

# Sectarian clashes threaten civil war in Pakistan

by Ramtanu Maitra

With less than six weeks to go before the general elections, Pakistan has been confronted with perhaps the most serious crisis that it has faced since 1971, when the nation was dismembered and Bangladesh was born. The crucial issue before the present caretaker government is to maintain law and order in the country and hold free and fair elections on Nov. 16.

The three-day carnage in the Sind province cities of Hyderabad and Karachi, which brought death to almost 300 people, is the focus of a pattern of ethnic and sectarian violence with sharp political overtones and potentially far-reaching implications. The target of the recent bloodletting in Sind are the Mohajirs—emigrés from India following the partition of the subcontinent in 1947.

On the night of Sept. 30, assassins wearing masks and riding jeeps took over control of Hyderabad and the neighboring town of Latifabad, picking their targets and raining bullets from their assault rifles. During the night, according to reports, 186 people were mowed down and another 600-plus were wounded. Roads and streets, lanes and by-lanes of Hyderabad were littered with the dead and dying. Most of those shot that night were Mohajirs. The next day, Oct. 1, the Mohajirs retaliated in Karachi: the result, 61 dead. By evening, the army had been sent in to patrol the streets of Karachi.

The nature of the killings, in Hyderabad in particular, indicates that the massacre was well-planned. The attack on the Mohajirs—whose emergence as an independent political force in the province is resented and feared by the opposition groupings and pro-government factions alike—is part of a battle for political control of Sind province. It is apparent that unless the government undertakes a thorough investigation and brings the assassins to justice, a sectarian civil war could break out in Sind well before Nov. 16.

Such a civil war will not long remain confined within the geographic borders of Sind. As an indicator, on Sept. 30, the same day the mayhem occurred in Hyderabad, Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Fiqah Jafria (TNFJ), a Shia political party, held a procession in Dera Ismail Khan, North West Frontier Province (NWFP), which resulted in a clash killing eight people. The procession had been scheduled for Muharrum but was canceled at that time due to “possible violence.”

In NWFP, along the Afghanistan borders, the Kabul regime has stepped up its two-pronged operation to spread terror and death. The Afghan policy, masterminded by the *glasnost* crowd in Moscow, is to carry out air raids on a regular basis, dropping bombs in the tribal areas and refugee camps, and instilling terror among the refugees. Simultaneously, the KHAD agents, dressed in the garb of Afghan refugees, are planting bombs in the crowded bazaars of Peshawar and smaller towns. Often, “unidentified gunmen” have shot at crowded buses which caused spontaneous sectarian riots. The assassination of the respected Shia leader of the TNFJ, Al-Hussaini, who was also killed by the bullet of an “unidentified gunman,” remains an unsolved murder.

## Bureaucratic reflex

The response of the authorities to the recent riots has been bureaucratic and politically indecisive. Acting President Ghulam Ishaq Khan and Chief of the Army Staff Mirza Aslam Beg—himself a Mohajir—visited the riot-torn cities and expressed their dismay at what they saw. President Ghulam Ishaq Khan—implying the involvement of external forces in the killings without, however, naming them—stated that army units would be moved to the India-Pakistan border to prevent “infiltration.” He also assured the nation that the forces which had been set up to eradicate gangsters in Sind would be reinforced.

Gen. Aslam Beg said that the Hyderabad killings and other such terrorist activities are part of a sinister conspiracy to destabilize the country, create a feeling of insecurity among the people, and sabotage the elections. General Beg did not elaborate who is hatching this sinister conspiracy. But the *Pakistan Times*, a government-run newspaper, raised the India bogey on the front page of its Oct. 3 edition, “The shooting of a large number of innocent people in Hyderabad and Karachi,” the daily asserted, “is also engineered by the RAW [Research and Analysis Wing, India’s foreign intelligence organization] personnel and condemned prisoners and those undergoing life imprisonment in Rajasthan jails who were set free by the Indian authorities and sent to Sind for sabotage activities.” The *Pakistan Times* cited “information received from across the border,” for its report.

Such accusations are a standard feature of the subconti-

ment's political repertoire. Such claims and counter-claims are often used to divert the population's attention from realities, and allow the government to sidestep problems it cannot or will not resolve. It is a policy reflex that has diminishing returns, if recent events are any indication. The fact that in the recent period a series of major events in Pakistan remain unexplained, the criminals remain unnamed and unapprehended, is certainly contributing to a tendency toward the breakdown of law and order in the country.

Besides the killing of Al-Hussaini by an "unidentified gunman," the blowing up of the Ojheri ammunition depot near Rawalpindi, which caused hundreds of deaths, and probably the reasons for the sacking of the Junejo cabinet on May 29 by the late President Zia ul-Haq, has been kept under a tight lid. In the process, however, culprits have remained unpunished and free. It is however, widely known that the Ojheri depot was serving as the warehouse for arms and ammunition for the Mujahideen, and its destruction was a welcome relief to both Kabul and Moscow. It is also clear that such large-scale and strategic sabotage could not have been possible unless someone in the army and elsewhere worked hand-in-glove with the saboteurs.

In the same vein, the circumstances under which President Zia and at least two top Army men who were vital in implementing the late President's pro-Mujahideen Afghan policy were killed, remain unexplained. Again, it is obvious that the involvement of some in the military and/or political scene was necessary for the deaths which pleased both Kabul and Moscow. The murder of Al-Hussaini, and the failure to bring the real culprits to justice, follows the same pattern. The assassination of the Shia leader is an important destabilizing device, since he belonged to the Kurram Agency bordering Afghanistan, and his death created a high level of tension between the Shias and the Sunnis in Dera Ismail Khan.

### The Sind dynamic

In Sind, troubles began in 1986 when the Pathans from the NWFP, allegedly sprinkled with the KHAD agents, began to assert themselves in the capital city of Karachi. Endowed with drug money and loads of Kalashnikov rifles, Pathans challenged the established community of the Mohajirs. A series of riots followed, and the Mohajirs organized themselves into a political party, the Mohajirs Quam Movement (MQM). In the ensuing period, the Mohajirs won municipal elections in Karachi and Hyderabad, and that did not endear them to the political parties such as the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) or the Jamaat-e-Islami, nor to the Sindhi secessionist elements under the tutelage of G.M. Syed. There are indications that the Pakistani government at the highest level—perhaps fearing that the Mohajirs' independent organization might undermine their generally pro-establishment alignment—was also making deals with Syed and his ilk. Since President Zia's death, a number of clashes have

taken place in which the MQM has figured against various political groups. It is widely known that the interior of Sind, which is under the control of large landlords, is filled with marauding gangsters who are often used as mercenaries by the landlords.

It is clear that considering the weakness of the political parties in Sind, the MQM has emerged as a powerful force that both the PPP and Jamaat believe must either be won or tamed. Forces inimical to the stability of Pakistan, for whatever reasons, want the MQM to be declared illegal, but the Mohajirs refuse to accept this.

As soon as the election date was announced, almost every political party leader in Sind began courting the MQM leaders with the hope of forming an electoral alliance. Although the Pakistan Muslim League (Fida group) has sent out word that the MQM has agreed to such an alliance with them, no formal declaration has yet been made. Meanwhile, the PPP, Jamaat-e-Islami, and Jamiatul-Ulema-e-Pakistan of Maulana Noorani have gotten involved in baiting the Mohajirs and getting them entangled in riots.

Under the circumstances, the minimum that acting President Ghulam Ishaq Khan can do is to stop the MQM-baiting and bring to justice those politicians who are using the drug-runners, gangsters, and outright anti-social elements to try to cripple the MQM. Suppressing the truth and enhancing tension with India is hardly the solution.

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