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Rise of the MQM in Pakistan: Politics of Ethnic Mobilization

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RISE OF THE MQM IN PAKISTAN

Politics of Ethnic Mobilization

Farhat Haq

The sudden and dramatic rise of the Muhajir Quami Movement (MQM) in Pakistan's Sindh Province in the mid-1980s is an important case study in cultural pluralism and example of very successful ethnic mobilization. The MQM's claim that Urdu-speaking *muhajirs* (refugees), Muslims who left India after partition in 1947, constitute a fifth nationality in Pakistan was also a redefinition of political identity (Muhajir) for a community that had previously shunned particularistic ethnicity in favor of a broader Muslim Pakistani identity. The rise of MQM has occurred in the midst of ethnic unrest in urban Sindh, especially Karachi. The level of violence has not abated despite an Operation Cleanup launched by the military in 1992. A greater understanding of the factors responsible for the emergence of MQM can contribute to the larger literature on cultural pluralism and also shed light on recent political developments in Pakistan.

In April 1985 the death of a college student hit by a minibus led to rioting by students against transporters in Karachi. Within two days, widespread clashes erupted between ethnic Pathans, who are the owners and operators of minibuses, and Urdu-speaking Muhajirs, predominantly the passengers on minibuses.¹ This conflict intensified over the next two years, and a group of young Muhajir students led by Altaf Hussain formed MQM, claiming that the Urdu-speaking Muhajirs constitute the fifth nationality (along with Punjabi, Pathan, Baluchi and Sindhi) in Pakistan and ought to be granted constitutional recognition as such.

In 1988 the MQM won a landslide electoral victory in municipal elections in Hyderabad and Karachi, and it repeated these victories in the national elec-

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1. A mid-1980s report cited traffic congestion and reckless driving as one of the main reasons for growing ethnic tension in Karachi.

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