



MAR Background Report: Election Violence in Pakistan

Nearly 100 people have been killed in violence in the Pakistani city of Karachi in recent weeks. Violence began over the weekend of October 16th, coinciding with voting in the city for the replacement of a Sindh provincial lawmaker, Raza Haider, murdered in August. Raza Haider belonged to Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), which has the support of ethnic Mohajir. The MQM is secular and speaks out against the “Talibanization” of the city, aimed at the party’s main rival, the Awami National Party (ANP) comprised of mostly ethnic Pashtuns from the Taliban heartland in the northwest. ANP chose not to participate in the elections, claiming fraud. Shootings began around the same time as ANP announced its intention to boycott the poll. Cars and buses were also torched during this most recent outbreak of violence in the area.

Raza Haider was a senior member of MQM, and many party members held ANP responsible for his death on August 2. It was later discovered Sunni militants were to blame for the murder, but many ethnic Pashtuns and their businesses were targeted in the ensuing violence. Ethnic riots escalated between the Mohajirs and Pashtuns, resulting in a death toll of more than 100 people.

Mohajirs, which literally means “refugee,” are Urdu speakers who fled India after the 1947 partition. While Mohajirs are primarily Sunnis, their identity revolves not around religion but their perceived “outsider” status. Mohajirs comprise approximately 8% of Pakistan’s population; in 2006, MQM held 25 of 340 seats in the national legislature, about 7%, though in the past Mohajirs claimed to be underrepresented in government. According to information collected by the Minorities at Risk Project, they are mainly represented by the MQM and its many factions; factionalization is severe among the Mohajirs. Historically, intra-communal Mohajir violence often exceeded violence between the Mohajirs and the government or with other ethnic groups. Mohajir discontent is focused on the return of self-rule for the Sindh province.

The number of Pashtuns in Karachi has increased recent years, as refugees of Pakistan army offences against the Taliban move to the city. Pashtuns are mostly concentrated in the northwest, along the border of Afghanistan, but many live in the urban centers of Karachi, Sindh, and Hyderabad. The Minorities at Risk Project has found that intense internal divisions on tribal lines within the Pashtuns have prevented them from becoming a strong political force at the center, resulting in representation being split among multiple organizations. ANP is arguably the most dominant political force, but the Pashtuns are



also organized along several nationalist parties and Islamic groups. The civil war in Afghanistan and the US-led war against the Taliban have strongly influenced the Pashtuns, and the increasing destabilization along the Pakistani/Afghan border further fuels the unrest.

The violence has included targeted killings meant to intimidate entire communities. Police arrested over 60 people in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, some of whom are affiliated with political parties, but prosecution is thought to be unlikely. By October 20, businesses and schools all over the city were shut down, and officials were contemplating a curfew. The fear in the city further escalated after a gunman opened fire in a commercial market, killing 11. MQM accused ANP over the killings, claiming that 19 of those dead were workers and supporters. ANP has denied the allegations. The rising tension between the MQM and ANP poses a serious threat to stability in Karachi, accompanied by the risk of further inflaming ethnic tensions in other regions of Pakistan.

About the Minorities at Risk Project

The Minorities at Risk (MAR) Project, based at the University of Maryland, monitors and analyzes the status and conflicts of politically-active communal groups in countries with a current population of at least 500,000. The project is designed to provide information in a standardized format that aids comparative research and contributes to the understanding of conflicts involving relevant groups. Selected project materials on more than 283 groups (the MAR database and codebook as well as detailed historical chronologies) are available on the [project's website](#) for researchers, public officials, journalists, students, activists, and others interested in the topic. The project also has collected data on 118 ethnopolitical organizations representing MAR groups in the Middle East and North Africa in the Minorities at Risk Organizational Behavior dataset.



Minorities at Risk Project
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