



THE POLITICS OF POWER AND PUBLIC SPACE



EVALUATING VIOLENCE IN KARACHI, PAKISTAN



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Karachi has been deemed one of the world's most dangerous cities. Using it as an urban laboratory, I investigate the role of physical space in the materialization of power, urban insecurity, and violence. I identify the key spatial factors that invite violence-driven power schemes: institutions of informality, structures of social division, and pockets of high-density settlement. The case of Karachi shows that relative weakness of state organizations in terms of their ability or willingness to plan the city, or to ensure a uniformly enforced system of property rights, led to divergent societal and political responses most frequently manifesting in acts of urban violence.

What is the role of physical space in the materialization of power, insecurity, and violence? This question is critical to executing effective policies and interventions for urban security in the global south. In this study, I explore how physical space is leveraged by non-state actors to establish territorial control. Regions of insecurity often exhibit ongoing battles where acts of violence have no bounds. But what is it that makes certain urban landscapes more inviting to violence-driven power schemes? To investigate, I explore the spatial paradoxes of Karachi, which was deemed one of the world's most violent cities in 2011 (Gazdar, 2013). In examining Karachi, I identify three factors that influence and perpetuate urban insecurity:

Institutions of Informality compromise the state's capacity by encouraging a toxic dependence on special-interest groups for conditional assistance;

Structures of Social Division exacerbate marginality and socioeconomic divisions between low-income and vulnerable populations;

Pockets of High-Density Settlements produce a forum for systemic gang recruitment and agenda-driven indoctrination.

These elements work together to transfer power and control into the unauthorized hands of non-state actors: groups and individuals that are exempt from the rule of law.

Current literature on regions of insecurity and rampant violence focuses on ways non-state armed actors use territorial control to establish power within a region (AlSayyad, 2011, p. 25). This idea is central to understanding the relationship between physical space and violence; however, contemporary analysis fails to explore how this power is established. I found little evidence of studies that evaluate how physical space impacts violence, as most focus on the impacts of violence on physical space.

This study intends to contribute to our understanding of the role of physical space in the production of violence. I present the case of Karachi with the hopes of pursuing further research on methods to mitigate the city's urban insecurity. Too often, planners and policy-makers normalize the implementation of solutions that are intended for extremely divergent cultural, social, and environmental circumstances. By highlighting the unique strategies used to manipulate land and its functionality in Karachi, we can approach regional policy with a better grasp of the layered variables that feed urban insecurity. Eventually, this may determine a more tailored approach to understanding insecurity and devising possible strategies to address it.

CASE STUDY: KARACHI, PAKISTAN OVERVIEW: A VOLATILE METROPOLIS

Karachi is a city of pronounced paradox. Celebrated as a civic hub of art, commerce, and progressive intellect, it is also a leading source of Pakistan's instability (Chotani, Razzak & Luby, 2002). The city of 18 million residents is frequently victim to violence and insecurity caused by politically motivated homicides, terrorist and gang-related violence, and crimes that have permeated daily life in Karachi (e.g., robberies, muggings, kidnappings, vehicle snatching) (Kaker, 2013). The city has faced a history of power-brawls between mafia, ethnic, and political groups who apply extortion tactics, such as land grabbing, evictions, and settlements, to create and shape constituencies. Pitched firefights that go on for days between gangs, or between gangs and the police, are not uncommon. It should come as no surprise that Karachi is listed among the world's most dangerous megacities.



Map 1

Karachi and Surrounding Geographies

Since the advent of the U.S.-Pakistan alliance in the 'War on Terror,' Karachi has witnessed a severe increase in internal violence. Pakistani Taliban militants have gained a foothold in the city, carving out territory in neighborhoods like Manghopir, where they run criminal and smuggling rackets, rob banks, and administer a cruel and terrifying form of justice (Chotani, 2002). Taliban groups have attacked multiple targets in Karachi: state security forces, army installations, US and NATO supplies, foreign consulates, five-star hotels, mosques and shrines, and religious and political processions. This violence and the associated fear of violence have had a visible effect on Karachi's landscape: razor wires, guarded barriers, checkpoints and road closures, and enclave settlements are scattered across the city (Faruqui, 1995). Although it is valuable to understand how this urban insecurity impacts

physical form, we must also interrogate the nature of the urban conditions that have allowed such violence to flourish. These visible markers of violence in physical form evoke the question: How did Karachi arrive at this conjuncture?

UNDERSTANDING THE INSTITUTIONS OF INFORMALITY

The current violence in Karachi needs to be understood as a continuum of tension from the years following Pakistan's independence in 1947 (Faruqui, 1995). At the time of partition from India, Karachi was inhabited by a large number of affluent Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. The controversial decision to name Karachi the nation's federal capital, a title it held until 1960, attracted over 600,000 immigrants from the Muslim areas of India who sought government and white-collar jobs (Gazdar, 2013). The massive influx of Mohajir migrants competing for jobs provoked hostility among the indigenous Sindhis. Additionally, housing for these migrants became a severe issue for both municipal and national authorities who needed not only to stabilize the new capital, but also to lay a foundation for a new nation. Their initial priority was providing shelter for the government employees who had been transferred to Pakistan, while poorer refugees lived in makeshift camps, locally known as bastis, that had emerged in public spaces in and around the urban center (Gayer, 2007).

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the government demolished, evicted, and relocated the informal refugee settlements. However, these efforts left 250,000 refugees needing to be "resettled" in 1953; in 1958, 100,000 refugees were still unsettled (Gayer, 2007). The state provided refugees with residential plots far from the city center in suburban sites: Malir, Korangi, Khokrapar (present-day East Karachi district), and Orangi. Although

the Karachi Development Authority (KDA) was established to systematically relocate refugee settlements to lots designated for displaced partition migrants, its main focus became creating large housing schemes for the urban middle class of Karachi (Gazdar, 2013). These efforts to restructure refugee settlement policies appeased the urban elites, thus neglecting the very population that the policies were initially created to serve.

Karachi's repeated implementation of ineffective refugee housing policies has led to the rise of informal economies of land tenure. Most refugees are tenants who are subject to various forms of conditional leases from non-state authorized landlords. The astronomical profits presented to landlords created an informal economy of housing capital, perpetuating a chain of dependency. The tenant pays rent, the landlord pays whoever deals the plot of land, and the chain continues through actors that are still unknown. The fundamental right to shelter is controlled by a powerful group of landlords, who are in turn controlled by a larger power of mafia-like gangs. The hierarchies of power continue to lock urban residents into a rigid cycle of violence and enforced poverty.

In the ensuing decades, Karachi's bastis grew in size and number, especially by Pathan populations from the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), who made up most of the labor force for the city's construction (Ghazdar, 2013). As a response to growing migrant populations, illegal subdivisions became common as "independent private persons" developed and sold peripheral land even though they lacked property rights over it (Ghazdar, 2013). These informal entrepreneurs were in close contact with police officers, politicians, and bureaucrats, whose connections offered basti dwellers a certain degree of security against eviction (Faruqi, 1995).

Drug barons and mafia groups made their entry into Karachi's informal housing market at the peak of the Soviet War, when Karachi served as an initial staging area for lucrative opium and

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heroin exports to the drug markets of Western Europe and the Americas. In addition to the concomitant increase in corruption, turf wars and wealth inequities, Karachi paid a human price as the number of heroin addicts rose from less than 10,000 in 1980 to roughly 300,000 by 1990 (Gayer, 2007). Coercion and violence were not new to Karachi's bastis, but the shocking levels of drug addiction within low-income populations made them an even more vulnerable population and promoted the climb to power for Karachi's mafia groups and drug dealers.

EXPLORING STRUCTURES OF SOCIAL DIVISION

Karachi has long been characterized by patterns of residential segregation by caste and socioeconomic status. In recent decades, however, the patterns of exclusion have been deliberately altered through organized ethnic public campaigns. A prominent political party, the Muttahida Qauma Movement (MQM), remains entrenched in the complex political scenario of the country. MQM's political base is primarily the Mohajir, Urdu-speaking immigrants from

India and their descendants. Using public space to manipulate symbols, organize public street spectacles, and play on a deep-rooted Mohajir sense of victimization at the hands of Pakistan's indigenous population, MQM established itself as a political hegemony at the violent expense of other ethnic groups, as well as secular and religious political parties (Gayer, 2007). Links between interparty rivalry, ethnic group identity and crime have become a part of the standard narrative of Karachi's politics (Boivin, 2011). Political violence is readily associated with ethnic conflict in Karachi, as the main parties with influence have identified ethnic support bases.

Densely populated spaces allow mafias and similar extortionist groups opportunities to balance agenda-driven indoctrination with humanitarian assistance.

The rise of urban violence has extended beyond the management capacity of municipal authorities and brought about emerging neoliberal policies that promote high-end, enclave development. Residential enclaves in Karachi are affluent, gated communities intended to fulfill the responsibilities of local government and offer security from pervasive urban violence. The irony is that although the city is fast morphing into an "archipelago of secure enclaves, Karachi continues to be drawn into a vortex of violence," and the residents remain insecure (Gayer, 2007). The phenomenon of enclavization has contentiously been compared to "a new form of apartheid that spatializes biopolitics and perpetuates social segregation based on socio-economic differences" (Chotani, 2002). Creating these divisive communities builds a climate of fear that unapologetically debilitates Karachi.

This mass enclavization has reinforced the self-perpetuating nature of urban violence. Karachi's enclaves and satellite towns build antagonistic notions of identity in urban spaces and separate the neighborhoods belonging to Mohajir (those who migrated from India after Pakistan's independence) from those belonging to Sindhi (the indigenous population living in Karachi pre-independence). These divisive spatial strategies are implemented to establish ethnic and socioeconomic supremacy and the social exclusion of low-income Sindhi and Pathan populations. Where you live defines who you are, but the privilege of choice is limited to the urban elite. This increasing marginality breeds inter-communal and interpersonal violence, propagating the structural continuum of conflict in Karachi.

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF HIGH-DENSITY SETTLEMENTS

It is challenging to visualize the rapid pace of population growth in Karachi; statistics simply fail to capture the rise of informal residents. The city's population grew approximately 80 percent between 2000 and 2010 (Ali, Krantz & Gunilla, 2012). That's roughly equivalent to adding more than New York City's entire population in just a decade, and this statistic represents only the formal population living in government-recognized homes and settlements.

Refugees live in an environment that, by its very nature, creates social preconditions which ethnic parties and mafia groups use to their advantage. The connection between these groups and refugee camps is pivotal in establishing a structure of dependency for basic necessities and loyalty to the group's agenda. Densely populated spaces allow mafias and similar extortionist groups opportunities to balance agenda-driven



Map 2
Karachi Conflict Zones, 1985-2005. Conflict is visibly more prominent between regions of ethnic enclaves and neighborhoods. Source: Gayer, 2007.

indoctrination with humanitarian assistance. Ultimately, the recipients of their aid are subject to conditions that support the group's cause.

Most villages or slum-shanty growths of uncontrolled urban settlements still lack the facilities of proper cities and receive sporadic bursts of electricity. Groups effectively exploit difficult humanitarian circumstances of refugee camps by providing services and frequently manipulating loyalties, thus creating small communities of political supporters and subordinates (Boivin, 2011). Moreover, dense communities are selected by mafia groups on the basis of their specific spatial and social configurations. For example, pockets of high-density urban settlements are favorable for these groups because they enable recruitment for conflict and reinforce a hold over target

populations. It is clear that the state's unwillingness to plan the city or to ensure a uniformly enforced system of property rights has led to divergent societal and political responses manifesting in acts of urban violence.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As in most cities, urban violence both influences and is influenced by physical space. While investigating the social, political, and economic circumstances of Karachi, we can begin to understand how physical space is used as a platform to establish territorial control. The city's ethnic divisions, infrastructural failure, and negligent state government allow for conditions under which urban violence becomes a solution and a tactic to deal with crises of governance,

insecurity, and disruption in everyday urban living. The politics of exclusion exacerbate marginality for more vulnerable residents and users of space, and the inadequate planning of long-term spatial production has led to the prevalence of violence and conflict within Karachi.

The prevalence of informality, particularly with respect to urban settlements and land use, is a well-established aspect of compromised state capacity in Karachi. In fact, municipal planning and development in Karachi have not kept pace with Karachi's exploding population and economic growth. Since there was insufficient housing available to migrants, this resulted in large informal settlements and slums. Today, over 6 million people live in such dwellings (Gayer, 2007). As demand for these services outstrips the government's ability to supply them, a lucrative sub-economy has sprung up where everything is available – for a price. Rival mafias marked

their turf and consolidated their businesses, often winning over law enforcers and administrators by offering them a slice of the pie. It should be no surprise that Karachi is an extremely difficult city to police, partly because of the constantly changing population, but mainly because of the tangled web of vested interests that operates outside the law.

Coping with urban insecurity is not foreign to Karachi's residents. Although much can be learned from their adaptive capacity, I urge contemporary urban intervention to move beyond adaptation strategies and, instead, understand the factors that produce these issues. Effective policies require a deeper analysis of a city's physical space and its role in nurturing illicit dynamics of power and violence. Using Karachi's institutionalized insecurity as a warning, other vulnerable cities can avoid the creation of violent nations. ■

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