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Karachi's Security Crackdown a Boost for Pakistan's Islamists; Terrorism Monitor Volume: 14 Issue: 22

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Political violence and gang wars in Karachi have remained a critical issue for the Pakistani authorities over the years. The situation even became an agenda item in the country's National Action Plan on counter-terrorism, an initiative that received unanimous approval in parliament following the 2014 massacre by Taliban militants of 145 school children at an army public school in Peshawar.

Led by the Pakistan Rangers paramilitary force and targeting criminal gangs, terrorist groups and the militant wings of political parties, the Karachi Operation has been under way since 2014 in an attempt to impose law and order on a part of the country that has become increasingly chaotic.

The main purpose of the crackdown was to target criminals, thousands of whom were associated with the militant wings of political parties (Express Tribune, March 24, 2015). But action on the sprawling network of Islamist terrorist groups such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi in Karachi has also been important. Unfortunately, a lopsided focus on the operations of Karachi's powerful secular parties has opened up a space where Islamists political movements can thrive.

Terrorism and Organized Crime

Karachi, with an estimated population of 20 million people, is the backbone of Pakistan's struggling economy. All major political parties have a presence there, to a greater or lesser degree, and their alleged militant wings operate seemingly with impunity. The popular Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), a secular party that mainly represents the Urdu-speaking middleclass migrants from India who arrived during partition in 1947, has for years accused its political opponents of acts of violence. And the accusations go both ways. (The News, March 4) Despite the accusations, however, MQM maintains a sizeable following in the city, holding 17 of the 20 National Assembly seats.

In addition to political violence, Karachi has been indirectly affected by Pakistan's military operations against Islamist fighters in other parts of the country. A series of military operations in the tribal areas and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province have displaced hundreds of thousands of people in the tribal areas who have migrated to the cities. According to one senior police officer from Sindh, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, TTP's several factions, the Afghan Taliban, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, Jaish-e-Mohammad, Baluch Liberation Army and Islamic State all have a presence in Karachi's Pashtun-majority areas as a result. [1]

Attempts to tackle the situation go back to 2011, when the Supreme Court, in a suo moto decision, ordered the authorities take action on the deteriorating situation in Karachi (Express Tribune, October 6, 2011). Initially a police-led operation was launched, but it failed to yield the desired results. This prompted the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Shariff to change strategy, giving the lead role to the Rangers in September 2013 (Dawn,

September 5, 2013).

Since then, the operation has enjoyed some success and led to a sharp decline in number of terrorist incidents. [2] There remain, however, significant concerns over how the operation has been carried out, and the lenience with which it treats Islamist political groups.

Secular Activists Targeted

Secular political parties say they have been targeted while the authorities have allowed Islamist political parties the freedom to continue their activities. In May, MQM accused the Rangers of the extrajudicial killing of 240 workers and, in a separate incident, the forced disappearance of another 171 (Dunya News, May 12; Dawn, May 3). The ruling party of Sindh province, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), also accused the Rangers of moving beyond their mandate when Rangers personnel arrested PPP stalwart Dr. Asim Hussain on charges of facilitating terrorists in his hospital (ARY News, July 19).

The authorities deny they have been discriminatory, but it is clear that the militant wings of religious parties, as well as proscribed sectarian groups, are still active. Student movements and the charity wings of militant Islamist organizations, as well as those affiliated with Islamist political parties, have been allowed to continue.

In the space opened up by the crackdown on the activist networks of the mainstream political movements, the Islamist parties are set to take advantage. As the U.S.-based author and security expert, Arif Jamal, has noted: "The weakening of the MQM and other political parties is creating a lot of space for jihadist groups in Pakistan ...terrorist organizations like Dawa fundraise millions of dollars on the occasions of Eid-ul-Azha while political parties such as the MQM are not allowed to fundraise for genuine charity reasons. In fact, every year the jihadists fundraise hundreds of thousands of dollars" (DW, August 23).

In an indication of the growth of Islamist-sectarian parties in Karachi, it is notable that during last year's municipal elections the proscribed Islamist terrorist group Sipah-e-Sahaba, the parent organization of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, participated under the name Rah-e-Haq, and succeeded in winning nine seats in Karachi's Pashtun majority areas displaying its growing strength and support base (The News, December 7, 2015).

Extending the Crackdown

Islamist militants, whether operating in Karachi or in other parts of the country, treat Karachi as a safe haven and a source of funding, obtained through extortion, kidnapping and robbery. The spirit of the Karachi crackdown should have to be a non-discriminatory drive for the establishment of law and order. Brushing aside Islamist terrorist groups and militant wings associated with religious parties will solve part of the problem facing Karachi.

Islamist parties and Islamist militant groups have a symbiotic relationship. While they differ in how they intend to achieve their goals, their political views have much in common.

Linking the crackdown on Karachi's criminal elements to the anti-terrorist National Action Plan is a positive measure aimed at broadening the ambit of the operation and curbing Islamist violence. But unless the crackdown is broadened and extended to the activist wings of the Islamist political parties, it will serve only to create a dangerous vacuum that Islamists will seek to fill.

NOTES

[1] Author interview with a senior police officer who requested anonymity (October 4).

[2] See Pakistan Security Report (2015) published by Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS).