

Once synonymous with the 'revolutionary' violence that galvanised Mohajir youth in the Karachi conflict (c.1985-2002), since 2002, MQM-in-government has pursued a modernising agenda of 'progress' and 'development', transforming Karachi's youth culture. MQM's new agenda is not just a question of militancy or modernisation, but rather strategic, historical practices with shared motives and outcomes. Practices reflecting common desires for social advancement, expressed simultaneously in the discourses and practices of violence and of romantic love. This paper is concerned with the ways individuals have been recruited to MQM's agendas of militancy and modernisation.

Violence and love:

the mobilisation of Karachi's Mohajir youth

NICHOLA KHAN

The Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) is Pakistan's third largest political party representing Pakistan's ethnic Mohajirs, the predominantly Urdu-speaking Indian Muslims who migrated to Sindh following the Partition of India in 1947, and their descendants. Originally formed as the All Pakistan Mohajir Student Organisation (APMSO) at Karachi University, MQM was founded by Altaf Hussain in 1984, who has retained his premiership ever since.

Mohajir militancy was associated not only with the anomaly inflicted by the unequal development of centre-province power relations, and a political generational struggle between Islamic orthodoxy and modernism, but also with the profound failures in democratic political legitimacy over the course of post-independence history. In addition, explanations have accounted for the context of a city at breaking point. In the eighties this was due to the proximal effects of massive economic and demographic transformations, the ethnic competition in Karachi's transport and housing sectors, expanding arms and narcotics trades, and extreme living conditions; in the nineties, it was internecine warfare and military repression (Gayer, 2007). These circumstances produced a dynamic, militant youth culture (Verkaaik, 2004). Karachi's Mohajirs first mobilised an organised, violent response to these pressures in the Mohajir-Pukhtun riots of 1985-6, propelling MQM into the political limelight.

The advent of Pakistan's ethno-nationalist Mohajir party, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), to provincial government in Sindh in 2002 marked a shift in the oppositional basis of political identity. Violence had characterised its political and military involvement in around 15 years of conflict in Karachi. Comparing aspects of that conflict with MQM's term in government, this paper explores practices and discourses around dynamic forms of social and cultural change in urban youth communities in Karachi.

In contrast to MQM's violent transformative agenda in the conflict, more recently the party has structured its strategies for social and political change around a project of 'modernisation', 'progress' and 'development'. These processes, occurring in the last five years, have transformed Karachi's public landscape and culture, especially for its youth. Yet both discourses and political cultures are not as different as they may appear. Modernisation and militancy both have been produced by political agendas and reflect dynamic, strategic variations relevant for MQM's

designs for political power in diverse historical circumstances.

Eruption of violence: the locality

This paper draws on fieldwork and interviews I conducted in a local context, in Liaquatabad, a semi-formal Mohajir settlement in Central Karachi. Known interchangeably as Lahuqhet, Liaquatabad runs alongside the Lyari River between 'old' *sabzi mandi* (vegetable market) and *Teen Hatti* bridge, on two sides of S. M. Taufiq Road. It is separated from *sabzi mandi* and the largely Pukhtun squatter settlement *Nashtar basti* by a bridge. A historical site of violent militancy, Liaquatabad experienced severe consequences in the conflict, in the form of inter- and intra-ethnic riots and military repression. Many of Lahuqhet's youth are poor and unemployed but educated. Their frustrations were cited as a crucial motivational force for mobilisation to violence within MQM, in a highly contested 'kalashnikov culture'. Now that unemployment, overcrowding, food and rent hikes are again urgent concerns for Karachi's Mohajirs, *sabzi mandi* has become a centre for a dynamic, very different youth culture.

Individual motives

The Mohajir-Pukhtun rioting of October-December 1986 has been described as virtual ethnic warfare, 'unprecedented since the partition of the subcontinent' (Hussain, 1990). MQM mobilised violent responses and in Liaquatabad, Arshad swiftly joined the momentum, marking his initiation as a political militant:

"One morning in Aligarh Colony and Orangi Town the Pukhtuns killed more than 280 Mohajirs in their homes. By the evening all Karachi knew what the Pukhtuns had done, so the Mohajirs stood up to kill. Our blood was hot, we wanted revenge. I remember that night, it was 14 December 1986... We went to find some Pukhtuns, of course innocent Pukhtuns... We were fourteen boys in four cars. We killed as many as we could find and it was reported in the morning newspapers. That's how I started killing people."

Others joined forces, not for political reasons, but to defend themselves and, later, for the respect and social standing violence entailed. Faisal revealed:

"We were terrified. The police and army couldn't protect us. Honestly, I felt I had no choice. I was terrified because Lahuqhet is next to sabzi mandi market, run by Pukhtuns and Punjabis. I couldn't sleep for five nights, terrified I'd be killed in my home. I bought two guns easily. My father saw the gun in my hand but said 'we have no choice, we must protect our women.' When people feared for their lives I protected them, with my

friends. I risked my life for strangers, so they respected me like a hero. I was protecting innocent people from killers. I had so much respect."

Third-class citizens into power

The intersection of these contexts of ethnic conflicts, political mobilisation and violence, raises questions relating to the diverse range of motives for violence and to the way violence is collective, idiosyncratic and variegated. For Shakeel, they revolved around economic gain and status:

"We had many weapons and did robberies to finance buying more. We raised money for MQM but undertook ventures to raise personal expenses. There was no law and order in those times. Our group became renowned because we killed several influential police chiefs who had carried out operations and killed our workers. We became famous overnight."

The militants used organised violence to respond to the situation but also to develop a unique identity and gain circumscribed, but effective, power and autonomy. In doing so, they became respected men of the social and political community, usurping their fathers' authority. Their interviews suggest that violence represents a solution to problems they experienced relating to ethnic exclusion, poverty, unemployment and military authoritarianism, especially brutal police practices and military crackdowns, but also that the men played an active role in shaping practices of opposition to their problems.

Extreme violence and killings, beginning with the Mohajir-Pukhtun riots, may thus constitute a rational response to conventional desires for social mobility, careers, status and respectability which have been effectively blocked. Violent action, during conflict, was a potent lever to re-organise exclusionary, repressive practices, respond to violent threats, and to achieve deep (personal and political) desires for transformative change.

The militants become the retainers of MQM's violent ethno-nationalist discourse and acquired social, political and economic advantages. In participating in the performative arena of violent conflict, young Mohajirs forged a reactionary identity that could provide them status and purpose in an alternative world.

Young love's progress

Since my fieldwork in Liaquatabad, Karachi politics, society and public culture have undergone a radical change. MQM has completed a five-year term in provincial government, continues to govern in the city and has undergone a radical turnabout. Having faced the loss of its long-term violent opposition (at least officially) to the state, MQM is faced with having



MQM activists in A-Area Liaquatabad, 1995. Photography courtesy of the author.

to generate new ways for creating power and sustaining support. In government, MQM supports state institutions it previously desecrated. In place of 'exclusion' and violent reversal, current discourses emphasise a non-confrontational, modernising rhetoric of 'progress' and 'development'. Alongside the construction of roads, bridges and malls, MQM is also funding, convivially, 'love' marriages and collective marriages (MQM News, 2005). Young Mohajirs, and Karachiites, as Hasan (2007) notes, are increasingly pursuing an upward social mobility through activities that include status-consumerism and romantic love.

These processes of social and cultural re-organisation in MQM have contributed to the emergence of a new apolitical, urban youth who are conspicuous in the rapidly changing landscapes of public space. This is strikingly evident in the city's new green spaces such as *Bin Qasim Park* in Clifton and *Sabzi Mandi Park*, which was developed after *sabzi mandi* market was moved to the city's peripheries, ostensibly to reduce the flow of heavy traffic. Here, 20 years after the Mohajir-Pukhtun riots, young couples enact romantic visions of a better future, assisted by the 'MQM' security guard who ensures they are not disturbed. Irfan and Rizwana visit *Sabzi Mandi* park regularly. They shun the former militant 'heroes' of the conflict and politics generally. Yet, in the light of MQM's achievements in Karachi, they pledge their continued support. They dream of marriage, owning a home, car, private education for their children and foreign travel. The couples share an individualist desire to achieve for themselves what successive governments have failed to provide.

Yet forebodingly, their dreams occur against a backdrop of increasing unemployment, street crime, housing problems, inflation and food shortages. Indeed, by contrast, other residents are experiencing modernisation's more brutal effects. For example, the construction of the new Lyari Expressway, designed to re-route heavy through-traffic, via Liaquatabad, has resulted in the destruction of homes, the burning of settlements and the loss of a quarter million livelihoods (Hasan, 2006). Many more buildings are scheduled for demolition and several former activists are

litigating against the road construction, their former idealistic hopes that MQM would usher in an equitable, just society, in tatters.

Deeper discontent

Thus, militancy and modernisation in MQM express diverse strategies and desires for social advancement and societal transformation, at different historical periods, and have been instrumentalised differently by different social actors. MQM's political shift from a stance of radical militancy to a more conformist position reflects the need to adapt its methods for acquiring political power to being in government. For individuals, violence expresses variegated motives commonly structured around desires for personal and political transformation. Romantic love, reflecting an individualist, progressive agenda, involves similar concerns. Yet, as recent events indicate, development, modernisation and romance within MQM are in tension with continued violence, pointing to people's deeper discontents, deep fissures in the city's well-being, and MQM's political struggles over power.

Nichola Khan

University of Brighton
N.Khan@brighton.ac.uk

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