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Talibanization of Karachi: Fear or Fact?

Mutihidda Qaumi Movement (MQM) is the political party that dominates Karachi, Pakistan's largest metropolis. Hyderabad, the Sindh province's 2nd largest city, is also under MQM's political domain. MQM draws its strength from working class and lower/middle strata of the society and prides itself for being an anti-feudal and a secular party. Karachi is among the most literate cities of Pakistan and is dominated by two ethnicities, Urdu speaking Mohajirs and Pashto speaking Pashtuns. In fact, Karachi has more Pashtuns than does Peshawar, the provincial capital of NWFP. Addressing a large gathering of Karachites via telephone in early November, the Quaid (supreme leader) of MQM, Altaf Hussain warned the "Sufi-loving people of Sindh" and "peaceful people of Karachi" that a systematic campaign was underway to "Talibanize Karachi."

He pointed that the areas of Pakhtoon Abad and Sultan Abad were particularly of great concern to both the MQM and the government of Sindh. "Now, Baitullah Mehsud is sending his people to Karachi and many cable operators, CD shop owners and girls schools have been asked to shut down their operation because they are un-Islamic," Altaf said. He alleged that the Taliban elements have "collected nearly 2 billion rupees" in ransom over the past two years and there were nearly "5 million small arms in the city." He urged the MQM activists to "be ready to defend themselves and get training in self defense and get arms' licenses." Altaf criticized the sluggish response and flawed intelligence of the government and announced that every party worker of MQM will defend their city and "you should be able to keep waking up in the night to check such miscreants."

Altaf also added that MQM wanted to see Karachi and Pakistan free from all arms but "cannot ignore the fact that religious extremists supported by religious political parties were eyeing to

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take over Karachi by force." We will not let this happen, he announced.

This was not the first time that MQM had suspected that Pashtun Taliban were trying to create social and political unrest as a bigger game plan of their narrow minded agenda (after getting hard-hit by Pakistan military in the tribal areas of Pakistan). Despite his warnings, the Sindh government did not agree with his assessment and the provincial Home Minister, Dr. Zulfiqar Mirza, responded that there was no danger of Talibanization of Karachi. Altaf reportedly spoke with him on phone and said that "Talibanization was not as simple a process as the government thinks it is."

To be certain, over the immediate past, nearly 100 new seminaries have sprouted in and around Karachi's Pashtun majority areas. Serious observers now contend that Altaf's fears may indeed be valid.

In Karachi, Pashtun and Mohajir communities live under a delicate socio-political peace and there have been many incidents of ethnic violence at various places in the city. After Altaf's address, the provincial leadership of Pashtun nationalist Awami National Party (ANP) called on the governor of Sindh and reported that the increase in population in Pashtun dominated areas was not a systematic support for Taliban but "these are the people who have left their homes in Swat and Bajaur where Pakistan army is operating against extremists and militants." Both sides agreed to evolve a mechanism that any new arrival from these areas should be reported to the local community leaders who should in turn report such arrivals to the relevant police stations. ANP conveyed to the governor that this influx of the Pashtuns must not become a reason of any governmental operation in Pashtun dominated areas.

Pakistani observers and commentators have urged the government to pay attention to Altaf's apprehensions and have demanded a high-level inquiry. There are strong fears that if the government would sit idle and keep on watching the tensions grow between both the

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communities, Karachi will have another bloodbath like 1986 and 1994 when hundreds of ordinary citizens were killed every month.

All political and religious groups in Karachi are armed. They in fact are better equipped and in situations better trained and motivated than the law enforcement agencies. According to media reports, nearly 40 political workers of various political, religious and ethnic groups have been killed since September 2008. Overall, political violence in Karachi spiked through October and November 2008.

The Federal and Provincial governments must ensure that Karachi remains peaceful and the government's writ is strongly enforced. A chaotic Karachi will be the last thing that an economically endangered Pakistan could afford.