Hundreds killed in national-ethnic violence in Pakistan's largest city

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The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan recently reported that more than 1,350 people have died so far this year in ethnic-political violence in Karachi. This includes 169 killings just in the month of October.

Most of the violence arises from "turf wars"—for land, control of drug and other rackets, and political influence—between leaders and activists of the three major parties in Pakistan's national coalition government. There are concerns that the escalating violence could ultimately trigger the collapse of the Pakistan Peoples Party-led coalition and exacerbate centrifugal tensions within the Pakistani federal state.

While the gangs responsible for the violence are associated with rival political parties, many of those killed are not gang member or even party activists. Rather they are ordinary people—in the main, workers and slum-dwellers—who are targeted because of their ethnicity.

Nearly every day new bodies are found in this port city of 18 million. Although the political violence in Karachi is largely ignored in the Pakistani and international press, it has resulted in more deaths this year than the attacks and bombings carried out by Taliban and Taliban-aligned groups throughout Pakistan. "There are 30 to 40 bodies some weeks," one Karachi morgue worker told Reuters. "When just one member of a party is killed, I know the other [party] will respond and there could be many more deaths."

In October, 13 people, most of them Muhajirs (the Urdu-speaking descendants of people who migrated to Sindh from north India following the 1947 communal partition of the Indian subcontinent), were killed in a brazen attack on Karachi's enormous Shershah auto parts market. The attack was blamed on Baloch gangsters with ties to the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). A BBC news report cited witnesses to the shooting as saying that the attackers had demanded to know who was Urdu-speaking and then fired at them. Within hours of the Shershah attack, seven innocent Baluch men were killed in revenge attacks.

On November 17, three people were killed and six injured when a gun battle broke out between rival groups in the city's Lyari area, according to *The Nation*. On November 22, ten people were killed in ethnic-political violence in various parts of the sprawling city. The bullet-ridden body of one youth was found hanging in North Karachi and another unidentified person was shot dead by unknown assailants in the same area, according to *Samaa News*.

Pakistan's largest city, Karachi is also the country's economic engine. It contributes more than half of the government's total revenue and represents 25 to 30 percent of the country's GDP. The political-ethnic violence often disrupts commerce and industrial output and sections of the elite are concerned about its long-term impact on the economy, including foreign investment, since most foreign companies that operate in Pakistan are headquartered in Karachi.

The city is also vital for the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. At least half of all the food and fuel consumed by the US forces in Afghanistan is funneled through Karachi.

The vast majority of the city's inhabitants must contend with mass unemployment, poverty, spiraling food and energy prices, and electricity load-shedding (power cuts). Many of the city's poor residents live in slums like Lyari, with little to no access to basic necessities like sanitation. Orangi Township, which is said to be the largest slum in Asia, is located in Karachi.

While the majority of the city's residents struggle to make ends meet, Karachi's elite live in enormous houses located in gated communities. These wealthy neighborhoods have been largely insulated from the violence.

Karachi has long been plagued by criminal gangs, drug lords, arms dealers, and extortionists willing to use any means to guard their turf. During the 1980s—when Pakistan, under the dictatorship of General Zia-ul Haq, worked hand-in-glove with the US in supporting the mujahideen in Afghanistan—Karachi was inundated with guns and heroin.

In many cases, Karachi's criminal organizations are directly linked to political parties. The three main parties involved in Karachi's national-ethnic violence are the PPP, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), and the Awami National Party (ANP).

The PPP, led by Pakistan's almost universally despised president, Asif Ali Zardari, is the country's largest political party. It has long been associated with, and made appeals to, Sindhi nationalist sentiments. (Karachi is located in the province of Sindh, which is predominantly Sindhi-speaking, but Sindhi-speakers make up less than 10 percent of Karachi's population.) The PPP machine in Karachi is said to use gangs drawn from the city's Baloch minority to carry out targeted killings of ethnic Muhajirs with the aim of countering the MQM's dominance of the city and its government.

The MQM was founded as an exclusivist Muhajir party. Today it claims to be open to people from all ethnic groups, but it continues to function as an ethnic-based bourgeois party, which serves the interests of the Muhajir elite while exploiting the fears and grievances of the Muhajirs over the communal polarization and violence its politics have helped produce.

The ANP is a Pashtun nationalist party. It forms the provincial government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly the North West Frontier Province) and purports to defend the interests of Karachi's large and growing Pashtun minority.

The Urdu-speaking Muhajirs became the largest ethnic group in Karachi, shortly after they began arriving in the city, having left north India due to the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent into a Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India. The more prosperous and better-connected of the Muhajirs quickly took the place of the large number of Hindu merchants and shopkeepers who fled Karachi, along with virtually the entire Hindu population, in 1947-48.

Whilst the vast majority of the Muhajirs are poor toilers like other Pakistanis, Sindhi nationalists and others have focused on the predominant ethnic identity of Karachi's business class to channel the anger born of capitalist exploitation in a reactionary communal direction. The MQM, meanwhile, has not shied away from promoting the Muhajirs as superior

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to Karachi's other "poor" and "backward" ethnic groups.

Karachi's first significant ethnic riots were between Muhajirs and Pashtuns. They erupted in late 1964 and early 1965 when Gohar Ayub Khan, son of dictator Marshall Ayub Khan, launched attacks against Muhajir communities, in revenge for their support for Fatima Jinnah, sister of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, in Ayub Khan's staged 1965 presidential "election."

Years later, the Sindhi-first policies of the PPP increased tensions between Muhajirs and Sindhis. Large-scale riots broke out in 1972 when the Sindh Assembly, which was controlled by Sindhi-speaking PPP members, pushed through a bill declaring Sindhi to be the province's official language. Numerous protests were held against the bill throughout Muhajir-dominated areas of Karachi. Muhajir resentment was also stoked by the PPP government's adoption of a quota system guaranteeing a set number of university places and public sector jobs to people from rural areas. Under conditions where Sindhis constituted more than 90 percent of the province's rural population and the Muhajirs were almost exclusively urban, this constituted in practice, if not in name, an ethnic quota system. Three decades later the divisive quota system remains.

The MQM was created in 1984, emerging out of the first Muhajir political organization, the All Pakistan Muhajir Student Organization, which had been created in 1978 by Altaf Hussain. Hussain has lived in London since the early 1990s , but he remains the unchallenged leader of the MQM.

At its birth, the MQM worked in concert with the Zia-ul Haq dictatoship, which faced especially tenacious opposition in Sindh. It quickly emerged as Karachi's largest party and seized control of various criminal rackets, thus enabling it to combine political patronage with illicit activities, to tighten its grip on power. Later, the MQM came into conflict with the Pakistani military and state bureaucracy, which accused the MQM of conniving with Pakistan's arch-enemy, India. For two years, beginning in June 1992, the military mounted a major operation aimed at crushing the MQM., placing Karachi under virtually military occupation.

Throughout its existence the MQM has promoted anti-Sindhi and anti-Pashtun sentiments and used communal and political violence in order to maintain its grip on political power in Karachi.

Over the past quarter century it has repeatedly entered into shaky, short-lived alliances with Pakistan's two major parties, the PPP and Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League. When the Bush-supported dictator General Pervez Musharraf sought to give a democratic façade to his rule, the MQM rushed to its offer support. As a result, the MQM was given a share of power in both the national and Sindh governments from 2002 on. In May 2007, the MQM fomented violence in which several dozen people were killed to prevent Pakistan's dissident Chief Justice, Iftikhar Chaudhry, from speaking in Karachi. Musharraf had sacked Chaudhry as head of Pakistan's Supreme Court because he feared that Chaudhry would not rubber stamp a phony presidential election slated for later in the year. (See: Pakistani president seeks to drown mounting opposition in blood).

However, in early 2008, when the Musharraf regime unraveled, the MQM was able to strike a deal with the PPP, which needed allies to form a national government. As a result, the MQM is a junior partner of the PPP in both Pakistan's national and Sindh governments.

A factor that has facilitated the alliance between the PPP, with its roots in rural Sindh, and the Karachi-based MQM, is their perceived joint interest in marginalizing the ANP in Sindhi politics.

The bulk of the political violence in Karachi in recent years has revolved around competition between Muhajir gangs backed by the MQM and Pashtun gangs associated with the ANP. This conflict has been exacerbated by Pakistan's participation in the US war in Afghanistan—a war that all three parties, the PPP, the MQM, and ANP support. At the US' behest, the Pakistani military has waged a counter-insurgency war against Taliban and Taliban-aligned militias in much of Pakistan's northwest. The war has displaced hundreds of thousands of ethnic Pashtuns, many of whom have found their way to Karachi.

There are now over 5 million Pashtuns in the city, with many struggling to secure shelter and employment in the slums. Pashtuns in Karachi must also deal with discrimination and anti-Pashtun sentiment encouraged and promoted by the MQM.

The ANP, meanwhile, has been busy exploiting the legitimate grievances of the Pashtuns for its own reactionary ends. The ANP incites hatred against the Muhajirs and other ethnic groups. Recently it has been campaigning against the issuance of national identity cards to "Bengalis" residing in Karachi. (Many of the Bengalis are in fact Urdu-speaking Biharis who moved to East Pakistan following partition and then to Karachi following the breakaway of Bangladesh in 1971) There are as many as two millions Bengalis living in Karachi, and the community has been courted by the MQM, leading the ANP to charge that the MQM is patronizing "foreigners" to gain votes.

Last August, over 100 people, mostly Pashtuns, were killed in a weeklong orgy of communal violence when a senior member of the MQM and Sindh Assemblyman, Raza Haider, was shot dead at a funeral.

The ANP has called on the military to rein in the MQM, and some ANP members have even called for a military operation in the city along the lines of the counter-insurgency campaign in the northwest of the country.

"Without an army operation here, the whole of Pakistan will be brought down," Shahi Syed, head of the ANP in Karachi, told McClatchy Newspapers. "Karachi is the heart of Pakistan."

The ANP's acting president, Haji Mohammad Adeel, made a similar statement in Pakistan's Senate, when he asked why troops can be called in to deal with Islamacist militants in Malakand, but not to end the violence in Karachi.

While the MQM does not want the military interfering in what it views as its Karachi fiefdom, Hussain made a speech in August in which he indicated he would be ready to collaborate with the military were it to unseat the current PPP-led government.

When Sindhi flood survivors from outside Karachi tried to find refuge in the city during last summer's devastating floods, the MQM strongly objected and at its instigation the city's police force opened fire on some of the helpless refugees.

The violence in Karachi demonstrates the venal character of the Pakistani bourgeoisie and all its political parties. For decades, the political representatives of the Pakistani ruling class have engaged in reactionary national-ethnic and religious appeals in order to divert popular anger over chronic poverty and immense social inequality into regressive channels and muster support for their sordid struggles for pelf and power.

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