

A turn towards violence

Karachi

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IN the article published in this space last week I provided some data on the explosive growth of Karachi's population over the last 60 years. Karachi had always attracted foreigners to its shores but the waves of migrants that arrived after the birth of Pakistan, and the selection of this once sleepy port to become the country's first capital, changed the city beyond recognition.

It was to become not only the most important player in Pakistan's non-agricultural economy. It also had a role in shaping Pakistan's political and social texture in ways that could not have been imagined by Mohammad Ali Jinnah when he chose to bring the country's capital to the place of his birth.

Once Karachi had settled down demographically in the sense of having accommodated, albeit tenuously, three streams of migrants within its ever-expanding borders, it was to be subjected to a series of forces that culminated in the production of three perfect storms. These storms — their genesis and how they affected not only Karachi but also the rest of the country — is the subject of this series of articles.

As discussed last week, the migrant streams that inundated Karachi were made up of the arrival of Urdu-speaking refugees from India in the period immediately following the June 1947 decision by the British government to partition India. This group of migrants was followed almost immediately by another wave that arrived from the poorer areas of the provinces of Punjab and the North West Frontier to build the infrastructure and buildings needed by the new capital.

The third stream was pro-

oping world before focusing on some of its unique circumstances.

Demographers define mega cities as urban agglomerations of more than 10 million people with ill-defined boundaries. Most of these were initially in Latin America. However, as result of the rapid growth of Asian populations, mega cities have also cropped up in this part of the world and have been subject to the same kind violence and lawlessness that has become endemic in Latin America.

Social scientists have studied for several decades the cause of urban violence in the metropolitan centres of the developing world, particularly in those located in Latin America. The story is the same whether it is Mexico City in Mexico, or Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo in Brazil, or Buenos Aires in Argentina.

The cause is almost always rooted in economics. Hundreds of thousands of young people are attracted to the metropolitan areas by the promise of employment that goes largely unfulfilled. Local residents have to compete with the newcomers for scarce jobs and that puts pressure on wages, particularly for unskilled and semi-skilled occupations.

Unable to find reasonably rewarding jobs in the formal and informal parts of the economy, many from among the young turn

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Hard numbers on the economic development of a city such as Karachi are not usually available. What I am about to offer are guess-estimates based on using surrogates such as the rate of growth of the modern parts of the economy in the country to estimate Karachi's economic performance. When Karachi was chosen to become Pakistan's capital, the size of its economy and the per capita income of its population was considerably less than that of Lahore. Lahore in 1947 was the new country's largest city, the centre of education, the centre also of the road and railway networks, and the main source of support for agriculture, the economy's most prominent sector.

However, Lahore was quickly eclipsed by Karachi. This happened for two reasons. Karachi's selection as the capital attracted refugees from India who brought with them the skills and experience the new country desperately needed. Second, India's decision to halt trade with Pakistan soon after the two countries achieved independence forced rapid industrialization upon Pakistan. Karachi became the centre of industry and the associated sector of commerce for the simple reason that it had

the skills and financial resources that were needed to launch this extraordinary effort aimed at attaining self-sufficiency. Over the next two decades Karachi, went through an economic transition of the scale not seen in many urban areas of the developing world.

The city's gross domestic product increased at the rate of more than 12 per cent a year in the 20-year period between 1947 and 1967. In 1967, Karachi's GDP was almost 10 times as large as it was at the time independence.

Karachi's 'bustis' developed their own culture. Sometimes they also cultivated their own brand of religion. Often these cultures and separate religious identities produced clashes that turned exceptionally violent. While non-economic circumstances played a greater role in turning Karachi towards violence, economics set the stage for this unfortunate development.

The third stream was produced by the Afghan refugees who escaped from their country following the invasion by the Soviet Union in December 1979. While most of them were accommodated in the dozens of refugee camps strung along Pakistan's long border with Afghanistan, tens of thousands seeped into Karachi and settled among the Pushtun population of the city. This mix of communities created the environment for the turbulence that hit the city over a period of a quarter century, from the late seventies to the opening years of the 21st century.

Karachi, in spite of all the storms generated by demography, did not become more violent than some of the other mega cities of the developing world. The perception about Karachi's violence is largely the consequence of some high-profile foreigners having become its victims. It has certainly not helped the city's reputation that this was the place where Daniel Pearl, a highly respected correspondent of the influential Wall Street Journal, was beheaded by a group of Islamic extremists. Karachi was also the scene of a car bombing that killed a number of French engineers who were helping the navy. Islamic extremists have also repeatedly attacked the US consulate located in the city.

Proponents of radical Islam directed their wrath not only against foreigners. They also hatched plans to assassinate President Pervez Musharraf and actually carried out an attempt on the life of General Ahsan Saleem Hayat, the highest ranking military officer stationed in the city. Karachi, in other words, has witnessed all the methods used by Islamic radical groups to disrupt life in other parts of the world. It has seen suicide bombers, car bombings, kidnapping of foreigners, and gruesome murders of prominent individuals with their killings videotaped and placed on the Internet.

While violence in Karachi has a dimension different from that seen in other large cities of the developing world, its roots are not too dissimilar. What has made Karachi different is that some unique developments in the city's demographic situation added a number of ingredients to the socio-economic mix that has made so much of urban developing world prone to extreme acts of violence. First, let us examine the socio-economic characteristics Karachi shares with other violent cities in the devel-

oped world. Gangs develop their own economic interests based on a variety of criminal activities including bank robberies, car-jacking, kidnapping for ransom, and sometimes trade in contraband items such as drugs.

Once the young have turned to violence they get trapped in a vicious cycle from which it is difficult to escape. Since the law and order machinery has poor control in the more violence-prone areas in the cities, the young enforce their own conduct and rules of behaviour.

What further exacerbates the situation in many mega cities is the failure of the state to deliver such basic services as education, primary healthcare, drinking water, sanitation, and shelter. Most mega cities in the developing world — and some also in developed countries — do not have the means to maintain law and order. These failures of city governments are usually grounded in their inability to mobilize resources to provide adequate services to their citizens. There are not many examples from around the globe of city governments succeeding to create revenue bases that worked independently of central authority.

Competition for scarce resources usually results in corruption and this further burdens society. Gangs sometimes take over the task of providing the people with the goods and services they desperately need. Karachi's infamous water and electricity mafias are now well established in the city's economic life.

While Karachi fits the mould described above, its situation was further complicated by a set of factors that have roots in its peculiar demographic development. Karachi has known violence but the cause is not always economics. As discussed above, Karachi's population was formed by three distinct episodes of immigration that brought in millions of people into the city over a period of nearly six decades. These newcomers were accommodated but never fully absorbed. They founded their separate communities without a great deal of interaction among them.

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time independent. However, the population had also grown 10-fold with the result that there was no increase in income per head. This did not matter much since the poorer segments of the population were dominated by the migrants from Pakistan northern areas.

For them, simply participating in Karachi's work force meant a significant increase in personal income. Even if the rate economic growth of the first two decades after 1947 could not be maintained for much longer and even it had declined by 50 per cent to about eight per cent a year, Karachi's GDP would still have doubled every nine years and that would have brought some prosperity to the lower income groups since by that time the rate at which the city's population was increasing had begun to slow down.

At the lower rate of economic expansion, Karachi would have managed to produce a sufficiently large number of jobs to accommodate not only the natural increase in its population. It could have continued to provide for employment to those in other parts of the country who had fewer economic opportunities available to them in the local economies. That did not happen for two reasons.

The first of these was the decision by President Ayub Khan to move the capital from Karachi to Islamabad. After the move of the capital to Islamabad, the city lost a great deal of its economic dynamism. Its economy did not stagnate but it lost the vigour and the dynamism that had propelled it forward for nearly two decades. The other shock to Karachi's economy was delivered by the administration of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The latter, as we will discuss in the article next week, was a champion of the city.

Not well tutored in economics, he did not realize that his decision to expand the public sector at the expense of private enterprise would take the wind out of Karachi's economic sails.

Virtual stagnation set in Karachi in the decade of the seventies largely because of the nationalization of large-scale industries and the entire banking sector. These were the mainstay of the city's economy. Karachi's GDP growth slowed down to a bare three per cent a year in the 1970s. Its economy never recovered from the blow inflicted by Bhutto and set the stage for its turn towards violence.