

# Karachi Turns Deadly Amid Pakistan's Rivalries



Reuters

Angry Pakistanis in Karachi, responding to a political killing, set a bus on fire in August; the city has had more than 1,350 such killings in 2010, a report says.

By JANE PERLEZ

Published: November 18, 2010

KARACHI, Pakistan — This chaotic city of 18 million people on the shores of the Arabian Sea has never shrunk from violence. But this year, Karachi has outdone even itself.

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Drive-by shootings motivated by political and ethnic rivalries have reached new heights. Marauding gangs are grabbing tracts of land to fatten their electoral rolls. Drug

barons are carving out fiefs, and political parties are commonly described as having a finger in all of it.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan recently reported that more than 1,350 people had been killed in Karachi in targeted political killings so far this year, more than the number killed in terrorist attacks in all of Pakistan.

That tally has solidified Karachi's grim distinction as Pakistan's most deadly place, outside its actual war zones, where the army is embroiled in pushing back a [Taliban](#) insurgency.

Indeed, it is the effect of the war, which has displaced many thousands of ethnic Pashtuns from the northern tribal areas and sent them to this southern port, that has inflamed Karachi's always volatile ethnic balance. For the most part, extremists who torment the rest of Pakistan with suicide bomb attacks exploit the turmoil here to hide, recruit and raise funds.

The attack last week on the police headquarters by a suicide bomber that killed dozens was the exception, the first attack by extremists against a government institution in the city. Far more common have been killing by gangs affiliated with ethnic-based political parties hunting for turf in a city undergoing seismic demographic change.

Karachi has long been dominated by ethnic Mohajirs, Urdu-speaking people who left

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India in the 1947 partition and who have been represented politically by the Muttahida Qaumi Movement, commonly known as the M.Q.M.

The M.Q.M. has a long association with violence. In 1992, the army moved into Karachi to suppress it, accusing it of a four-year rampage of torture and murder. During what amounted to a two-year occupation by the army, "several thousand" people were killed, according to accounts at the time.

The latest challenge to the M.Q.M.'s hold is the influx of Pashtuns who have fled the war to seek work and shelter in Karachi's slums. Though the Pashtuns number some five million here now, they remain politically underrepresented, and the frustrations of the newcomers have increasingly been channeled into violent retribution by the Awami National Party, or A.N.P.

The two sides have set their gangs on each other. In August, after a senior M.Q.M. member was shot to death at a funeral, more than 100 people were killed in a weeklong orgy of violence.

The army, [asked](#) by some political parties to move in again and keep the peace, declined. During the by-election last month to fill the provincial assembly seat left vacant by the murder, more than 30 people were killed.

In that rampage, members of a self-styled people's peace committee affiliated with the Pakistan Peoples Party, which leads the national government and considers this province, Sindh, its base, stormed an outdoor market on [motorcycles](#) and shot 12 Mohajir shopkeepers, the police said.

Hours later, seven men of ethnic Baluch origin were killed, apparently in revenge for the deaths of the Mohajirs, said Zafar Baloch, a spokesman for the peace committee.

Amber Alibhai, the secretary general of Citizens for a Better Environment, said: "If our government is not going to wake up, I fear Karachi will have ethnic cleansing like Bosnia. There's no one to stop it. Who's going to stop it? The police? The army? They can't."

The cost of Karachi's violence hurts all of Pakistan. More liberal than the rest of the country in decorum and religious belief, Karachi is the economic engine of the nation, home to petrochemical plants, steel works, advertising agencies and high-tech start-ups.

The rich live in grand houses in gated communities paved with broad boulevards. The poor live in neighborhoods like Lyari, a slum with little sanitation, fleeting electricity and hardscrabble roads that sits under an expressway.

Other megacities in the developing world — like Shanghai and Mumbai — manage law and order through political leadership that is absent in Karachi, said Farrukh Saleem, a political analyst who writes in *The News*, a national newspaper.

A scared, understaffed and in some cases complicit police force compounds the problem. That was the message of a new report by a parliamentary committee that said 603 police officers had been assassinated since 1996. This year, 33 officers have been killed, the report said.

Many of these senior police officers were targeted, the report said, as retribution for the military action against the M.Q.M. in 1992, a sign of the long memory of the M.Q.M.

But it is the persistent lack of Pashtun representation in the city and provincial governments that underlies the troubles, said Abdul Qadir Patel, the chairman of the committee that wrote the report and a Pakistan Peoples Party member of Parliament. "The Pashtuns are frustrated and the A.N.P. says, 'We'll fight back,'" Mr. Patel said.

In rare candor for a Pakistani government document, his report said "ethnicity, sectarianism, perceived insecurity due to demographic changes, gang war between

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mafias and clash of interests among workers of political parties have been the real cause of violence in Karachi.”

Of 178 boroughs in the 18 towns of Karachi, only 4 are controlled by the Pashtuns. Of 168 seats in the provincial assembly of Sindh, where Karachi is located, the A.N.P., the party of the Pashtuns, has just 2.

Based on Karachi's demographics, Pashtuns “could have up to 25 seats in the provincial legislature,” Mr. Saleem wrote. “That is political power way out of sync with demographic realities.”

As part of the push and pull in the demographic war, the major political parties use armed thugs to commandeer public land so they can gerrymander election districts, said Mrs. Alibhai of the citizens' group. One of her group's workers was killed last year trying to protect a park.

“Land grabbing is used by political parties to increase their electoral mandate and enhance their financial position,” she said.

A recent former M.Q.M. mayor of Karachi, Syed Mustafa Kamal, denied that his party, which has long been favored by Washington for its secular outlook, was involved in the killing of Pashtuns.

Mr. Kamal, who as mayor from 2005 until this year is credited with extending running water to several Pashtun neighborhoods, said Karachi was the rightful home of the Mohajirs. The Pashtun, he said, harbor the Taliban and foment terrorist attacks. “We are the victims,” he insisted.

The gruesome clash between the Mohajirs and the Pashtuns has spread recently to the stalls in Gulshen Town, a Mohajir-dominated area, where people sip tea and chat.

There, Pashtun waiters who deliver hunks of roasted lamb to truck drivers at curbside tables, have become targets, said Noorullah Achakzai, the chairman of a union of hotel workers.

In April, Abdul Rehman, 35, said he was eating lunch with a friend when six men on three motorcycles fired at them. “I got one bullet, my friend got one, the others were scattered,” he said.

Mr. Rehman showed a long scar across his stomach. His friend died, one of the first, Mr. Achakzai said, of 52 outdoor waiters killed in Karachi this year.

*Zia Ur Rehman contributed reporting.*

A version of this article appeared in print on November 19, 2010, on page A6 of the New York edition.

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