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Karachi's Ethnic Tinderbox

by Ahmed Humayun and Ali Jafri

Over the last month, Karachi- Pakistan's largest city and the center of its commercial and financial life - has witnessed its worst ethnic violence in years. On October 16 a wave of targeted ethnic killings began rolling across the city; four days later, more than 60 people were dead and Karachi had come to a standstill. Since then, the city has been teetering on the brink of even more bloodshed. Why is this violence erupting now?

The proximate cause is straightforward. On August 2nd, Raza Haider, a senior leader of the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) and a member of the Sindh provincial assembly, was assassinated. The MQM blamed Haider's death on its political rival, the Awami National Party (ANP). The MQM primarily caters to the interests of the Urdu-speaking Muhajir group while the ANP draws support from Pashtun constituencies. After Haider's demise, the MQM argued that the city's law enforcement agencies were biased against Muhajirs and deliberately not capturing the perpetrators of the murder. On October 16, a bye-election for the assembly seat left vacant by Haider's death was to be held, which prompted the recent spate of tit-for-tat killings.

The underlying causes of this urban violence, however, are rooted in a longer, more complex history of ethnic politics that dates back to Pakistan's founding. Karachi has long been the destination for generations of ethnically diverse migrants, a fact which has inevitably fueled conflict. One major component of this volatility has stemmed from the tense relations between Pashtuns and Muhajirs. After the partition of 1947, many Muhajirs moved to the city and encountered resistance from established Sindhi families. Several decades later, their struggle as migrants is being mirrored in the experience of the Pashtuns, who have been trying to establish a foothold in the city since the 1980s.

While both groups have shared common challenges, they have developed rival mechanisms to consolidate power at the local level. The Muhajirs tend to dominate the city's municipal political machine. Conversely, the Pashtuns have a strong grip on Karachi's vital transportation sector, which connects the outside world to urban and rural centers throughout Pakistan. Whereas the Pashtuns accuse the Muhajirs of refusing to peacefully accept their growing demographic, political and economic clout, the Muhajirs argue that the Pashtuns are infiltrating hard line Islamist extremism into the city.

These ethnic tensions have been exacerbated by the criminal networks that have taken advantage of Karachi's weak governing institutions. These networks include land mafias, weapons gangs, and drug cartels. For example, land mafias seize unoccupied plots of land and rent them out to residents from particular ethnic groups. The resulting ethnic enclaves are then patrolled and managed by armed cadres. In return for access to patronage from political parties, these mafias ensure that their tenants vote as blocs during municipal elections. Furthermore, since 2002, the wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan's northwestern regions have increased the strength of illicit criminal activity in Sindh. Established criminal gangs have become even more

entrenched and powerful as they facilitate the transportation of weapons from Karachi to militant groups such as the Taliban.

Domestic and regional wars are also engendering large scale societal shifts with long-term political implications. In particular, counterinsurgency operations in the Pashtun-dominated northwestern areas have resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people from their homes. Many of them have made their way to Karachi to seek refuge with extended families or otherwise seek alternate livelihoods. Not only has the influx of Pashtun migrants strained the city's already overextended resources to the breaking point, but the resulting change in the demographic balance of power has further aggravated tensions between the MQM and the ANP.

In one profound sense, history is repeating itself in Karachi. In the 1980s, the city became a key transit point for weapons, money, jihadists and refugees as a result of the Soviet Union's war in Afghanistan. Three decades later, as another war rages in Afghanistan, Karachi is once again being destabilized. Given the city's longstanding and uniquely combustible mix of marginalized ethnic groups, resource competition, and criminality, it is unsurprising that traditional ethnic and political fissures have deepened even further in the last few years.

Natural catastrophe has sharpened the edge of man-made conflict. Pakistani officials have indicated that as a result of the disruptions caused by this past summer's devastating floods, the permanent resettlement of millions of Pakistanis in Sindh's major towns and cities is required. Officials estimate that long term housing settlements for as many as 6 million people will be created in Sindh (whose current population is 45 million). As a result of this population transfer, existing political alignments will be severely challenged across the province. Dominant political organizations may therefore resort to even greater violence in order to quell potential challengers.

If current trends continue unimpeded, last month's violence will not be the end. The state's authority in its most important city will continue to shrink, while informal rules of economic and political interaction organized around ethnic identity and ruthlessly enforced by political organizations and their non-state proxies begin to govern day-to-day affairs. In order to prevent such an outcome, the Pakistani state must make a forceful effort to exert its authority. This includes the implementation of more stringent law enforcement as well as a serious attempt to splinter some of the criminal and militant networks that are exploiting ethnic tensions for their own ends. Otherwise, continuing lawlessness and anarchy will rip Karachi's fragile social fabric apart –with deleterious consequences for Pakistan's long term future.

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