

Beyond this Battle of Karachi

The battle of Karachi is near an end. The MQM's delayed eagerness to find a political way out and the government's cagey talk-talk-fight-fight tactic are two pointers. A third one is the apparent depletion of MQM's leaders and cadres. The fourth and the most poignant denominator is the enormous suffering which the two MQMs and the government have inflicted on Karachi's hapless citizens; their desperate need for respite is palpable.

There may be five grand lines to this ending. One, the government has crushed the MQM (A) militarily. Two, the MQM as it had existed until now will either cease to function for a while or become merely a crippled syndicate of embittered young men bent on revenge and violence. Three, this military 'solution' may not yield political dividends congruent with its human and economic costs. To the contrary, the vast liabilities of the 'military solution' are likely to out-weigh its limited gains. Four, the resulting environment shall put a high premium on statesmanship and democratic governance - elements which are in short supply in Pakistan. Five, since callousness and corruption are likely to substitute for reform and reconstruction, this country will have suffered another self-inflicted wound from which it may take a longer time to recover than before. Brief discussion of these points follows:

The MQM (A)'s armed confrontation has predictably run out of steam. Only, this has occurred sooner than most observers had expected. Urban armed struggle does not have a history of success unless, that is, it is an ancillary of a larger struggle rooted in rural hinterlands. The Chinese Communists learned that lesson in Shanghai; and Mao avoided significant urban engagement until his guerrillas had completely encircled the cities. When they finally took Beijing and Shanghai, these were icing on the cake they had slowly cooked. Similarly, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara rounded their long run in Havana and San Diego. Short of general insurrection such as the one that occurred in Moscow and St. Petersburg in October 1917, or in Tehran and Tabriz in 1978, politically mature folks do not set up barricades nor start up fireworks in cities. When they do, the costs are often heavy.

The greatest urban battle of the twentieth century was produced by the FLN - the hair-raising Battle of Algiers seen by millions of people in Gilo Pontecorvo's classic film. The FLN had the Algerian people's solid support and it was a revolutionary organisation that worked like a Swiss clock. The French army paid a price but did finally crack the FLN in Algiers in less than two years. Algeria's enormous costs for prematurely engaging in urban warfare included the distortion of its revolutionary process. Ultimately, the FLN led Algeria to independence because it kept a military presence in the rural areas while winning the war politically and negotiating intelligently with France.

Lesser movements had no such luck: the smart-set of educated and articulate Tupamaros were decimated by a combination of CIA planning and Uruguayan government brutality. You can see the brilliance of their planning and clean operational style in Costo Gavras' taut film, *State of Siege*. Mariguella's urban guerrillas who had significant roots in Brazil's underclass in cities like Sao Paulo went under even more easily in just about half a year of shoot-outs, mass arrests, tortures, and house-to-house hunts in quartered neighbourhoods. Notably, the political ground for the harsh military Juntas which brutalised Brazil and Uruguay was levelled by the counter-insurgency operation. An exception to this history of failure in urban warfare is presented by the IRA which sustained one of the longest armed confrontations in history; we may return to its example later.

Where does the MQM belong in this pantheon of failed urban movements? Low down, in my estimation! In the last four months it displayed strategic inadequacy, tactical

incompetence, and a ghettoised mentality whereby it hit mostly neighbourhood cops, local rivals, and innocent bystanders. Its failings are comprehensible. It is not a revolutionary organisation and obviously, unfamiliar with even the fundamental principles of armed insurgency. Rather, it is a hodge-podge - in parts parliamentary, ethnic, gun-toting bully and extortionist - held together less by well-defined political objectives than by cult of personality and its constituents' sense of victimisation.

Organisations of this sort tend to combine a hard superstructure with a soft infrastructure. They are successful at intimidating the weak and tiring the hesitant, but crack rather easily when faced with a determined and ruthless state. Lacking the focal point of defined political goals, they engage in pot-pourri politics. So in a space of seven years, the MQM ran in elections and boycotted the most important one, intimidated the Press prohibiting critical stories on it, beat up journalists who did not conform, and assaulted even the Edhi Welfare Trust, today almost the only organisation in Karachi that rescues the wounded and counts the dead. During its long tenure of exercising of street power, the MQM alienated nearly all thinking people in the country. Above all, parties which substitute the cult of personality for commitment to political programme and participation of constituents are nearly always lacking the will and capacity to sustain a struggle. Their leaders and cadres are prone to spilt under pressure, make deals with adversaries and duplicate the 'supreme leader'. In personalistic politics 'Haqiqis' invariably multiply.

A comparison between the IRA and the MQM may be instructive. Like the IRA, the MQM is an ethnic organisation, committed to redressing the grievances of a given community. Like the IRA, it combines parliamentary politics with organised violence. Like the IRA, it has engaged in collecting funds both voluntary and by intimidation. Thereafter, contrasts set in: IRA's leadership is institutionalised not personalised, a fact that has ramifications. It is the military wing of a party, Sinn Fein, which controls and disciplines it. Its commitment is to a political programme and an institution, not to a person. As such, it elicited the support of the Irish intelligentsia, the middle and even upper classes (By contrast, the Urdu-speaking intelligentsia and educated classes remained by and large aloof from the MQM). If an Irish leader fled the country (I know of no major figure who did) or was imprisoned, his absence neither divided, nor demoralised, nor distorted the organisation. IRA's cadres were steadfast so that in prison they could fast unto death and by their stark, willed suffering arouse the world's conscience.

In the ranks of urban organisations which have engaged in armed confrontations with the state, the MQM appears infirm and ineffectual. Its deficiencies are political and structural. When the army started Operation Clean-up, at least the MQM estimated its weakness correctly and avoided full-scale confrontation, thus preserving much of its resources. But then it failed to utilise its strength when it boycotted the fairest election held in Pakistan to date. It exposed its soft political underbelly and the high cost which personalism in politics exacts when it gambled away its best political opportunity in years to the conveniences of its exiled leader.

It appears that the MQM has taken a sound beating. After an spasmodic growl or two it is likely to lick its wounds and for a while quiet may return to Karachi but only for a while if the government does no more than enjoy its smug sentiments. This prospect raises a question, the answer to which is crucial to the future of this country: will the governments of Pakistan and Sindh use this interregnum to build toward a lasting peace in the city? One has reason to be pessimistic in answering this question. For, the governments concerned have evinced to date scant comprehension of the causes which have led the most literate and urbanised Pakistani community to follow a chiliastic movement like the MQM.

Leaders with landed background and non-productive role in society, are normally ill-suited to address the challenges of governance in times of rapid social change. They

tend to see the world through the prisms of power not of political processes, from the vantage point of ethnicity not citizenship, from feudal perspectives rather than modern viewpoints. Unlike many politicians of Pakistan, Ms Benazir Bhutto carries a dual legacy of feudalism and modernity, as Ian Buruma once wrote, of Harvard and Larkana, Karachi and rural Sindh. Citizens can only hope and pray that at least now she will address the challenge of Karachi as a modern leader. This would entail a three-pronged policy of (i) cleansing the apparatus of the state of the germs of lawlessness and misuse of power which it has gathered to an excess in Karachi; (ii) enfranchising Karachi's people so that theirs may become a self-governing city; and (iii) bridging the chasm between Karachi's exponential demographic growth and its frozen infrastructure of services.

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