

Sectarian violence in Pakistan's commercial capital

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Karachi—Pakistan's main commercial and industrial hub—has been rocked by a wave of sectarian violence in May and early June. More than 60 people have been killed and hundreds wounded. While the city has been hit by bloodletting between Shiite- and Sunni-based groups before, the latest round is the worst in recent years.

The media and police have pointed the finger at the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LEJ) militia, which is connected to the Sunni-based Sipah-e-Suhaba and is notorious for sectarian attacks on Shiites. But no one has claimed responsibility for any of the violence. Moreover, in Pakistan, the involvement of the army and its intelligence wing cannot automatically be ruled out. The military has close connections to Islamic extremist groups and has manipulated sectarian violence for its own purposes in the past.

Whoever is directly responsible, however, Washington has played a key role in inflaming tensions and stoking the violence in Karachi and throughout Pakistan. The US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the collaboration of the Pakistani regime in hunting down suspected Al Qaeda and Taliban members, have angered broad layers of the population. That hostility has been exploited by various Islamic fundamentalist groups and, in some cases, turned in a sectarian direction.

The latest round of violence in Karachi began on May 7 with the bombing of the Haideri Shiite mosque, which killed 22 people and wounded another 125. Three weeks later, on May 30, Mufti Nizamuddin Shamzai, a prominent Sunni leader and head of the Binoria mosque, was assassinated in front of his home in Karachi. His son, a nephew and the driver also were wounded when unidentified gunmen opened fire on their car.

Without providing any evidence, the media immediately speculated that the assassination had been in revenge for the attack on the Shiite mosque. On May 31, angry Sunni protesters took to the streets. They ransacked the Jamshed Quarters police station and set fire to some 20 vehicles, two bank branches and a petrol station.

On the same day, a bomb blast ripped through the Ali Raza Imam Bargah Shiite mosque, killing more than 20 people and injuring at least 75. The mosque is less than two kilometres from where Shamzia was assassinated. The blast cracked the mosque walls and shattered windows in a building opposite.

The following day, Shiite mourners marched through the streets and clashed with thousands of troops and police who were mobilised to block protests. Vehicles and buildings including a bank, shops and a government office were set alight. Young Shiite marchers clashed with police and blocked roads and a rail line.

The escalating violence and protests immediately put pressure on the Pakistan's military strongman Pervez Musharraf and his Pakistan Muslim League-QA (PML-QA). The PML-QA rules in Sindh province, which has Karachi as its capital. The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA)—a coalition of six Islamic fundamentalist parties—called nationwide rallies on June 2 to protest against the failure of the Sindh government to curb the violence. The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) held separate protests.

The mood of the demonstrations was not only anti-government, but also anti-US. In a bid to deflect the growing anger, Sindh governor Dr Ishratul Ebad told the media: "There is a conspiracy afoot to destabilise Pakistan and destroy the commercial hub of Karachi." Ebad touched on the role of the US when he declared

that the attacks were against the government's recent operations against terrorism.

Under pressure from Washington the Musharraf regime launched a major offensive in February, involving some 70,000 troops, in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, trying to crack down on Taliban and Al Qaeda supporters. Sharp clashes in March resulted in heavy casualties on both sides. While the army backed away temporarily, the US has urged Musharraf to continue the operation.

The hunt for top Al Qaeda leaders is not confined to remote border areas. It is also proceeding in the major Pakistani cities with the assistance of the FBI and other US officials. Afghanistan's ambassador to Washington, Tayeb Jawad, highlighted the US focus on Pakistani cities when he declared on May 25 that the search for Osama bin Laden should be centred in Karachi or Quetta. As in the past, the US-backed regime in Kabul continues to faithfully echo US demands for Pakistan to step up the "war against terrorism".

Some Islamic extremist groups like the LEJ have used US aggression to justify not only attacks on government officials but also on Shiites, accusing them of being American spies. The group blames ethnic Hazaras in Afghanistan, most of whom are Shiites, for the involvement of Hazara-based organisations in the US-backed Northern Alliance that fought alongside US forces to topple the Taliban regime in 2001. The LEJ claimed responsibility for an attack on a Shiite mosque in Quetta in July last year, which killed at least 53 worshippers and wounded many more.

Following the recent round of attacks, a number of Islamic groups rejected sectarian violence and appealed for unity between Sunnis and Shiites. Shia leader Yousaf Hussain condemned the murder of the Sunni cleric Shamzai on May 30 and appealed to both communities to remain united. A report on the Indian-based *Rediff.com* web site stated that "many of Shamzai's colleagues in the Binori madrassa have refrained from blaming Shia extremists for the assassination".

These appeals reflect a broader revulsion among Pakistanis at the bloody sectarian violence that has claimed at least 4,000 lives over the past two decades. A strike called by the MMA on June 4 attracted widespread support from both Sunnis and Shiites, virtually shutting down the city. Shops were closed,

many streets were empty and the Karachi stock exchange was shut.

The protests have further undermined the already unstable Musharraf regime, which is acutely aware that its collaboration with the Bush administration is fuelling opposition. In early June, the president of the ruling PML-QA, Chaudhry Shujaat, called on the MMA and PPP to form a consensus government in Sindh province. After both parties rejected the appeal, Musharraf made several cosmetic changes, pushing the Sindh chief minister Ali Mohammed Meher to resign and transferring the Karachi police chief.

However, the moves have done nothing to halt the tense situation in Karachi and elsewhere in Pakistan. One of the country's top military commanders, Lieutenant General Ahsan Hayat, barely escaped with his life after his convoy was ambushed in Karachi on June 10. The gunmen killed 10 members of the security forces and one bystander in the attack.

The timing of the attack suggested that it may have been in response to a renewed military offensive in the tribal border areas. Nek Mohammad, a tribal leader accused of sheltering Al Qaeda fighters, warned after the ambush: "If the government does not halt its operations, there will be attacks in Peshawar, Islamabad and Karachi."

The Musharraf regime responded with a police dragnet in Karachi and an intensified offensive in the tribal area of South Waziristan. Police announced on June 13 that they had arrested 10 men allegedly connected to Al Qaeda or to the sectarian violence in the city. Last week, the Pakistani military announced that it had killed Nek Mohammad in a rocket attack on one of his hideouts.

While Islamabad has claimed these as "victories" in its "war on terrorism", the latest events will only further inflame an already volatile situation in Pakistan.



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