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Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

**NES-1
PAKISTAN**

Nicholas Schmidle is a Phillips Talbot Fellow of the Institute studying identity and politics in Pakistan.

Calling Home

A Story About the MQM in Pakistan

By Nicholas Schmidle

MARCH 2006

KARACHI, Pakistan—There is no set schedule, but about twice a month Altaf Hussein leads a rally in Karachi. Armed security guards comb the premises beforehand, speakers the size of New York City apartments are set up, and telephone cords and jacks are tested repeatedly to assure maximum clarity and connectivity. That's because Altaf Hussein, or as his followers call him, Altaf *Bhai* ("Brother" Altaf), isn't actually in Karachi. Since he and his followers became the target of extra-judicial killings in the 1990s, he has been halfway around the world in London, self-exiled like a number of other prominent Pakistani politicians (including former Prime Ministers Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto). Altaf was the first to flee; he left Karachi in 1991. And he set another trend that Sharif and Bhutto have since tried to copy: the telephonic rally.

These telephonic addresses are just what they sound: one telephone, one microphone, one massive PA system. When Altaf decides the time is right, the local leadership of his party, the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), gets the word out. Pulling largely from the middle- and lower-class *mohajir*¹-dominated neighborhoods in Karachi, the party can, according to Dr. Farooq Sattar, Deputy Convener of the MQM's Central Coordination Committee, mass 6,000 to 10,000 people in just a few hours.

On the last day of February, I am invited by Sattar to attend one of Altaf's famed rallies in a pink-walled park just a couple of blocks behind Nine-Zero, the MQM's headquarters in Karachi. The rally marks the 19th anniversary of the Labor Division of the MQM, and a cinema-screen-sized poster is standing up in the direction everyone is facing, and where I assume Altaf would be standing if he were here. The poster reads (in English): Stand by the Flag, and it shows a shadowed and featureless man holding the MQM's red, white, and green flag. In the background of the Iwo-Jima-esque pose is an industrial landscape with cranes, skyscrapers, skeletal oil rigs, and a couple of hourglass-shaped nuclear reactors. The reactors look like they are raging, full-throttle, and seem to be spitting either gas, smoke or flames into the sky. I'm grateful that nothing about the poster bears a resemblance to anything in Karachi.

Even the park feels distant from the honks and horns of Karachi. In my experience, you can usually hear at least a rumble of anticipation from the crowd in the minutes before a keynote speaker takes the podium. Here, few people are talking, and where they are, it's more like hushed Church conversation. Even the birdsong

¹ The word *mohajir* has a storied history. Simply translated, it means migrant or refugee. Yet it also refers to the first, dedicated believers of the Prophet Mohammad who followed him to Medina from Mecca in 622 A.D. Those who accompanied Mohammad on his *hijra*, or flight, became known as *mohajirs*. In Medina, a society grew up around the teachings and sermons of Mohammad. It became, more or less, the first Islamic state. Thirteen hundred years later, Pakistan was conceived as being the first modern Islamic state. Those who left India to settle in Pakistan and run the new state also became known as *mohajirs*.

About the Author



Nicholas Schmidle

"My fellowship will focus on domestic politics and culture in Pakistan at both the national and provincial level. I imagine my fellowship embedded in the grassroots, identity politics of Pakistan."

"The chance to spend two years in Pakistan presents an invaluable opportunity to combine my undergraduate education in philosophy and religion, my graduate studies at Loyola University in political philosophy, and my graduate studies at American University in international politics. A number of common threads run through these experiences, but most relevant here is the focus on people as political actors and the creation of identity through political action. With the assistance of the Phillips Talbot Fellowship, I look forward to exploring Pakistanis' separate and multifaceted ethnic, religious and nationalist identities and, above all else, what it means to be Pakistani in Pakistan today."

is louder. Overhead, uncovered light bulbs are strung like phosphorescent popcorn, and the green strips of turf laid over the ground almost give off the smell of fresh-mowed grass. Karachi has never seemed so bucolic.

It's during this moment of calm that a voice punches over the PA, followed by two deep, throaty, and extended "Haallllooooo"s.

Near total silence. Altaf Bhai. Brother Altaf. The Great Leader. Long Live Altaf Hussein. The inside of the park is draped with bed sheets adorned with hand-painted slogans praising Altaf Hussein. One would think he couldn't see them from his sound room in London, but I am not convinced. Upon hearing his voice, I see faces smeared into expressions of equal-part excitement and fear. Local news channels are taping the rally, ostensibly for later release. I wonder if Altaf is somehow watching a live feed. Earlier, I asked MQM party leaders if they had thought about incorporating some video into the show.

They said they had tried in the past. Technical difficulties. Now, I am starting to think Altaf likes it this way so he can milk the whole incorporeal mystique of a body-less voice (this drifts towards the terribly ironic because the MQM champions its grassroots, middle-class appeal).

The stage is set. The members of the Central Coordination Committee² are sitting cross-legged on the turf in front of the Stand By The Flag poster. On either side are glossy portraits of Altaf. They are backlit and on stilts. Beside them are even larger snapshots of the *pir*.³ These are leaning on a grounded easel of some kind. His outfit is different in most of them, though he still looks, well, leader-like. There is one right in front of me that I am not so fond of. It looks too posed: like a cross between a local D.A.R.E. officer, a hard-ass city mayor, and an Evangelical preacher from New Mexico. There are, however, some commonalities with the others.

First, the Pancho Villa mustache and slicked-back hair. The mustache is common enough in Pakistan, but the hair clearly separates this man from most. Second, the turquoise ring on his right hand. No idea what this means. Third, the right hand/fist. In every shot the right hand/fist is clenched, shaking or pointing. The portrait in front of me is staged and it's obvious that he isn't in mid-tirade. Some of the others look candid, and the clenched/shaking/pointing right hand/fist is actually intimidating. Fourth, the shades. In nearly every picture I have seen of Altaf Hussein over the past few weeks, he is wearing orange-tinted, Ray-Ban-aviator-sunglasses. All things considered, he looks like a revolutionary skeet shooter.

"Can you hear me?" he asks in Urdu after the two or three start-off "Haallllooooo"s. His voice sounds how, having seen only his picture, I thought it might. It is gravelly and phlegm-ridden. Perhaps he just drank some pulpy orange juice. Or, like the telephonic style, perhaps it's just how he likes it.

He starts promptly at 7 p.m. Before long, Altaf is reading passages from the Quran. The crowd is transformed into parishioners. When he speaks, they are docile. When he pauses, someone inevitably jumps up and yells out "Jiye [Long Live] Muttahida" and "Jiye Altaf!" I wonder if it's the same handful of diehards every rally. They, for a brief moment, are sucked directly into Altaf's world. It must be a rush. They lead a chant until someone hears the beeping sound of Altaf tapping the speakerphone button. Church voices again.

Welcome to the MQM.

The MQM was publicly launched on August 8, 1986, when Altaf Hussein gave his first public address to a crowd of several thousand people in Karachi's Nishtar

² The MQM's main policy-making organ.

³ The name given to a Muslim spiritual guide or a Sufi holy man. Altaf is frequently referred to as *pir* by his followers.



Setting the controls for Altaf-time

Park. MQM folklore mystifies the torrential downpour that failed to deter the masses. "It was resolved on that day," Altaf Hussein once said, "that if the rain could not deter our determination then the rain of bullets would not even force us to leave the ideology and struggle." Less mentioned in the MQM literature were the masked gunmen surrounding Altaf or the hail of bullets they fired into the air.

Nishtar Park was the MQM's coming-out party. But it wasn't their first public stint. Not only had the MQM been officially founded two years earlier, but its predecessor, the All Pakistan Mohajir Student Organization (APMSO), had been active on university campuses since 1978. And it was around then that Altaf really made his debut.

September 11, 1979. Altaf Hussein, leader of the APMSO, is hauled away by authorities for setting a Pakistani flag on fire. For symbolic gusto, he does it in front of the tomb of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the father of the country. Altaf is tried in a military court and five days later⁴ is convicted of treason, in addition to charges relating to his abuse of Mr. Jinnah, the Quaid-e-Azam ("The Great Leader"). Altaf's flag-burning is motivated by what he and the APMSO see as calculated neglect by the central government toward the *mohajirs*, those people who had migrated to Pakistan from India at the time of

partition in 1947. The flaming flag was meant to show that such discrimination, especially against those people who led the campaign to form Pakistan, meant the failure of Pakistan.

These sentiments had been building for decades. After independence and partition in 1947, millions of Muslims traveled from the Urdu-speaking regions of India to become citizens of the new Pakistan.⁵ For the first decade, they



D.A.R.E. not to listen to Altaf

⁴ If something positive can be said about military coups and martial law, it's the expediency of the justice system.

⁵ There were three predominantly Urdu-speaking regions: Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, and Bihar. People from the former two mostly went west, to the West Wing, today's Pakistan, while the latter went east, to the East Wing, known today as Bangladesh.

enjoyed great influence. They were arguably more fit than anyone to govern. Many of them, like Jinnah, were Western-educated, versed in British bureaucracy, and uninterested in the guns-and-turban culture that reigned in North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan. When they came to Pakistan, they not only brought hope, but their experience in the civil service of the British Raj. Through Pakistan's first decade, the *mohajirs* ran the political scene.

October 1958. Pakistan witnesses its first military coup. The man who takes power is a general named Ayub Khan. Khan is a Pathan⁶, and two things about Karachi apparently rub him the wrong way: the weather and the *mohajirs*. Before long, he moves the capital from seaside Karachi to mountainous and seasonal Islamabad. This not only brings Ayub closer to his cultural roots in the ruggedly independent North-West Frontier Province, it also physically separates the *mohajir* strongholds in urban Sindh from the new centers of political power.

Ayub Khan ruled for ten years before he was thrown out of office by another general, Yahya Khan. Yahya was from the Punjab, and his rule characterized what Pakistan's other main ethnic groups — Baluchis, Pathans, Sindhis, and *mohajirs* — regard as Punjabi arrogance and unabashed ethnic domination. In 1970, an election was held that awarded a parliamentary majority to the Awami Party and gave the Prime Minister-ship to its Bengali leader, Sheik Mujibur Rahman. Yahya repeatedly postponed attempts by the newly elected National Assembly to convene, accused Rahman of secessionist politics, and eventually launched a military operation in

Dhaka, capital of what is now Bangladesh, to crush the Awami League. A civil war ensued between the Punjab-dominated Army and East Pakistan. India later joined on the side of the Bengalis in the East, and by the year's end, Pakistan was divided and Bangladesh was formed. For *mohajirs*, the 1971 war was a significant event for two reasons: first, it highlighted the internal fissures in the new Muslim state, ones on which Altaf Hussein would later capitalize; and second, it brought Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, a Sindh landowner and foreman of the People's Party of Pakistan (PPP), to power.

Shortly after taking power, Bhutto reinvigorated Pakistan's quota system — which was originally adopted in the 1950s to appease the demands of the majority Bengalis — and, in July 1972, passed the Sindh Language Bill. The Language Bill made Sindhi language study obligatory for all residents of Sindh. This was seen by the Urdu-speaking *mohajirs*, who had taken up residence in the urban centers of Sindh, as a clear attempt to dilute their Urdu-speaking *mohajir* identity. The worst was yet to come. Although the quota system had long been in place, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto made a further division. Typically, university spots and civil service jobs were apportioned based on the relative size of the applicant's home province. Punjabis were always allowed the most slates, since they were the largest, the Baluchis the least, etc. But Bhutto took Sindh and divided it further, along urban and rural lines, thus shutting out a crop of qualified *mohajir* applicants. "Bhutto's ghost is still hovering over this country," says Arif Abbasi, former Managing Director of Pakistan International Airlines and the longest-serving cricket official in the country. "His policies still affect industry, health, education, banking and insurance."

The MQM was, more or less, born out of the college-admissions process. The city-dwelling *mohajirs*, most of whom were well-educated and qualified, were refused admission to top programs based on what appeared scantily-veiled ethnic discrimination. "I didn't get into engineering school because of this [quota system]," Zaffar, a journalist from Islamabad, tells me. "All my Sindhi friends did." Many *mohajirs* had similar experiences. Farooq Sattar was one of them. So was Altaf Hussein.

A week after arriving in Karachi, I have an appointment to meet with Dr. Farooq Sattar. At 1:30 in the afternoon, a driver is



6 The dominant ethnic group in western Pakistan, as well southern and eastern Afghanistan. They are typically mountain dwellers, and are also known as Pashtuns or Pakhtuns.

sent by the MQM to take me from my hotel to Nine-Zero. He arrives a few minutes late. When I get into the front seat of the white van, it reeks of gasoline, the liquid, I assume, pooled up in the divots of the plastic floor mats. At one point, the driver offers me a cigarette. I decline, but he strikes a match anyway. I quickly roll down the window, hoping either the breeze or evaporation or some other natural phenomenon will dry the puddles of petrol at my feet.

In Nine-Zero's neighborhood a traffic circle features a statue of a clenched fist rising from an old, dried-up fountain the color of rain clouds. Altaf's mug shot adorns several billboards; MQM flags haphazardly line the street. I know we're close when we come upon a chain drawn across a residential street. An old guy manning the chain promptly unhinges one side and waves us through. A red metal pole, about the girth of my chest, blocks the next intersection. A couple of guards are there. They have assault rifles. They too wave us through. Same deal at the front gate of Nine-Zero. "Farooq Sattar?" They are expecting me. "Follow me sir." And I am led through the courtyard, into the main building, down the main hallway, past a door with a sign saying "Central Coordination Committee," and into a sparse waiting room.

The whole setup is pretty bare. No painted donkeys, elephants, or local varieties of politically co-opted animals. No old MQM campaign posters or calendars lying around, either. The only decorations in the hallway are a couple photo-murals of Altaf Hussein, preaching. One is particularly dramatic. It is turned landscape-style and it looks genuinely like an action shot. It is a floodlit night and Altaf's right arm is reaching out to the crowd. Nothing else in the way of hallway adornment.

In the waiting room, there is a smaller, more manageably-sized portrait of Altaf in the corner. Then I notice the clocks. One is set for Karachi time. The other is London — i.e., Altaf — time. As if anyone even doubted where else it would be set for, a white piece of paper at the bottom reads "London." People around Pakistan say that the MQM wouldn't be anything without its voter base in Karachi. But without London, I am starting to realize, the MQM could no longer function.

While I am waiting for Sattar, a couple of MQM folk



MQM faithful processing to the Altaf Hussein rally on February 28.

are sent to enlighten/entertain me. One guy, a soft-faced man with a mustache and a smirk, introduces himself as a journalist. He asks if I have read his book about the MQM. Two minutes later, he hands me a copy. No, he says, I don't work for the MQM. Still today, I am unconvinced. Over the next couple of weeks, I consistently see him at MQM events, handing out leaflets and helping conference guests find their seats.

Farooq Sattar enters and introduces himself in the third-person. I expected someone polished, tall, and with the kind of hard, masculine good looks associated with typical Hollywood mobsters. You know, your Ray Liotta type. But Sattar is tiny, hardly taller than 5'5", and that might even be a stretch.⁷ He wears a sport coat over a tie-less, plaid shirt, and has a trimmed beard. His hair, though grey in spots, mostly has the color and look of corkboard. His eyes, however, really stand out. They seem gargantuan for his relatively small head, and his lids are stretched thin trying to keep his eyeballs from falling out. This, of course, gives him certain attributes of a reptile, but he has none of the slimy, deceitful characteristics that some of my other reptilian acquaintances through the years, I suddenly realize, have all possessed. Minus the eyes Sattar reminds me of Dr. Lippke, my very collegiate-looking — i.e., kempt beard, wavy hair, khaki-and-tucked-shirt dress code — Moral Philosophy professor at James Madison University. The difference is that whereas Lippke always looked simultaneously absorbed in thought and amped on coffee, Sattar looks pensive and tired as hell. This is in part because of the eyes. Not only does he have the dark circles of an overworked businessman, his eyeballs

⁷ I am not good at guesstimating heights. Weights and age are another matter. Point out a fat woman in the grocery store, and I can, metaphorically speaking, pin the tail on the proverbial donkey. And so long as I am not hedging the age-guess because my subject is threatening me with severe punishments if I err high, I can usually nail someone's age, even at grocery-store distance.

bulge so far that they literally cast a shadow.

I am most interested in two things: Asking Farooq Sattar about the MQM's recent attempts to refashion itself as a party for the downtrodden masses of Pakistan;⁸ and trying one of the coconut-encrusted shrimp skewers that are stacked on a plate across the room. The shrimp, as well as a plate of samosas and a couple of sodas, are brought while Sattar and I are sitting in the corner of the room in front of a picture of Altaf Hussein. We shifted there when a photographer entered⁹ and haven't returned to our original seats, where the shrimp are set out. Sattar doesn't so much as acknowledge the spread, and is giving ten-to-fifteen minute answers to my ice-breaking questions that I hoped we would have been through an hour ago. He is rehashing the history of the MQM and we are at about 1986 at five minutes before 4 p.m. when a party worker enters the room and says that it's time to go.

Earlier the same day, an MQM-Member of the National Assembly (MNA) from Hyderabad named Khalid Wahab died at his home in Islamabad. His body is supposed to arrive at the Karachi airport in 30 minutes, after which Sattar and a caravan of MQM-dignitaries will escort it to Hyderabad for the burial ceremony. As I am thanking Sattar for his time and requesting another interview, he asks if I would like to accompany him to Hyderabad for the evening. The trip, he says, is about two hours each way and we'll stop at a nice restaurant on the Super Highway on the way back to Karachi. I am ready to go. Sattar points to the shrimp skewers, samosas, and sodas and tells a guy to package them for the road. I shovel in one of each when no one is looking.

When we step out of Nine-Zero, the streetscape has changed dramatically. Four or five sedans and at least three navy-blue pickup trucks are waiting. The trucks are sent, according to Sattar, at the request of the Sindh Provincial Governor, an MQM member. The bed of each truck is covered, and five or six elite police/paramilitary guards huddle inside. The guards wear cargo pants and black shirts with one word written in Urdu on the back. I think it says something like "we are here for you." One is standing up through a hole in the middle of the cover.

He wears a motorcycle helmet and rests his AK-47 on the roof. The others hold their weapons in their laps.

I get into the back seat with Sattar. It's obvious that he usually travels alone: a box of tissues lies on my seat, an extra pair of shoes are on the floor, and a bunch of files are shoved under the back window. Seconds after we sit down, his bodyguard — a silent, bearded guy with a baseball cap — gets into the front seat. He points his AK-47 to the floor and plays with (for lack of a better word) one of the banana-shaped clips. He has two clips duct-taped together; each magazine holds 30 rounds. Sattar changes his socks and feels the need to explain. "I am constantly moving around," he says, "and always keep an extra outfit with me."

We pull out of Nine-Zero trailing one of the navy-blue pickups; another's behind us. Besides the guy in the motorcycle helmet, two others are hanging out the back of the truck, swinging their weapons around to motion cars off the road. We are stop and go. Creating a lot of commotion. It's about the sloppiest motorcade I've ever seen.

As I am about to make some comment to Sattar about the motorcade¹⁰, I notice his expression. He looks uncomfortable and his face is twisted as we sprint through Karachi, threatening to shoot people unless they abandon their lanes. "This is no race," he says disgustedly watching the police/paramilitary guy standing on the truck's rear bumper who is really getting into it. On the trip from Nine-Zero to the airport, this guy's shirt comes unbuttoned from all the wind and gun-waving.

We get out of the car at the airport. People land on Farooq Sattar like honey bees. I keep a few feet's distance before the crowd unintentionally pushes me away. Sattar's bodyguard turns and motions me forward. Inside, Sattar is undoubtedly the main attraction. The Pakistan International Airlines cargo office is stuffed with people. Considering the circumstances, no one is especially jovial. But everyone is ecstatic to see Sattar, and when he introduces me as a "historian writing about the MQM", they throw some poor chap out of his seat, send someone else scurrying for a soda, and ask if I want anything else. The

8 In 1994, the MQM changed its name from the *Mohajir Quami Movement* to the *Muttahida Quami Movement*. It has since expanded its offices beyond urban Sindh into both rural Sindh and into the Punjab. Its efforts during the recent earthquake were applauded by many. Most recently, it has tried to emerge as a powerful voice speaking out against the Army's bombardment of villages in Baluchistan under the name of quelling the insurgency going on there. On February 25, I attended an MQM-hosted conference about "Baluchistan and Provincial Autonomy." Most of the leading Baluch leaders boycotted the event, as well as members of various opposition parties. Baluch leaders, including Ataullah Mengal, *sardar* of the powerful Mengal tribe, told me after the fact that they simply don't trust the MQM. In Punjab, it doesn't seem to be as much an issue of trust as that very little is known about the MQM, with its power base in Karachi.

9 Every time I am with the MQM, someone is snapping photos. After I finish interviewing deputy mayor of Karachi Nassrin Jalil, her "special assistant" walks me through the clay-colored, Raj-era building. He is quite a ham, calling the photographer to follow us for the tour. Every couple of seconds, he points to an architectural landmark he knows nothing about, waits for the flashbulb to pop, and then drops his arm. The tour is very dramatic. I get into it as well, taking notes with a stitched-up brow and captivated eyes. I am still waiting for those pictures.

10 This is my first armed motorcade, but I have watched them effortlessly glide through thick D.C. traffic jams many times, and know that you have to have at least someone stopping traffic an intersection or two ahead, rather than just bowling through it. To these guys' credit, however, no one in Pakistan really heeds the siren as they do in the States. People are more apt to try and outrun a speeding ambulance than to pull off the road.



Yes, some Pakistanis are better fed than others.

body of the dead MNA finally arrives from Islamabad. Outside, it is loaded into an ambulance. A few more navy-blue pickups join the entourage. In no time, we are terrorizing traffic again.

Sattar and I don't really settle into another conversation until we are on the outskirts of Karachi, near the massive, Al-Asif apartment block and a district known as Suhrob Goth.¹¹ The Super Highway that blasts north out of Karachi all the way to Lahore suddenly turns into a rocky detour that parallels the main road. Alongside the detour dust-covered Pathans survey the traffic. Behind them, flags fly from the rooftops. I don't recognize any of them: they are neither Pakistani national flags nor MQM flags. The most common one is a black-and-white-striped flag that, I am told, represents the Jamiat-i-Ulema-i-Islami (JUI). The wind is so strong that the black-and-white stripes are exactly parallel to the ground. If I were the chief of a lawless pirate state somewhere in the south Pacific, this would be my perfect flag.

"We were ambushed here in 1986," Sattar says to me with a single head-nod. October 31, 1986. Three months after the MQM's inaugural public rally at Nishtar Park, a convoy of MQM vehicles comes under attack as

they drive to Hyderabad for the party's second rally. Prior to the MQM's debut, Islamist parties and organizations, fueled by events, ideas and money from the war in Afghanistan, control Karachi. According to Sattar, the October attack is a response to the MQM's rapid growth and appeal among Karachi's middle-class.

Yet this, I later discover, is only half the story. April 15, 1985. A college girl named Bushra Zaidi is killed by a recklessly driven minibus in Karachi. Within moments, mobs descend on the vehicle and set it on fire. The bus, like most of the transport sector in Karachi, is owned and driven by a Pathan. Zaida is a *mohajir*. Ethnic riots break out across the city, with mobs tied to the MQM burning buses and cars. Zaffar, the Islamabad-based correspondent, tells me he and a friend counted

55 burning buses. More than 150 are reportedly torched. "After this," Zaffar says, "it basically became a turf war. The MQM said, 'We are the chiefs. We are willing to negotiate if you accept, but Karachi is ours.'" The party's violent streak is out for all to see.

After a few dusty minutes, our convoy is through Suhrob Goth and we are back onto the paved Super Highway. Sattar requests the bag of coconut shrimp and samosas. Near his feet are a couple of juice boxes. He is clearly more practiced at getting into these things; I nearly mispuncture and make a mess all over the back seat. As we are sitting there, I notice the display on his two mobile phones. One is a picture of his two daughters. The other is Altaf Hussein. In this particular picture, Altaf's face looks especially swollen, as if he were pressed up against clear plastic.

I ask Sattar about the MQM's attempts to present itself as a party for Pakistan's downtrodden. I have in mind an ultimatum issued by Altaf Hussein in mid-January in which the MQM leader demanded that the government: a) stop building the Kalabagh Dam, a controversial project that, by most analyses, will stop the water flow to the people in Sindh and Baluchistan, and b) halt its military

¹¹ Among the lore surrounding Suhrob Goth is the story of Osama bin Laden's stay here. Bin Laden's rumored presence in and around Karachi makes for worthwhile anecdotes, but there is little to validate any of them. Nonetheless, it's said that in the winter of 2001-2002, shortly after escaping from Tora Bora, bin Laden was sheltered in Al-Asif. The tale goes like this: apparently, a landlord went to collect his monthly rent from a group of Pathans living in the apartment complex. The residents were normally cordial and had a good record of paying on time. But on this occasion, they hardly opened the door, and through a crack asked the landlord what he wanted. When the landlord answered that he had come to collect the rent, the men asked him how much he wanted for the apartment. "The apartment is not for sale," he said. "Give us a price and we will pay you right now," the men replied, "on condition that you never come back here." The landlord quoted the men \$50,000. Five minutes later, they returned with a briefcase of \$100,000 and instructed the landlord to *never* come back. This story is, of course, subject to great scrutiny, but whether it's accurate or not, it paints a certain — also accurate or not — picture of the mystique surrounding Suhrob Goth.

operation in Baluchistan. Hours later, Altaf announced that his demands were met and he withdrew his ultimatum. "I'll get to that. But where did we leave off, 1986?" I realize Sattar is not about to let me off on my MQM history. I am still not sure where the notion that I am a historian even came from.

The rest of the drive to Hyderabad is smooth. By about halfway, I am used to the maniacal security pickups speeding past us, then slowing down, then speeding past us, and so on. When we arrive in Hyderabad, madness re-erupts.

Hyderabad is a city of about 2 million people. The population is predominantly *mohajir*. MQM territory.

We get out of the car to a crowd of several hundred men waiting to greet Sattar. I follow closely as we thread our way through the mass and gather underneath a tent. On the way, young boys and grown men alike lunge forward to reach for Sattar's hand.

Inside the tent, one man — I think it is a family friend of the deceased — is crying. Everyone else's eyes are blank until they catch Farooq Sattar's. We — Sattar, a handful of other MQM leaders, and I — are sitting cross-legged at the front of several hundred citizens of Hyderabad. Now, if you have ever seen me sitting cross-legged, you can imagine what a struggle this turns out to be. I am a shade over six-foot, but am about as flexible as Andre the Giant. It took years of running and post-running stretches for me to be able to consistently touch my toes. Indian-style seating is the closest thing I have to a nemesis: my knees point straight up, I fidget and rock, and, from every witness who has ever seen me in the pose, I don't hide my discomfort well.

The dead man's son has just joined us at the front when the first chair is brought to the front line and presented to me. Oh no. I am not about to sit in that mahogany straight-backed chair in front of hundreds of people sitting on the ground who I don't know — at a funeral for a man I don't know. I almost make a scene before I see another chair coming through the crowd. And another. Whew. One more. Five in all. Me. Farooq Sattar. The former mayor of Hyderabad. A couple of ministers in the provincial government.

Thankfully, it's not long after we assume these quasi-thrones that the coffin comes out of the house after being cleaned and dressed up. It is covered with black fabric with gold lettering from the Quran on it. Roses are laid on top. With a heave-ho, the coffin is lifted up and the procession begins.

The first few steps are awfully rowdy. There is lots of pushing and bumping as the mass begins moving to the mosque. I contemplate how this is a blatant violation of my number one rule regarding crowds in this part of the

world: stay away from them. And here I am, like a finless fish, being swept along under no control of my own. Luckily, Sattar's bodyguard has a close eye on me. Whenever I begin to drift, he reaches back, throws some people aside, and waves me near. The bodyguard, Sattar later tells me, is actually a volunteer. One hundred percent unpaid. Just cause he loves MQM.

The people carrying the coffin are moving quickly, and after about five minutes, it disappears up ahead. The preferred walking posture here seems to be hands clasped behind the back, and this works well with the slowed-down pace of the procession now. No one is speaking. Only the rubber rattle of hundreds of footsteps.

We reach the mosque and the mullah says a few prayers. It is very muddy at the entrance. Five or six young boys have formed a human guard-rail to prevent people from walking into the mud. I don't understand what they are doing at first and I try to push through them. I, of course, step in the mud.

The procession continues from the mosque to the graveyard. Inside the graveyard, there are no footpaths or sidewalks. Everyone is stomping along on top of mounds of dirt. I lose Sattar and the bodyguard, but I can see the pit where they are about to bury the body, so I figure they must be close. People are standing on headstones to see.

There is a great dispute over how to get the body into the grave. Yelling back and forth. The mullah waits by the side until it's his turn to speak. The dispute continues. In Christian burials, things seem so orderly. Everyone knows how it is supposed to happen. To argue over anything would be considered, in a way that I can only partially comprehend, disrespectful to the dead. Here, everyone thinks they know the best way to get the casket lowered, the burial shroud unwrapped, and so on. Those who say that Islam is not an egalitarian religion have probably never seen a Muslim burial.¹²

Finally, after the body is covered with dirt, the mullah starts his spiel. He gets quite theatric. I only feel I am entitled to say this because I watch the mullah, getting all carried away, totally space out on the name of the dead man. At dinner later that evening I ask someone: "Is that part of Islamic tradition, pausing and letting someone else fill in the name of the deceased?" No, they answer. He just forgot. I feeling better

When we finally get back and into the car, people outside are pressed against the windows trying to see Sattar. He appears very composed. As we start pulling away he explains modestly that "This is the people's only chance to meet their party leaders."

About 25 miles from Karachi, I calculate that we are

12 The procession and burial ceremony, nonetheless, are all-male.



The MQM fort on the night of the rally.

close enough for me to ask Sattar a couple of tough questions. If he tells the driver to pull over and make me walk, I can probably catch a cab from here.

The fact remains that the MQM has a terrifying reputation. Extortion rackets. Bookings of Killings. In the 1990s, when the MQM was out of government and allegedly the cause of insecurity and violence in Karachi,¹³ a military operation was launched against the party that sent most of its leadership into prison or exile. Since 2000, reports the March 2006 edition of the monthly magazine *Herald*, “as many as 111 police officers linked with the operation [against the MQM] have met an untimely end.” Individual incidents are far too many to list. One observer says simply, “The MQM is a militant party with a political wing.”

Mahmood Sham, the editor-in-chief of *Jang*, the most widely circulated daily in the country, tells me one night at dinner about the goon squads the MQM sent to his office during the 1990s. “Five to six people would show up with pistols and say: ‘We are sending news. Keep a four-column space open,’” Sham says. “They increased their pressure.

Even though their news was being published correctly, [they said] the other parties’ wasn’t.” Sham, who wears a khaki safari suit and is soft-spoken, looks across the table at me, “Farooq sat at these meetings. He knows.”

Sitting in the car sipping juice boxes together, it is hard for me to imagine Farooq Sattar’s involvement in all this. He did, after all, call an AK47 an “AK45” when we were talking earlier about the incident at Suhrob Goth. Still, I have to ask my question. I think it’s a good one.

I start by commenting that Karachi is clearly a tough city to do politics in, and in some ways, is reminiscent of 1920s Chicago. I share with him a famous quote by Al Capone that my dad reliably dishes out every so often, whenever the issue of law and order or street politics becomes a topic of debate. With the same, pseudo-wise-guy-gangster smirk that my dad adopts when he recites it, I tell Sattar what Capone once said. “You can get more with a kind word and a gun than with a kind word alone.” Sattar seems to get a kick out of it. I ask him next to what extent this thinking might characterize the MQM’s political philosophy. “All political parties [in Pakistan]

¹³ Today, the MQM is party of the ruling government in the National Assembly. It also occupies a number of cabinet-level positions in the provincial government. Karachi’s relative calm, some say, is because the MQM sees no reason to soil its own tent.

have a militant element,” he answers matter-of-factly in between slurps on his juice box. “And all parties need a militant wing.”

Farooq Sattar looks like a different person in the presence of Altaf Hussein, even if The Great Leader is just on the telephone, thousands of miles away. In Hyderabad, he was the man to touch. The night of the Labor Division rally, he looks timid. He is just another parishioner in the church of Brother Altaf.

There is little intimacy between Altaf and the MQM’s public figures. In August 2005, Nassrin Jalil, current deputy mayor of Karachi and longtime MQM member, was suspended by Altaf for one week from having any contact with the party. The announcement was publicized. Her phone didn’t ring. Provincial ministers have reportedly been made to literally stand in the corner for Altaf-deemed misbehavior. Allusions to fascism pop up again and again among disgusted human-rights lawyers, journalists and rival politicians.¹⁴ The MQM is brimming with slogans, but two stand out: “We need a leader, not a destination” and “He who betrays Altaf deserves death.” Altaf rallies

are compared to the ones at Nuremberg.¹⁵

Farooq Sattar sits with a mike by his feet. His chants are amplified. When Altaf hits the speakerphone button, Sattar motions to the crowd to resume calm. Arif Abbasi, the former PIA director, tells me how he once secured a “cherry-picker” — one of the devices used by airlines for cleaning plane wings — at the MQM’s request for Altaf to speak from. After he helped deliver the cherry-picker, he watched the rally for a few minutes. “It was the most amazing thing. Altaf Hussein simply raised his finger to his lips...and thousands immediately fell silent.” Tonight, this is Sattar’s job.

The rally lasts for about an hour. By the end Altaf sounds exhausted on the phone, and worked into a frenzy. I imagine him spitting all over the place, his fleshy jowls and neck all sweaty. The final ten minutes, the climax, if you will, are bursts of rising and falling growl.

There is a mild-mannered MQM party worker sitting next to me. He leans over and says with a wide, but unashamed, smile, “You must think we are crazy about Altaf Hussein.” In Altaf’s presence, I am not about to disagree. □

14 Even Farooq Sattar uses the word fascist — but to describe the Musharraf government. When I ask him about the inherent problems of having a party dependent on one person, he says that, “All [MQM] senior party leaders want to continue to sustain the myth that the MQM is a one-man show because what we are encountering in Pakistan is a fascist regime. Pakistan is a classic divide-and-rule system.”

15 The MQM has a sense of history. Sattar tells me that, in the beginning, Altaf was holding all-night training session with party workers. “We were studying different revolutions and histories of freedom movements: Lenin, Mao, Mandela, and the French Revolution. This is now paying off.”

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A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Philosophy at Rutgers, Iona College and the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Rick Connerney is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

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An editor for the *New York Times*' Op-Ed page for the past five years, Kay holds an M.A. in Comparative International Politics and Theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the *Universiteit van Amsterdam* in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*. She has traveled in and written from Haiti and began her journalistic life as city-council reporter for Somerville This Week, in Somerville, MA.

Cristina Merrill (June 2004-2006) • ROMANIA

Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from *Adweek* to the *New York Times*, and is spending two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceausescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

Nicholas Schmidle (October 2005-2007) • PAKISTAN

Nicholas is a freelance writer interested in the intersection of culture, religion and politics in Asia. He is spending two years in Pakistan writing on issues of ethnic, sectarian, and national identity. Previously, he has reported from Central Asia and Iran, and his work has been published in the *Washington Post*, the *Weekly Standard*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and others. Nick received an M.A. in International Affairs - Regional Studies from American University in December 2005. He lives with his wife, Rikki.

Andrew J. Tabler (February 2005 - 2007) • SYRIA/LEBANON

Andrew has lived, studied and worked in the Middle East since a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship enabled him to begin Arabic-language studies and work toward a Master's degree at the American University in Cairo in 1994. Following the Master's, he held editorships with the *Middle East Times* and *Cairo Times* before moving to Turkey, Lebanon and Syria and working as a Senior Editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the Economist Intelligence Unit. His two-year ICWA fellowship bases him in Beirut and Damascus, where he will report on Lebanese affairs and Syrian reform.

Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • GERMANY

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

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Author: Schmidle, Nicholas
Title: ICWA Letters (South Asia)
ISSN: 1083-4257
Imprint: Institute of Current World Affairs, Hanover, NH
Material Type: Serial
Language: English
Frequency: Monthly
Other Regions: East Asia, The Americas; Mideast/North Africa; Sub-Saharan Africa; Europe/Russia

ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4257) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

Phone: (603) 643-5548
Fax: (603) 643-9599
E-Mail: icwa@valley.net
Web address: www.icwa.org

Executive Director:
Peter Bird Martin

Program Assistant:
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Administrative and Publications
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