

Guns, Slums, and “Yellow Devils”: A Genealogy of Urban Conflicts in Karachi, Pakistan

LAURENT GAYER

CSH, New Delhi/CEIAS, Paris

Summary

Karachi is a city of migrants and an important commercial hub, which provides Pakistan with a window on the world. But Karachi is also a deeply fragmented city, plagued by an acute urban crisis that takes roots in the failure of the development plans that successive Pakistani governments have delegated to foreign experts. The transnationalisation of the Afghan *jihād*, in the 1980s, also fuelled social and ethnic antagonisms in the city and contributed to the proliferation of violent entrepreneurs and ethnic parties. Both criminal elements and ethnic activists contributed to the ever-increasing fragmentation of urban space in the city, and to the multiplication of ethnic enclaves controlled by private militias. This extreme fragmentation of the city has benefited local *jihadis* and foreign terrorists who have taken shelter here since the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. However, Karachi will never be a “sanctuary” for jihadi militants, due to the hostility of local ethnic parties, whose activists see themselves as enlightened secularists at war with the most retrograde elements of their society and their foreign allies.

*Meri tamir mein muzmir key ik surat kharabi ki, hayola barkey khirman ka hey khoonay
garm dekhna ka . . .*

[Inherent in my creation is the seed of my own destruction, the passion of my creative endeavour creates instead the force which strikes me down] Ghalib¹.

Laurent Gayer received a Ph.D in political science from the Institute of Political Studies (Sciences Po) in 2004. His doctoral dissertation, which dealt with the international dimensions of Sikh and Mohajir identity politics, was entitled “Les politiques internationales de l’identité. Significations internationales des mobilisations identitaires des sikhs (Inde) et des Mohajirs (Pakistan)” [The Globalisation of Identity Politics. International Dimensions of Sikh and Mohajir Ethnic Movements]. He is currently a research associate at the Centre d’études de l’Inde et de l’Asie du Sud (CEIAS, EHESS/CNRS), Paris, and the coordinator of the international relations research programme at the Centre de Sciences Humaines (CSH), New Delhi.

¹ Quoted by M. Naqvi, *Mass Transit*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 13.

When Sir Charles David Napier reached the port of Karachi in 1843, all he found was a small fishermen's village protected by mud ramparts, which was linked to the outside world by two doors: the door of "salted water" (*kharadar*), giving access to the Arabian Sea, and the door of "sweet water" (*mithadar*), facing the Lyari river. The town, which was founded in 1729, was known as *Kalachi-jo ghote* (Kalachi's pond), in memory of a local fisherman². It had only 14 000 inhabitants and its commercial potential was limited, as its port was unfit for high tonnage foreign ships. Yet, the dusty hamlet, whose climate Napier found more salubrious than Hyderabad's, soon received the favours of the *Raj*. Even if it had no modern infrastructures, Karachi's port was an important knot in the regional "proto-globalized" economy³ since the eighteenth century, linking Sindh and Punjab with the Persian Gulf and, further, with China and Africa⁴. At the end of the 1830s, ships sailing from Europe, China and India, transiting through Bombay, were bringing iron, silk, satin, velvet, cotton, *ghee*, coconuts and spices, while vessels from Muscat brought precious "proto-global" commodities such as dates, ivory and slaves⁵. The goods leaving Karachi by sea were various too: salt, skins and dry fish were exported to Kutch and Muscat, while shark fins and opium⁶ were destined to

² The first known historical reference to Karachi is due to an emissary of Nader Shah, Muzafar Ali Khan, who mentions his stay in the city in his *Tuhfat-ul Kirram*, written in 1742. Karachi was founded 13 years earlier by a certain Bhojmal, who got its ramparts built by Arabian workers paid in dates imported from Bahreïn and Muscat; cf. S. K. H. Katrak, *Karachi: That was the Capital of Sindh*, (Lahore, 1963).

³ The notion of «proto-globalization» was coined by world historians "to refer two interacting political and economic developments that became especially prominent between about 1600 and 1800 in Europe, Asia and parts of Africa: the reconfiguration of state systems, and the growth of finance, services and pre-industrial manufacturing"; cf. A. G. Hopkins, 'Introduction: Globalization – An Agenda for Historians', in A. G. Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History*, (London: Pimlico, 2002), p. 5.

⁴ For a remarkable history of the Sindhi trade diaspora, which played a decisive role in the rise of Karachi, cf. C. Markovits, *The Global World of Indian Merchants, 1750–1947: Traders of Sindh from Bukhara to Panama*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁵ The slaves sold in Karachi came mostly from East Africa. They were known locally as *Sidis* (this term designating Africans in general) or *Habshis* (this term being applied to Abyssinians only). The 3/4th of the 650 *Sidis* "imported" annually were young girls, who cost between sixty and a hundred rupees. The number of *Habshis* was more limited, 30 to 40 of them being "imported" annually. The British made this trade illegal in 1839 but it seems to have perpetuated itself for a few more years.

⁶ Sindhi opium was mostly prepared in the Larkana and Sikharpur area and it generally transited through Diu and Daman, before sailing for China in Portuguese

China. The colonisation of Karachi connected it even tighter to the world economy. The British started modernising Karachi's port from 1854 onwards. The bay was dredged, in order to make it fit for high tonnage ships and modern docks were built⁷. Sir Bartle Frere, who was appointed Chief Commissioner of Sindh in 1850, also saw a bright future for Karachi, which he considered as "an alternative of Calcutta for the internal security of the Empire"⁸. In the 1860s, Karachi's economy benefited from the American cotton crisis and in the 1870s McLeod Road became the hub of Karachi's commercial and financial activities, being home to an ever increasing number of European firms and banks. In 1885–86, eight more European firms opened a branch in Karachi and the connection of Sindh with the Punjab through railway links made the transportation of wheat and cotton to its port far easier, so that in 1899 "it outstrip[ed] Bombay as wheat exporter-340,000 tons to 310,000 tons"⁹. In 1889, the construction of Empress Market endowed Karachi with the second largest vegetable market in the world after Bombay and at the end of the nineteenth century, Karachi had become a serious rival for more ancient cities such as Bombay and Calcutta. The First World War turned it into "the grocery of India"¹⁰ and it played a key role in the logistic support to British and allied troops. During the Second World War, Karachi was yet again a major knot in the procurement of food and equipment to the allies' troops and it became a major "ship hospital", where a thousand vessels undertook repairs between 1942 and 1945¹¹.

On the eve of Partition, Karachi had 425,000 inhabitants and 2.8 million tons of cargo were transiting annually through its port, wheat and cotton counting for 70 % of these exports. By 1958, those exports had risen to 4 million tons and Karachi's future looked brighter than ever, both economically and politically. Between 1947 and 1951, the massive influx of refugees from India, who came to be known as

vessels. Opium was brought to Karachi by camel caravans and yearly shipments varied from 80 to 1500 camel loads in the first decades of the nineteenth century; cf. Secretariat Karachi Port Trust, *History of Karachi Port*, (Karachi, 1980), p. 15.

⁷ Although the construction of Karachi's port docks started in 1882, it was only completed in 1944.

⁸ Quoted by Y. Lari and M. S. Lari, *The Dual City: Karachi During the Raj*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 91.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹⁰ S. K. H. Katrak, *Karachi*, p. 27.

¹¹ Z. A. Nizami, *Karachi Through the Centuries*, (Karachi: Karachi Development Authority, 1982?).

“Mohajirs”¹², brought Karachi under intense demographic pressure but it also provided it with a highly competent workforce and an experienced bureaucracy, which made the economic and the political success of the capital of Pakistan in the following years. Karachi’s localisation had played in its favour when the time to choose a capital had come for the Muslim Leaguers. Lahore, the great rival of Karachi in West Pakistan, was considered too close to the border with India and, thus, strategically vulnerable, while Rawalpindi was a middle-range town which could not pretend to compete with its more illustrious rivals. Dacca’s case, for its part, “had been doomed from the very start” due to the minor role played by Bengal in the Pakistan movement¹³. And whereas the Punjab and Bengal had collapsed amidst anarchy in the last months of the British *Raj*, Karachi had remained “a relative haven of tranquillity”¹⁴. The city, whose municipality was the oldest of India¹⁵ and which had become the capital of Sindh in 1937 after the province was separated from Bombay, “could also boast of a nucleus of administrative buildings, which was what a central government suddenly faced with the problem of housing the offices of an entire state needed”¹⁶. Karachi was officially made the capital of Pakistan on 22nd May 1948, when the Constituent Assembly decided that it would be separated from Sindh to become a federally-administered area. This decision fuelled the anger of Sindhi *ansars* towards the *muhajirin*, whom they deemed as arrogant city-dwellers full with contempt for the “sons of the soil”¹⁷. The seeds of ethnic strife were thus planted in Sindh, which would soon become a battleground for aggrieved ethnic groups constructing their identities through their confrontation with the Other(s). Karachi’s modern history is thus marked by an apparent economic success mitigated by violent ethnic and, more recently, sectarian conflicts. Such categorisation is deeply problematic, though.

¹² 900 000 Mohajirs settled in Karachi between 1947 and 1951; see Laurent Gayer, *Les politiques internationales de l'identité: Significations internationales des mobilisations identitaires des Sikhs (Inde) et des Mohajirs (Pakistan)*, Ph.D Dissertation, (Paris: Sciences Po, 2004), annexure 2.4, p. 839.

¹³ T. Y. Tan & G. Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*, (London/New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 179.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹⁵ The Karachi Municipal Corporation (KMC) was established in 1832 to counter epidemics affecting the city as a whole.

¹⁶ T. Y. Tan & G. Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition*, p. 181.

¹⁷ S. F. D. Ansari, “Partition, Migration and Refugees: Responses to the Arrival of Muhajirs in Sind during 1947-48”, in D. A. Low & H. Brasted (eds.), *Freedom, Trauma, Continuities: Northern India and Independence*, (Delhi: Sage, 1998).

Karachi's alleged "ethnic" and "sectarian" conflicts initially had little to do with ethnicity and religiosity. In the 1980s, Karachi's urban crisis fuelled social antagonisms which turned into ethnic rivalries due to the particular social division of work in the city. The Afghan *jihad* also brought to Karachi a flow of arms and drugs which gave birth to a culture of ultra-violence amongst the city youth, for whom Russian TT-pistols became the hottest commodity in town. Since the Afghan *jihad* has "come home", in the 1990s and even more so after the fall of the Taleban¹⁸, Karachi's ethnic conflicts seem to have been supplanted by "sectarian" ones but this shift is open to question, as Karachi remains a largely secular city, where jihadist and sectarian organisations have undoubtedly taken roots but where they remain marginal political actors.

The politics of Karachi's urban crisis

Since Partition, Karachi is no longer divided between a "white" and a "black" city¹⁹ but between "planned" and "unplanned areas" [cf. Table 1]. The former consist of residential and commercial areas developed by the Karachi Development Authority (KDA) or integrated into its development plans. The latter, which provide shelter to 50 % of the 15 million inhabitants of the city, refer to squatter settlements developed through the illegal occupation or subdivision of public land, at the periphery of the city, along its natural drainage channels and its railway lines and inside its river beds. Housing conditions and access to utilities, to education and to health vary greatly between planned and unplanned areas. If the former can boast of modern educational, health and recreational facilities, this is not the case in unplanned

¹⁸ M. Abou-Zahab & O. Roy, *Islamic Networks: The Pakistan-Afghan Connection*, (London: Hurst, 2003); L. Goodson, *The Talibanization of Pakistan*, (New York/Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2002).

¹⁹ Only the notables, big land owners and merchants lived in the «clean» part of Karachi, east of the old centre, which had much more and much better educational, health and recreational facilities than the "black" part of the city. In this way, "the dominating position of the rulers was reflected in the spatial structure of the city in which separation was a main element"; H. Meyerink, "Karachi's growth in historical perspective", in J. W. Schoorl, J. J. van der Linden & K. S. Yap (eds.), *Between Basti Dwellers and Bureaucrats: Lessons in Squatter Settlement Upgrading in Karachi*, (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1983), p. 8.

TABLE 1
Comparison between Planned and Unplanned Areas of Karachi

| Item | Planned Areas | Unplanned Areas |
|--|---------------|-----------------|
| Demography | | |
| a) Average household size | 6.9 | 7.3 |
| b) %age gender distribution (male) | 54 | 65 |
| c) %age population < 20 | 48.6 | 56.4 |
| d) Crude Birth Rate | 1.3 | 3.6 |
| Housing | | |
| a) %age permanent structures | 70-90 | 20 |
| b) %age semi-permanent structures | 10-30 | 75 |
| c) %age temporary structures | — | 5 |
| d) Built Up M ² per person | 19.25 | 11.59 |
| e) Number of persons per room | 0.5 | 3.3 |
| Access to Utilities | | |
| a) %age water connections | 83 | 50.3 |
| b) %age gas connections | 98.4 | 75.8 |
| c) %age sewage connections (estimated) | 75.3 | 35.1 |
| | 85 | 12 |
| Education | | |
| a) %age population rate > 10 years | 76 | 48-67 |
| b) %age population with primary education | 9.5 | 21.7 |
| c) %age population with intermediary education | 19.8 | 16.3 |
| d) %age population with Bachelor and above | 19.1 | 3.1 |
| Employment | | |
| a) %age population employed | 65.7 | 64.7 |
| b) %age population unemployed | 24.9 | 25.3 |
| c) %age housewives | 31 | 34 |
| Income / Expenditure | | |
| a) Average Income (Rs. per month) | 3808-4930 | 1899-2158 |
| b) %age earned through wages | 50.8 | 77.7 |
| c) %age earned through profit | 20.2 | 16.8 |
| d) Average expenditure (Rs. per month) | 3083 | 1648-2109 |
| — %age spent on food | 53 | 58 |
| — %age spent on rent | 18 | 13 |
| — %age spent on saving | 30 | 2.3 |

Source: Adapted from Arif Hasan, *Understanding Karachi*, Appendix 2, table 1.3, p. 167 (Based on data compiled by Arif Hasan and Asiya Sadiq for UNCHS *Global Report on Human Settlements*, 1996)

areas, where “health, education and recreational facilities [...] are developed incrementally over time by the informal sector and remain inadequate and badly operated”²⁰.

²⁰ A. Hasan, *Understanding Karachi: Planning and Reform for the Future*, (Karachi: City Press, 1999), Appendix 2, p. 166.

The origins of Karachi's squatter settlements, locally known as *bastis*²¹, can be traced back to Partition and to the subsequent formidable increase in the city's population. Between 1941 and 1961, Karachi's population grew by 432 per cent, a rate of growth "no other city anywhere else in the world at any time in human history has ever experienced"²². All the *muhajirin* could not be properly accommodated in the city and a great deal of them had to make do with *katcha* housing²³ for a while. In 1953, 250,000 of them were to be "resettled", i.e. provided with decent accommodation, and in 1958, 100,000 refugees were still in this situation²⁴. In the following decades, Karachi *bastis* grew in size and in numbers with the arrival of in-migrants from Punjab, Balochistan and the Frontier.

Informal housing has taken two forms in Karachi: "unorganised invasions" and "illegal subdivisions". The former started occurring after Partition, when squatters occupied illegally state land, whereas illegal subdivisions became more important in the 1960s, when peripheral land was developed and sold "by 'independent' private persons who lack[ed] the property rights" over it²⁵. These informal entrepreneurs, who came to be known as *dallals* (patrons), were in close contact with police officers, politicians and bureaucrats, these connections offering a certain degree of security against eviction to *basti* dwellers.

Until the beginning of the 1980s, most *dallals* were either Punjabi or Mohajir but this situation changed with the irruption of Pathan entrepreneurs in Karachi's informal housing market²⁶. Many Pathan

²¹ *Bastis* are "spontaneous settlements that came about without official government planning"; J. J. Van der Linden, 'The Bastis of Karachi: The Functioning of an Informal Housing System', in J. W. Schoorl, J. J. van der Linden & K. S. Yap (eds.), *Between Basti Dwellers and Bureaucrats*, p. 43.

²² T. Y. Tan & G. Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition*, p. 185.

²³ «*Katcha*» houses are temporary structures made of mud and thatch; in the subcontinent, the notion of «*katcha*» has a deeply pejorative connotation, as it implies impurity. «*Katcha*» housing is opposed to «*pakka*» housing, which relates to permanent buildings made of cement.

²⁴ M. Waseem, 'Ethnic Conflict in Pakistan: The case of MQM', *The Pakistan Development Review*, 35 (4), winter 1996, p. 620; S. F. D. Ansari, 'The Movement of Indian Muslims', p. 159.

²⁵ J. V. D. Linden, E. Meijer & P. Nientied, 'Informal Housing in Karachi', in J. V. D. Linden & F. Selier (eds.), *Karachi: Migrants, Housing and Housing Policy*, (Lahore: Vanguard, 1991), pp. 67–68.

²⁶ S. Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia*, (New Delhi: Vistaar, 1996), pp. 84–185.

transporters, who often happened to be policemen²⁷, started investing in real estate in the 1980s and so did several of the drug and arms barons who made their entry on Karachi's political stage during the Afghan war. Within a few years, Punjabi and Mohajir *dallals* had lost the control of Karachi's informal housing market to the Pathans, who imposed a new *modus vivendi* in squatter settlements: after land was seized by gunmen, plots were developed and rented to tenants who could be evicted at will. Coercion and violence were not new to Karachi's *bastis*, but they had never reached that level and the Pathans often met with resistance, particularly in Orangi, Karachi's largest squatter settlement, with an estimated population of about one million²⁸.

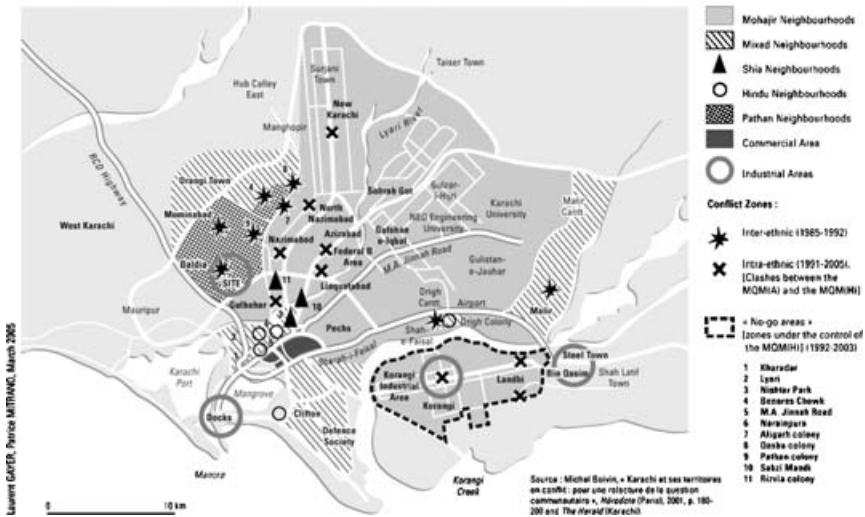
Karachi's first major "ethnic riot"²⁹, which took place in April 1985 and claimed at least a hundred lives, mobilised Mohajir, and more particularly Bihari *basti* dwellers *versus* Pathan gunmen who were trying to extend their influence to *mohallas* situated at the margins of their recently consolidated "territories". In Orangi, the main battlefield was situated between Banaras Chowk and the Metro Cinema, an area adjacent to new Pathan strongholds³⁰. During the December 1986 riots, Pathan gunmen also attacked *mohallas* adjacent to their zones of influence, such as Aligarh and Qasba Colony [*cf.* Map 1]. Most of the residents of these two *bastis* happened to be "Biharis", *i.e.* "stranded Pakistanis" freshly repatriated from Bangladesh. These newcomers were the most vulnerable inhabitants of the city, since they had not taken roots yet. However, they were often familiar with war and military organisation, as the founder of the first Canadian unit of the Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) recalls:

²⁷ 90 % of Karachi's minibuses belonged to policemen; *cf.* «Traffic in Death», *The Herald* (Karachi), May 1985, p. 43.

²⁸ Mohajirs and Pathans each constituted 25 % of Orangi's population, the remaining 50 % of the population being a mixture of Punjabis, Sindhis, Baluchis, Bengalis and Afghan refugees.

²⁹ Karachi has seen anti-Ahmedi riots in the early fifties, anti-Pathan riots in the late 1950s and again in 1965, anti-Ahmedi riots again in 1969–70 and Sindhi-Mohajir riots in 1972–73. However, the ethnic clashes which occurred in the second half of the 1980s in the city were unprecedented in their scale and brutality. Clashes have occurred between Pathans and Biharis in April 1985, October and December 1986, and February and July 1987, and between Mohajirs and Sindhis in May, September, and October 1988, and again in May-June 1990.

³⁰ Approximately 250,000 of the estimated 1.5 million Pathans of Karachi were living in Orangi.



Map 1. Karachi and its conflict zones (1985–2005)

The Mohajirs who came from East Pakistan, they came from a war-ready people. They were the kids who had fought a war, so they made indigenous guns. I had reports that the steel poles for electricity, they're hollow, so they cut that down, make it the barrel of a big gun and train it towards the Pathans. They *make* it. So they say “Ok, you come and try to kill us, but that gun is going to shoot on 20 miles, remember that...”³¹.

With each community boasting of its respective “martial traditions” and stockpiling weapons to counter the enemy’s threat, what were originally housing conflicts turned into ethnic rivalries. However, one should be aware that in their initial stage, the April 1985 “riots” did not oppose Pathan developers and Mohajir *basti* dwellers but transport-users, whether Punjabi or Mohajir, and transporters, who often happened to be Pathans. Akmal Hussain has identified Karachi’s “transport problems” as “the immediate context” which made Pathan and Mohajir communities “vulnerable to being emotionally manipulated into ethnic conflict”³². The owners of Karachi’s minibuses, locally known as “yellow devils”, generally leased them out to individuals whose profit depended on the number

³¹ Interview, Montreal, 4/04/2000.

³² A. Hussain, ‘The Karachi Riots of December 1986: Crisis of State and Civil Society in Pakistan’, in V. Das (ed.), *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 188.

of passengers they carried daily, thus encouraging them to drive recklessly. The absence of a bus terminal and of bus stations in Karachi led the “yellow devils” to encroach on the pavement to drop and to pick up passengers, thus threatening pedestrians. In 1984 and 1985, road accidents claimed two lives daily, in a city where the number of vehicles had more than tripled in ten years³³. It was one of those accidents that prompted the April 1985 “riots”. On the morning of April 15, 1985, a Pathan mini-bus driver, eager to outrun a competitor, did not respect traffic lights and hit a vehicle before bumping into a group of students of Sir Syed College, in Liaqatabad, killing one of them. In the hours that followed the incident, young angry students organised a protest demonstration that was brutally repressed by the police. The attitude of the police, which was accused of molesting young female students after it entered Sir Syed College, fuelled the anger of Mohajirs and Punjabis alike and in the following days violence erupted all over the city, from Liaqatabad in the east to Orangi in the west [*cf.* Map 1]. Far from being unorganised, these rioting incidents often involved young Mohajir and Punjabi activists from the Islami Jamiat-e Tuleba, the student wing of the Jama’at-e Islami. The young *jama’atis*, eager to provoke the police, set buses and minibuses on fire, which inevitably met with harsh responses. In the afternoon of April 6, the army was deployed in Liaqatabad and Nazimabad, the Mohajir dominated lower-middle class areas where violence had first erupted after Bushra Zaidi’s death. But while the army was trying to defuse tensions in those two localities, a new incident set Orangi ablaze. A bus carrying Mohajir students to Bushra Zaidi’s funeral was attacked by a band of armed Pathans in Banaras Chowk, a strategic location which plays the same role of “interface” as Haider Chowk in Hyderabad³⁴. In the words of Allen Feldman, the “interface” is “the topographic ideological boundary sector that physically and symbolically demarcates ethnic communities”, where rioting functions as “a traditional mechanism for setting and even extending territorial boundaries”³⁵. In Orangi, Banaras Chowk was the main point of contact of Bihari and Pathan residents: it was an informal bus terminal linking Orangi to the rest of Karachi and, as such, it was “a center of all those activities involved

³³ ‘Traffic in Death’, *The Herald*, May 1985, p. 44.

³⁴ J. J. Richards, *Mohajir Subnationalism and the Mohajir Qaumi Movement in Sindh Province, Pakistan*, Ph.D dissertation, (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1993).

³⁵ A. Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 28.

with transport and its ancillary needs, ranging from repair shops to eating places"³⁶. On April 6, 1985, it became a battlefield after Pathan gangs attacked Mohajir students, before invading adjacent Abdullah Girls College, where they molested female students and damaged costly laboratory equipment.

The 1985 riot thus erupted in "a context of general public grievances, which included the transport problem"³⁷, as well as the informal housing crisis. This urban crisis only took an "ethnic" tone due to the communal division of work in the city and to the ethnic affiliations of the main protagonists in Karachi's new real estate politics. In other words, all inhabitants of Karachi came to see the Pathans as factors of nuisance and insecurity not because of their ethnic origins but because of their professions, and the clashes which occurred between Pathans and Biharis in April 1985 and December 1986 had less to do with ethnicity than with the new politics of public transportation and real estate development in the city's squatter settlements. The new demography of the city also came to play a key role in Karachi's slip into violence in the 1980s.

A City of (Armed) Youths

Karachi's urban crisis alone cannot explain the upheaval of the 1980s. Indeed, if Karachi's transport and housing problems are endemic, living conditions improved considerably in Sindh cities during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1987, the year the Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) met with its first electoral victory, unemployment was actually much lower than in 1971–72, water was available in most parts of the city and transportation had become far easier than in the preceding decade. Thus, "Sindh's urban crisis cannot be dismissed as simply a reaction to a lack of urban services and employment. Nor can the government's incapacity to address the situation be explained away completely by saying that the administration has been bought over by the mafia. There are bigger forces at work". For urban developer Arif Hasan, these "bigger forces" were "colossal economic and demographic changes that have taken place in Pakistan in general, and Sindh in particular"³⁸. In 1987, almost 36 % of

³⁶ S. Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds*, p. 188.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

³⁸ A. Hasan, 'A Generation Comes of Age', *The Herald*, October 1987, pp. 52–53.

Karachi's population was between the ages of 14 and 30 and 80 % of the individuals belonging to this age group were born in the city. 71 % of them were literate, as compared to the overall Karachi literacy figure of 55 % and the overall Pakistan figure of 26.17 %. Almost 28 % of this age group had passed its "matric" and 22.4 % of its members were graduates. The majority of them were white collar workers or artisans, a large number of them being self-employed³⁹.

Karachi's and Hyderabad's violence, in the 1980s and 1990s, was the outcome of these demographic and social changes, as they expressed the frustration of a more numerous and more educated youth, which fought among itself while rejecting the authority of traditional local leaders such as *muezazins*, *izatdars* and *dallals*. The upheaval of Sindh cities in the 1980s was concomitant with an unprecedented dynamism of the "political society" at the local level, attested by the creation of large numbers of *mohalla tanzeems*, social welfare organisations, corporations, cultural groups, sports clubs and anti-drug movements. Sindh's campuses were also bustling with extra-curricular activities since the end of the 1970s, although student unions were banned by General Zia-ul Haq in 1984. This ban did not affect the Islami Jamiat-e Tuleba, the student wing of the Jama'at-e Islami, which enjoyed the favours of the regime, and its activists took control of university campuses in Sindh. In Karachi, they met with a strong resistance, as one former student at Karachi University (KU) recalls:

I was in Karachi University from 81 to 88 and at that time, student politics was mainly divided between the Islami Jamiat-e Tuleba and the United Students Movement (USM). The USM was basically an alliance of different groups [that] had some common issues. APMSO⁴⁰ was a very insignificant force. Near the elections, they had rallies and that's all, and they never brought up more than 100 or 200 students, that's all, while there were 14,000 students in KU, in 41-42 departments. KU, you can call it a «mini-Pakistan», because there were students from all provinces. So it was sort of reflective of Pakistani society and the rise of the APMSO was linked with the rise of the MQM in the city. I don't know exactly how it happened and what was the crunch point because I was not very much involved in politics till 84. (...) During Zia time, there was a lot of pressure on any political activity and there were a number

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴⁰ The foundation of the All Pakistan Mohajir Students Organisation (APMSO) was announced by Altaf Hussain, Azim Tariq, Salim Haider, Imran Farooq and a few other activists on October 18, 1978. Altaf Hussain's and Azim Tariq's political activities led to their expulsion from Karachi University in 1980. Altaf then left for Chicago, where he worked as a taxi driver before returning to Karachi in 1984, after his comrades announced the foundation of the MQM.

of incidents in KU where people got penalised for being political, including lecturers. But I remember from my personal information from class fellows belonging to the Mohajir community that until 84–85, they were not much interested in Mohajir politics, but after that they really politicised around the Mohajir identity. One girl from our class once said during a discussion: «we did not have politics on our agenda. Our whole life was to work and to build our homes and have fridges, TVs, good cars . . . that type of life we were involved in . . . But we are forced to take up arms because those who are coming to Karachi, they are taking over and they have guns. Now, we have sold refrigerators, TVs and bought Kalashnikovs»⁴¹. I think they actually did that, because otherwise she would not have said that . . . Everyday, there were 10–15 people getting killed here and there, so it was like that . . . In 88, when I came back, Karachi had really been taken over by Mohajirs in terms of street power and all that. So it became Mohajir City⁴².

As this former Kashmiri student at Karachi University suggests, a power shift occurred on Karachi campuses in the middle of the 1980s, when Mohajir students withdrew their support to the Islami Jamiat-e Tuleba (IJT) to join the MQM and its student wing, the APMSO. Until then, Mohajir students had been the backbone of the IJT in Karachi, their parents being ardent supporters of religious parties such as the Jama'at-e Islami and, in the case of Barelvis, the Jamiat-e Ulema Pakistan (JUP). The Mohajirs' support to the religious parties was not a manifestation of their "fundamentalism": for these refugees and their siblings, it was an attempt to join the Pakistani mainstream, as Muslims and not as "refugees". Since they could not rely on an ethnic identity of their own, as the Sindhis, the Punjabis, the Balochs and the Pathans, the *muhajirin* could only rely on the larger Muslim *political* identity derived from Jinnah's two nation theory. Their support of political Islam was thus inspired by their specific identity politics rather than by their endorsement of the islamist *weltanschauung*. On the contrary, the *muhajirin* were urban dwellers prone to cultural liberalism and a great many of them were at odds with the religious parties' ideology. Most of the founders of the APMSO, including Altaf Hussain himself, came from the IJT, but their relation with the religious parties has gone sour since they divorced them to organise on an ethnic basis. At the beginning of the 1980s, supporters of the APMSO even clashed frequently with young *jama'atis*, as one cadre of the MQM recalls:

⁴¹ On October 31, 1986, while addressing his supporters in Hyderabad, Altaf Hussain advised Mohajirs to sell their luxury goods to buy kalashnikovs.

⁴² Interview, Oldham (GB), 16/02/2002.

I read in the newspapers and heard people talking about the discrimination against Mohajirs, and the 'sons of the soil problem'. I felt that the police had no sympathy for us unless we spoke Punjabi. I read in matric and just opposite my school was Government Jinnah College, where the APMSO was already established by Amin ul-Haq. I was the captain of the hockey team in my school and during a match against a famous school hockey team, I saw some people beating 2 or 3 persons. Me and my associates stopped them and tried to understand what was going on. Then one of the guys told me 'I'm a member of the APMSO and my name is Shahid Mohajir and these two colleagues are my neighbours in Orangi Town and the people beating us belong to Islami Jamiat-e Tuleba and they accused us of shouting Mohajir slogans and of wearing *kurta-pajama*'. I was impressed, because I am also a Mohajir, I also speak Urdu and I also wear *kurta-pajama*...⁴³.

The "pyjama culture" on which the MQM has relied to build a Mohajir identity has already been studied elsewhere⁴⁴ but the impact of Karachi's campus politics on the rise of the MQM has received less attention from scholars. The MQM has been more popular with analysts of Mohajir politics than the APMSO and the genesis of Altaf Hussain's party thus remains shrouded in mystery. This is regrettable, because the first half of the 1980s was a crucial period for Sindh, during which campus politics spilled over local and provincial politics, before affecting relations between the province and the centre. The large-scale influx of firearms into the province, courtesy of the Afghan *jiḥād*, turned its campus into battlefields. In Karachi University, *kalachins* made their first appearance in August 1979, in the hands of Husain Haqqani's bodyguards⁴⁵. In the following years, the IJT trained units of armed militants who would take up positions at strategic points in the campus as soon as incidents would break out. Until the beginning of the 1980s, these militants' most bitter enemies were left-wing groups such as the Punjabi Students Federation. In 1982, a series of incidents between APMSO and IJT activists started up a new confrontation in the city's campuses, which culminated in the clashes of September 1988, during which over 50 students were injured⁴⁶. By that time, the APMSO had acquired a veritable arsenal, which was intended to counter the *jama'atis* in Karachi and Sindhi nationalist groups such as the Jiye Sindh Students Force (JSSF) in the rest of the province.

⁴³ Interview with Kamal Mansoor, Karachi, 14/04/2001.

⁴⁴ O. Verkaaik, 'A People of Migrants: Ethnicity, State and Religion in Karachi', *Comparative Asian Studies*, n° 15, (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994), pp. 10–23.

⁴⁵ Husain Haqqani was an IJT activist who later became Nawaz Sharif's councillor; cf. J. J. Richards, *Mohajir Subnationalism*, p. 249.

⁴⁶ 'The Campus Mafias', *The Herald*, October 1988, pp. 52–65.

After the riots of April 1985, MQM activists started distributing weapons to their supporters during public meetings, only asking for "a donation to the party" in exchange; ammunition was five rupees a piece and the buyers were given an *ajrak* (Sindhi shawl) to conceal their purchase⁴⁷. According to a former MQM militant, Altaf Hussain and his companions had their first encounter with Kalashnikovs in 1986 at Sindh University:

We had not seen any Kalashnikov rifles [before January 1986], though we had heard a lot about them. The first time we saw a Kalashnikov was when Altaf Hussain was invited to attend G.M. Syed's birthday at Sindh University. Altaf stepped down from the dais and went towards a man holding a Kalashnikov. When the man put the AK-47 rifle on the floor, Altaf quietly watched it. After the function, snacks were being served in the hostel. We accompanied Altaf to a separate hostel room where arms were displayed. Some revolvers, pistols, rifles and AK-47 rifles were stacked on a table. A Jiye Sindh activist identified various types of arms and their use. We listened with rapt attention. When we came back to Karachi, the entire MQM started searching desperately for a Kalashnikov. We searched endlessly, but in vain. Then suddenly, one day, an AK-47 rifle appeared on the premises. It had been brought by Jawed Langra. There was a wave of jubilation. In the night, Jawed went upstairs on the roof and fired. The whole of Azizabad reverberated with sound. People rushed out of their houses in fear. After that day, we saw many Kalashnikovs⁴⁸.

The APMSO bought its first weapons from the IJT and the National Students Federation (NSF) while the MQM built a part of its armoury by trading cars for guns with the Pakistan People's Party (PPP)⁴⁹. Feuding organisations were thus freely trading arms with each other throughout the 1980s, forming what Elizabeth Picard has termed a "militia system" (*système milicien*) in the cases of Lebanon and Northern Ireland⁵⁰. However, at the end of the 1980s, the rules of gun-running changed in Karachi and Sindh at large. In 1989, a report of the magazine *Newsline* suggested that "in the last one year, the business has been taken over by a new breed of independent underground entrepreneurs—students and political activists patronised by political parties who maintain what one student terms the 'minimum safety

⁴⁷ O. Verkaaik, *Inside the Citadel: Fun, Violence and Religious Nationalism in Hyderabad, Pakistan*, Ph.D dissertation, (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 1999), p. 151.

⁴⁸ G. Hasnain, 'For Us, Altaf Hussain Was Like a God: The Diary of a Former MQM Militant', *Newsline* (Karachi), May 1997, p. 33.

⁴⁹ M. Anif, 'The Gun-Runners of Karachi', *Newsline*, October 1989, p. 23.

⁵⁰ E. Picard, 'Liban, la matrice historique', in François Jean, Jean-Christophe Rufin (eds.), *Economie des guerres civiles*, (Paris: Hachette, 1996), p. 92.

distance'. These boys have not only taken over the local distribution network, but also bring in their own supplies through regular visits to the tribal areas. They travel in small groups, always by train, and return to Karachi with their bags brimming with metal"⁵¹. The Mohajir students who resorted to that trade were initially apprehensive, thinking that the Pathan gunsmiths would refuse to sell them weapons because they would be turned against their brethren in Karachi. But ethnic prejudices were set aside by the Pathans when striking deals with Mohajirs. A Mohajir activist, describing his first experience with a Pathan gunsmith, thus recalls: "I was apprehensive at first. I asked him what would happen if he went back on the deal saying that we were killing his Pathan brothers with his guns. And he said *"Tum kaisa Musalman ho? Hum ney Pathan ko khana hay? Hamain roti chahiey"* [What kind of a Muslim are you? I can't eat Pathans. I need my bread]⁵².

Between 1986 and 1989, the prices of guns went down by 40 to 50 % in Karachi. The TT-pistol sold for 5500 rs. in 1987. In 1989, it was priced at 3000 rs⁵³. In the Frontier, the price of an AK-47 went down from 40 000 rs. in 1980 to 16 000 rs. in 1989⁵⁴. During ethnic clashes in Karachi and urban Sindh, "a rise in the prices of weapons was noticed because supplies were reportedly being rushed from the NWFP"⁵⁵, but the large influx of arms in Karachi in the following years stabilised the prices of weapons and eventually led to their decrease. In this environment, a culture of ultra-violence developed among Karachi's and Hyderabad's youths⁵⁶ and firearms became a "fetish" for a whole generation, *i.e.* objects which cease to be purely functional to take on "an abstract power, an autonomous agency"⁵⁷. These deadly weapons were no longer the attributes of the "uncouth and tribal Pathan": they became "glamorous" to all and many young Mohajir males started carrying arms as an ornament. The possession of arms also provided these frustrated youths with a feeling

⁵¹ M. Anif, 'The Gun-Runners of Karachi', *Newsline*, October 1989, p. 22.

⁵² Quoted by *ibid*, p. 23.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 22.

⁵⁴ R. Yusufzai, 'The Frontier Connection', *Newsline*, October 1989, p. 26. In March 2001, an AK-47 sold for 10,000 rs. in Karachi.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 26.

⁵⁶ On the contribution of ultra-violence to the construction of a Mohajir identity in Hyderabad, see O. Verkaaik, *Inside the Citadel*.

⁵⁷ B. K. Axel, *The Nation's Tortured Body: Violence, Representation and the Formation of a Sikh "Diaspora"*, (London/Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 31.

of empowerment. "There is no greater feeling than having a well-oiled, loaded kalashnikov in your hotel room cupboard, with the whole hostel knowing about it" declared a Mohajir student to the magazine *Newsline* in October 1989⁵⁸. Twelve years later, when I visited the city for the first time, guns were not visible any longer, but many youths I met with were nostalgic of the time when they could unload their AK-47s from the roofs of their houses. Those who could still afford to wear pistols under their *kurtas* were generally sons of police officers and many envied them. One week-end, a group of young residents of Clifton and Defence Housing Authority, two posh areas separated from the rest of the city by the Clifton Bridge, asked me if I would be interested in going to a "rave" at "French Beach"⁵⁹ or, alternatively, if I would like to go "shooting some rockets in Balochistan". For these youths, violence remained glamorous and fun.

The "new Hong Kong" or another Beirut?

In the second half of the 1980s, these aggrieved and playful youths became the backbone of the MQM and the main architects of the "parallel local state"⁶⁰ which the party started running in Karachi after it swept municipal polls in 1987⁶¹. This "secondary state" came into being through a symbolic construction and occupation of space⁶². The visual environment was saturated with political slogans and symbols, while boundaries between ethnically polarised communities were materialised by khaki check-posts and barbed barricades. Since 1987, the MQM bastions have been situated in the middle income areas of District Central and District East, such as Nazimabad, Liaqatabad, Azizabad, Federal B Area, New Karachi and Gulshan-e Iqbal. District South has traditionally been under the influence of the PPP, which also has a strong presence in Malir. District West, for its

⁵⁸ Quoted in 'The Anatomy of Violence', *Newsline*, October 1989, p. 15.

⁵⁹ «French beach» is a private beach a few miles away from Karachi, where the sons and daughters of rich and mighty Karachiites organize parties on week-ends; in Pakistan, a "rave" usually means "a thumping party with pounding music and not necessarily a substance fuelled all nighter"; 'Having a Raving Good Time', *The Friday Times* (Lahore), February 7–13, 2003.

⁶⁰ J. J. Richards, Mohajir Subnationalism.

⁶¹ The MQM only got 29.5 % of the votes in the city but it was attributed 46.6 % of the councilor seats at the Karachi Municipal Corporation.

⁶² J. J. Richards, Mohajir Subnationalism, p. 346.

part, has remained under the control of the ANP, which is particularly powerful in Baldia, Pathan and Qasba colonies. The last counting political force in the city is a dissident faction of the MQM, the MQM (Haqiqi), which transformed Landhi, Korangi, Shah Faisal Colony, Lines Area and parts of Malir into “no-go areas” for Altaf Hussain’s supporters after the launching of Operation Clean-Up in 1992 [cf. Map 1]. Until the military coup of 1999, most Karachi *mohallas* have remained ethnic enclaves regulated by “armed clientelism”⁶³. Many streets had “their own soldiers, an armoury, and a young general”, who considered themselves “members of a heroic vanguard”⁶⁴. With these armed youths coming in charge of *mohalla* affairs in the city, public spaces came under attack and most Karachiites retreated to the private sphere. Like in Beirut, this epidemic of violence led many of its residents to “a search for security through segregation [which] led to the generalisation of segregation and insecurity”⁶⁵. The destruction of Karachi’s “common world”⁶⁶ gave birth to a myriad of micro-territories that rapidly became hotbeds of separatism. Every *quaid* of *mohalla* started managing his zone of influence as an autonomous state and Mohajir activists, though they claimed to be the most ardent supporters of the Pakistani state, were the first to undermine it by carving a territory for their community. In August 1988, MQM activists declared Urdu the official language of District East and barbed barricades were set up around the party’s zones of influence at the beginning of the 1990s. After the launching of Operation Clean Up, in 1992, the Haqiqis followed the same strategy of ghettoization and in 1995 one Haqiqi leader based in Landhi declared: “Let them make Karachi a separate province or country or whatever they wish, this will remain my state”⁶⁷.

⁶³ D. Pécaut, ‘De la banalité de la violence à la terreur’, *Cultures & Conflits*, n°24–25, Winter 1995, p.162, where the author suggests that by offering armed protection to the residents of their zones of influence, militias contribute to the fragmentation of urban space and to «the transformation of territory into a patchwork of micro-territories». An English version of this paper was published in K. Koonings & D. Krujit (eds.), *Societies of Fear: The Legacy of War, Violence and Terror in Latin America*, (London: Zed Books, 1999).

⁶⁴ ‘The Anatomy of Violence’, pp. 17–18.

⁶⁵ A. Mouzoune, *Les transformations du paysage spatio-communautaire de Beyrouth, 1975–1996*, (Paris: Publisud, 1999), p. 108.

⁶⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Condition de l’homme moderne* [*The Human Condition*], (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1983), p. 92.

⁶⁷ M. Hanif, ‘Cry, my Karachi’, *Newsline*, March 1995, p. 19.

In 1994, the rumour spread that Karachi would become the "new Hong Kong" after the retrocession of the island to China. Rumours were also circulated that American companies were planning to buy huge terrains along the coast and that the Aga Khan had urged his followers to invest in real estate in Karachi. These rumours were probably circulated by real estate entrepreneurs to give the market a boost and it is attested that in 1994–95, real estate agents from the five city districts based their main argument for buying around "the bizarre speculation that Karachi may well become a new Hong Kong"⁶⁸. The rumours did succeed in boosting the real estate market, but they also had important political outcomes. Karachi has remained the financial capital of Pakistan since Partition⁶⁹ and these promises of prosperity have led many Mohajirs to fantasize about Karachi's independence, privately at least since the MQM has always been careful not to alienate the "establishment" it claims to oppose by endorsing separatist projects publicly⁷⁰. MQM members settled abroad are generally more loquacious, on this delicate issue, than those who remain based in Pakistan:

When the majority wants a separate state and we get the support of other countries, then we can do it... based on violence... because we will have to use violence. (...) I'm not saying MQM *should* do that, create that kind of environment where people suffer... but in my opinion, if I was the MQM leader, I would tell them to create that environment where we can make that state... It's pretty harsh but when you have to do it, one way or another, either you shut your mouth or you do it all the way... Even if you have to kill a few people... If you want to gain something then you have to lose something... [...] Karachi is going to grow so fast that we will control the

⁶⁸ 'The Hong Kong Factor', *The Herald Annual*, January 1995, pp. 58–59.

⁶⁹ At the end of the 1990s, Karachi was still generating 25 % of state revenues and 23.2 % of the GNP. 33 % of the country's activities in the industrial sector were taking place in the city, as well as 61.6 % of the activities in the banking sector and 37.6 % of the activities in the tertiary sector. The income per inhabitant is the highest in the country; in 1997, at 900 dollars, it was more than twice the amount of the GNP per inhabitant. Half the vehicles registered in the country belong to Karachiites, who also possess 35 % of the country's televisions; see M. Boivin, 'Karachi et ses territoires en conflits: pour une relecture de la question communautaire', *Hérodote*, n° 101, 2001, p. 186.

⁷⁰ In face-to-face interviews, MQM leaders are often more outspoken; an American diplomat who met unofficially with Altaf Hussain in London was even told that Karachi might separate from Sindh in the future, following Singapore's example; interview at the American consulate in Karachi, April 2001.

whole of South Asia from there. The job market is going to be so ideal that all the computer companies will come⁷¹.

If Sindh is under . . . say, for example . . . MQM's control, all the cities of Sindh are under the MQM's control, in the true sense of the word, and we have Mohajir administration, and anything else, Mohajir police, etc. then we can say that we'll carry out more developmental programs, we will provide safety, safeguards to the interests of foreign investment, we'll have more foreign investment. I mean, I think we've given you our manifesto. It says that all these restrictions on development and foreign industries will be lifted, so we'll do that and give special concessions for using Karachi port. So this package can be made very attractive . . . so industry pours in. That's why Hong Kong was made into Hong Kong, why Singapore became Singapore, because of the port, because of the facilities given to them⁷².

Although separatist ideas seem to be more prevalent among Mohajirs settled abroad than among those who remain based in Pakistan, this does not imply that the former are articulating a "nationalism from afar" which would assume, in the words of Benedict Anderson, "a heavy sense of guilt and overcompensation, a ritualistic and symbolic fervour often found in the attempt to retain the old ethnic ingredients"⁷³. It is impossible to make generalizations on Mohajir identity politics abroad. If many MQM members in exile do not hesitate to demand the complete independence of Karachi, it is primarily because their immediate environment is more favorable to free speech. When they were confident that neither Pakistan officials nor MQM leaders would know about what they would tell me, several of my interlocutors in Karachi admitted that the separation of the town from Sindh and eventually from Pakistan was the only viable solution to the "Mohajir problem". Moreover, the first overseas members of MQM were more favorable to political compromises than their comrades in Pakistan and many of them, particularly in North America, were evicted from the party at the beginning of the 1990s due to this greater moderation. For many Mohajirs settled abroad, the experience of emigration or exile actually had a tempering effect; they endorsed the democratic values of their place of residence and often came at

⁷¹ Interview with an MQM member exiled in America, Washington D. C., 25/04/2000.

⁷² Interview with Tariq Meer, Joint Chief Organiser of the MQM UK & Europe, London, 21/07/1999.

⁷³ B. Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World*, (London: Verso, 1998).

odds with the authoritarian political culture of the MQM. The founder of the first MQM unit in Canada thus told me:

We were quite independent, we had this in our constitution that we will not depart from Pakistani MQM, we will follow their advice, we will follow their objectives but we will not take their directions. That was the difference. Because we thought their way of doing politics was different from ours which is more *expliquer, expliquer, expliquer* . . . The view about the people and their persecutions was the same. The difference was they wanted a *centralised* team, which meant that every move that you make in the world should be first approved by them⁷⁴.

When a new faction appeared inside the MQM (Altaf) in the summer of 1999, advocating the liberation of Karachi and Hyderabad through armed struggle, it was led by a Pakistan-born British citizen⁷⁵, but it included several influential members of the MQM Coordination Committee based in Pakistan, such as Khalid Maqbool Siddiqi. The resignation of the seven dissidents was refused by Altaf Hussain and they were reintegrated inside the party after Imran Farooq, the suspected leader of the MQM "militant wing" who had been "underground" for the last seven years, mysteriously reappeared in London⁷⁶. Farooq convinced the dissidents that the Mohajirs were not in a position to ask publicly for "*Urdu desh*". Successive military operations had failed to eradicate the MQM, but they had proved that urban insurgency could not succeed in Karachi and Hyderabad. 1971 could not be repeated in urban Sindh and after the military coup of 1999, the only option left for the MQM was to make a compromise with the army and its intelligence agencies. Discussions between the "Chief Executive" Pervez Musharraf and the MQM started shortly after the coup. In the words of Farooq Sattar, former mayor of Karachi and present parliamentary leader of the MQM in the National Assembly, "[General Musharraf's] coup was a bowl of fresh air for us (. . .). He saved us". Although these discussions derailed shortly, they were promptly resumed by the MQM, whose leaders see Musharraf, a Mohajir himself, as their logical "patron". In the eyes of MQM leaders,

⁷⁴ Interview with Samin Ahmad, Montreal, 4/04/2000.

⁷⁵ Muhammad Anwar, who was at that time the Joint-Chief Organiser for the MQM UK & Europe.

⁷⁶ In July 2001, Imran Farooq told me that he never left Karachi during these seven years; he also told me that a few weeks before the rebellion, he had finally received the fake British visa he had been waiting for and that it was merely a "coincidence" if he had reappeared in London at a time when his colleagues were "very upset". His arguments obviously failed to convince me.

Musharraf is a Mohajir before being a *fauji* (soldier): “[He] comes from an urban background. He is different from other military men. He does not come from a martial race but from a civilized race”⁷⁷.

The deal between the Army and the MQM was made public a few months before the general elections of October 2002⁷⁸ and it has ensured the party’s political survival to date. But no one can predict how long the truce will last. The MQM has secured the post of governor in Sindh and it is presently using its alliance with the “likeminded” PML (Q) in the province and at the Centre to strengthen its position in Karachi, primarily against the religious parties, which have become the MQM’s *bête noire* in the last few years, since it defeated its Haqiqi rivals with the support of the army. However, the alliance between the MQM and the PML (Q) at the provincial and at the central level remains fragile. The MQM has been the nemesis of all coalition governments it has taken part in and its present alliance with the “establishment” it has so vigorously combated in the past might well meet the same fate. “Remember Moses, says Farooq Sattar, he lived with Pharaoh for many years, but he finally revolted himself. . .”⁷⁹.

From “Mohajir Town” to “Jihadabad”?

Karachi plays a key role in Pakistani and Afghan jihadist networks since the beginning of the Afghan war. It was the main port of entry for arms destined to the Afghan *mujahidin*, half of which never reached their destination. Karachi’s banking institutions⁸⁰ have also appealed to islamist groups from all over the Muslim world and some of its *madrassas* are known to preach a rigorous and militant Islam. The most famous of these religious schools is the Binory town *madrassa* (*Dar-ul*

⁷⁷ Interview with Farooq Sattar, Karachi, 20/02/2005.

⁷⁸ H. Mansoor, ‘Has MQM struck a deal with the government?’, *The Friday Times*, August 30–September 5, 2002, p. 4.

⁷⁹ Interview with Farooq Sattar, Karachi, 20/02/2005.

⁸⁰ Karachi is the financial capital of Pakistan and it concentrates 50 % of the bank assets in the country; all the major Pakistani banks have their head office in the city and most foreign banks operating in Pakistan have set up their main branch here as well. The development of Karachi’s banking sector predates independence; in the 1860s, several banks started operating in the city, such as the Agra and Masterman Bank, the Agra and United Service Bank and the Oriental Cooperation Bank. The Bank of Kurrachee was founded in 1861 and several other banks opened branches in the city in the following years, such as the Chartered Bank of India, Australia and China, the Sindh, Punjab and Delhi Ltd. and the Bank of Bombay.

Uloom Islamia Binori)⁸¹, which has become the hub of Deobandi Islam in Pakistan, along the Haqaniyah *madrassa* of Akhora Khattak, due to its role in the rise of the Taliban and later in the foundation of the Jaish-e Mohammed (JeM)⁸². Since 1994, Karachi has been affected by "sectarian" violence⁸³ and since 1995, foreign interests have also come under attack in the city⁸⁴, which has been the theatre of the largest anti-American demonstrations that took place in Pakistan after 09/11. *Jihadi* organisations are also making their presence felt in the city

⁸¹ The *Dar-ul Uloom Islamia Binori* has 8000 students from all around the world. In Sindh at large, 20 *madrassas* and 30 "Model Schools" (as defined by the Education Department after *madrassas* were accused to be training *jihadis*) would be run by the Jama'at-ud Dawa (the parent organization of the Lashkar-e Taiba). In Karachi, the JuD's bastion is the *Ahl-e Hadith Jamiat al-Darshat-ul-Islamia* university.

⁸² The foundation of this jihadist organization, which is organically linked to the sectarian Sipah-e Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), was announced by Masood Azhar at the Masjid-e Falal, in Karachi, on 3 February 2000. Masood Azhar is a former student of the *Dar-ul Uloom Islamia Binori*, where he taught before joining the *jihadis* in East Africa and later in Kashmir. Two other "Binory Town" professors played a key role in the foundation of the JeM: Mufti Nizamuddin Shamzai and Maulana Yusuf Ludhyanvi (the latter was the commander-in-chief of the Sipah-e Shahaba Pakistan in Karachi). In May 2000, both of them left for Afghanistan, where they tried to convince the Taliban to extradite Ussama Bin Laden. On May 18, 2000, two days after his return from Afghanistan, Ludhyanvi was assassinated in Karachi. Nizamuddin Shamzai was also murdered in Karachi in May 2004.

⁸³ 4000 people have been killed in terrorist-related violence in Karachi since 1994, but "only" a few hundreds have fallen to the bullets of sectarian terrorists. Sectarian violence did not affect Karachi until 1994 but claimed 57 lives this year, 98 in 1995, 13 in 1996, 28 in 1997, 8 in 1998, 58 in 2001 and 4 in the first four months of 2002. In 2001 and 2002, sectarian terrorists stopped targeting mosques and *imambargahs*, which had become heavily guarded, to focus on Shia "professionals" (doctors, lawyers, etc.). However, on February 22, 2003, two men riding a motorbike attacked an *imambargah* in Rafa-i Aam Society and killed 9 people. On May 07, 2004, 23 people were killed and over 100 injured in a suicide attack on Hyderi mosque; on May 31, 2004, 23 people were killed in a bomb blast at Imambargah Ali Reza. On the presence of sectarian groups in Karachi, see N. S. Ali, 'Doctors Under Fire', *Newsline*, August 2001; M. Ansari, 'Moving Target', *Newsline*, February 2002; N. S. Ali, 'The Jihad Within', *Newsline*, May 2002. On the events of May, 2004, see 'Bloody May', *The Herald*, June 2004.

⁸⁴ In 1995, an agent of the CIA, Gary Durrell, and another of the NSA, Jacqueline Van Landingham, were gunned down in their van on Sharah-i Faisal Road, the city's main artery, which links the airport to the city center. In November 1997, five employees of the Houston-based Union Texas were killed in a similar manner and attacks on foreign targets have multiplied since the beginning of the American "war on terror"; on May 8, 2002, 11 French engineers died in a suicide-attack which was the first of its kind in Pakistan; one month later, the American consulate was the target of another kamikaze-attack, which resulted in the death of 15 Pakistanis. In December 2002, the Macedonian consulate was bombed and three Pakistanis with their throats slit were found in the rubble.

through a number of publications such as *Islam, Zarb-e momin, Al-Badr*, and the more recent *Shamsher* and *Ghaiva Times*⁸⁵.

All these elements do not make Karachi a bastion of radical Islam, though. Since it defeated the JI in the 1987 Karachi municipal elections, the MQM has remained unbeatable in urban Sindh and neither the Haqiqis nor the religious parties, MQM's arch rivals, have been able to cut deep into the MQM's vote-bank. The JI did sweep eleven of the eighteen city districts in the 2001 municipal elections, but this success was primarily the outcome of the MQM's boycott of the elections. This was confirmed by the electoral success of the MQM in the last municipal elections, which were held in 2005. During October 2002 general elections, the Haqiqis won one National Assembly (NA) seat⁸⁶ and the Jama'at four, but the MQM won seventeen NA seats and forty two Provincial Assembly (PA) seats. Until then, the MQM had never secured more than fifteen NA seats and thirty one PA seats, in 1990 and 1988 respectively. The recent performance of the MQM at the polls has been presented by commentators of Karachi politics as a disappointing one because the party's arch rivals have won a few seats at the national assembly and because two top-rank cadres of the party were defeated in Karachi (Nasreen Jalil) and Hyderabad (Aftab Sheikh)⁸⁷. But when comparing the results of October 2002 elections with those of past elections [*cf.* Table 2 & Table 3], it appears that the MQM has retained its political hegemony over urban Sindh. After compiling data from previous elections, it even turns out that the MQM has never won so many NA and PA seats in the past. Such comparisons do not make much sense, though. The number of NA seats increased from thirteen to twenty in Karachi during last general elections, and similar increases have taken place in other parts of the province. Moreover, substantiated allegations of polls-rigging make the results of these elections unreliable.

⁸⁵ The last two publications are the new versions of the *Jaish-e Mohamed* and the *Jihad Times*, which were banned in February 2002; *cf.* A. Rana, 'Jehad Inc -Back in Business', *The Friday Times*, January 17-23, 2003, p. 5.

⁸⁶ M. Qureshi is the first Haqiqi candidate to have won a seat in the national assembly. However, he died shortly after his victory and the MQM (A) won his seat back.

⁸⁷ H. Mansoor, 'MQM Shake-Up Will Test Altaf's Control', *The Friday Times*, November 15-21, 2002, p. 2.

TABLE 2
Results of National Elections in Pakistan, 1988–2002

| Party | Number of seats won in 1988 elections | Number of seats won in 1990 elections | Number of seats won in 1993 elections | Number of seats won in 1997 elections | Number of seats won in 2002 elections |
|---------|--|--|--|--|--|
| MQM | 13 | 15 | boycott | 12 | 17 |
| PPP/PDA | 92 | 44 | 86 | 17 | 80 |
| PML | – | – | 75 | 134 | 19 (PML-N) |
| IJI | 54 | 106 | – | – | – |

TABLE 3
Results of Provincial Elections in Sindh, 1988–2002

| Party | Results in the 1988 elections | Results in the 1993 elections | Results in the 1997 elections | Results in the 2002 elections |
|---------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| MQM | 31 | 28 | 28 | 42 |
| PPP/PDA | 67 | 56 | 36 | 67 |
| PML/IJI | 7 | 6 | 15 | – |

Clashes between MQM and Muttahida Majlis-e Amal (MMA) workers⁸⁸ have become more frequent in the city since October 2002 elections. During the electoral campaign, MQM and MMA activists even exchanged gunfire in the Paposh Nagar locality⁸⁹. Violence also erupted between MMA and MQM supporters during the by-elections of May 2004, leading to 15 deaths. In February 2005, clashes also erupted between APMSO and IJT supporters on Karachi's college campuses, leaving a dozen students injured⁹⁰.

Among the religious parties which have united under the banner of the MMA, the bitterest adversary of the MQM is the JI, although MQM activists, many of whom happen to be Shia, also clashed with Barelvi militants of the Sunni Tehrik (ST)⁹¹. In January 2003, the

⁸⁸ The MMA is a coalition of Sunni and Shia religious parties, which was formed in fall 2002 to contest the first general elections held in Pakistan since General Musharraf's coup.

⁸⁹ H. Mansoor, 'Karachi Electioneering Becomes Violent', *The Friday Times*, September 27–October 3, 2002.

⁹⁰ S. S. Hasan, 'APMSO-IJT Standoff Forebodes Trouble in Local Bodies Elections', *The Herald*, March 2005.

⁹¹ During October 2002 elections, an ST's candidate from NA-249 and his rival MQM candidate, Aamir Liaquat Hussain, have lodged cases against each other for "generating violence and disrupting the campaign"; see H. Mansoor, 'Karachi electioneering becomes violent'.

73-year-old city *nazim*, Naimatullah Khan, who happens to be a former Karachi *amir* of the JI, has infuriated the MQM by declaring that he would “gradually turn Karachi into an Islamic, welfare society” and by pushing through a resolution in the City Council making it compulsory for female students in government-run institutions to wear the *hejab*⁹². The scarf was already part of schoolgirls’ uniforms in the city, though, and the *nazim*’s program of islamization is actually much ado about nothing. Karachi remains “Pakistan’s secular centre”⁹³ and it is not this septuagenarian, whose legitimacy is open to question⁹⁴, who will turn it into a bastion of the Islamic revolution. *Altafis* are presently at daggers drawn with *jama’atis* in the city and on January 18, 2003, Altaf Hussain accused the MMA of “conspiring to destroy peace in Karachi and the rest of Sindh”, to which the MMA replied that the MQM-dominated government in Sindh had “consciously embarked on a policy of confrontation with the MMA to destroy peace and to obstruct progress and development through the local government”⁹⁵. In this emotionally charged context, the murder of two MQM party workers, Salman Farooqi and Syed Masood Ali, was quickly attributed to the JI by the *Altafis*, but the latter did not elaborate on the fact that the victims were personal acquaintances of their killers, to whom they had offered a share in the *bhatta* (protection fee) they collected from businessmen, expecting to be authorized to set up a small business in the zone under their foes’ control in exchange⁹⁶. These improbable connections are reminiscent of the links between the MQM and its Pathan and Sindhi rivals of the 1980s and they suggest that despite the confrontation between their parties, MQM and JI activists are sometimes cooperating, although unofficially and mainly on criminal matters, at the local level. Press reports also suggest that before President Musharraf’s 2002 crackdown on sectarian and *jihadi* outfits, which delighted the MQM, many Mohajir activists had started switching over to the *jihadi* organisations when “they [had] realised that having a beard in Pakistan gave them a licence to get away with

⁹² H. Mansoor, ‘Islamicising Pakistan’s Secular Centre’, *The Friday Times*, January 17–23, 2003, p. 3.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Khan rose to power largely because the MQM boycotted the Local Bodies Elections in 2001. The Jama’at was then able to take eleven of the eighteen constituencies in Karachi.

⁹⁵ ‘MMA Conspiring to Destroy Peace: Altaf’, *Dawn*, internet edition, 18/01/2003.

⁹⁶ H. Mansoor, ‘An Eerie Sense of Déjà Vu’, *The Friday Times*, 24–30/01/2003.

virtually everything"⁹⁷. Some Bareilvi members of the MQM's militant wing also switched over to the Sunni Tehrik⁹⁸. This infuriated the MQM top-brass because the young thugs are the backbone of the party at the local, *mohalla* level, containing militarily the party's adversaries and collecting on its behalf *bhatta* and sacrificial hides, which are the MQM's two main sources of income. Their desertion was thus putting the MQM's survival at stake in Karachi.

As we saw earlier, the conflict between the MQM and the religious parties, particularly the JI, is already ancient. This rivalry, which takes roots in Karachi's criminalized campus politics of the early 1980s, has been at the heart of Mohajir identity politics. "Mullah-bashing" has served the party at the national and at the international level. In urban Sindh, it was used to cut into the religious parties' vote bank and to craft a Mohajir identity which links ethnicity with religiosity, equating "Mohajir-ness" with "secularism" and "Punjabi-ness" or "Pathan-ness" with "fundamentalism". The MQM has also used this tale of "law-abiding secular Mohajirs *vs.* evil *jihadis*" to conquer hearts and minds abroad. The MQM started using this anti-jihadist rhetoric for international purposes before 09/11. Facing accusations of terrorism and criminalisation, the MQM did not receive the support it expected from the "international community" in the 1990s, and it saw in "mullah-bashing" an easy way to improve its image abroad. In the post-09/11 context, the MQM has reiterated its attacks against *jihadis*, surfing on the global "green scare". When the JI and other religious parties started demonstrating in Karachi against American military operations in Afghanistan, Altaf Hussain asked his followers to organise a massive "anti-terrorist" rally in the city. MQM activists based in New York and New Jersey were also mobilised in this transnational public relations offensive. At Altaf Hussain's request, they set up relief committees providing help to the victims of the attacks⁹⁹.

Although the MQM is instrumentalising secular values to promote itself abroad and to counter its rivals in Pakistan, it has never been

⁹⁷ M. Ansari, 'Moving Target', *Newsline*, February 2002.

⁹⁸ This Bareilvi sectarian organization was launched in 1992 by Maulana Saleem Qadri, a 32-year-old Gujarati Mohajir who started his political career as an activist of the APMSO before joining the Dawat-e Islami of Maulana Ilyas Qadri, from which he later disassociated. Saleem Qadri was murdered in May 2001 in the Rasheedabab locality (situated in District West) and in January 2002, the Sunni Tehreek was placed under observation by the Pakistan government.

⁹⁹ See <http://www.mqm.org/English-News/Sep-2001/news010913.htm>

a truly secular party. In the past, Altaf Hussain's Islamic rhetoric has taken two forms: a reinterpretation of the Shia tradition of self-sacrifice and a re-enunciation of the principles guiding the Sufi *pir-murid* relationship¹⁰⁰. The MQM party workers murdered by the police or by the Haqiqis are qualified as *shahids* (martyrs) and their families are praised and taken care of. During Moharram, the MQM also provides medical help to those wounded in *ashura* processions and it uses the commemoration of Imam Hussain's martyrdom not only to keep alive the memory of its own martyrs, but also to sustain new vocations among its supporters. Altaf Hussain has also relied on the Sufi idiom of submission to build a highly centralised party around his own charismatic persona. The relationship between *pir* Altaf and his *murids* is reminiscent of the Naqshbandiyyas' *suhbat*, which reveals itself in *tawajjuh*, "the concentration of the two partners upon each other that results in experiences of spiritual unity, faith healing, and many other phenomena"¹⁰¹. Before being admitted inside the MQM, candidates are given tapes of Altaf Hussain's speeches to meditate upon and the *pir* of Azizabad is often asked to embrace new born infants to make them benefit from his *barakat*. Thus, for the majority of Mohajirs, Altaf is not only a secular *pieta* embodying the sufferings of his people¹⁰², but also a spiritual leader who epitomises "a human promise and ethical power beyond the ordinary"¹⁰³. And like the Sufi saints he got inspiration from, Altaf Hussain is an ambivalent figure: he is an object of devotion and love but he is also seen by his followers and foes alike as an unpredictable and potentially dangerous character¹⁰⁴.

Whereas the old rivalry between the MQM and the religious parties, however ambivalent it may be¹⁰⁵, has taken a new intensity since the JI has swept municipal polls in Karachi, another battle has been raging in

¹⁰⁰ M. Boivin, 'Karachi et ses territoires en conflit', p. 197.

¹⁰¹ A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina University Press, 1975), p. 366.

¹⁰² For O. Verkaaik, Altaf Hussain is "a human icon that *absorbs* rather than *expresses* meaning"; see Oskar Verkaaik, *Inside the Citadel*, p. 52.

¹⁰³ P. Werbner & H. Basu (eds.), *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, Locality and the Performance of Emotion in Sufi Cults*, (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 5.

¹⁰⁴ On the ambivalence of popular representations of *pirs* in Pakistan, see L. Werth, 'The Saints who Disappeared': Saints of the Wilderness in Pakistani Village Shrines', in *ibid.*, p. 89.

¹⁰⁵ As we saw earlier, the rivalry between MQM and religious activists takes roots in "deceived love", which Georg Simmel identified as a major source of conflict; see T. J. Scheff, *Bloody Revenge: Emotions, Nationalism and War*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994).

the city in 2002–2003. The Haqiqis, once the “blue-eyed” boys of the Pakistan military, have come under threat after General Musharraf’s November 8, 2002 statement that “no-go areas will soon be abolished in the city”. This announcement, pointing to Islamabad’s desire to co-opt the MQM (Altaf), obviously raised tensions in the city, which had been running high since October 2002 elections¹⁰⁶. In the months which followed this announcement, the leaders of the MQM (H) were put behind bars and their headquarters in Landhi was razed by the bulldozers of the Karachi Development Authority in 2003. Since then, the Haqiqis have been running for their lives and although the armed conflict between the rival factions has lost its momentum since 2004, the MQM rival factions still settle their scores with bullets rather than ballots.

Conclusion

Karachi will undoubtedly remain a violent city in the future. Hundreds of thousands of arms are still stocked by its inhabitants and none of the structural problems of the city has been tackled with. The federal government has recently manifested its desire to address the city’s transport problem but the solutions it has proposed will have dramatic repercussions for the inhabitants of *katchi abadis*¹⁰⁷ and the MMA has started politicising the issue¹⁰⁸. The MQM’s alliance with the Punjabi establishment at the federal level is fragile and the stability of the provincial government is precarious. The rivalry between the MQM and the JI remains explosive, whereas the decade-old armed confrontation between the Haqiqis and the Altafis has lost its momentum, since the “liberation” of Landhi and Korangi’s “no-go areas” in 2003. Although the MQM will come under increasing

¹⁰⁶ During October 2002 elections, a member of the Haqiqi election cell, “Javed”, was shot dead in Landhi by two armed men on a motorcycle. A week after the elections, an MQM worker, Farooq Sarbazi, was ambushed in Lyari. After it struck a deal with the PML (Q) to form a coalition government in Sindh, the MQM (A) got the sole Haqiqi MPA, Younous Khan, arrested from the premises of the provincial assembly building, and in February 2003, Khalid Bin Waled, a top-rank MQM activist was murdered by “unidentified gunmen”.

¹⁰⁷ On the Lyari Expressway project, which risks to make hundreds of thousands of people homeless in Karachi, see N. S. Ali, ‘Highway to Hell’, *Newsline*, August 2002.

¹⁰⁸ On January 28, 2003, the provincial parliamentary leader of the MMA, Maulana Umar Sadiq, announced that the MMA would soon table a motion against the construction of the Lyari Expressway in the Sindh Assembly.

pressure from the religious parties in the coming months, its main challenge will come from its own ranks. By striking a deal with Sindhi nationalist groups such as the Jiye Sindh Qaumi Mahaz in 2001, and by presenting non-Urdu speaking candidates in October 2002 elections, Altaf Hussain alienated many Mohajirs in Pakistan. His attempt to heal the rift between Mohajirs and Sindhis was not understood by many of his Urdu-speaking followers while it failed to convince Sindhis. *Pir Altaf's* marriage to a Baloch also infuriated many MQM supporters and the party's last electoral campaign was particularly dull. In some constituencies, MQM voters went to poll stations only after "unknown persons" threatened cable operators to "shut or cut"¹⁰⁹. The MQM's last gambit -its alliance with the Punjabi establishment it has so vigorously combated in the past- might also prove costly on the long run. Last but not least, the pro-American stance of the party risks to alienate many Mohajirs who may not support the agenda of the religious parties but who are outraged, like most Pakistanis, by American interferences in Pakistan social and political life.

¹⁰⁹ M. Abbas, 'The MQM's New Reality', *Newsline*, November 2002.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.