

# ISAS Brief

No. 212 – 15 August 2011

469A Bukit Timah Road  
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770  
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239  
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447  
Email: [isasec@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isasec@nus.edu.sg)  
Website: [www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)



## Exploding Karachi

Shahid Javed Burki<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*Pakistan cannot make economic and political progress unless the different kinds of violence that have become routine in the country are brought under control. It is because of this that the World Bank in its 2011 World Development Report has included Pakistan, along with a score of other countries, in its list of fragile states.<sup>2</sup> In fact, there are three ongoing wars within Pakistan. There is no end in sight for any of them: they are the wars in Karachi, the war among the various sects of Islam and the war between the state and various extremist groups. This paper discusses the explosion in Karachi. All three are taking large economic and human tolls on the country.*

### Introduction

Will Pakistan soon recover – or recover at all – from the deep malaise that currently inflicts it? There are a number of things that are hurting the country. There is good understanding about the nature and scope of some of them, such as the troubles on the economic front. Economists know what should be done to get the country to walk back from the edge of the abyss. The real problem is that the political establishment does not have the will to do what needs to be done. Then there is the problem created by unsettled politics. Various components within the society are playing what are essentially seen by them as zero-sum

---

<sup>1</sup> Shahid Javed Burki is Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He was former Finance Minister of Pakistan, and former Vice-President of the World Bank. He can be contacted at [sjburki@yahoo.com](mailto:sjburki@yahoo.com). The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the institute.

<sup>2</sup> The World Bank, *World Development Report, 2011: Conflict, Security and Development*, Washington D.C., 2011.

games. What one loses the other stands to gain. They do not see – at least not yet – that political give-and-take is a plus-sum enterprise. Difficult manoeuvrings by those operating in politics are to be expected once Pakistan sets itself on the course towards democratisation. This, in a way, is healthy for the development of the political system. The country is learning to find solutions through discourse and accommodation rather than allowing the military once again to put its heavy hand on politics.

It is the third problem – that of the resort to violence to gain ground against opponents – that poses the most serious challenge to the country. Karachi, as discussed in the section that follows, has a population roughly balanced among three ethnic groups – the original Sindhi-Makrani group who lived in the city before it was chosen to be Pakistan's first capital, the refugees who arrived from India after the 1947 partition of the subcontinent, and the constant stream of Afghan/Pushtun refugees attempting to escape violence in their areas. Each has the support of large national parties: the Sindhi-Makrani by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP); the Muhajirs by the Mutahida Qaumi Movement (MQM)<sup>3</sup>; and the Pushtuns by the Awami National Party (ANP). Since the election of 2008, the three groups have been represented in the coalition that governs from Islamabad. The MQM has a stronger local base than the other two.

### **Karachi's Demographic Evolution**

The city has grown 50-fold since the country gained independence 64 years ago. Its population has increased from 400,000 in 1947 to an estimated 20 million in 2011. This means an increase of 6.3 per cent a year. This population explosion did not happen as a result of natural growth and what has been produced is not pretty. Had Karachi grown by a natural increase in population – in Pakistan's case by 2.85 per cent a year – it would have doubled in size in about every 25 years. Had it grown at a rate normal for large urban centres – about 5 per cent a year – its population would have doubled in every 14 years. In the latter case the city's population would be around 9 million, less than half its present size.

The explosion in Karachi's population was caused by three waves of migration that brought three very different people in search of jobs and, ironically, security. The first was the arrival of a million-and-a-half refugees from mostly the urban areas of the minority provinces of British India. Their arrival over a period of four years – but mostly in the few months after independence in August 1947 – increased the size of the city fivefold, and formed less than half a million to about 2 million within a period of a few of months. Extrapolating the increase in the size of the Muhajir population on the basis of natural growth—in their case of

---

<sup>3</sup> The MQM initially called itself Muhajir Qaumi Mahaz (Refugees National Front) but changed its name once it decided to broaden its base of support.

2.5 per cent, somewhat less than the national average – this group now has about 7 million people. This number includes hundreds of thousands of Biharis who moved to Karachi from Bangladesh after that country gained independence in December 1971. Biharis are ethnically close to the original Muhajirs. They, like the Muhajirs, are Urdu-speaking people. Factoring in the natural increases of the original inhabitants of the city and that of the Muhajir community still leaves a gap of some 12 million people. This is accounted for by the two other sets of migrations.

**Table 1: Ethnic Distribution in Karachi, 2011**

	Population (in millions)	Population Share (in %)
<b>Muhajir</b>	7	35
<b>Sindhis</b>	5	25
<b>Pushtuns</b>	5	25
<b>Punjabis</b>	2	10
<b>Other</b>	1	5

**Source:** Author's estimates

The first was the arrival of mostly construction workers from the northern parts of Punjab and Azad Kashmir to help with the building of the country's first capital and its largest industrial base. The second was made up of refugees from the wars in Afghanistan that now have gone on for three decades. Since no reliable data are available, the numbers involved in those two migrations can only be estimated on the basis of informed guesswork. This is the basis of the estimates in Table 1 above. There are probably two million people of Punjabi origin in the city and about five million people from the Pushtun areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. In other words, if Karachi today has a population of 20 million, slightly more than a third of it is made of the Muhajir community, about a fourth of the original Sindhi-Makrani population, about a fourth also of the Pushtuns and the remaining one-sixth of other ethnic groups. There are supposedly one million people from Bangladesh who reside in the city.

As shown in Table 2 below, Karachi's ethnic divisions do not translate into the citizen's linguistic preference. Urdu, a language originally spoken by the migrants who came from India, is now the dominant language used by almost one-half of the population. The reason for this is the economic domination of the Muhajir community for whom Urdu is the mother tongue. As a result it has become the language of business, commerce and finance, the three areas in which the Muhajir community has considerable proficiency. It was reported in the Census of 1998 that a significant number of second-generation Pushtuns did not have a working knowledge of Pushto, their ancestral language, and had shifted to Urdu, the language used in government and business. However, the rivalry between the Muhajir and Pushtun communities that is the main reason for the continuation of violence in the city has not been caused by the encroachment of Urdu over other languages.

**Table 2: Languages Spoken in Karachi**

	% of the population
Urdu	48.5
Punjabi	13.9
Pushto	11.4
Sindhi	7.2
Balochi	4.3
Seraiki	2.1
Other	12.4

**Source: Population Census of 1998**

## **Reasons for Violence**

Karachi's ethnic brew continues to churn and produce violence. The several communities that make up the city's population have not found a way of developing an institutional response to resolve their differences. The most recent episode of violence resulted in 318 deaths in July 2011, making it one of the bloodiest months in years. Violence continued in August. On the first day of the month, 26 persons were killed. There is evidence that this violence was well planned; according to Interior Minister Rehman Malik, 18 of those who died on 1 August were the victims of targeted killing, or planned assassinations.<sup>4</sup> According to Faisal Aziz of Reuters, 'most of the affected areas are home to ethnic Pushtun and Muhajirs.'<sup>5</sup>

The ethnic wars in Karachi started a couple of decades ago but subsided in intensity for a while. Their main cause was the inability of the city's very diverse population to further their interests without hurting those of the rest. Violence subsided once the system of local government introduced by the regime of President Pervez Musharraf brought government closer to the people. Under the system Karachi had Nazims, elected officials who were close to the people and local community organisations. The system lasted for as long as Musharraf was in power. With his departure, Islamabad, now under a coalition dominated by PPP, attempted to go back to the old system in which local authority was in the hands of officials appointed by the government. This was a throw-back to the colonial times and Pakistan's earlier times when the central government exercised authority through the officials – commissioners and deputy commissioners – it appointed. This change was not acceptable to the MQM. There was also a shift in the demographic compositions of the city with more

<sup>4</sup> Faisal Aziz, 'Violence in Pakistan's Karachi: 200 killed in July', Reuters, 1 August 2011, [www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/1-us-pakistan-karachi-violence](http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/1-us-pakistan-karachi-violence).

<sup>5</sup> Faisal Aziz, 'Violence in Pakistan's Karachi: 200 killed in July', Reuters, 2 August 2011, [www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/2-us-pakistan-karachi-violence](http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/2-us-pakistan-karachi-violence).

Afghan refugees arriving in the city from the troubled areas of northern Pakistan. This disturbed the ethnic balance on which relative peace rested in the early 2000s.

## **Conclusion**

Research suggests that rapid urban growth is associated with weakened social cohesions and increased risk of violence. Karachi, as discussed above, increased in size at a rate much higher than that of other megacities in the world. But despite its explosive growth, the city had one advantage: rough balance in the numbers of people belonging to different ethnic and social groups. This should have led to politics and economics of inclusion rather than of exclusion. That happened for a while when the Muhajir community gained political control of the city. Its leaders worked to develop not only the areas populated by their community but those of other ethnic groups as well. However, that balance was disturbed by the escalation of violence in the Pushtun areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. This generated another wave of migration which has brought in more people from this ethnic group. They are now trying to find economic and political space for themselves in the city and this has led to violence once again. The solution is not the use of force; it has to be economic and political accommodation of the people who feel excluded.

As the World Bank puts it in the above cited report, ‘recent research, while still in its infancy, points to the importance of institutions in mediating disputes and reducing violence. Where societies fail to reform institutions and insulate themselves from stresses associated with violence, they risk repeated circles of violence.’<sup>6</sup> This is where Karachi is today.

.....

---

<sup>6</sup> The World Bank, *World Development Report, 2011: Conflict, Security and Development*, Op. Cit, p. 84.