



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Violence and ethnic identity in Karachi and Hyderabad

Verkaaik, O.

DOI

[10.1080/00856401.2016.1228714](https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2016.1228714)

Publication date

2016

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

South Asia: Journal of South Asian studies

License

CC BY-NC-ND

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Verkaaik, O. (2016). Violence and ethnic identity in Karachi and Hyderabad. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian studies*, 39(4), 841-854.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2016.1228714>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.



Violence and Ethnic Identity Politics in Karachi and Hyderabad

Oskar Verkaaik

To cite this article: Oskar Verkaaik (2016) Violence and Ethnic Identity Politics in Karachi and Hyderabad, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 39:4, 841-854, DOI: [10.1080/00856401.2016.1228714](https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2016.1228714)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2016.1228714>



© 2016 The Author(s). Published by Taylor & Francis.



Published online: 20 Sep 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2403



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

Violence and Ethnic Identity Politics in Karachi and Hyderabad

Oskar Verkaaik

Department of Anthropology, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

From the mid 1980s onwards, urban Sindh has often been in the grip of ethnic violence. The Muhajir Qaumi Movement (now known as the Muttahida Qaumi Movement), established at around the same time, has played a central role in these conflicts. Most analyses interpret the violence as an escalation of already-existing communal differences between various migrant groups in cities like Karachi and Hyderabad. In this paper I argue that violence itself has often been constitutive of ethnic identity and ethnic mobilisation. Tracing the background of the language of ethnicity in Pakistani politics since Independence, I analyse how ethnic identity politics and violence have often gone hand in hand, beginning with the student activism of the late 1970s and developing into full-scale ethnic conflict during the 1980s and 1990s. This enables us to move away from primordial and communal interpretations of ethnic identity towards an analysis of ethnic identity in terms of political mobilisation.

KEYWORDS

Ethnicity; identity politics; Karachi; MQM; Muhajirs; Pakistan; political violence

In the mid 1980s, some fifteen years after the bloody war for Bangladeshi independence, ethnic confrontation again emerged in Pakistan, notably in the province of Sindh. But this time ethnic mobilisation came from an unexpected angle. This time it was not one of the recognised ethnic groups such as the Sindhis, Baluchis or Pakhtuns who were at the forefront of ethnic or separatist politics, but the newly-formed Muhajir Qaumi Movement (MQM; now called the Muttahida Qaumi Movement) that embarked on a project to radically remake the political identity of former migrants from India, known in Pakistan as Muhajirs. Ethnic violence played a crucial part in that struggle.

The Muhajirs' turn to ethnicity came as a surprise because ever since Pakistan's Independence, Muhajirs had been collectively seen as the 'champions' of an all-encompassing Pakistani political identity based on the presumably unifying power of Islam, in which ethnic affiliation had little role to play. As Urdu speakers amidst other people with different mother tongues, the spokespersons of the Muhajirs portrayed the migrant population as the ideological backbone of the new nation. In fact, the term *muhajir* itself referred to the *hijra*, or Islamic exodus, when the first Muslims left behind their clan loyalties to join a larger religious community. It was the Islamic tradition on which the new nation based itself ideologically. In the first few years of Pakistan's existence, the term *muhajir* was used to foster a sense of sympathy and oneness between migrants and the local

CONTACT Oskar Verkaaik  o.g.a.verkaaik@uva.nl

population. Later, the term came to be associated with a political identity radically opposed to the ethnic identities that threatened to split the Pakistani nation into various fractions.

To launch a party that proclaimed Muhajirs to be an ethnic group (*qaum*) in its own right seemed at first counter-intuitive, if not downright absurd. But this highly unexpected move soon turned out to be deadly serious. In 1985, one year after the founding of the MQM and amidst growing popular opposition to the military regime led by General Zia-ul Haq (1978–88), some of the worst ethnic clashes since the 1971 Bangladesh war of independence took place in Karachi. It was the beginning of a series of ethnic conflicts in the 1980s and the 1990s: first between Muhajirs and Pakhtun settlers in Karachi; then between Muhajirs and Sindhis in Hyderabad and other places in the interior of Sindh; still later between the MQM militias and state forces; and finally between various fractions of a by-then divided MQM. Due to the MQM, Muhajirs now came to be known as radical *particularists* pitted against other ethnic groups and their political organisations.

In this contribution, I focus on MQM-related ethnic violence in urban Sindh in the 1980s and 1990s. In various and shifting ways, the Muhajir Qaumi Movement has played a central role in these conflicts. Most analysts tend to interpret ethnic violence as an escalation of already-existing communal differences between various migrant groups in cities like Karachi and Hyderabad. In contrast, I argue that violence itself has often been constitutive of ethnic identity and ethnic mobilisation. Tracing the ways in which ethnicity has featured in Pakistani politics and the governance of populations, I analyse how ethnic identity politics and violence often go hand in hand, starting in the context of student activism in the late 1970s and developing into full-scale ethnic conflict during the 1980s and 1990s. This enables us to move away from primordial and communal interpretations of ethnic identity towards an analysis of ethnic identity in terms of political mobilisation.

Religion, Ethnicity and Nationalism in Pakistan

Ever since its birth, Pakistan has struggled with the problem of ethnic identity politics, the origin of which lies in the fact that the demand for Pakistan primarily came from those provinces in British India where Muslims were a minority, whereas it was the Muslim-majority provinces that would ultimately form the new nation-state of Pakistan. In some of these provinces, including Sindh, the support for an independent Pakistan came late and at a moment when an emergent ethnic nationalism had already developed. In Sindh, for instance, the struggle for independence from the Bombay Presidency that had linked Sindh to Bombay since the mid nineteenth century had already emerged in the 1910s and grown stronger in the 1930s.¹ As a result, after Independence, the ruling Muslim League, with its power base in the Muslim-minority provinces, found itself in a situation in which its *religious* nationalism had to compete with *ethnic* nationalism in large parts of its territory. Since the leadership of the Muslim League was by and large secularist and modernist in ideology, it opted for a religious nationalism of a secular kind (in order to keep the Islamic reformist Jamiat-i Islami at bay), while simultaneously depicting ethnic loyalties as traditional, uneducated and opposed to the supposedly universal nature of Islam.

1. Oskar Verkaaik, 'The Sufi Saints of Sindhi Nationalism', in Michel Boivin and Matthew Cook (eds), *Interpreting the Sindhi World: Essays on Society and History* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 196–215.

Ethnicity was thus seen as something primordial, an almost natural affiliation that had to be sacrificed in order to truly join the Pakistani nation. The term *muhajir*, with its religious connotation of sacrificing tribal loyalties in order to join the community of Muslims, fitted this modern nationalist ideology well. The nationalism of the Muslim League, later adopted by the military regime of General Muhammad Ayub Khan (1958–69), thus had a strong temporal dimension that portrayed the religious nation as modern and ethnic politics as backward.

At the same time and in opposition to this Pakistani modernism, a different version of religious nationalism emerged in Bengal, Sindh and other provinces, based on other, custom-laden forms of Islam that were said to be typically Bengali, Sindhi, and so on. These syncretistic constructions of Islam, which in Sindh revolved around regional traditions of Sufism, became one of the ideological pillars of an ethnic identity politics that challenged the centralising ideology of the state (another important pillar of ethnic mobilisation being language). The ideological construct of a religious nationalism that juxtaposed the unifying power of Islam against the dividing power of ethnicity thus became a struggle over the definition of Islam as either universal or as allowing for regional differences.

From this point of view, the MQM's turn to ethnic mobilisation seemed a leap back in time. It was initially the object of much ridicule. The MQM's claim that Muhajirs had their own form of ethnic culture was mocked as parochial and narrow-minded. Unlike the Sindhis, for instance, Muhajirs were not seen as a people with a specific culture, in the sense of folklore, but rather were taken to be a religiously-inclined people. In a nationalist discourse that took ethnic culture and Islam as largely incompatible, the MQM signalled an inconceivable return to primordial tradition. Unlike the ethnicity of the Sindhis and other formally-recognised ethnic groups, Muhajir ethnicity was believed to be wholly constructed and fictional.

Following an anthropological conceptualisation of ethnicity, I will investigate a perspective on the ethnic politics of the MQM that differs from the Pakistani nationalist one. In anthropologists' consensus,² ethnicity is conceptualised as political and constructed rather than primordial and traditional. Anthropologists do not deny that people live much of their lives in communities that have long histories such as extended families, city neighbourhoods (*mohallahs*), religious communities or language groups that shape people's sense of belonging and provide them with important social and economic ties. Yet, the transformation of these ties into political ideologies and organisations is far from a natural process. In making these loyalties the grounds for political action, they need to be redefined in terms of culture and values, explained by rewritten histories and invented tradition, reified in terms of customary behaviour, and guarded by identity markers and boundaries.

As a political anthropologist, I have been interested in this transformation of ethnicity as a political identity marker, and have studied the construction of political ethnicity in Pakistan in relation to state policies of governing populations.³ As briefly sketched above, by defining ethnic loyalty as a threat to religious nationalism, the Pakistani state itself introduced ethnicity as a political category. Large segments of the populations have been

2. Richard Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Explanations* (London: Sage, 1997).

3. Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

governed by the state in these terms by categorising them as Sindhis, Bengalis, Pakhtuns, Baluchis, and so on. While Muhajirs were initially excepted from this state logic, we will see that from the 1970s onwards, state policies in the province of Sindh increasingly distinguished between Sindhis and Muhajirs, or Sindhi speakers and Urdu speakers, which not only helped strengthen Sindhi separatism, but also opened the way for the formation of a Muhajir ethnic identity. When I talk of ethnicity as a constructed political identity, then, I refer to both the state logic of identifying large segments of the population in ethnic terms *and* the creation of ethnic movements and parties in opposition to the state.

From an anthropological perspective, the MQM has been an immensely interesting phenomenon because it so clearly illustrates this process of ethnic politicisation. The movement tried to create a sense of a primordial people or *qaum* out of a diverse refugee migrant population that hailed from many different places in India such as Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Bihar and even the Hyderabad Deccan. (Refugees from East Punjab mainly settled in the Pakistani province of Punjab and were not generally identified as belonging to the migrants who settled in Sindh). At the same time, the case of the Muhajirs is not radically different from that of the Sindhis, Bengalis, Baluchis or Pakhtuns; however, unlike the Muhajirs, who trace their ethnic identity back to their migration from India, the other ethnic groups add a territorial dimension to their construction of ethnicity. Unlike the Muhajirs, the other ethnic groups have often portrayed themselves as autochthonous peoples.

Building upon this notion of ethnicity, I now focus on the role of violence in ethnic identity construction. My argument is that if the idea of ethnicity is the outcome of a political process, and if violence in its various forms is part of that political process, then we need to pay attention to how violence contributes to the ethnicisation of politics. This also casts a different light on what is 'ethnic' in ethnic violence. Common sense tends to see violence as the *outcome* of ethnic tension; from a primordial view of ethnicity, ethnic groups and boundaries existed before the violence. In particular political situations, for instance during elections when irresponsible politicians are described as playing 'the ethnic card', tension between ethnic groups may grow to the extent that they start attacking each other and the other groups' homes. However, I will argue that in the case of Sindh, violence has to an important extent been *constitutive* of ethnic identity. I intend to show below that violence has often been staged and interpreted in such a way that it helped sharpen ethnic boundaries to the point of bringing about the ethnic cleansing of urban neighbourhoods.

Democratisation and Ethnic Politics

As argued above, ethnic politics was largely suppressed during the first decades after the independence of Pakistan. That was so because ethnic affiliation was seen as detrimental to the process of nation-building. While the secular elites were careful not to stress the importance of Islam too much out of fear of playing into the hands of religious parties like the Jamiat-i Islami and their call for an Islamic state based on the shariat, they also were apprehensive of regional elites whose positions of power rested upon forms of local nationalism. In its first few decades, the Pakistani state depended upon the party organisation of the Muslim League as well as the remains of colonial state institutions such as the bureaucracy and the army. However, with the exception of Punjab and Bengal, both these

institutions were underdeveloped in other parts of the new state. In Sindh, the Frontier Province and Baluchistan, authoritative local landlords and charismatic spiritual leaders held powerful positions. To curb their influence, regional identities and languages were downplayed as traditional and not befitting a modern Islamic nation. It was the Muslim League that initiated this governmentality in the early years after Independence. In the 1960s, the military regime of Muhammad Ayub Khan developed it further and made it the basis for the so-called One Unit Scheme in which provincial borders and influence were largely abolished. The discourse was particularly popular among the migrant population, in particular the Urdu-speaking segments of it, most of whom had settled in the then capital city of Karachi and had little to gain from regional identity politics.

It took almost a quarter of a century before Pakistan had its first democratic elections, but when in 1970, democracy finally got a chance, it was dominated by regional identity politics. The two parties that won the elections—the Awami League in East Pakistan and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) in West Pakistan—mobilised a large number of voters by emphasising the local way of life of ordinary men and women. Precisely because regional identities and languages had been suppressed by the state, and quite brutally so during the regime of Ayub Khan, opposition to the military regime often rallied around suppressed regional identities. The elections ultimately led to the creation of Bangladesh. Under the leadership of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his Pakistan Peoples Party, democratisation also brought to power another form of national ideology in what remained of Pakistan, an ideology that sought to combine national, religious and ethnic identities in one political affiliation. Hence, it became possible to present oneself as, at once, a Muslim, a Pakistani, and a Sindhi, Pakhtun, Baluchi or some other ethnic group.

This adjustment in ideology went hand in hand with changing power relations as local representatives of the PPP, rural landlords and spiritual leaders gained political power, often at the expense of urban bureaucrats. In Sindh in particular, the change of discourse and policy fuelled animosity between the Sindhi and Muhajir populations. In educational institutions, for instance, the Sindhi language was promoted in 1972 as a language of instruction on par with Urdu. Reservation programmes apportioned government jobs and student places between Sindhis and Muhajirs, with the effect that the Urdu-speaking urban Muhajir population began to lose the privileged position it had held during the first decades after Independence. As a result, the 1970s saw a growing tension between Sindhis and Muhajirs. In the city of Hyderabad, so-called language riots broke out between Muhajir and Sindhi students and activists in 1972 when the PPP-led provincial government proposed making Sindhi the official language of the province of Sindh.⁴ When I began my study of Muhajir political identity in the mid 1990s, many Muhajirs I talked to in Karachi and Hyderabad still looked back at the PPP's rule in the 1970s with a sense of betrayal and disappointment.

Nevertheless the ethnic polarisation between Sindhis and Muhajirs in the 1970s differed from the more radical and violent ethnic clashes in the 1980s and 1990s. Whereas the more recent enmity has involved large segments of the population, including the residents of the poorer parts of Karachi and Hyderabad, in the 1970s, the tension was largely

4. Tariq Rahman, *Language and Politics in Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

limited to what the Pakistani sociologist Hamza Alavi has, in various publications,⁵ called the *salariat*, that is, the existing or emerging middle classes that aspired to white-collar jobs, mainly in the bureaucracy or in education. Muhajirs had come to dominate these institutions after Independence because of their ideological proximity to the Muslim League, their status as Urdu speakers in a new state that had made Urdu its language of bureaucracy and education, and their pre-migration background as city-dwellers. The shift of the capital city to Islamabad in northern Punjab in 1967, as well as the growing influence of the military (which was dominated by Punjabis and Pakhtuns), had already limited Muhajir access to state institutions. With the PPP's attempts to more evenly balance the representation of societal groups in bureaucratic and educational institutions along ethnic lines, the position of the Muhajirs deteriorated even further. At the same time, the new democratic regime of the PPP increased ethnic identity politics by making ethnic affiliation an official category of state policy. Language in particular became the most important identity marker as the state distinguished between Sindhi and Urdu speakers.

Politically speaking, Muhajirs did not form a homogeneous group in the 1970s. There were huge differences amongst them in terms of class, education, religious affiliation and place of residence. It was generally believed that Muhajirs tended to support religious parties like the Jamiat-i Islami (JI) or the Jamiat Ulema-i-Pakistan (JUP), but this was only true for a limited number. Moreover, in the 1980s, the religious parties, notably the Jamiat-i Islami, lost some of their Muhajir followers by becoming the ideological allies of the Zia-ul Haq regime and because of their support for the Afghan *mujahideen*. As a result, the Jamiat-i Islami came to rely more and more on ethnic networks among the Pakhtun in a period of time when the relationship between Pakhtuns and Muhajirs in Karachi was quickly deteriorating. Besides, many Muhajirs had never felt at ease with the reformist, Deobandi-style Islam of the Jamiat-i Islami with its strong injunctions against *pir* (saint) worship and other forms of popular Islam.⁶ Many lower-class Muhajirs had voted for the PPP because of its links to labour unions and its promise to provide basic amenities to the poor.

In the 1970s, amidst the language riots between Muhajirs and Sindhis that took place in Hyderabad, another party emerged that called itself the Muhajir Punjabi Pakhtun Movement. It tried to form a front for *all* migrants in Sindh, including those from the northern parts of Pakistan, in opposition to the Pakistan Peoples Party and its supposed sympathy for Sindhis. This Hyderabad-based party was in a way the forerunner to the Muhajir Qaumi Movement because it was the first instance in which Muhajirs had organised themselves as an ethnic group on par with other ethnic groups like the Punjabis and Pakhtuns. The Muhajirs were leaving behind the ideology of an all-encompassing Pakistani political identity that eschewed ethnic affiliation. However, the Muhajir Punjabi Pakhtun

5. Hamza Alavi, 'Pakistan and Islam: Ethnicity and Ideology', in Fred Halliday and Hamza Alavi (eds), *State and Ideology in the Middle East and Pakistan* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 64–111; Hamza Alavi, 'Politics of Ethnicity in India and Pakistan', in Hamza Alavi and John Harris (eds), *South Asia: Sociology of 'Developing Societies'* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 222–46; and Hamza Alavi, 'Nationhood and the Nationalities in Pakistan', in Hastings Donnan and Prina Werbner (eds), *Economy and Culture in Pakistan: Migrants and Cities in a Muslim Society* (London: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 163–87.

6. Oskar Verkaaik, '“Our Rule”: The MQM, the Dawat-i Islami, and Mohajir Religiosity', in Nichola Khan (ed.), *Publics and Counter Publics of Violence in Karachi* (London: Hurst, 2016), pp. 118–30.

Movement remained restricted to Hyderabad and never managed to mobilise the much larger Muhajir population of Karachi. Even in Hyderabad, it remained a small party.

In fact, the position and concerns of the Muhajir population in Hyderabad differed profoundly from their fellow Muhajirs in Karachi. There, the Sindhi population was very small, mainly because prior to Independence, many Sindhi Karachiites had been Hindus, the vast majority of whom had migrated to India after 1947. This had devastated the Sindhi population in Karachi. In Hyderabad, however, Sindhis remained the majority. Sindhi students, intellectuals and politicians found a home in Hyderabad with its University of Sindh in nearby Jamshoro and a range of other Sindhi cultural and political centres. Fearing Sindhi domination, Muhajirs in Hyderabad tended to ally with other groups of migrants such as Pakhtun and Punjabi settlers, whereas the Muhajirs in Karachi were more concerned with Punjabi domination on the national level and with the growing presence of Pakhtun migrants in Karachi.

Whereas the experiment with ethnic Muhajir politics in Hyderabad quickly lost momentum, the founding of a student organisation called the All Pakistan Muhajir Student Organisation (APMSO) in 1978 would prove to be the beginning of a radical transformation of Muhajir political identity that would completely change the political field in Karachi and other Sindhi towns and cities. I have described the impact of student mobilisation on ethnic politics in some detail elsewhere,⁷ so let me just briefly summarise this episode here. At Karachi University and other institutions of higher education, student organisations held important powers such as the allotment of rooms in student dormitories. The most powerful student organisations were those affiliated with political parties, such as the Pakistan Student Federation that was linked to the Pakistan Peoples Party, and the Islami Jamiat-i-Tulabah associated with the Jamiat-i-Islami. Other student organisations were based on ethnic affiliation such as the Jeay Sindh Student Federation, the Pakhtun Student Federation and the Punjabi Student Association. The founding of APMSO by a small group of Muhajir students was intended to create a platform to enhance the interests of Muhajir students generally. Some of APMSO's members, including its leader Altaf Hussain, had initially supported the Islami Jamiat-i-Tulabah, which in Karachi was to a large extent a Muhajir-dominated organisation, but had left because they no longer supported the religious politics of the Jamiat-i-Islami. Ideologically, the Pakistan Student Federation was closer to the Leftist rhetoric of the PPP's student organisation; however, it was dominated by Sindhi students who were not particularly welcoming to Muhajir students.

Student politics took on a rather militant character from the early 1970s onwards; opponents were regularly humiliated, threatened or even beaten up. Student organisations therefore became not only essential in gaining access to student facilities, but also for protection. However, APMSO was only a small group that could not successfully defend itself against the power of the larger student organisations. In 1981, student members of the Islami Jamiat-i-Tulabah forced APMSO students to leave the campus of Karachi University.

In 1984, that same group of students would become the backbone of the Muhajir Qaumi Movement, the political party formed to represent the Muhajir population of Karachi. This took place during the regime of General Zia-ul-Haq, when political rallies were

7. Oskar Verkaaik, *Migrants and Militants: 'Fun' and Urban Violence in Pakistan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 60–3. See also Laurent Gayer, *Karachi: Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City* (London: Hurst, 2014).

banned. Instead, young MQM members tried to win over Muhajir residents via a door-to-door mobilisation campaign in the vast Muhajir-dominated neighbourhoods of Karachi such as Federal B. Area and Liaquatabad. Their expulsion from the Karachi University campus had thus forced Muhajir activists to continue their activities among the lower-middle-class segments of the migrant population. This turned out to be a decisive move because it laid the foundation for the emergence of the MQM as a truly popular movement. Right from its inception in 1984, the MQM has always presented itself as a popular and populist party, which mobilised not just the educated segment of the population that aspired to white-collar jobs, but found its true power base in lower-class areas in Karachi and Hyderabad. Apart from being an ethnic movement, then, the MQM was also an emancipation movement for the poor that condemned the ‘feudalism’ of rural landlords and the elitism of the traditional political class. Party leader Altaf Hussain soon began calling himself the ‘friend of the oppressed’ (*mazloomon ka saathi*), not unlike the way in which the PPP founder, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, had portrayed himself in the 1970s as the protector of the poor (the difference being that Bhutto was from a wealthy landlord family, whereas Altaf Hussain had an urban, lower-middle-class background). Besides, the MQM was to a very large extent a generational movement, led by second-generation migrants who had been born in Pakistan and felt disillusioned with their parents’ belief in Islam as the ideological pillar of the Pakistani nation. However, all this only existed in embryonic form when the party was formed in 1984. It was only during the ethnic riots of 1985 that the MQM began to make a name for itself and to fully develop its profile as an ethnic emancipation movement of young, secular, lower-class Muhajirs.

Violence and Its Impact on Ethnic Muhajir Identity

Although the rioting and killings that started in Karachi in April 1985 and occurred again in October and December 1986 are widely recognised in Pakistan and beyond as ethnic violence between Muhajirs and Pakhtuns, we have by now more than enough scholarly work about the events to indicate that the factors contributing to the violence were far too complex to simply attribute to an outburst of existing animosity between two ethnic groups.⁸ It is only because of an interpretive process which Stanley Tambiah has called ‘the transvaluation of violence’⁹ that the riots have gone down in history as ethnic violence. During this process of framing, the complexity of the events was downplayed because there was a focus on certain aspects only, which were subsequently read within an already-existing interpretative framework of ethnic politics. It was only because of this reduction in the interpretation of violence that the riots could be construed as an outbreak of primordial ethnic antagonism. This transvaluation of violence has been the joint, if largely unconscious, work of academics, journalists and political actors, and the MQM

8. Akmal Hussain, ‘The Karachi Riots of December 1986: Crisis of State and Civil Society in Pakistan’, in Veena Das (ed.), *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 185–93; Farida Shaheed, ‘The Pathan–Muhajir Conflicts, 1985–86: A National Perspective’, in Veena Das (ed.), *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 194–214; Stanley Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 185–91; and Verkaaik, *Migrants and Militants*, pp. 63–5.

9. Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds*, p. 192.

has been one of the most powerful players in the interpretation of the riots as essentially caused by ethnic animosity.

This is not the place to analyse the riots of April 1985 in detail, but let me indicate some of the factors involved to convey a sense of their complexity. The riots started with a bus accident in the Karachi neighbourhood of Liaquatabad that killed a Muhajir student named Bushra Zaidi. Many people blamed the accident on the reckless driving habits of Pakhtun bus drivers. (Public transport had been taken over by recently-arrived Pakhtun settlers in Karachi.) The increasing velocity and danger of traffic as the city daily became more crowded was thus one of the immediate factors that contributed to the riots that broke out soon after the accident. But the growth of militant student politics also was a factor since gangs of student activists were among the first to take revenge for Bushra Zaidi's death. There were many other factors contributing to the escalation of violence, including competition for housing in some slum areas between recent Pakhtun settlers and so-called Bihari migrants (that is, migrants from Bihar who had first settled in East Pakistan, but who migrated to West Pakistan after the creation of Bangladesh), the availability of firearms due to the war in neighbouring Afghanistan, violent competition between criminal gangs involved in drug trafficking, and the unjustified reputation of state forces for violence, as well as underground political mobilisation during the military regime which had banned overt political manifestations. Moreover, the interpretation of the riots as ethnic strife itself fuelled the violence.

As indicated above, the MQM was heavily involved in interpreting the violence as an attack on Muhajir communities in Karachi. Although, initially, party activists had not been directly involved in the April 1985 riots, party leaders nonetheless helped escalate the situation by painting an almost apocalyptic picture of the riots. Comparing the killings of Muhajirs to the deaths that took place during Partition in 1947, the MQM spokespersons depicted Muhajirs as a persecuted people who had been pushed to the very outskirts of the South Asian subcontinent and were now on the verge of being driven into the Arabian Sea. For instance, MQM chairman Azim Ahmad Tariq publicly stated: 'Two million Muhajirs have given their lives for the sake of Pakistan, a country which was achieved in the name of Allah. We left our homes and hearths for Pakistan, our entire cities were destroyed, but we are being killed for it'.¹⁰ While MQM leaders were making such public statements, party activists formed militias to protect Muhajir property and to retaliate for the loss of Muhajir lives. Offering humanitarian support to victims of the riots, the MQM promised the Muhajir population that it would defend Karachi as a Muhajir city. In the absence of any form of government support or protection, the residents of the neighbourhoods that were attacked had little choice but to turn to the MQM.

Another consequence of the violence was that it enabled the MQM to discredit Islamic parties like the Jamiat-i Islami and its student wing. As a staunch supporter of the Zia-ul-Haq regime, and because of its involvement with Afghanistan's *mujahideen*, the Jamiat-i Islami had rapidly-growing numbers of Afghan and Pakhtun followers. At the same time, however, it did not want to lose the support of a significant number of Muhajirs in Karachi. Reluctant to choose sides, the Jamiat-i Islami had tried to stay out of the conflict; as a result, it was scathingly attacked by MQM leaders. Altaf Hussain tried to discredit the

10. *Dawn* (30 Sept. 1989).

Jamiat-i Islami by describing its leaders disparagingly as ‘traders in Quranic verses’ and fundamentalist hypocrites. Referring to the time when he himself had been a Jamiat-i Islami member, he ‘confessed’ that he had been a ‘sinner (*gunehgaar*) like many of us who were blindfolded’.¹¹ Another MQM leader rhetorically asked the Jamiat-i Islami: ‘Where have your Islam, Pakistan and army gone when innocent Muhajirs are being butchered?’¹²

While commentators quickly dismissed such statements as mere rhetoric, Muhajir residents who found themselves overrun by violence found that this description of them as a beleaguered Muhajir community made a lot of sense. The way MQM spokespersons interpreted the violence revived powerfully the idea of Muhajirs as a diasporic people. That idea goes back to the nineteenth century when, in the colonial context, Muslim poets and intellectuals portrayed the Muslims of South Asia as essentially foreigners who originally hailed from the Middle East or Central Asia. Viewed from this perspective, Pakistan was supposed to have meant the end of diaspora because it would provide the Muslims of South Asia with a permanent home. When MQM leaders evoked the sacrifices of Partition, or spoke of the threat of being driven into the Arabian Sea, that idea of a safe and permanent home was itself under attack. In this way, the idea of Karachi as an essentially Muhajir city was born. Strongly identifying itself with the recent history of South Asian Muslims, the MQM evoked a language of Muhajir loss: the loss of India in 1947 and the loss of East Pakistan in 1971. It also, however, depicted Karachi—and to a lesser extent, Hyderabad—as the last Muhajir bastion, a city so utterly connected to the fate of Muhajirs as a diasporic people that they would never give it up lest they be exterminated.

The ethnic violence of 1985 thus not only helped lure Muhajirs away from the Islamic parties with their emphasis on reformist religion and piety as the basis for Pakistani nationalism, it also made real the notion of a Muhajir ethnic group or *qaum*, the essence of which lay in a history of persecution evoked by the MQM during the riots. The MQM’s claim that Muhajirs were being attacked *as Muhajirs* rang true to the victims of violence and those who sympathised with them. Compared to the MQM’s language of sacrifice and persecution, other interpretations that emphasised the complexity of the riots seemed powerless. Similarly, the notion of Islam as a unifying identity had little meaning during the violence. It is therefore safe to say that even though the MQM was not primarily responsible for the outbreak of violence in April 1985, the party skilfully interpreted the events as essentially directed against Muhajirs, which made its claim that Muhajirs formed a separate ethnic group highly plausible, if not, for some Muhajir residents, a matter of life and death.

The Victories and Violence of the MQM

A second round of ethnic violence occurred in October and December 1986. MQM activists on their way to Hyderabad provoked the residents of Sohrab Goth, an area of Karachi along the northern highway to Hyderabad dominated by Pakhtun settlers, insulting them and threatening to shoot them. An MQM activist was shot dead, after which MQM members retaliated by destroying Pakhtun property in Karachi and Hyderabad. Six weeks later, when the police raided Pakhtun neighbourhoods in Karachi in search of drugs and

11. *Dawn* (7 Nov. 1986).

12. *Dawn* (29 Dec. 1986).

arms, Pakhtun members of criminal organisations, who suspected the police operation had been instigated by Muhajir leaders, attacked Bihari and Muhajir residents in a neighbourhood known as Aligarh Colony.

Earlier, in August 1986, the MQM had held its first public meeting in Karachi. The time and place—a few days before Pakistani Independence Day and very near the grave of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who is considered the founder of the nation—were highly significant. They were chosen to demonstrate a continuation of the self-image of the Muhajirs as a people who had sacrificed themselves for Pakistan. Yet it was also clear that the MQM wanted to break with the conventional image of Muhajirs as relatively peaceful, religious-minded, educated city-dwellers. Amidst an atmosphere of political violence and state oppression, the MQM too portrayed itself as a militant group willing to fight for the rights of Muhajirs. Positioning itself against Pakhtun settlers in Karachi, as well as against the military regime of Zia-ul Haq, the MQM allied itself with Sindhi political parties that were equally opposed to what they considered influence from the northern parts of Pakistan, including from newly-arrived Pakhtun and Afghan migrants with their mixture of modern Islamism and tribal Islam. Visiting the leaders of the Sindhi-dominated Pakistan Peoples Party and the leader of the separatist Jeay Sindh Movement, the MQM's leadership appeared to opt for a new Muhajir identity as *new Sindhis* who were in allegiance with the 'old' Sindhis. Comparing Muhajirs to the recent settlers from the north, the MQM argued that the former had come to Sindh for more genuine reasons, to live in the cities of Sindh for good with no intention of returning to India; they therefore not only belonged to Sindh, but also shared with the old Sindhis the ownership of the province. MQM leader Altaf Hussain made public speeches declaring that 'the Sindhis will never tolerate any move against their cultural and national status', explaining that Sindh now consisted of 'two nationalities having exclusive rights to the resources of the province'.¹³ Among Muhajir youth in Karachi, the Sindhi peasant shawl known as an *ajrak* became immensely popular. (On a popular level, this newfound friendship with the Sindhis was a provocation to the older elitist Muhajirs who regarded with disdain the rural culture of Sindh). In terms of action, Sindhi and Muhajir militants sometimes joined together to attack the homes of Punjabi settlers in smaller towns like Nawabshah and Mirpur Khas.

In 1987, when municipal elections were held as part of the return to democracy, the MQM showed its political strength by winning a majority of votes in various Karachi districts. A year later, the party managed to win the vast majority of Karachi districts during the national elections. The MQM joined the PPP, which had won the national elections, in coalition at both the national and provincial levels. These victories were celebrated by MQM youth as more than just political victories—they also felt like a cultural liberation. For the first time in the history of Pakistan, a large part of the Muhajir lower-middle class felt it was represented politically by a party that made its values and identities respectable. Other parties that had campaigned for the Muhajir vote had often implicitly looked down upon the way of life of poorer Muhajirs, from the older Muslim League emphasis on a cultured, *ashraf* lifestyle to the Jamiat-i Islami's dismissal of popular Islam. For the ordinary Muhajir, the MQM was the first political movement since Independence that was truly 'of the people'. That a populist party with a leadership that sprang from the common people

13. *The Muslim* (1 Nov. 1986).

(*aam log*) now ruled the city and the nation had been an inconceivable idea for many Karachiites.

This feeling of victory gave MQM activists a sense of absolute power which was often abused once the party took government. Soon the party had acquired a reputation for intimidation and oppression of its rivals. At the same time, it built up a parallel state for its Muhajir constituency with MQM party members taking care of security, charity, recreation, some schooling and instituting a form of legal system. The MQM's alliance with the Sindhis, however, soon began to fall apart, beginning in Hyderabad which had a history of language conflict between Sindhis and Muhajirs. A more militant party known as Muhajir Ittehad Tehreek had begun attacking Sindhis in the city even as early as 1986 and 1987 in order to drive a wedge between Muhajir and Sindhi residents. Sindhi militants retaliated in September 1988 by shooting indiscriminately in several crowded crossroads in Muhajir-dominated areas, killing dozens of people. The MQM leadership in Karachi tried to prevent further escalation by organising ideological meetings in Hyderabad that were meant to discipline its local activists. But the relationship between the MQM and the PPP continued to deteriorate, and when the MQM eventually quit the national coalition in October 1989, the party no longer flirted with its 'new Sindhi' identity. More violence between Muhajirs and Sindhis took place in Hyderabad in May 1990 when again dozens of people were killed and several neighbourhoods were ethnically cleansed.

In hindsight it can be said that the years between 1987 and 1990 were the height of MQM power. After 1990, its brief alliance with the Muslim League of Nawaz Sharif never made the party as powerful as it had been during its alliance with the PPP. In 1992, a military operation against the MQM forced most of its leadership to flee the country, while many of its militants were hunted down by the military, either to be jailed or killed. The founding of a breakaway group known as the MQM Haqiqi, which many Muhajirs believed to be a creation of Pakistan's intelligence services, resulted in heavy and continuous infighting between the two rival parts of the MQM that paralysed life in Muhajir-dominated areas of Karachi for years. Toward the end of the millennium, the MQM changed its name from Muhajir Qaumi Movement to Muttahida Qaumi Movement (United National Movement) in an attempt to transform the party into a non-ethnic, lower-middle-class party fighting elite corruption. However, it never succeeded in attracting a substantial following beyond that part of the Muhajir constituency that has largely supported the MQM since the late 1980s.

The Tragedy of Muhajir Identity

In this article I have primarily focused on how ethnic violence has helped create a Muhajir political identity. In doing so, I have made the theoretical argument that ethnic violence was not simply the outcome of already-existing ethnic difference and conflict, but that the violence itself was constitutive of ethnic identity. I have, therefore, suggested that Muhajir identity manifested itself from the mid 1980s onwards in ways it had not done before. This is not to say that a sense of being Muhajir was totally new; as briefly mentioned earlier, the name goes back to Independence, when the religiously-charged term came into use to foster a sense of sympathy between locals and refugees from India. It is also clear that this sympathy did not always come naturally, not even immediately after 1947: conflicts between locals and refugees were reported very early on. In the interior of Sindh in

particular, a sense of competition and conflict emerged between Sindhi speakers and Urdu speakers,¹⁴ a tension that became more politicised during the language crisis of early 1972. In the decades after the mass migration associated with Partition, Muhajirs in Karachi developed a sense of attachment to the city as a quintessentially Muhajir city—one that spoke of hope and new beginnings. Their attachment to the city, however, became much more ferocious and uncompromising in the 1980s and 1990s, when the MQM portrayed Karachi as a beleaguered Muhajir city that needed to be defended. A sense of ‘Muhajir-ness’, therefore, was not completely novel when Muhajirs voted overwhelmingly for the MQM from the late 1980s onwards because the violence of the mid 1980s had made Muhajir identity more politicised and urgent than it had ever been.

In my monograph on the MQM,¹⁵ I described the party as a movement with many faces. For many of its supporters, the MQM was a revolutionary party that empowered the urban poor and did much to make their particular way of life respectable in a highly-stratified society. The MQM’s leaders themselves have depicted the party in shifting ways, from a rebellious, anti-establishment party flirting with the rural culture of the Sindhis, to the protector of the oppressed (*mazloom*), and as a popular party representing the common man in an essentially feudal society. The party’s opponents primarily associate it with intimidation and nepotism as well as an abuse of power and a routinisation of violence that brought Karachi to the verge of civil war in the 1990s. For social scientists like myself, the MQM primarily represents an immensely interesting case of political mobilisation on the basis of a remarkably successful transformation of political identity.

I have not so far placed the MQM in the wider regional context of South Asian politics, but if we look across national boundaries, it is striking that the MQM is to a certain extent comparable to the Hindu nationalist movement that rose to power in India at around the same time. Since Karachi and Mumbai (earlier Bombay) share a longer history, the similarities between the MQM and the Shiv Sena in Mumbai are particularly interesting. In both cases, we see a particular South Asian form of political populism based on what we may call the ‘shadow’ of post-colonial nationalist discourse. In post-colonial India, with its dominant ideology of Indian secularism,¹⁶ religious ‘communalism’ has usually been condemned as detrimental to national unity, both as Muslim nationalism which was partly responsible for Partition in 1947, but also in the form of Hindu nationalism and its claims to a Hindu superiority. And yet, the Hindu nationalist movement rose to power by exploiting to the full this very ‘taboo’ subject of post-colonial secularism. In neighbouring Pakistan, ethnic culture and affiliation have long been dismissed as the nation’s shadow that threatens the unity of the nation. Yet, here too, it is the discursive and visceral power of ethnicity, rather than the ideology of a united Muslim nation, that explains the remarkable success of the MQM.

However, this turn to ethnicity did not happen overnight. The authoritarian suppression of political elites in provinces like Sindh in the 1950s and 1960s engendered the rise of ethnic politics in the 1970s. It gave rise to Bhutto’s Left-wing rhetoric, which mixed the sentiment of autochthony with sympathy for the common people, at least in speech.

14. Verkaaik, *Migrants and Militants*, pp. 97–103.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Irfan Ahmad, *Islamism and Democracy in India: The Transformation of Jamaat-e-Islami* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); and Rajeev Bhargava, ‘States, Religious Diversity, and the Crisis of Secularism’, in *The Hedgehog Review*, Vol. 12, no. 3 (2010), pp. 8–22.

Ethnicity became part of government policy, pitting one linguistic group against another. During the regime of Zia-ul Haq, ethnic difference was again dismissed in favour of a new Islamic nationalism that differed from the Islamic nationalism of Jinnah and the Muslim League in that it was informed by a kind of Islamism that arose in the 1970s and 1980s, harking back to the work of Mawdudi and other Islamic reformist thinkers. This more radical understanding of Islam did not marry very well with the popular religiosity of Muhajirs in Karachi and Hyderabad. In this context, there was room for a redefinition of Muhajir political identity in terms of ethnicity, portraying the Muhajirs as a separate people. The violence that was partially caused by the MQM itself rendered that notion of a beleaguered *qaum* both real and urgent. It also, however, turned Muhajirs into a minority again—no longer a religious minority amidst a majority of Hindus as had been the case before Partition, but an ethnic minority amidst a majority of shifting opponents like the Pakhtuns, the Punjabis and the Sindhis (the latter particularly in Hyderabad). There was thus something paradoxical, if not tragic, about the self-ascribed minority identity of a Muhajir *qaum* in that its escape from minority status in India had been the ideological motivation for Muslim families leaving India to settle in Sindh in the first few years of Pakistan's existence.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.