**[Karachi diary](https://www.dawn.com/news/1818216/karachi-diary)**

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FOR a city this dynamic — it is the hub of commercial and business activity in the country — and for a city this size, Karachi’s infrastructure is poor.

This is not just a problem for the people of Karachi; it should be of concern to every citizen in the country as Karachi generates a lot of business and commercial activity that fuels the rest of Pakistan too. The road network is quite broken, the transport infrastructure is not good or adequate, the water supply is poor, and water drainage is bad. A spell of rainfall of six to eight millimetres was enough to cause major hurdles for transportation for a good 24 hours and some parts of the city were flooded.

But the people of Karachi are extremely enterprising. They get on with doing what they need to and find ways and means to get by. The city keeps moving. Whether it is because they are self-reliant or whether they have given up on the government, or both, or one because of the other, they move on, and the dynamism of the city and its people clearly comes through.

I have lived in Islamabad and mainly Lahore for most of my working life. Recently, I got a chance to spend a month in Karachi thanks to an invitation to be visiting faculty in February at the AKU-IED. A month was enough to fall for Karachi’s charms.

Karachi is definitely more diverse in ethnic, religious and linguistic terms than Lahore. Maybe this explains why people are less interested in finding out who you are or where you are from. Female friends tell me that people stare at you a lot less in Karachi than in Lahore. There are sub-groups in Karachi and in-group and out-group issues are more significant here in many organisations, but for general interaction, across society, these matter less and allow more personal space to individuals.

What a lovely, vibrant and diverse city Karachi is. There is always a lot going on in the city.

I felt that service culture and orientation is a lot higher in Karachi as well, compared to other parts of the country. From interacting with office staff to talking to sales/ service personnel in shops and restaurants to dealing with people supplying all sorts of services, there is a higher level of professionalism and professional interaction. This was a welcome change from the laid-back attitudes I was used to in Lahore.

Services are not only better quality, they seemed to be a bit cheaper in Karachi too. I do not have a large enough pricing base here to go beyond my experience though. Could it be that keener competition is having an impact on quality and pricing? The Karachi market is bigger and more competitive for most services.

And, Lahoris will not be happy with me for saying this, but it applies to food as well. There is more variety in the types of cuisine available, and the quality/ price trade-off is much better in Karachi than in other cities of Pakistan. This might have a connection with the size of the market and the competition issue as well. There is also a large middle-tier of restaurants that cater to middle-income groups. The price/ quality trade-off is quite good in this category.

Karachi has its very rich residents, of course. Being the business and commercial hub, the amount of wealth the top-income tier has is clearly significant. But the rich in Karachi are not as ‘flashy’ as they are in Lahore.

We do not see as many luxury cars, the houses are not as extravagant, and even dress and personal accessories, in public spaces at least, are not as ‘in your face’. Is this a remnant of the fears about the law-and-order situation in the city, or are there deeper differences due to Karachi being a more multicultural and metropolitan city?

The sense of security in most people is still fragile and memories of a different Karachi are not forgotten. The number of armed guards across the city must be a record, even in per capita terms, in the country. Mobile snatching and mugging has definitely been internalised by the people here.

Every person has a personal or secondary incident to tell in this regard. Some people carry two mobiles, some carry just a simple mobile so that the replacement cost is not high. People have stories where muggers have been ‘nice’ and have taken cash and phones but not the cards in the wallet. For some Karachiites, it has become a ‘rite of passage’. What all human beings are capable of normalising!

Public spaces have a lot more women than in most other cities. But, interestingly, you see a lot fewer women driving motorcycles/ scooters in Karachi than in Lahore. Is this linked to law-and-order insecurities or is there another explanation? ‘Women on wheels’ type of programmes might be needed to get a critical mass going.

There is definitely more philanthropy, and institutionalised philanthropy in Karachi than in Lahore or Islamabad. On every street you see boards for trusts and foundations doing something or the other in areas of education, health, food and/ or social welfare. It is no wonder that a number of people mentioned that Karachi is a ‘*ghareeb parwar*’ city. It would be wonderful if a sociologist is able to study this phenomenon and come up with some explanations. And it is something residents of other cities could learn from.

What a lovely, vibrant and diverse city Karachi is. There is always a lot going on in the city. If federal and provincial government could focus a bit more on the infrastructure and transportation provision, the heart of Pakistan would be able to pump a lot more life and activity for not just the residents of the city, but for the entire country.

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