

Karachi: Unholy alliances for mayhem - Report of an HRCP fact-finding mission

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Findings and conclusions

The fact-finding team believes that all of the main political parties in the city bear responsibility for the people being massacred in Karachi. Even the political parties that have not assigned armed wings to pull the trigger have a lot to answer for. All of the main political parties in Karachi shoulder considerable blame for their consistent and prolonged failure to prevent the loss of human life and of property. There is more than enough blame to go around and little evidence that there is even any realization among the political parties, much less remorse, of how they have failed the people. There are many accessories to these murders. This is one of those instances when no bystander is innocent.

There are no two views that the state has miserably and utterly failed in its responsibility to safeguard the people's right to life. The fact that Karachi is in a state of turmoil should not surprise anyone. More than two decades of myopic state policies were bound to end in disaster. All stakeholders in the city are in agreement that despite the horrific bloodshed in recent months the potential for chaos in Karachi is infinitely more, thanks in no small part to well armed cadre of the main political parties and the huge political and economic stakes involved.

The HRCP mission to Karachi makes the following observations:

1. The main political parties in Karachi point to each other's role in instigating violence and patronising criminals and highlight the number of members of their own ethnic community/party killed. All are reluctant to acknowledge any role of their activists/militant wings in killing others, and generally state that members of their community (but not party members) may be retaliating against violence by other parties and ethnic communities. The main political actors in Karachi acknowledge that peace can only be restored with a joint approach, yet there is little evidence of efforts to devise such an approach. Karachi continues to attract migrants, mainly from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and South Punjab and the MQM fears losing the battle of numbers to its political rivals. ANP dreams of increasing their seats in the National / provincial assemblies, provided that elections are free and fair, cannot but cause concern in the MQM camp which would like its present electoral status to remain unchanged. This would be Karachi's main fault-line.

2. Intellectuals describe May 12, 2007 as a turning point in the context of violence in Karachi when another ethnic group (Pakhtuns) asserted itself and a turf war started between MQM and ANP, the emerging political force in Karachi. The problems facing Karachi need a political settlement and although nearly all political parties agree that it is necessary for all to respect each other's position and legitimate interests and desist from attempts to capture political high ground through violence, they still rely on militant wings to battle it out to protect or expand their turfs.

3. In the form of ruling political parties' patronage for criminals, state power and militant powers have come together and the citizens are viewed increasingly through their identity with an ethnic / linguistic / political group. The political parties focus on and watch out for their own financial and

political interests rather than the interest of the people at large. State intervention in Karachi's politics has been unlike that in any other big city in Pakistan. Since 2002, political power and state machinery have been used to grab land. While gangs of land-grabbers and mafias have tried to exploit the breakdown of law and order, they do not appear to be the main directors of the horrible game of death and destruction; that distinction belongs to more powerful political groups and it is they who hold the key to peace.

4. Even issues that everyone acknowledges as crucial have not been addressed, such as de-weaponisation, because of different interpretations of de-weaponisation. There is no reason why an all-party campaign to recover weapons, including the licenced ones, cannot be launched immediately.

5. Not that long ago, ethnic identity was a mantra for the political parties and not for the people themselves. However, Karachi is a deeply fractured city now, in the grip of a multi-sided wave of political, linguistic/ethnic and sectarian polarisation. Nothing epitomises the divisions better than the fact that even the injured and dying victims of violence are taken only to hospitals seen to be sympathetic towards one's ethnicity. The people find that there is no security for life or property and killings have attained an ethnic basis. In upsurges of violence, often pushcarts, rickshaws, trucks, and roadside restaurants—primarily businesses run by Pakhtuns—are targeted, and it is immaterial whether those targeted have any political affiliations or not.

6. Law enforcement agencies are inefficient, ill-prepared, poorly resourced, and lack the political support to be effective. Killing of hundreds of policemen in the city in the past decade has affected morale and the policemen are not keen to stick their necks out.

7. The emergency and paramedical staff are intimidated and have to remain ever vigilant lest they be seen to be sympathising with any ethnic group, simply on account of treating the victims of violence.

8. It seems that the problems inherent in Karachi's urban growth and expansion as an industrial and commercial mega city have not been tackled imaginatively or even properly appreciated. Overpopulation, uneven, ill-planned and poorly implemented development and turf wars have compounded the law and order problems. Organised land grabbing has also resulted in high rents, with the poor being pushed to the margins of society. There has been ghettoisation of large parts of the city and the official watchdogs have been serving the interest of commercial builders and developers. Low-cost housing has not been promoted, even though the greater part of population increase in the city is of the poor. The glaring problems of employment, housing, transport, education, healthcare, supply of water, electricity and gas continue to aggravate amid apathy from the government.

9. Journalists express a sense of fear in reporting from the areas affected by violence. With a few exceptions, they have not been provided any safety gear by media organisations. They fear all groups equally and say it is extremely difficult to move from one ethnic-dominated locality to another. A journalist that manages to pass through a locality dominated by one ethnic group is viewed with suspicion by the other. The political parties have even briefed the people of their respective ethnic community on what to tell the media and reporters feel that they can no longer be certain of the veracity of their version of events.

10. The government has completely failed to ensure safety of life or property, or provide justice or compensation to the affected families. Families narrate harrowing accounts of killing and torture of family members, and arson attacks on shops and other property. Even when cases are lodged with the police and some arrests made, families do not see the judicial process moving forward. The

complaints against law-enforcing agencies received by the HRCP mission range from dereliction of duty, abandonment of post, and long delays in responding to distress calls to downright collusion with criminals. In at least some cases where police have failed to take action, policemen asked the victims' families to take revenge on their own. The people of Karachi feel that unless these shortcomings are removed there is little hope of peace and security.

11. From small to medium and large, all businesses are subject to extortion. The extortionists are believed to have links with all political groups present in Karachi and operate in areas where these political groups exercise greater control. Much of the violence is linked to disputes over who collects from which area. Businessmen feel that police operate under political pressure and patronage, and fail to protect them from extortionists and other criminals or to generally uphold the law. Infrastructure in Karachi has deteriorated, including electricity and gas supply, water availability, quality of roads and transport systems and garbage collection. This has generated frequent public protests, strikes and affected commercial activity and industrial output. The law and order situation has ruined Karachi's image internationally and foreign investment and trade has plummeted, leading to flight of capital and shifting of industries/businesses to other cities in Pakistan or abroad.

12. Lawyers in Karachi are being murdered in targeted killings. The lawyers continue to lodge protests even though they consider it unlikely that their peaceful protests and strikes would achieve anything substantial. The lawyers' target killings are elaborately planned and are certainly not random. Fifteen lawyers have been killed in the city since March. After May 2007, there is an impression among the legal community that lawyers are being killed because of consciousness among members of the bar who raise important issues from the forum of the bar.

13. Despite the state's weakened capacity to keep order, the ultimate responsibility for the present situation and for addressing it and ensuring people's rights, including their right to life, lies with the state. People expect the state to act not for the sake of votes in the next elections, but simply because that is what the state is under an obligation to do. The arrest, trial and conviction of a few ringleaders will have a salutary effect on the situation.

14. Some people interviewed by the mission expressed complete disappointment with democratic governance and looked up to extra-constitutional forces for deliverance. Other said that the cycles of violence were never as intense under dictatorial rule. HRCP has explained to this tiny minority why it does not share their inclination for out-of-the-frying-pan-into-fire solutions.

Recommendations

1. So far the government's stance on Karachi has been long on rhetoric and woefully devoid of substance. That has led to an entirely justifiable crisis of confidence in the government's ability and sincerity to prevail over crime and bloodshed. The government must now reform its ways, speak with one voice and only make promises that it intends to keep.

2. The state has little writ in Karachi. Whatever strategy the government had for restoring law and order in the city has clearly not worked and must be thoroughly reviewed. Law enforcement agencies should be given political support and adequate resources to be effective. The police department should be depoliticised and given the confidence that they would not be signing their death warrants by acting against criminals. Effective investigating of the large-scale murder of policemen in the city and prosecution wherever possible would also send a positive signal of the government's commitment and support. Political intervention to secure the release of criminals the police do arrest has been alleged in several quarters. Proper investigation into these allegations and punishment of anyone found guilty will have a deterring effect on the various gangs.

3. In order to re-establish the independence, credibility and community respect of the police, they must resume implementing the law without fear or favour in all fields, major and minor (traffic, encroachments on roads, tackling street crime, better crime investigation procedures, etc). The involvement of non-political community leaders in policing work must be encouraged.
4. The people who have suffered losses in the bloodshed in Karachi must be given appropriate compensation without exception, for the simple reason that it was the obligation of the government to prevent the losses that have befallen the residents of the city.
5. The state must use all means at its disposal to safeguard people's right to life and other fundamental human rights. It must demonstrate that it considers human life precious and has zero tolerance for the sort of killings that have become the norm in Karachi. Robust measures should also be taken to prosecute the unspeakable acts of terror that have visited Karachi and the law breakers' affiliation with one political party or another must not be seen as a 'mitigating circumstance'. No exceptions must be made in invoking the law of the land for any instigation to violence, harbouring of criminals, extortion of money and land grabbing. A witness protection programme, and technological support for investigation would go a long way in securing prosecution and conviction of the mischief makers.
6. Outsourcing of policing responsibilities to the community or different parties in different parts of Karachi must end forthwith. Karachi is in its present state of woe in large part because the state either looked the other way or facilitated political parties as they formed and armed militant wings, which are in essence private militias. All such militias must be disbanded. Resisting the temptation to pick favourites in Karachi would be central to a sustainable solution to the lingering law and order challenges in the city.
7. There is a broad consensus on the need to de-weaponise Karachi. The main political stakeholders may disagree on details, and the crisis of confidence in the government's word and its ability to deliver what it promises are bound to be major hurdles. However, there is no longer any alternative to biting the proverbial bullet. Karachi must be purged of all weapons, both licenced and otherwise, especially because political parties are known to have facilitated plenty of weapons licences for their activists and supporters. Nothing short of total de-weaponisation would work. It is up to the government to persuade all concerned that citizens and political parties would not need guns to protect themselves as the government would do that. It is well known that the state is not in charge in the city. It takes days for the law enforcement forces to get to sites of crime and violence. In the circumstances reluctance to give up weapons is obvious. The task would not be easy because of the severe lack of confidence in the government, but a sincere effort has to be made. Beefing up security to prevent more weapons being smuggled into the city must be the first step.
8. Instead of jointly striving to address the causes of friction and stamp out violence, all political actors in Karachi have been content with playing to the galleries in their respective constituencies. The level of mutual distrust among the main political parties in Karachi is truly astounding. However, the fact that they have remained part of coalition governments for years testifies that politics is indeed art of the possible. All political parties should make an effort for the sake of the perpetually suffering people of Karachi to work for peace as enthusiastically as they have to arm themselves. The decision would be made easier if a clear message is sent by the government that violence and crime will not be tolerated in the name of politics and reconciliation.
9. It is time to take a critical look at Karachi's urban growth and address the challenges of overpopulation, lack of employment, housing, transport and uneven/ill-planned development of infrastructure on priority and in consultation with the people. Prioritisation and resource allocation in this respect must actively seek to prevent discrimination and perceptions of favouritism.

10. The state land grabbed by the encroachers should be recovered to send a message that there would be no premium in grabbing or dealing in such land as it would be reclaimed by the state without exception. Low-cost incremental housing (in the style of Khuda Ki Basti) should be developed on the recovered land to prevent ghettoisation of the city.
11. Mainstreaming and integrating all communities in Karachi is vital because of the multi-faceted polarisation of the city. Imaginative steps need to be taken to prevent discrimination or marginalisation of particular communities to end the resentment on which violence feeds. No-go areas established by different political parties in Karachi should be cleared and barriers should be removed permanently.
12. Reports of hospitals treating patients on the basis of ethnicity underline not only the deep fissures in Karachi but also the urgent need for steps to promote inter-communal harmony and tolerance.
13. All illegal immigrants in the city should be registered.
14. Civil society organisations must not sit on the sidelines anymore. They must play their role in campaigning for de-weaponisation, engage the people and organise discussion groups to sustain the dialogue.
15. There is a consensus that extortion rackets thrive partly on the people's inability to secure facilities (licences, permits, access to utilities, transport) to which they are lawfully entitled. A thorough revamping of the public service functions of the administrative agencies will reduce the people's dependence upon and vulnerability to extortionists.
16. Last but not least, state intervention in Karachi's politics must end. The state should think of caring for and dealing with the people instead of abandoning them to the whims of armed gangs masquerading as political groups.