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Pakistan Faces Testing Time

By Sajjad Ashraf

Synopsis

Political crises and clashes involving old and new migrant communities in Karachi raise the threat of dismemberment of Sindh. Politicians face a testing time to save their parties or Pakistan.

Commentary

PAKISTAN FACES a testing time politically when the flood waters which have inundated most of its southern plains the past two months recede. The devastating rains in 20 of Sindh's 22 districts affecting millions, have staved off charges of conspiracies of political dismemberment traded by political parties in Karachi, for now.

But the country has many crises, chief among them being the demographic threat to its Urdu-speaking Mohajirs, or migrants from India whose forbears had moved to Pakistan at partition of the subcontinent in 1947 and are concentrated in Karachi and urban centres in Sindh.

The MQM factor

The threat comes from the recent migration of Pashtuns from the frontier regions of Pakistan in the aftermath of military operations against insurgents in the FATA and SWAT, adding to the influx of Afghan refugees in search of economic opportunities. They are said to number over four million in the city of 20 million. The ethnic Mohajir political party Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), which was sponsored by the military ruler General Zia ul Haq to break the control of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) over Karachi, had maintained its electoral stranglehold ever since, even through violent means.

The latest crisis broke a month ago when Sindh Home Minister Mirza, an ally of President Zardari, openly called the MQM a terrorist organisation and accused it of targeted killings and extortions in the city. Holding a copy of the Quran on his head, Mirza quoted the MQM chief, Altaf Hussein, living in self-exile in London, telling him that MQM supported US plans to dismember Pakistan and that MQM would continue to kill Pashtuns.

In a riposte the MQM leader made a statement by video link accusing everyone except Zardari of involvement in conspiracies to dismember Pakistan. He claimed that the leader of Awami National Party (ANP) representing the Pashtuns, had accepted eight million dollars from the Americans prior to the 2008 elections. Both MQM and ANP traded charges of terrorism. Though a truce has been called the underlying hostility remains strong.

While the political theatre continued the Supreme Court of Pakistan held "suo moto" (acting on its own cognisance) judicial proceedings over targeted killings in Karachi, which revealed large-scale patronage of criminal gangs by the main political parties, now joined by sectarian organisations. Much of the blame is being

laid on MQM. The police are powerless to act as the various factions are politically patronised and heavily armed.

Saving Pakistan

Nationally President Zardari is trying to save his coalition both at the federal and Sindh level till the Senate elections due next February, which are expected to give the PPP a majority in both houses of parliament. Some within his own party ask whether Zardari wants to save the coalition or save Pakistan.

The dice seems to be loaded against the MQM, though it will resist any attempt to dent its absolute control of Karachi. The Mohajirs have their backs to the sea and have warned that they will fight to the bitter end, which may end up in a situation like that of the Tamils in Sri Lanka. The Pakistan Army, which had failed to prevent the breakaway of Bangladesh in 1971, and is now engaged in fighting the militants in the north of Pakistan, is unlikely to have an appetite to fight the people of Karachi and Sindh.

Forgetting Pakistan's own creation out of a separation, many Pakistanis fail to realise that no border is permanent. Even educated Pakistanis become agitated when reminded that in less than 25 years Pakistan too had its own separation. Mishandled natural calamities in which millions perished, political polarisation between the two wings of Pakistan, and a bitter war of liberation, resulted in the creation of Bangladesh.

When the politicians return to the political arena after the Sindh floods recede, unless they can find political accommodation, they will face the challenge of saving Pakistan from the trauma of a third partition and a second dismemberment.

Sajjad Ashraf was Pakistan's High Commissioner to Singapore from 2004 to 2008. He contributed this article specially to RSIS Commentaries.