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## Karachi's Deadly Unrest

**A deadly bus attack underscores the tensions roiling Pakistan's largest city.**

By Kiyya Baloch

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Despite considerable rhetoric and months of effort, the operations Pakistani paramilitary forces have been carrying out in Karachi still appear to be far short of bring peace to the port city. On Wednesday, six gunmen armed with sophisticated weapons gunned down at least 43 people and wounded 13 others in a busy market in the city. The attackers were able to flee unhurt from the scene.

The attackers opened fire inside a bus carrying members of the Ismaili community, a sub-sect of Shiite Muslims known for their liberal views. In the wake of the attack came chaos, as mobs took out their anger on local police.

Hundreds of men, women and children took to the streets, blaming Pakistan's paramilitary forces and police for not targeting Jundullah, which claimed responsibility for the deadly attack. Jundullah is a splinter group of the Pakistani Taliban, allegedly based in a Pakistani tribal area and Quetta. According to senior Pakistani journalist Umar Farooq, Jundullah has very strong links with the Islamic State (IS), pledging allegiance in a November 2014 video message.

Asked about the attack, Gulam Haider Jamali, Sindh Police Chief said, "We are in the process of investigation, if it was a security lapse we will act against police officers within the parameters

of the Constitution. I have personally directed Additional Inspector General Police Sindh (DIG) Ghulam Qadir Thebo to immediately submit a preliminary report in this regard.”

Ismaili Shiites are renowned for their progressive Islamic views. Their spiritual leader Prince Karim Aga Khan is a globally renowned philanthropist and business magnate. Over the last decade, Shiites have become a soft target for Islamist militants in Pakistan. As many as 1,000 Shiites have been killed in the past two years, Most of the attacks were claimed by the hardline Sunni group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), which views Shiite Muslims as heretics.

### **Taliban in Karachi**

A pamphlet found at the site of the deadly attack suggests that the Islamic State had a hand in the killings and has threatened more attacks.

Karachi has become a hotbed of militancy, targeted attacks, and sectarianism in recent years. In particular, it has seen a surge in attacks on Shiites, the worst taking place in January 30 this year when a suicide bomber blew himself up in a mosque in the southern Shikarpur district of Karachi, killing 61.

Similarly, on the evening of April 25, the director of The Second Floor (T2F), Sabeen Mahmud was gunned down by masked men in a highly guarded area of Karachi. The police were quick to point the finger at religious extremist groups active in Karachi, although Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) denied involvement. Still, while Karachi’s problems remain largely ethnic and political, it is clear that the Taliban has a presence in the city.

In March 10 this year, security forces claimed to have shot dead a top Taliban commander along with three of his companions. Yet a huge swathe of Pakhtun neighborhoods in western and eastern Karachi, including some areas of District Malir are reported to be under the influence of Pakistani Taliban.

A reliable source says Taliban leaders are living quite freely in Karachi, but because they have nothing to do with the government they are left alone. To date, neither intelligence reports nor the media have been able to confirm the suspect presence. Yet the TTP has managed a number of attacks in the city, targeting polio workers, politicians, and top police officer Chaudhry Aslam.

### **Political Tensions**

Karachi is Pakistan’s largest city and its financial capital. On the surface, much of the city seems calm, but underlying tensions persist. Residents fear a major military operation against the city’s most powerful and influential party. That would be the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), a secular party that has been blamed by government agencies and rival groups for the unrest in the commercial hub. Most MQM members belong to middle-class families with a strong educational background. More than 90 percent of the members of the party are Urdu-speaking Muhajirs, descendants of migrants from India after partition in 1947.

MQM has been accused of being the force behind Karachi's recent unrest. In fact, anxiety about the MQM is not restricted to Pakistan: Canada has designated it a terrorist organization. MQM chief Altaf Hussain has been implicated in the murder of one of the party's founding members, Imran Farooq in London. MQM has been accused of using its political strength to bully and even kill opponents in Karachi.

Members of the Pakistan People's Party, a rival for political power in Karachi, accuse MQM of fueling unrest in the port city through a "deep conspiracy." PPP leader Zulfiqar Mirza, former home minister of Sindh, has accused MQM of creating unrest and carrying out assassinations in Karachi. He claims to have arrested gunmen belonging to MQM during his days in the Sindh government.

For its part, MQM leadership rejects all the charges, calling it a massive campaign against the party. MQM blames the Awami National Party (ANP), a Pashtun party, for hurting and damaging peace prospects in Karachi by killing innocent Muhajirs. A huge number of Pashtun migrants settled in Karachi after fleeing from the North-West Frontier Province following operations against the Taliban there.

A senior journalist from Karachi who wished to remain anonymous told *The Diplomat* that Pakistan's political parties, including MQM, PPP, ANP, and Sunni Tehrik (ST), are at war with each other. He says that Karachi is divided into areas that are controlled by PPP, MQM and ANP. "An Urdu speaker can't go to Lyari and a Lyrian cannot go to Nine Zero that's controlled by MQM." The journalist says that the militant wings of political parties and other groups were involved in target killings in Karachi. "Baloch gangsters and criminals in Lyari have been using the flag of PPP. Those involved in extortion in downtown Karachi are provided with a safe hideout by MQM, while the rest of the criminal activities and targeted attacks on ethnic Urdu speakers are carried out by Pashtun and Baloch who are supported by ANP." He added that "All militants and criminals are sheltered in camps run by political and ethnic parties. They use their flags and cards to commit crimes."

The parties deny the existence of militant wings and have disowned criminals arrested by law enforcers. Yet Pakistan civilian and intelligence agencies have claimed to have arrested some 5,882 suspected criminals since the launch of the Karachi operation in September 2013, of which 55 percent are believed to be associated with political parties.

A recent media briefing by senior police official Anwar Rao, in which he accused MQM of maintaining connections with India's spy agency, was widely seen as a deliberate attempt to pave the way for another crackdown against the party.

Certainly party leaders thought so, and have claimed that MQM has been the target of a heavy crackdown in a months-long military operation. In March, Pakistan Rangers raided MQM headquarters, arresting more than three dozen people, including a party leader. That wasn't the first such raid, and it has been accompanied by a war of words between the party and the Rangers. MQM leader Haider Abbas Rizvi has said that the raids and allegations directed at his party are part of a large-scale campaign designed to remove the MQM presence from Karachi.

## **Crushing “All Mafia”**

Following the deadly bus attack, military spokesperson Major General Asim Saleem Bajwa said on Twitter that Pakistani military chief General Raheel Sharif had cancelled his scheduled visit to Sri Lanka. During a visit to Karachi in April, Sharif had vowed to crush “all mafia” in Karachi and made it clear that operations in the port city would continue.

Information Minister Pervaiz Rashid says that operations in Karachi had been launched with the consensus of all political parties, with the political and military leadership in accord. He also insists that operations would continue.

However, senior MQM leaders claim that targeted operations by Rangers in Karachi are being conducted against a particular party but not against Islamist militants, criminals, terrorists, or extortionists. But a senior MQM leader claimed that “Raids are being conducted only in areas where the MQM position is strong. The government has given a completely free hand to law-enforcement agencies to carry out their targeted actions in the city to eliminate MQM.” Clearly, the troubles are far from over.