

Karachi torn by mounting political-ethnic violence

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The Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) is preparing to rejoin the national coalition government after the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) agreed to a new power-sharing arrangement under which the Musharraf-era local government system in Sindh is to be revived throughout the entire province. The deal was reached after months of national-ethnic violence in Karachi, the country's largest city. The violence and bloodshed escalated dramatically in June after the MQM decided to leave the national coalition government led by the PPP.

According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), over 800 people were killed in ethnic violence in Karachi between January and August this year. At least 300 were killed during the month of July alone, with most attacks carried out by gangsters and party activists associated with the PPP and MQM. The political-ethnic violence in Karachi this year has been the deadliest since 1995, when 900 killings were reported during the first half of that year. The overwhelming majority of those killed in the violence have been ordinary people targeted for their ethnicity. The government has deployed hundreds of additional police and paramilitary rangers to patrol the city streets.

Despite the agreement reached between the PPP and MQM, the violence in Karachi has continued in recent days. On August 17, at least seventeen people were killed in gun and grenade attacks around the city. The dead included former parliamentarian and PPP member Waja Karim Dad, who was shot dead by unidentified gunmen along with four of his associates at a restaurant in Kharadar. Gangsters associated with the MQM are believed to have carried out the attacks on the 17th, which were specifically aimed at PPP activists and ordinary Balochis. In their wake, violence erupted across the city, as Baloch gangs linked to the PPP launched revenge attacks against Muhajirs (the Urdu-speaking descendants of people who migrated to Sindh from north India following the 1947 communal partition of the Indian subcontinent) residing in older neighborhoods of the city.

Twenty-one bullet-ridden corpses were discovered around the city early last Thursday. Many of the bodies displayed signs of torture and were stuffed in jute bags. Most of the dead were Muhajirs who had been kidnapped, tortured and executed in revenge attacks launched in retaliation for those that had targeted local Balochis and PPP activists in the preceding days. The violence continued throughout the weekend, with at least 15 people killed. Violence on Monday brought the one-week death toll to nearly 100. A "day of mourning" strike called by the MQM brought the city to a standstill yesterday.

The MQM has repeatedly called for a military intervention in the city. Local business groups have also called on the military to intervene and put an end to the violence ravaging the country's financial capital. The PPP has thus far refused these demands. While it is far from certain that the military would welcome such an assignment, the PPP, which claims to have led the fight to restore democracy in Pakistan, recognizes an army deployment in the country largest city would be a humiliating admission of the government's weakness and strengthen the hands of the generals

with whom its relations remain fractious.

Most of the violence in Karachi arises from "turf wars" between leaders and activists of the PPP, MQM, and the ANP (Awami National Party). These parties have aligned themselves with various slum landlords, drug barons and gun-runners in their competition for land, political influence and control of various rackets like the "protection racket." Criminal gangs have been unleashed to do the dirty work, with workers and toilers of all ethnicities suffering the consequences.

The political parties involved in the violence predictably blame each other for the carnage that is taking place. However, every faction of the Pakistani bourgeoisie is complicit in the communal violence that plagues Karachi and much the country. For decades, politicians from all the bourgeois parties have engaged in national-ethnic and religious appeals so as to divert popular outrage at chronic poverty and rampant corruption into reactionary channels.

With an estimated population of 18 million, Karachi is Pakistan's largest city and the country's economic engine. More than half of the government's total revenue is contributed by the city, which also represents 25 to 30 percent of the country's GDP. The ethnic violence rocking the city often disrupts commerce and hinders industrial output. Since Karachi is vital for the country's economic growth, sections of the ruling elite are concerned the violence may have a long-term impact on the economy.

The overwhelming majority of the city's residents must contend with mass unemployment, poverty, spiraling food and energy prices, and crippling power cuts. Many of the city's poor residents live in enormous, overcrowded slums like Orangi Township, where they lack access to basic necessities like potable water. The city's elite, meanwhile, live in wealthy neighborhoods, like Defence Housing Authority and Clifton, and are largely untouched by the violence.

Karachi has experienced rapid population growth since the inception of the Pakistani state in 1947, when there were just 450,000 people living in the city. In 1951, the city's population surpassed 1 million and by the early 1980s it had increased to well over 5 million people. The city's population has continued to rise rapidly in recent years. According to the Karachi City Government, the city's population increased from 9.2 million in 1998 to approximately 14.5 million people in 2007. Large numbers of people continue to migrate to the city from every part of the country. People living in rural areas in Sindh and other provinces have virtually no access to jobs and basic needs like health care and education, forcing them to head to the city in search of a better life.

The economic slump has had a devastating toll on the country's working population. Two-thirds of the population now spends the majority of their income on food. Thirty-six percent of Pakistanis are "undernourished," according to a recent Oxfam report. Researchers claim that up to 44 percent of children in rural areas are stunted. Food prices have increased by 94 percent in the last four years, according to the Federal Bureau of Statistics.

While the miserable social conditions that exist in the countryside have been the driving factor of the mass migration to Karachi, Pakistan's role in supporting the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan has added a new dimension to the political-ethnic strife in the city.

Under orders from Washington, the PPP-led coalition government has intensified counterinsurgency operations against Taliban-aligned militants in the country's northwest tribal areas, displacing hundreds of thousands of ordinary Pashtuns in the process. Many of these Pashtuns have fled to Karachi, where there are now at least 5 million Pashtuns living in the city. These refugees must struggle to secure employment and housing, but must also deal with the anti-Pashtun sentiment promoted by the MQM, which claims to defend the interests of the Muhajirs

Much of the ethnic violence in recent years has stemmed from competition between Muhajir gangs backed by the MQM and Pashtun gangs supported by the Awami National Party (ANP), a Pashtun nationalist party that purports to uphold the interests of Karachi's growing Pashtun population. According to the *Financial Times*, "Murders of activists from all sides began to increase sharply in May 2007 and rose rapidly after 2008 national elections, when the ANP won its first two city seats. Many believe the MQM is determined to prevent the upstart gaining a foothold." Recently, Baloch gangsters associated with the PPP and based in Lyari have also been involved in heavy fighting with the MQM as they've sought to expand their turf. The *Dawn* recently reported that the factors fueling the recent wave of communal-ethnic killings include the "alleged involvement of some Lyari gangsters in the Haqiqi-led attack on an MQM stronghold in Landhi-Malir area last month, a protest campaign by many traders of Kharadar and adjoining areas against so-called 'protection money,' and retaliatory action by the extortionist mafia and other affected groups."

Haqiqi (Muhajir Qaumi Movement-H) is a rival faction of the MQM, from which it split in 1991, after Altaf Hussain, founder and unchallenged leader of the MQM, opened up party membership to non-Mohajirs. Some journalists believe the increasingly deadly factional struggle between the MQM and MQM(H) is partly to blame for the sharp rise in political-ethnic violence in Karachi.

Tension in the city increased sharply after the MQM left the PPP-led national coalition government in June, after helping the PPP pass its draconian austerity budget for the 2011-2012 fiscal year. At that time, the MQM had charged the PPP with not doing enough to control ethnic violence in the city. The MQM's departure came after the PPP had secured an alliance with the military-sponsored Pakistan Muslim League (Q) (PML-Q)—a party that was established to provide a civilian window dressing for the US-backed Musharraf dictatorship. The pact with the PML (Q) strengthened the position of the PPP, which had long viewed the MQM as an unreliable ally not only because its bitter rivalry with the party in Karachi, but also due to the MQM's posturing as opponents of right-wing economic reforms demanded by the International Monetary Fund.

After the PPP deferred Azad Jammu and Kashmir elections for three seats representing Kashmiris residing in Karachi and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the MQM announced it was leaving the federal government and accused the PPP leaders of pressuring it to give up one seat in Karachi to the PPP.

Violence increased dramatically following the MQM's departure from the government. The MQM charged PPP ministers in the Sindh provincial government with persecuting its supporters in retaliation for quitting the government. After weeks of intense fighting, President Asif Ali Zardari invited the MQM to rejoin the government and promised to address its demands and concerns.

As part of the deal between the PPP and MQM, the PPP has agreed to restore the local government system across Sindh that Musharraf's

National Reconstruction Bureau had instituted in 2001, in a move designed to strengthen the national government at the expense of the provinces. The system allowed people to elect local politicians to represent their district, providing a pseudo-democratic fig leaf for the local bourgeoisie. Shortly after the MQM left the government this June, the PPP had reintroduced the commissioner system in the province that had prevailed up until 2001.

The MQM was closely-aligned with the Musharraf dictatorship and was the main beneficiary of the local government system, strengthening its hold over urban Sindh. The MQM vehemently opposed the PPP's attempts to revive the colonial-era commissioner system. Initially, the PPP had proposed restoring the local government system only in the MQM strongholds of Karachi and Hyderabad. However, this proposal led Sindhi nationalist parties and Sindhi nationalists within the PPP to charge the PPP leadership with dividing the province along ethnic lines.

The longstanding cleavage between Mohajir and Sindhi nationalist politicians has been further exacerbated by recent calls from sections of the Pakistani political elite for the creation of one or more new provinces. To date this debate has focused around discussion about the possible creation of a new province in southern Punjab, where Pakistan's Seraiki-speaking people are centered. An area dominated by landlordism, the southern Punjab is notorious for its high levels of poverty and extreme deprivation.

The call for a new province in southern Punjab is being spearheaded by the PPP, which by channeling social discontent in the south Punjab along national-ethnic and regionalist lines hopes to undermine its arch rival, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz). The PML (N) is based in and currently rules the Punjab, which is home to more than half of Pakistan's population.

While the PML (N) has not yet done so, there are widespread fears within the Pakistani elite ruling that it might try to counter the PPP's Seraiki gambit by proposing the division of other provinces whether on ethnic or administrative grounds.

The national-ethnic violence in Karachi once again demonstrates the bankruptcy of all sections of the Pakistani bourgeoisie. The 1947 communal partition of the Indian subcontinent into a Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India, was a betrayal of the mass anti-imperialist movement that swept across the Indian subcontinent during the first half of the Twentieth-Century. 64 years after "independence," Pakistan's venal elite continues to rely on the promotion of communalism and religious bigotry to safeguard its rule, with catastrophic results for workers and toilers across the country. The bloodshed and misery that plagues the country, and the poverty and inequality that define life for masses, will only be overcome through the building of a revolutionary socialist movement, uniting all the toilers against the bourgeoisie and the capitalist system it defends.



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