ANP – two parties whose enmity is believed to be the driving force behind much of the violence in Karachi. Such occurrences leave little doubt about the identity of the perpetrators of violence and show the cognizance of the government to the involvement of these parties behind the acts of such barbarism.

It is worth mentioning here that violence in Karachi has assumed such terrible proportions only recently – in fact more so during the reign of the current government. The situation was relatively normal during the Musharraf era. Between 2002-07 there were negligible reports of ethnic violence in the city and consequently, the city's economic activity picked up again. The Mutahidda Qaumi Movement (MQM) won the local bodies elections in 2004 and ran the city amicably, fully supported by the central government. Also, no major suicide bomb attacks by Taliban/al Qaeda took place in the city (after 2005) and sectarian violence also witnessed an all-time low.

The contrast between Karachi's situation during the tenure of the two governments corroborates our hypothesis about the primacy of political factors in city's violence. When the MQM was able to govern the city on its own, there was no violence. However, as the Pashtuns awoke to the possibility of translating their numerical strength into commensurate political gains, which, obviously, were to come at MQM's expense, an all out conflict ensued. Pashtuns have no representation in the national assembly and only two out of the 40 Karachi MPAs [Members of the Provincial Assembly] are Pashtuns<sup>4</sup>.

This all started with the February 2008 elections, when ANP, for the first time, won two Sindh provincial assembly seats – a tantalizing result which encouraged ANP to aspire to expand their political gains. For MQM, however, the results were an alarm bell which raised the possibility of Karachi slipping out of their complete dominance. As the two sides were determined to pursue and preserve their interests at all costs, the result was deadly violence becoming part of Karachi's everyday life.

Politics, thus, has not only been mainly responsible for providing the backdrop that has triggered the current phase in violence in Karachi, it has also been the major factor why the omnipresent official security apparatus has miserably failed in apprehending the perpetrators of the violence. More than anything else, it is perhaps the fragility of the coalition government at the center, where both MQM and ANP are coalition partners, that has stymied the government's ability to penalize the elements responsible for the violence in what used to be called the 'city of lights.' As the government lacks political will to tackle the situation, which would require taking

on elements belonging to its coalition partners and perhaps to its own ranks, Karachi continues to remain in the grips of a deadly wave of violence.

### **3. ETHNIC FACTOR:**

The ethnic factor is inseparably intertwined with the political factor that explains much of the violence in Karachi. Most observers of the violence choking the city of Karachi are of the view that underlying the bloody conflict between the MQM and ANP is a huge demographic shift in favor of the Pashtuns - who are believed to constitute 20-25% of Karachi's population. There has been an explosion in the Pashtun population in Karachi in recent years mainly for two reasons: Firstly, because of the military operation in FATA and Swat and secondly due to the presence of a large number of madrassas in Karachi. When Pakistan's security forces launched operations in FATA and Swat against the terrorist elements based in those areas, it resulted into a huge crisis of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) when a large number of inhabitants from these areas were forced out of their homes. Many of them came to Karachi to take refuge as most had some relative already settled here. Once settled in Karachi, they were soon tempted to eke out a living in the country's largest commercial center.

Second factor which explains the continuous rise in the Pashtun population in Karachi is the existence of a large number of madrassas in the city – three of which are believed to be the largest in the country. These madrassas cater to the educational needs of hundreds of thousands of students. It is worth mentioning here that during 2010, the number of students enrolled in these madrassas was considerably higher than in 2009. Majority of these madrassas belong to the Deobandi school of thought which is the dominant school of thought among the Pashtuns. So these madrassas continue to attract Pashtun students which end up swelling the Pashtun population.

Sensing the resultant demographic shift, the MQM leadership took strong exception to this trend, accusing the ANP of Talibanizing Karachi, while the ANP took offence to such allegations, criticizing the MQM for equating Pashtuns with the Taliban.<sup>5</sup>

As the shifts in the city's demographics were bound to affect the respective share of each ethnic group in the city's political representation, the issue got enmeshed with the political tussle between ANP and MQM.

The tussle between the two parties, representing two ethnicities took a vicious turn after the 2008 elections when the pashtun dominated ANP won seats in the provincial assembly – a first in Sindh's history. The election results appear to have emboldened Karachi's Pashtuns who are believed to constitute 25% of the city's population but have been excluded from the structures of power in the city. The results have awakened the Pashtuns up to their strength, who appear determined to expand their share of the political pie. This has, understandably, evoked stiff resistance from the MQM, representing Karachi's Urdu speaking majority, which has hitherto enjoyed absolute control over the city's politics and governance. This on-going conflict of interests between the MQM and the Pashtun ANP clash is believed to be mainly responsible for the recent spate of target killings in the country's industrial capital.

#### **4. SECTARIAN FACTOR:**

The sectarian dimension to the ethno-political violence has also been gaining salience for quite some time. A nexus between the political parties and the six banned sectarian outfits appears to have emerged. Besides incidents carrying overtly sectarian dimensions such as attacks on Ashura processions - the most important of the rituals practiced by the Shias - many other incidents of sectarian violence are also believed to have taken place among various groups.

According to some analysts, sectarian violence in Pakistan has always worsened when the protagonists have a base where they can operate from. A Karachi beset with a serious law and order problem offers these elements an ideal place to turn it into a base for the implementation of their nefarious designs. Karachi's huge population is a mix of Shia and Sunni Muslims, represented by various religio-political and purely religious groups, with links to militant organizations. A tug of war between these groups is a constant destabilizing factor and a constant threat to peace and stability in the city. These elements seem to be benefiting from the city's ethnic and political polarization and the state's institutional decay to create room for themselves.

The ranks of sectarian elements involved in Karachi violence have swollen also due to the ongoing military operations in the country's tribal region. It's a well established fact that the Sunni sectarian organizations have had close links with the militant organizations fighting against the US forces in Afghanistan and now against the Pakistan army in the tribal belt. As these militants had to flee their areas, due to the military operations against them, most of them are believed to have come to Karachi, joining the ranks of sectarian elements.

Some analysts believe that the MQM-Haqiqi - a splinter group of MQM - has forged close ties with Sunni militant elements. This alliance appears to be responsible for the attacks on MQM's Shia leaders. Shia elements in turn are also believed to have been resorting to violence to avenge the killings of their fellow community members.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, as Pushtuns are predominantly Deobandi and most of the MQM supporters are Brelvi and Shia, a section of Muhajir Deobandis support JI. This situation provides banned Deobandi outfits like outlawed Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and Lashkr-e-Jhangvi with an ideal opportunity to use Karachi as their desired hunting ground.<sup>7</sup>

The government's attitude towards the sectarian violence has been that of denial. Interior Minister, Rehman Malik, has been harping on the theme of involvement of 'external forces' and a 'third hand' behind such violence, which he once stated on the floor of the upper house of the parliament.<sup>8</sup>

However, the sectarian character of many of these acts of violence is so pronounced that it leaves little doubt for any observer of the city's events to identify the true motives behind such violence.

## **5. GANGSTERS AND CRIMINAL ELEMENTS:**

Close observers of the city's politics agree, however, that the central actors in the bloodshed are competing ethnic political parties and the criminal gangs linked to them. At the heart of the conflict, they say, is a fight for control of the hugely lucrative tracts of public land that are being illegally developed, both for profits and cementing control of turf and political power.

Turf wars between drug cartels, land mafia, organized crime syndicates and extremist groups complicate the difficult task of policing vast slums.<sup>9</sup>

The presence of fleeing terrorists from tribal areas due to the army operations have added to the complex web of criminal elements in Karachi. These elements have had links in Karachi since the 1980s. They can easily find refuge in the madrassas and slums. They do not face much difficulty in reaching Karachi from the tribal areas. The Taliban generate millions of dollars through criminal activities in Karachi, with one-third of bank robberies and ten percent of kidnappings linked to the Taliban, and average ransom sizes of \$60,000 to \$250,000<sup>10</sup>. From an American perspective, it also happens to be the hub for importing life-saving relief supplies as well as material for the U.S. and NATO war effort in Afghanistan.

Though the above narrative gives a very bleak picture about the prospects of peace and stability in Karachi, the situation can still be brought under control. In fact, government has no option but to restore normalcy in the country's commercial capital otherwise the law and order situation in the city will continue to deteriorate with hugely negative repercussions for the nation's economy, sectarian and ethnic harmony and healthy patterns of political interaction among various groups. Two steps need to be taken immediately: de-weaponization of the city and the establishment of government's writ on all parts of Karachi.

As long as it remains hostage to the politico-business interests of various competing groups, which continue to obtain arms easily, it will remain a daunting challenge to bring peace and normalcy to Karachi.

One of the ways to solve the problem of violence in Karachi is through its de-weaponization. Several attempts have been made in the past to rid Karachi of weapons and failed miserably because those supposed to cleanse the society of arms are themselves armed to the teeth. To eradicate the menace of violence from the city, it is imperative that only the state institutions hold possession of arms and have monopoly over legitimate violence. The capacity of the law enforcement agencies should be strengthened. They should be equipped not only with the latest arms but also with state of the art training in combating urban violence. And to ensure the successful undertaking of these tasks, strong political will is desperately required. The government should not bow before the dictates of political expediency and allow the law enforcement agencies to have a free hand. Any perpetrator or instigator of violence should be brought to book regardless of his political, ethnic or religious affiliations.

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