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<http://strategicstudyindia.blogspot.in/2017/02/pakistan-stoking-fire-in-karachi.html>

Pakistan: Stoking the Fire in Karachi

2/2/8/2017

Decades of neglect and mismanagement have turned Karachi, Pakistan's largest and wealthiest city, into a pressure cooker. Ethno-political and sectarian interests and competition, intensified by internal migration, jihadist influx and unchecked movement of weapons, drugs and black money, have created an explosive mix. A heavy-handed, politicised crackdown by paramilitary Rangers is aggravating the problems. To address complex conflict drivers, the state must restore the Sindh police's authority and operational autonomy while also holding it accountable. Over the longer term, it must redress political and economic exclusion, including unequal access to justice, jobs and basic goods and services, which criminal and jihadist groups tap for recruits and support. It must become again a provider to citizens, not a largely absentee regulator of a marketplace skewed toward the elite and those who can mobilise force. Sindh's ruling party and Karachi's largest must also agree on basic political behaviour, including respect for each other's mandate, and reverse politicisation of provincial and municipal institutions that has eroded impartial governance.

The megacity's demographics are at the root of its many conflicts. Every major ethnic group has a sizeable presence; economically-driven waves of rural Sindhis, Pashtuns, southern Punjabis, those displaced by conflict and natural disasters and refugees and illegal immigrants from all over South Asia continue to add to the population. While long term these waves could reconfigure its politics, today's primary divide dates to British India's 1947 partition and the influx into Karachi of millions of Mohajirs (Urdu-speaking migrants from India and their descendants) that reduced Sindhis to a minority. In Pakistan's early years, a predominantly Mohajir Muslim League leadership stacked government institutions with its constituents,

creating Sindhi resentment. In turn, the policies of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) government, including quotas for under-represented Sindhis in government jobs and other institutions, were resented by Mohajirs in the 1970s and resulted in violent clashes during the 1980s and 1990s that destabilised provincial and national politics.

Karachi's citizens lack reliable access to health care, water and affordable transport and accommodation.

With Sindhis now fewer than 10 per cent of Karachi's population, less than Mohajirs, Pashtuns and Southern Punjabi Seraiki speakers, the contest between the PPP, Sindh's largest party, and the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), Karachi's largest, is not primarily electoral but over the nature of the city's governance. The Sindhi-dominated PPP has sought to centralise authority in the provincial government as a way to control Karachi's considerable resources; dominant in that city but with limited electoral prospects beyond the province's urban centres, the MQM has advocated decentralised authority in municipal institutions for the same reason. With both parties politicising the state institutions they control and providing services on partisan grounds, Karachi's citizens lack reliable access to health care, water and affordable transport and accommodation. This politicisation has also aggravated ethno-political conflict.

The growing informal economy and privatisation of basic services have opened opportunities for exploitive middlemen and mafias. Criminal gangs, to varying degrees in collusion with political parties and state authorities, have flourished, including MQM-linked extortion groups and a Baloch-dominated outfit that had PPP patronage. Jihadist groups have benefited from a combination of lax law enforcement and state support. With sectarian violence again threatening Karachi's peace, some of the country's most dangerous religious and sectarian groups are actively contesting turf and resources, compounding law and order challenges. The predominately Pashtun Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP, Taliban Movement of Pakistan), which established a base in the city after military operations against it in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), is targeting the anti-militant Pashtun nationalist Awami National Party (ANP) and using force to assert its writ.

The state's September 2013 response to escalating violence – empowering the paramilitary Rangers, who are nominally under the federal interior ministry but in practice answer to the military leadership, to operate against jihadist and criminal networks – is unlikely to restore peace. Characterised by heavy-handedness and human rights violations, including extra-judicial killings, torture and enforced disappearances, it instead breeds ethnic tensions and could boost recruitment to criminal, including jihadist, networks. The MQM sees it as a partisan attempt to suppress the party and pit its Mohajir constituents against each other and competing ethnicities. The PPP, the military's historic foe, is also in the Rangers' sights, and its provincial government faces rising pressure to expand the paramilitary unit's policing powers to the rest of Sindh, the party's political lifeline. Meanwhile, anti-India outfits like the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba/Jamaat-ud-Dawa (LeT/JD) and Jaish-e-Mohammed continue to operate madrasas and charity fronts with scant reaction from the Rangers or police.

Tensions are escalating fast, and failure to defuse the impending ethno-political crisis and rein in criminal and jihadist networks threatens to sink Pakistan's most important economic centre

further into conflict. The PPP and MQM leaderships should recognise that their governance failures have opened opportunities for the military's counterproductive intervention in Karachi's political affairs on the pretext of restoring stability. Reversing the military's impositions on civilian authority gives them a mutual interest in depoliticising and strengthening the police. Sindh's superior judiciary must also assume its primary responsibility of dispensing justice and protecting citizens' rights.

Recommendations

To achieve the political reconciliation needed so that technical fixes are achievable and gains are sustainable

To Karachi's political parties:

The PPP, MQM and Awami National Party (ANP) should restart a comprehensive dialogue to address Karachi's political and security challenges, recognising shared interests in reviving civilian political space and credibility and creating the conditions in which institutional reforms can be debated, agreed on and implemented.

Reestablish as basic rules of the game respect for each other's mandate; separation of provincial and municipal functions by credible and accountable devolution of power; and commitment to deliver provincial and local governance equitably rather than on the basis of patronage and exclusion.

Renounce the practice of collaborating with the military to counter political rivals and refrain from appealing for military intervention in the city's internal affairs.

Renounce any current or future alliance with criminal gangs and armed activist wings.

To demonstrate the political will to restore civilian authority, redress the adverse consequences of the Rangers' operation, enforce the rule of law in Karachi and prevent renewed criminal and jihadist violence

To the federal and provincial Sindh governments:

Replace selective counter-terrorism with an approach that targets jihadist groups using violence within or from Pakistani territory; regulate the madrasa sector; and act comprehensively against those with jihadist links.

End the Rangers' operation and commit to a law enforcement policy rooted in a reformed criminal justice system, including an operationally autonomous but accountable police force.

Resist military pressure to renew the Protection of Pakistan Act or grant wide powers to military and law enforcement agencies that lend themselves to abuse, including 90-day remand without charge; and repeal the 90-day remand provision in the 1997 Anti-Terrorism Act.

Resist military pressure to renew military courts, the authority of which under the 21st constitutional amendment expired in January 2017.

Replace, for the Sindh government, the 1861 Police Act with a new police order, using the 2002 Police Order as a template, to guarantee operational autonomy and robust internal and external accountability; and abandon plans to give police recruits military training, instead committing to fundamental reorientation of policing toward intelligence gathering, investigation and building court cases.

Investigate all allegations of custodial killings, torture, illegal detention and other human rights abuses by any law enforcement/security agency and hold individuals to account.

To the Sindh High Court:

Uphold the constitutional right to fair trial by:

prioritising petitions and cases involving alleged human rights abuses and denial of due process by law enforcement agencies, including the Rangers; and establishing and mandating implementation of practicable investigation procedures and fixing individual responsibility in those cases; and

ordering release of anyone detained in violation of basic due process; and using such cases as an opportunity to review and strike down any legal provisions that contradict the right to due process and fair trial.

To the political parties:

Establish funds to support female dependents of party members who have been detained, killed, gone missing or are otherwise unable to return to normal life, including material and psychological support; and facilitate unimpeded access to human rights and other civil society organisations for female dependents and family members affected by an operation.

To address the drivers of conflict, including extreme inequality that criminal and jihadist organisations exploit to expand their influence

To the provincial Sindh government:

Revive and properly resource public housing and public transport projects and ensure they benefit lower income groups rather than speculators, mafias and other elites, thus reconceiving the concept of land and transportation as a foundation of a peaceful body politic, not simply a market-provided good.

Ensure equal access to basic services, including water and power, for all residents, and prevent the Defence Housing Authority (DHA) and elite private real estate schemes from unfairly acquiring a disproportionate share.

End illegal regularisation and sale of public land and sale of valuable public agricultural and legally protected property to DHA and any similar public or private schemes.

Revive moribund state-run polytechnics, create additional ones and give the private sector incentives to establish vocational training institutions.

Karachi/Islamabad/Brussels, 15 February 2017 <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan/284-pakistan-stoking-fire-karachi>

Ethnic, political and sectarian rivalries, jihadist groups, criminality and heavy-handed security policies are turning Pakistan's biggest city into a pressure cooker of tensions. Feuding politicians must set aside their conflicts or Karachi's law-and-order crisis may further worsen