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## The Ongoing Talibanization of Karachi

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The attack on a girls' school (the school taught girls in the morning shift and boys in the evening) in a Pashtun-dominated locality of Karachi in late March was yet another sign of the increasing presence of the dreaded terrorist group, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), in the largest metropolis of Pakistan. The brazen attack, in which militants used grenades and machine guns to kill the male principal and seriously injure six female students, clearly bore all the hallmarks of the TTP. Unfortunately, this was not the first incident involving the TTP in Karachi; there have been numerous attacks both on sectarian minorities and Sufi Muslim shrines throughout the city.

**Alok Bansal, Executive Director of the South Asian Institute for Strategic Affairs in New Delhi, explains that “The window of opportunity for the Pakistani state to contain the growing influence of the TTP in Karachi is rapidly declining.”**

However, this attack on a girls' school is the signature trademark of the TTP terrorist group. For a number of years, Altaf Hussain, leader of the moderate liberal Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) party, who is based in London for reasons of personal security, has been warning about the dangers of the Talibanization of Karachi. Hussain's predominantly secular MQM has traditionally drawn its support from the *Mohajir*—migrants from India—community, an ethnic group that has dominated the city since creation of the state of Pakistan.

Unfortunately, his warnings were dismissed as the rhetoric of a leader whose political influence was waning as the demographics of the city shifted with an increasing influx of ethnic Pashtuns from the war torn areas of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

Whenever Hussain warned of the dangers of Talibanization of Karachi, he was countered by another “secular” party, the Awami National Party (ANP), which represents the Pashtun community. ANP considered Hussain's and the MQM protests as nothing other than political attempts to curtail the growing presence of their party in the city. The ANP was determined to secure their base after winning their first two seats in the Sindh provincial assembly from Karachi in 2008 elections, signifying the substantial Pashtun presence in the financial capital of Pakistan.

Although Karachi has always had a Pashtun community, Pakistani military operations in Swat, Waziristan and other parts of the ungoverned borderlands with Afghanistan have forced more and more Pashtun refugees to migrate to the largest city in Pakistan in search of a livelihood. Consequently, there are more Pashtuns in Karachi today, than in Peshawar, Kandahar or Kabul. Today, the Pashtun population dominates the transport industry and accounts for roughly a quarter of Karachi's population.

For electoral reasons, the ANP was more than happy with its rising vote bank and was unwilling to pay any heed to the charges of “growing Talibanization in Karachi” leveled by the MQM leadership. There were violent turf wars in Karachi between the MQM and ANP, as the new Pashtun refugees fought with the more established

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*Mohajirs*. When MQM accused the Taliban of attacking its cadres, it was seen by the ANP as an attempt to cleanse Karachi of Pashtuns. For political reasons of its own, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), which held power in both the federal government in Islamabad and the provincial government in Karachi in alliance with the MQM and ANP, was more than content to play one side off against the other.

All this changed however in August 2012, when three leading ANP activists were killed and four others were injured in a TTP attack in Karachi. It took some time for the ANP to recognize that it was the TTP and not the MQM that had targeted its workers. Since then there has been a relentless stream of attacks on ANP workers and many have been forced to move out of Pashtun localities for safety.

The ANP has also been forced to close many of its offices in these localities for the same reason. In the run up to the May general election, the TTP has clearly stated that it will target rallies of “secular” parties, namely the MQM, PPP and ANP. The situation has been so bad that the ANP has decided not to hold rallies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (North-West Frontier Province), where it was the ruling party.

In Karachi, the TTP is slowly pushing the ANP out from the Pashtun dominated localities. As all the recent migrants have come from the areas afflicted by the Taliban, they have carried its influence and ideology into the metropolis. Historically, the ANP, despite its huge support base amongst Pashtuns in the settled areas, never had much influence in many of the tribal areas of Pakistan, and many tribes, including the Wazirs and Mehsuds hailing from Waziristan, naturally gravitated towards the more fundamentalist and violent TTP.

Today every single faction of the TTP is represented in Karachi, although factions led by TTP Amir Hakimullah Mehsud and Mullah Fazlullah from Swat valley, are the most powerful. There have been disturbing media reports of TTP militants in Karachi surrounding armed police parties who had come to arrest them, resulting in the police having to negotiate their own release from the militants. Clearly, this shows the capability of the militants to almost act with impunity within Karachi.

Pakistan’s security forces have been struggling for some years to contain urban terrorism and insurgencies in the rural areas along the border with Afghanistan, and have had some success. However, given the manner in which Pashtun neighborhoods in Karachi are coming under the influence of the TTP, the security forces may soon be forced to deal with a full-fledged urban insurgency, similar to Beirut in the 1970s and ‘80s.

If Beirut’s tragic experience is any indication, urban insurgencies are extremely bloody with enormous collateral damage and loss of life. They are also much more difficult to eradicate. Karachi is at least ten times more populous than Beirut with different ethnic groups in dense clusters.

The window of opportunity for the Pakistani state to contain the growing influence of the TTP in Karachi is rapidly declining. Indeed, it may already be too late. The only hope is if the two “secular” parties, the ANP and MQM, can come together to jointly fight the menace of the TTP in Karachi.

The recent history of the relationship between the two parties does not give much hope, but they must realize that if they do not jointly and resolutely address the growing influence of the TTP in Karachi, then they, along with the other liberal and peace loving citizens of Karachi, run a serious risk of being devoured by the fundamentalist and obscurantist doctrine of hate and fear being propounded by the TTP militants.

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