

Pakistan: Ethnic violence in Karachi deadliest since 1994

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Pakistan's largest city is being ravaged by increasingly bloody ethnic and sectarian violence. While Karachi has been the scene of such violence for decades, the past year has been one of the deadliest in the city's history. Not a day goes by without reports of target killings or bullet-riddled bodies being discovered in one of the city's numerous slums. The violence is expected to worsen in the coming months as next year's national election draws closer.

According to the Citizens' Police Liaison Committee, a civic organization that works in partnership with the Karachi police force, violence in the city had claimed 1,938 lives as of late November, the deadliest year since 1994, when the organization first began collecting figures. Police tallies put the number of dead at 1,897 through mid-October. Many more people have been killed since the release of these figures.

On Tuesday, four female polio vaccination workers were killed in three separate attacks carried out within the space of less than an hour. No one has claimed responsibility for the killings, although the Taliban has threatened anti-polio campaign workers in the past. A male health worker was also killed Tuesday, but after initially connecting it with the other killings authorities later concluded it was unrelated.

Karachi is a sprawling port city on the Arabian Sea with an estimated population of 18 million. Like most megacities located in underdeveloped countries, Karachi is home to an enormous population of impoverished workers, many of whom live in overcrowded and filthy slums. The city's elite live in luxurious mansions protected by armed security guards, and rarely leave their posh and serene neighborhoods.

Karachi is Pakistan's economic engine, and the violence has taken a mounting toll on the economy. According to Mohammed Atiq Mir, Chairman of the

All Karachi Trade Association, 20,000-25,000 businesses have left the city, resulting in economic losses of \$10 million per day.

Much of the violence in recent years has arisen from "turf wars" between leaders and activists of the Awami National Party (ANP) and the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM). The two parties are involved in a fierce struggle for political influence, and have also aligned themselves with slum landlords, drug barons and other criminal elements as they seek to control various rackets, particularly the extortion racket. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which heads a federal coalition government in which the ANP and MQM are both partners, has also seen hundreds of its members killed over the past four years, mainly at the hands of the MQM. The vast majority of people killed in the violence are ordinary workers targeted for their ethnicity.

The MQM is an ethnic-based bourgeois party founded by Altaf Hussain in 1984. The party claims to uphold the interests of the Muhajirs (the Urdu-speaking descendants of people who migrated to Sindh from north India following the 1947 communal partition of the Indian subcontinent). The ANP is a Pashtun nationalist party. It forms the provincial government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and purports to defend the interests of Karachi's large and growing Pashtun minority.

The violence in Karachi has been greatly exacerbated by the Pakistani elite's ruthless counterinsurgency war in Pakistan's northwest tribal areas—a war that has seen Pakistani security forces use indiscriminate shelling, torture and extrajudicial killings to intimidate the Pashtun population. The MQM, which runs Karachi's civic administration, feels that its hold over the city is slowly slipping away as more and more impoverished

Pashtuns move to Karachi to escape the brutality of the Pakistani military and relentless US drone attacks.

“The battle lines are visible across the city. MQM flags and posters blanket the Urdu-speaking neighborhoods, and red flags and graffiti mark ANP territory in the poorer, blue-collar neighborhoods,” the Associated Press noted in a recent report.

The MQM asserts that the Pakistani Taliban has been able to increase its presence and influence in Karachi by hiding among the Pashtun population. There is some evidence to suggest that the number of Taliban militants has increased in the city, including the growing number of sectarian killings targeting members of Karachi’s Shias minority. However, ANP claims that the MQM is exaggerating the number of militants in the city so as to provide it with a pretext to crack down on the Pashtun community should not be dismissed. ANP members have also been targeted by the Taliban, according to statements issued by the party.

ANP lawmakers have been pushing for an army operation in the city. “The army should immediately start an operation in Karachi to cleanse the city of anti-social elements,” Senator Zahid Khan of the ANP declared last month.

The MQM, which participated in the “civilian” government under the previous military dictator General Musharraf, is fiercely opposed to the deployment of the military in Karachi, which would weaken its control over the city’s government.

While the MQM was initially encouraged by the military as a counterweight to the PPP in its early years, it was later the target of a military intervention in Karachi between 1992 and 1994 during which scores of Muhajirs were killed.

The leadership of the PPP is also resisting calls for an army intervention and Army Chief Ashfaq Kayani ruled it out, at least for the moment, when he was asked by reporters about the situation in Karachi last month.

It’s no coincidence that the violence in Karachi has increased in the run up to the national elections due to take place next spring. For decades, Pakistan’s reactionary and politically bankrupt politicians have utilized ethnic and communal appeals as part of their election campaigns, with this year being no different. Communal tensions have increased over the past year as various parties have proposed creating new

provinces based on ethnicity so to undermine the influence of their rivals. The main purpose of such appeals, however, is to divert mass popular anger over the poverty, hunger and unemployment that plague the country, and to distract the attention of workers and toilers from the complicity of all the political parties in the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan and the AfPak War.



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