

## Writings on the Wall

Not long ago, some concerned citizens sat in a Bath Island home discussing Karachi's crisis. As they raised questions, I kept thinking of Lebanon, a smaller, more modern and manageable country than Pakistan. And of Beirut where it all began.

In 1970, Beirut was similar to Karachi in 1980; in most respects except size, it being smaller. It was the commercial capital of the Mashriq, the Arab East. A multi-ethnic metropolis where a diverse people had lived peacefully until forces, both internal and external, gradually pitted them against each other. A site of urban sprawl where the galloping population outstripped the crawling infrastructure. Home to a displaced people, the Palestinians, who were first welcome, then resented by the indigenous people, a city where arms and drugs proliferated as by-products of warfare in neighbouring states. A place where politics was overwhelmed by the politicians' fixation on violence. Above all, as Karachi in relation to Pakistan, Beirut was a city where the central contradictions of the Lebanese state and society had converged. From Beirut the rot spread and, in all except the legal sense, destroyed the Lebanese state.

It was in 1986 I think that I visited Karachi after several years and was struck by how similarly to Beirut earlier, the storm was gathering there. A couple of warning essays in a Lahore daily were ignored then by the dictatorship; our tragedy is that the 'democrats' have been equally good at ignoring. The slide has been gradual since, and steady so that today Karachi bears remarkable similarity to Beirut in 1977.

What happens next? asked Nazim Haji Sahib who has done yeoman service to Karachi as one of three founders of the Citizens and Police Liaison Committee. People in the room were not happy to hear the answer: One, in Karachi today as once in Beirut, political violence and confrontations are starting to merge with criminal violence and private adventures. The line between politics and crime is increasingly blurred. Apart from the random insecurities it entails for individual and family lives, this process is fraught with lasting implications for the future of state and society. The unity and cohesion of both is premised on maintaining a clear demarcation of the boundaries of politics and crime.

Two: like Beirut, Karachi is witnessing a process of militianisation. When practised by groups, violence has a tendency to proliferate. Militia multiply especially in urban environments of protracted violence. Discontented ethnic communities, shanty-town dwellers, the armies of unemployed youth, and school drop-outs, all find an outlet for their frustrations, a community of action, a source of power and profit in joining militia.

In Karachi, the logic of militianisation has taken hold. In some areas self-styled MQM youth gangs are reported to be operating beyond the MQM's control. Similarly, non-Urdu-speaking militia are emerging. There is a proliferation also of mafia-sponsored ones.

Three: as militia proliferates they expand spatially. Typically, urban space is limited and as competition for turf augments, contenders move on to occupy new spaces. The militia were at first largely concentrated in the South of Beirut, and gradually occupied the whole city including the very elite multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan neighbourhoods of west Beirut. Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto is fond of underlining the normality of Karachi by telling visiting journalists and dignitaries that only five of Karachi's fourteen districts are affected by violence. If that is so, it cannot remain that way. If the crisis persists - and it will if the government seeks none but a coercive solution - the chickens of Karachi's violence will surely come to Clifton and Defence to roost. There will be sandbags, armed guards, and private power generators in rich homes. And the profits of Karachi's textile mills shall be overtaken by those of Brinks and SMS.

Four: in environments of protracted and organised urban violence the authority and integrity of the state erodes. In Beirut, the erosion was rapid because the state's competitors - especially the Falange and PLO - were better armed than the police, and the army divided along ethnic lines. In Karachi, this process has been gradual and due less to defections than to institutional distortions and corruption which necessarily accompany repressive policies and abuse of authority. In the violence-affected areas of Karachi, the distinction between private militia and the forces of the state is already blurred. In fact, most citizens have begun to dread the forces of law and order more than the political and private militia. Even in such elite areas as Defence, Clifton, and PECHS one frequently hears accounts of policemen moonlighting as robbers. These are realities which official denials cannot change.

Five: a fundamental shift in the decline of state occurs when families and communities begin to turn to private political militia for protection. This shift has occurred decisively in Karachi's low income areas where the majority of the city's population dwell. I can only hope that Pakistan's intelligence agencies and its Ministry of Interior know the extent and significance of this development in Karachi and, to a lesser extent, other towns in Sindh and if they do they have informed the President, Prime Minister and her cabinet of what they know.

Six: the logic of lawlessness and armed defiance of the state's authority invariably spreads from city to country, a point that governments and national elites ignore at their own peril. In 1977, the gentry in Sunni-dominated Tripoli viewed Beirut's crisis with a certain insouciance - until the virus of violence reached Tripoli itself. The indifference of Islamabad's and Lahore's gentry toward Karachi is much greater and more striking. But Karachi's own elite is not much better. As in Karachi today, Beirut's commercial and professional elite failed to pay timely attention to the gathering crisis. Their responses were personal and familial. Beyond sandbags and armed guards, they escaped to safety in Tripoli, Damascus, Cairo, and Cyprus. Similarly, luxury cars with Karachi license plates are a common sight in Islamabad and Lahore these days. Escape, unfortunately, merely compounds problems.

Seven: protracted and organised violence tends to divide cities and societies along ethnic lines. In Lebanon the crisis involved at the beginning only one sectarian party which gathered the Maronite community under the proto-fascist and highly personalised leadership of Pierre Gemayel and his son Beshir. As the crisis persisted, sectarianism flourished in Beirut and spread to the rest of Lebanon, turning the whole country into a cauldron of ethnic strife.

Karachi's crisis began with confrontation between the state and MQM, a party with similar characteristics as the Falange but mercifully without the same punch. By now the Pakistan People's Party in Sindh behaves virtually like a sectarian political organisation. Sectarian strife has not quite taken hold in the melting pot of Pakistan but sectarian sentiments are beginning to simmer. To make matters worse, the government itself seems to be promoting sectarian divisions in order to increase the pressure on the MQM. Major General Naseerullah Khan Babar's unfounded public allegation that the MQM was engaged in "ethnic cleansing" in Karachi is one example; the Sindh government's hasty and unbecoming effort to implicate the MQM in the murder of several persons from Hazara is another. But the most telling evidence is the deplorable behaviour of police and the rangers toward Urdu-speaking citizens.

Sectarianism like organised violence are termites which eat into the very foundations of state and society. When private and political groups spawn sectarianism, it is society's responsibility to discredit them, and the state's responsibility to keep them within the boundaries of law. But when the state itself becomes implicated in sectarian politics it strikes at the very foundations of statehood. This is but one lesson the Pakistani

establishment should have learned from its Bengal debacle. Citizens should insist that the federal and provincial governments observe caution, in this regard, and make concerted efforts instead to promote amity within Pakistan's diverse people. As governor of Sindh in Ms. Bhutto's first government, Justice Fakhruddin Ebrahim set a good example.

A final point: prolonged internal strife invariably invites external interventions, and sometimes invasion. The Israelis intervened throughout the Lebanese crisis, invaded southern Lebanon in 1978 and the whole country, in 1982, nearly destroying Beirut. Pakistan experienced this phenomenon in 1971-1972 when the commander of its armed forces in East Pakistan surrendered to India in a televised ceremony. As the song goes - "when will they ever learn?"

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