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PAKISTAN'S ETHNIC DIVIDE

by Carol Rose

Soldiers stare from barricades at every major intersection in this desert town in the heart of Pakistan's Sindh province. Police and army officials stop cars at checkpoints, scanning identity papers and searching for weapons.

It has been six months since the army moved into Sindh. Operation "Blue Fox" -- a name announced by the government, then later denied -- was supposed rid this troubled province of the bandits and kidnapers who have terrorized the people here in recent years. Almost everyone agrees that the law and order situation has improved since the army arrived. Six months ago, few would have dared travel the roads that brought me from Karachi to Hyderabad. The risk of being kidnapped was too high.

But while the army has brought a temporary calm to Sindh, few think it can solve the underlying problem of ethnic warfare here. Nor is the danger limited to one province of Pakistan. The threat of civil war in Sindh is a symptom of the ethnic

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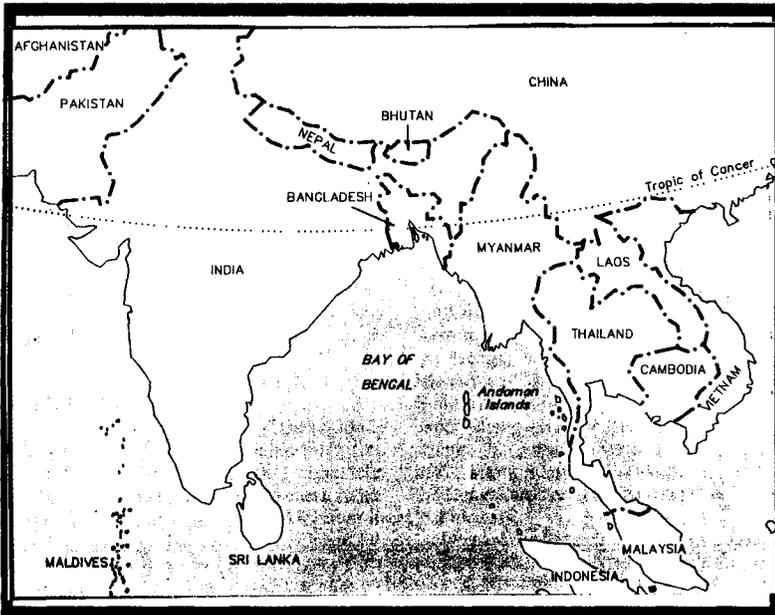
fragmentation taking place throughout Pakistan. Some say this disintegration is inevitable, that the seeds of dismemberment were planted when Pakistan was created by the division of India in 1947. The question now is whether a country forged on the principle of Islamic unity can hold together in the absence of military rule.

Land of the Pure

When the British quit India in 1947, Pakistan was created in response to demands by India's Muslim leaders for an independent Islamic homeland. Led by Mohammad Ali Jinnah and his Muslim League, these leaders rejected arguments that India's secular constitution would provide equal protection for the Muslim minority and the Hindu majority. The name of this Muslim state was: "Pakistan" -- land of the pure.¹

But Pakistan's founders failed to acknowledge that India's Muslims themselves were deeply divided on ethnic, linguistic and sectarian lines. These divisions led to language riots as early as 1952, a civil war in 1971 between East and West Pakistan, separatist movements in Baluchistan and the North-west Frontier

Province, and the present Army occupation of Sindh province. Created on the basis of religious unity, Pakistan increasingly risks being torn apart by ethnic division.



LOCATION OF PAKISTAN AND BANGLADESH
(FORMERLY EAST PAKISTAN) IN SOUTH ASIA

Already, the country has divided once. Pakistan consisted originally of two huge blocks -- East and West -- separated by thousands of miles, different languages and different histories. In an effort to unify the

¹ PAKISTAN, according to some, is an acronym standing for Punjab, Afghania (North-West Frontier Province), Kashmir, Iran, Sindh, Tukharistan, Afghanistan and Baluchistan. See Edward Mortimer, Faith and Power: The Politics of Islam, Faber and Faber, 1982.

country, the government of Pakistan made Urdu the official national language. But Urdu was never a native language of Pakistan. It was the language of northern India, the mother tongue for India's Muslim leaders who migrated to Pakistan at the time of partition. These Urdu-speaking Pakistanis are still known as mohajirs -- "refugees."

In 1971, war broke out between East and West Pakistan over the issue of ethnic representation. The conflict began over language. The people of East Pakistan were ethnic Bengalis who spoke the Bangla language and were proud of their ancient literary tradition. They could not countenance laws that made Urdu -- a military language -- the official tongue of Pakistan. Tension between East and West erupted in a civil war in 1971, after the more-populous East Pakistan won a majority in parliament and, thus, the right to name a Bangla-speaking Prime Minister. When leaders in West Pakistan, led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, convinced the army to suspend Parliament, East Pakistan erupted in riots. The army moved in, sparking a civil war in which East Pakistan emerged as the independent nation of Bangladesh.

The aftermath of the war threw what remained of Pakistan into an identity crisis that continues to this day. During the First Congress on the History and Culture of Pakistan held in Islamabad in 1973, Waheed-us-Zaman said that people were asking:

"Questions which are no longer academic inquiries or theoretical concepts, but questions of national continuity and survival. What are the links that bind the people of Pakistan? What is the soul and personality of Pakistan? What is our national identity and our peculiar oneness which makes us a nation apart from other nations?"²

Intensifying this national identity crisis was the fact that what remained of Pakistan was divided on ethnic lines. People in the four major provinces spoke different languages: Baluchi was spoken in Baluchistan; Pushtu was the language of the Northwest Frontier Province; the Punjabis spoke Punjabi and Sindhi was the language in Sindh.

Urdu was spoken only by immigrants from India, or by the educated and urban elite. Nonetheless, it was required for anyone who wanted a job in the civil service, army or in many industries. In addition to rising resentment against the mohajirs, there was growing anger at the Punjabis, who were the most populous of the ethnic groups and had disproportionate

²

Ibid., p. 215.



Provincial Capitals of present-day Pakistan: Karachi in Sindh; Lahore in the Punjab; Quetta in Baluchistan; Peshawar in the NW Frontier Province.

representation in the Army and civil service. Ethnic nationalist movements arose in Pakistan's three smaller provinces in response to perceived discrimination against those who were neither Punjabis nor Urdu-speakers.

In 1973, nationalists in the province of Baluchistan launched a movement to separate from Pakistan. Then-Prime Minister Bhutto dismissed the elected provincial government of Baluchistan and put the province under military rule, thus provoking an armed rebellion in which thousands died or were imprisoned.

Bhutto also imprisoned the leader of the Pushtuns, who had sought to create an independent Pushtun nation made up of Pushtuns from the Northwest-Frontier province and neighboring Afghanistan. The leader, Abdul Wali Khan, had this to say about his identity:

"I had a very interesting question asked once in this connection. The question was obviously intended to put my loyalty and patriotism to test: What are you, Wali Khan? A Musalman, a Pakistani or a Pushtoon first? My reply was simple -- I said I am a six thousand years old Pushtoon, a thousand year old Musalman, and a twenty seven years old Pakistani.³"

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan thwarted dreams of a separate Pushtun nation as the Afghans from a variety of ethnic backgrounds joined forces to oust the foreign invader. Nonetheless, ethnic nationalist movements still exist in Baluchistan and the North-west Frontier Province.

Since my arrival in Pakistan two years ago, the key focus of ethnic conflict has been the southern-most province of Sindh. Until recently, news coming out of Sindh deterred me from visiting. Almost daily, the newspapers told of foreigners who were kidnapped, industrialists who were murdered, women who were raped. Sindh was one place in Pakistan I considered too dangerous to visit.



Soldiers peer out from heavily-fortified barricades at a busy intersection in Karachi.

Operation "Blue Fox" changed all that. Suddenly, it was possible to travel in Sindh. More important, the eyes of the nation were on the province. It seemed that questions of ethnicity were being asked not only by those who lived in Sindh, but by all Pakistanis. I traveled to Sindh to talk with leaders from opposing sides in the conflict. My aim was to better understand Pakistan's identity crisis.

Sindh: Another Partition?

Getting a handle of the ethnic and political situation in Sindh is not easy. There are not just two opposing sides or ethnic groups, but economic and religious divisions as well. The native Sindhis are divided between the feudal landlords and the landless peasants. There are mohajirs, who control the big cities. And there are immigrants from Baluchistan, the Northwest Frontier Province, the Punjab and Bangladesh. In effect, Sindh is a microcosm of Pakistan.

It hasn't always been this way. Like the rest of present-day Pakistan, Sindh in 1947 was populated almost exclusively by an indigenous population. There was a long tradition of Sindhi culture and literature, and Sindh was one of the few provinces in British-controlled India in which British officers were required to learn the local language.

But when the small Sindhi fishing village of Karachi was named Pakistan's first capital city in 1947, hundreds of thousands of Muslim immigrants from India moved there and to the nearby city of Hyderabad. Within two decades, Karachi was transformed into a center of Pakistani culture, finance and industry. Rural Sindh remained dominated by ethnic Sindhis, while Karachi soon was controlled by Urdu-speaking immigrants. Hyderabad became equally divided between Sindhis and mohajirs.

I arrived in Hyderabad in mid-October. In an attempt to sort out the different sides in the Sindh conflict, I spoke with both Sindhi nationalists and Urdu-speaking mohajirs. My first stop was the local office of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP). Shakil Pathan, the local HRCP coordinator, was



Cartoon in the local Frontier Post newspaper shows Army leading Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. October 3, 1992.

busy taking down stories of police brutality from the dozen or so people who had crowded into his office. Nonetheless, he agreed to show me around Hyderabad. One of our first stops was the office of Ali Hassan, a Hyderabad-born journalist whose parents migrated from India 45 years ago.

"Before 1947, the middle class in Sindh was Hindus. When they migrated to India in 1947, they left behind a vacuum in the middle class that was soon filled by the Urdu-speaking people," said Hassan. "The Urdu-speakers immigrated from the industrialized areas of India and were comparatively better educated and skilled.

"The Sindhis had two extreme classes: the feudal landlords and the 'hari' or landless peasants," said Hassan. "But 15 years after the creation of Pakistan, the Sindhis developed their own middle class. With it, came a feeling of deprivation -- the idea that whatever was controlled by the Urdu-speakers had been usurped from the Sindhis."

While Sindhis felt their province had been expropriated by outsiders, many Urdu-speaking immigrants soon began to feel as though they were unwelcome in what was supposed to be a homeland for all Muslims. This alienation grew during the reign of Prime Minister Bhutto -- a Sindhi -- in the mid-1970s.

"The systematic annihilation of the Urdu-speaking mohajirs started under Bhutto," said Hassan. "He started dismissing them from the civil service in the government. In 1972 he nationalized the two sectors of the economy -- banking and education -- that were dominated by Urdu-speakers. He did it intentionally with the idea in his mind to cut down the Urdu-speaking population and induct Sindhi-speakers to support him. When this happened, the Urdu-speakers developed a sense of separate identity."

Calls for Islamic unity have done little to erase this sense of separateness between Sindhis and mohajirs, since the two populations have different approaches to Islam. The mohajirs generally follow the orthodox Islam first espoused by the Moghul rulers of India, in which the mass of people were subservient. The Sindhis, in contrast, generally follow the Sufi strain of Islam, which rejects the religious hierarchy of the mullahs and follows a more populist and mystic tradition -- in which there are fakirs, whirling dervishes, trances and meditation.

Rasul Bux Palijo, president of the "Awami Tahrik" political party, is a popular and charismatic Sindhi nationalist who pointed out the basic religious and cultural differences between the Sindhis and mohajirs. According to Palijo, the Urdu-speaking immigrants brought with them "a basic philosophy that includes the supremacy of Islam and conquest."

"They had been able to rule as a minority in India for 1,000 years, so they came here expecting to rule over us as well," said Palijo, when I met with him in Hyderabad. "They knew the arts of politics, of dividing people and making the Sindhis feel as if they were fourth rate.

"The mohajirs must stop acting as terrorists and rulers and put a limit on their ambitions. They must hand up their obsession with conquest and their hallowed concepts of Islam," said Palijo. "We Sindhis come from the Sufi, mystic tradition of Islam. We don't believe in their religious jingoism, but in the equality of human beings.

"All was the wrong from the very first day Pakistan was created," he added. "And we refuse to fit into this whole scheme."

MQM: Democratic Movement or Mafia?

In the mid-1970s, discontent among the mohajirs led to the rise of the *Mohajir Quami* [National] Movement, or MQM. Led by a university student named Altaf Hussain, the MQM vowed to represent the interests of the Urdu-speaking population throughout Pakistan. By 1988, it was the third largest political party in Pakistan and controlled the Sindh provincial Parliament, Sindh local governmental bodies, and most businesses and industries in Sindh. Likewise, the MQM was a major partner in the political coalition that brought Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to power in 1990.

"The MQM started out as a student gang about 10 years ago," said Najma Sadeque, a Karachi journalist who has written extensively on the MQM. "Altaf Hussain wanted to be in the pharmacy department but he was refused because he didn't make the grade. So he organized a petition saying he was deprived because he was a mohajir and forced the head of the university to resign. Ever since, those boys have muscled their way into everything, saying that they are deprived. But Urdu is a compulsory first language in this country for government, industry, business and the armed services. They are hardly deprived."

Sadeque said that 60 to 70 percent of the civil servants and nearly 40 percent of the army personnel are Urdu-speakers. She described how the MQM wields power through rigid organizational discipline.

"It operates like a highly organized church hierarchy, indoctrinating young people from an early age," she said. "It tells them how to lead their daily lives, what time to be awake, when to pray, everything. They adopted this discipline and threw out the religion. The result is a fascist organization."



Cartoon showing MQM leader Altaf Hussain, second from left, asking Pakistan's politicians to "play his game."

According to recent newspaper accounts, the MQM divided Karachi and Hyderabad into territories of control. MQM leaders then forced shop-keepers, businessmen and industrialists to pay kick-backs and protection money in order to operate in those territories. When the army moved into Sindh last May, it released pictures showing torture cells allegedly operated by the MQM.

"If you didn't pay, you would be beaten, lose a leg, or perhaps lose your wife, daughter or son," said one Karachi journalist, who spoke on the condition of anonymity out of fear of reprisals from the MQM. "People just disappeared here, children disappeared."

Since the army arrived six months ago, hundreds of MQM leaders have gone underground to escape arrest. Hussain, now formally charged with murder, has remained in self-imposed exile in London.

One night in Hyderabad I met with eight MQM leaders and students at a secret "safe house" where they gathered while in hiding from the police. Driving through the darkened streets and alleyways in one of Hyderabad's mohajir neighborhoods, I reached a pre-arranged intersection where I was met by a man who ushered me into a house. At first glance, the house seemed to be

abandoned. But in a back room, a group of young men sat on sofas and chairs waiting for my arrival. They warned me that they couldn't stay long because the army might raid the house at any time. They agreed to talk on the condition that I not print their names.

"We wanted to be called Sindhi, but they called us "mohajir" [refugee] or animal names," said one man. "No one would say that we were sons of this soil. So, what is our identity here? No group is bigger than us in all of Pakistan and yet we have no name."

When I asked about the torture cells allegedly found by the Army and pictured in local newspapers, the men said they were "just weight-lifting gyms. There were new ropes and everything, just health clubs," said one man. "The kidnappings were not done by the MQM, but by the feudal landlords -- all the dacoits [bandits] work for the landlords.

"In Pakistan, all organizations are run by the military, but this is the first time one of them -- the MQM -- became equal to the military," he added. "We are from the middle class, while the other political parties are controlled by feudal lords."

While I doubt that the alleged torture cells were actually health clubs, other people with whom I spoke confirmed that the MQM used the torture chambers mainly against their own people. Moreover, such methods are common to all political parties in Pakistan.

"When the MQM emerged, it had difficulties preventing their members of parliament from crossing the floor in exchange for bribes during votes," said Hassan, the Hyderabad-based journalist. "To bring their own people into the fold some measures were adopted by them, including physical and mental torture. But they never applied it to people outside of their organization, only to their own rank and file. And in Sindh, Baluchistan and the Punjab, several zamindars [landlords] are running their own private prisons against their enemies.

"It is part of the culture," he added. "Every party has its own way of operating, of keeping control."

The Grip of the Feudal

If the MQM holds the power in Sindh's urban regions, it is the Sindhi landlords who control the countryside and, some argue, Pakistan's national parliament. These landlords -- including the family of Benazir Bhutto -- control virtually all of the land-based wealth in Sindh. These feudal landlords pay no tax on

agricultural income, while the vast majority of Sindhis are landless peasants live in abject rural poverty.

"Democracy in our country is just a name, not a fact," said Aftab Ahmed, the most recent mayor of Hyderabad, who was dismissed by the federal government last month. "In reality, the entire country is ruled by money and family relations -- by about 20 families. And those people base their power on a division of the booty from the mass of the people. It doesn't really matter whether you are talking about the government or the opposition. The power comes from these families. And every now and then the army has to be called in because a fight has broken out among the families over the division of booty."

In many instances, the powerful feudal families are in league with bandit gangs. "In the rural areas the dacoit [bandit] problem is not from the MQM, because MQM is made up of hoodlums who wouldn't know what to do with a spade," said Sadeque. "In the rural parts of Sindh there is growing and acute unemployment. Harassment of the landless peasants by the feudals has become so bad that it is even driving the poor people into gangs just so they can earn a living. In other cases, the gangsters are in league with the feudals, receiving protection and using the feudals' forts as hiding places. Sometimes the feudals take a cut of the profit. Sometimes they are just after revenge against their enemies."

In many instances, the tactics reportedly used by feudal landlords resemble those allegedly used by the MQM -- kidnapping, torture, rape and murder. And, like the mohajirs, the victims of brutality by Sindhi landlords are not only people from other ethnic groups, but the Sindhi peasants who would dare to oppose the power structure.

"We have no middle class in Sindh, only a ruling class played by feudals," said Sindhi nationalist leader, Paliyo. "But it would have been toppled by peasants by now if the politicians in Islamabad had not supported the feudals all these years - - just as the British maintained the Rajas for their own power."



An end to police corruption sounds laughable to most Pakistanis, even the policemen pictured here.



**VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE IN
SINDH...PHOTOS OF PEOPLE MURDERED IN A
SINGLE DAY IN HYDERABAD, OCTOBER 3, 1992.**

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Fuel to the Fire: Police Corruption in Sindh

Adding to the problem is the corruption of the Sindh police force. "In Sindh at least 50 percent of the police are corrupt," said Hassan. "We pay a policeman only 1300 rupees [\$52] a month and give him no education for his children, no housing and no medical benefits. He has no choice but to be corrupt in order to support his family.

"The police are hand-in-glove with the bandits," he added. "They gave them protection for so long that it was inevitable that we would one day have to invite the army in to clean up the mess."

Stories of police brutality are so common in Sindh that people seemed almost inured to the problem -- until it affects them personally. At the Human Rights Commission office in Hyderabad, a young man described how his 23-year-old brother had been killed by the local police in a place called "Hala."

"My brother, Mujib was a medical student, with no party affiliations or involvement," said Imtiaz Jatoi. "He was traveling on a bus to Karachi, the police boarded the bus to look for Sindhi activists. My brother said, 'Why don't you go after the dacoits [bandits] and leave the innocent people alone?' They took him off the bus and the next day sent a message to us that he had committed suicide at the police station. But when we saw the body, there were three skull fractures, two electro-shock burns on his arm and iron burns on his stomach."

The Jatoi family filed a court case against the Hala police over the death of Mujib. Within days, the police raided the family home, stole their cash, jewelry and television set, and arrested the boys' father.





"The police also harassed our lawyer and then tried to bribe him," said Imtiaz. "The police and army are both involved in terrorizing innocent people like us rather than giving justice."

According to Hassan Bux Taebo, a member of the central committee of the Sindhi nationalist "G.A. Sindh" party, police and army brutality increases pressure on Sindhi politicians to push for an independent Sindhi country -- known as Sindudesh. "If we have all of our human rights guaranteed then we have no reason to separate from Pakistan," he said. "But we see in the huge Soviet empire that when democratic rights are violated people fight for their independence. If our rights are not given to us, then independence is our last option."

Army: Problem or Solution?

There are two things that everyone in Sindh seems to agree upon. First, that the army operation was necessary to stop the deteriorating law and order situation in the province. Second, that the army created the law and order situation in the first place as part of a "divide and rule" strategy in Sindh.

"These days, every political party is saying that it is good to have the army in Sindh," said Shakil Pathan. "Meanwhile, the mohajirs kill two Sindhis, then the Sindhis kill two mohajirs. The army promotes this nationalism as part of its strategy of divide and rule. They know that if the people got together and formed a democracy, the army would lose control -- and they would no longer be able to control the national budget and, as individuals, become millionaires."

Sindhi nationalist Palijo says the army is responsible for fueling rumors of a Sindhi break-away movement. "The army has set up phoney terrorist organizations of Sindhis to give the impression that we



are anti-Pakistani or Sindudeshis," said Paliyo. "Those are phoney groups of half a dozen people who the army says will rise up against them. It doesn't make any sense. We don't stand for separation, but for equal treatment and democracy."

Perhaps surprisingly, MQM leaders say almost the same thing. "We have no interest in having a war between the Sindhis and the mohajirs," said Anis Khani is the number two man in the MQM, just below Altaf Hussain, who spoke by telephone from a secret hiding place. "We just want to live in peace."

"This is a conspiracy against us by so many agencies in the government," said Khani. "They want to make us [Sindhis and mohajirs] fight so that the army can rule."

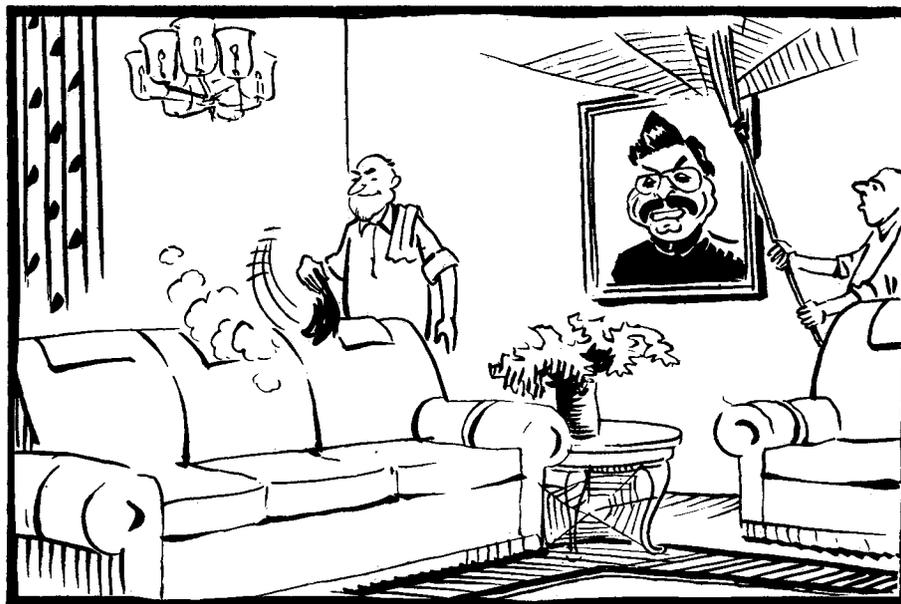
Since the army arrived six months ago, however, both Sindhi nationalists and MQM leaders have insisted that the army has targeted their side.

Initially, the army operation seemed aimed at weakening the power of the MQM. Some argued that the army was responding to an incident in June 1991, when an army major and four soldiers were kidnapped and brutally tortured by MQM activists.

But since the initial days of the operation, the army seems to have focused increasingly on rural Sindh -- where the bulk of the population is ethnic Sindhis. In part, this may be in response to pressure from the civilian government to spare the MQM -- which is a member of the ruling coalition. Local newspapers report that Pakistan's president, Ghulam Ishak Khan, asked the army to confine its operations to rural Sindh and to go easy on the MQM.

"The army has armed and given protection to the MQM in the cities and to the feudal lords in the rural areas of Sindh," said Sindh leader Taebo. "But it is an open secret that the MQM is a terrorist organization actually created by the army and the ISI [Inter-services Intelligence agency] for the ulterior motive of dividing and ruling in Sindh. The army has come in lately only to keep the MQM on a kite line. Not a single MQM person has been tortured while more than 51 innocent Sindhis have been tortured to death in the last six months."

Suspicion that the army was targeting rural Sindh intensified following two well-publicized cases of brutality. The first occurred in the village of Tando Bhawal on June 6, when soldiers gunned down nine innocent Sindhi farm laborers. After initially trying to cover up its involvement, the army bowed to public pressure to accept blame for the killings. A military court imposed life imprisonment on 13 army officers and pronounced a death sentence on one army Major who was involved.



Peons dusting off a house in anticipation of the return of MQM leader Altaf Hussain

In another incident, three civilians died while in police and army custody, including a prominent political leader named Mohammad Yusuf Jakharani, whose corpse showed signs of torture. To date, the army has not taken responsibility for this murder.

"The problem is that the army's rural crackdown is directed against Sindhi nationalists more than against the dacoits [bandits]," said Sadeque. "As a result, it is just encouraging the dacoits because it doesn't get at the root cause, which is unemployment."

Search for National Unity

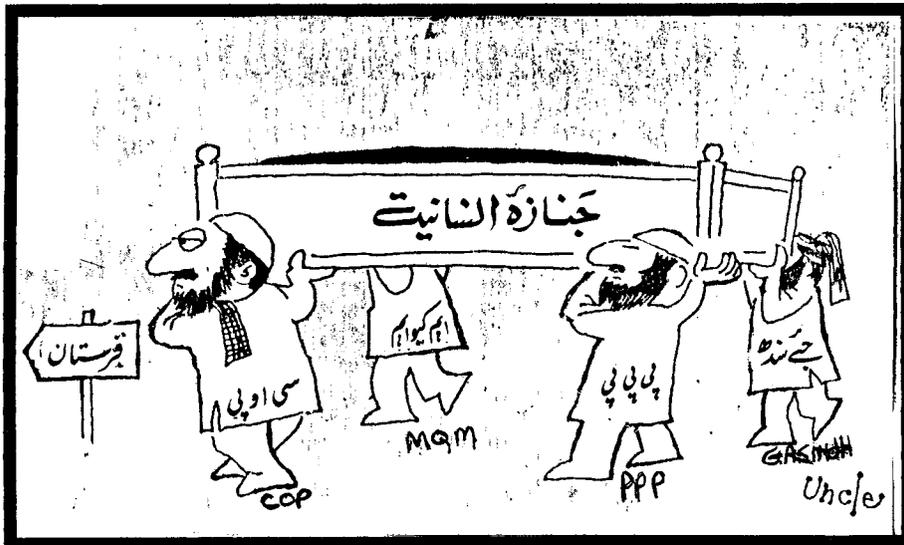
In meeting with leaders from the opposing groups in Sindh, I noticed that all sides said they want to live in peace and be "left alone." Unfortunately, in light of Pakistan's burgeoning population, there is little chance that any of Pakistan's ethnic groups will be left alone. The real issue is whether they can find a way to live together, peacefully.

Answering that question is difficult; the more I learn about Sindh the less I seem to understand politics in Pakistan. Nonetheless, it seems to me that Pakistan has little chance of creating ethnic harmony as long as its politicians eschew democracy and instead base their power on powerful special interest groups -- Islamic extremists, feudal landlords, and the urban mafia.

Nor will the situation change as long as the average Pakistani has no political voice and no protection against human rights violations. A typical person here does not identify himself, first and foremost, as a Pakistani, because protection and political power are available only to those who join a subgroup. Hence, the rise of ethnic nationalist movements, extremist religious party, and bandit gangs.

These movements, in turn, exacerbate the fragmentation of the country along ethnic, sectarian and economic lines. The resulting deterioration of law and order is slowed only by periodic Army intervention. The military thus consumes more and more of Pakistan's national budget, at the expense of public education, housing, sanitation, medical care and infrastructure projects that might benefit the masses.

"No one should be surprised at the situation in Sindh," said Shakil Pathan. "When you plant flower seeds, you get flowers. And when you create all the conditions in Sindh, you must not be surprised when the result is violence."



Who is to blame? Cartoon showing representatives from four leading Sindh political parties carrying a "dead human being" to the cemetery.

Thanks to Shakil Pathan for his assistance in researching this newsletter and for use of cartoons and photographs from his magazine, Siasi Tamasha.