

Karachi's Alarming Message

I had wanted to resume the discussion which we began last week on Pakistan's Kashmir policy but could not write. The writing block owed to the bloodshed in Karachi, Pakistan's commercial capital, primary source of revenue to the state, home to a majority of its university graduates and nearly eight per cent of its population.

As I struggled to write on Kashmir, a painful reality haunted: During the past week alone many more people were killed and wounded in Karachi's civil war than in Kashmir. The contrast may be misleading; the similarities are more striking. As in Kashmir, at war in Karachi is the state with a people. As does India in Kashmir, government officials in Pakistan dismiss their political adversary as mere terrorists. Like the Indian government in Kashmir, the governments of Sindh and Islamabad seek a militia solution to an eminently political problem. As in Kashmir, there is no end in sight to the torment and bloodletting. With the killing and dying continuing in Karachi, Pakistani leaders' rhetorical flourishes on Kashmir sound banal to ears native no less than foreign.

Our officials' statements, no less than their policies in Karachi betray a nearly total incomprehension of the roots of the civil war. It is being waged in an empirical and analytical vacuum. No commission has reported on the causes of the decade-long imbroglio in Karachi, and none has been asked to recommend ways to resolve a crisis which is eroding the very foundations of the state. It is a tragedy so fundamentally neglected that even the basic facts which define Karachi's malaise are not available. Yet Karachi's predicament remains a portent of the future, the symptom of a serious and, unless it is radically treated, terminal disease. To argue that the problem is confined to only one city - or only eight of the city's twenty districts - is like saying that a cancerous growth is not serious because it has infected only a part of the body. To varying degrees, the conditions which have brought Karachi to the brink are being duplicated in urban Pakistan. Noteworthy among those factors are the following.

In Karachi the gap steadily widened between demographic growth and the development of infrastructure: In the last three decades, the city's population is estimated to have grown at the rate of around five per cent annually. In 1950, the city had a million inhabitants. According to 1981 census there were 5.2 million, and in 1995 it is estimated that 9-10 million persons reside in the city. By contrast the infrastructure of such basic amenities as housing water, electricity and health clinics has fallen woefully behind, growing at a rate of less than two per cent annually. Even that is a misleading figure in so far as most of the infrastructural expenditures are incurred where the elite population resides. A majority of Karachi's inhabitants are reduced to competing with each other for access to basic needs of life. They live in the city as though they were inside a pressure cooker. Whenever the lid is pried open by the political shenanigans of one party or another, the steam comes out excessively and violently. Other things being equal, matters are likely to get worse: by the year 2010 Karachi's population is projected to be 21.4 million.

Karachi's top-heavy economy and a centralised administration generate unemployment and frustration, especially among the youth. Even approximate official figures of unemployment are not available. It is estimated that as many as 30% of the male manpower may be unemployed. It is the unemployed youth who constitute the mainstay of various do-and-die militias of Karachi. Yet, no government in Pakistan has pursued an economic and social programme designed to link productivity with employment and broad-based income generation. This, despite the fact that Pakistan is the site of a rare model of sustainable, community-based development. The experiment, identified by the World Bank as one of the world's most effective urban development projects is based in Karachi, an admonishment to the wasteful development programme of successive

governments.

In April 1985, Orangi was at the forefront of the city-wide ethnic rioting which followed Bushra Zaidi's death under the wheels of a truck driven by a Pakhtun driver. I first visited Dr Akhtar Hameed Khan's brilliantly conceived Orangi Pilot Project early in 1987 just a couple of months after the area had been rocked by the last of a bloody series of ethnic violence. Khan Sahib and his associates were at work then at reconstructing the wrecked lives and economy of Orangi's one million people. One day I shall report at length on their extraordinary accomplishment. For now I should mention only a few notable facts: (1) An endogenously designed, inexpensive and efficient sewerage system has invested Orangi with clean air and neat streets, and its inhabitants have developed pride and vested interest in keeping it that way; (ii) With an estimated 70% in school, Orangi's children have won it the highest literacy rating in the country; (iii) Unemployment is low in Orangi because nearly a quarter of its inhabitants are either self-employed or work in small locally generated businesses; (iv) Since 1988, no significant outbreak of violence has occurred in Orangi. Development experts from foreign countries come to study the Project. Few among Pakistan's high and mighty have cared to look and learn. "Why don't they?" I asked Khan Sahib during another visit. His plain reply was this: "This is a low-cost, people-based scheme. There is no money to be made from it."

Karachi is starved of the wealth it generates, while politicians and bureaucrats plunder it with impunity. The city contributes more than sixty per cent of the federal and Sindh governments' revenues. Only a fraction of it is invested back in building its infrastructure. To make matters worse, under successive governments Karachi land and other resources have been prey to the greed of those in power. As the population increased, so did the value of land. The greed of those in power augmented correspondingly.

Dr Akhtar Hameed Khan and architect Arif Hasan, also of the Orangi Pilot Project, were among the first analysts who drew in the mid-1980 public attention to the relationship between the land grab and criminalisation of politics in Karachi. The process begun under Mr. Z.A. Bhutto, accelerated during Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship. No one in power paid attention. But the horror stories abound of arson and burnings of poor abadis by organised mafias who are allied with politicians and power brokers. As the government became implicated in the crimes against people, an increasing number of Karachi's poor sought protection from armed political militias, some of whom are allied to the government and some opposed to it. In an environment of shifting alliances it is impossible to make moral judgements between the licensed and the unlicensed terrorists.

In total violation of the principle of democratic governance, power is centralised in Pakistan with the provincial and federal governments while local governments are weak, fragmented and frequently denied existence. Karachi's citizens are effectively disfranchised. It may be the only major city in the world which has not had an elected mayor for much of the time. There has been none since 1992, and without wincing, Ms Benazir Bhutto told Newsweek that there will be none for years to come. When there is a Mayor, he sits in city hall a Merovingian cipher. For he collects only nominal taxes such as octroi, and does not control the city police force, nor its water and electricity distribution, nor even large swathes of its land. I know of no other city in the world which is organised as arbitrarily irrationally, and undemocratically as Karachi. Obviously, citizens in a metropolis so organised could not prevent the steep deterioration of their civic life.

Violence becomes endemic when an environment is saturated with popular frustrations and powerlessness on the one hand and, on the other hand, untrammelled greed and manipulation by official and unofficial power holders. As a fall out of the Afghan war,

Karachi's simmering violence acquired in the mid-1980s the underpinnings of organisation (ethnic/sectarian parties), political economy (drugs), and technology (weapons). With the encouragement of Zia's dictatorship, the MQM emerged with dual power - political and coercive. Manoeuvres to weaken It by promoting splits within it may yield temporary gains, but such manoeuvres implicate the government in crime and help delegitimise the state. There is never a military solution in such situations. What is required is an end to the duality by a combination of political compromise and the government's uncompromising commitment to the rule of law.

At stake then, is the legitimacy and stability of the state in Pakistan. Karachi is the first battleground. There, forces of the state have been gradually reduced to militia status, albeit the most powerful ones. In other places too, competitors are emerging - sectarian enforcers, thugs, dacoits, and private militia. In Karachi, the state is fully implicated in crimes, including crimes against the people. Elsewhere too, the phenomenon is discernible but awaits maturation. In Karachi, the distinction between the policeman and the robber has been blurred. As for elsewhere, ask the young bride whose soldier husband was murdered in Islamabad. In Karachi, democracy has been experienced by citizens first as a farce, then as tragedy. In other places which I have visited, that feeling is starting to take hold. In Karachi, as in Kashmir, life has become nasty, brutish, and unpredictable. And elsewhere in the country? You tell us.

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