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## Sindh's Ethnic Predicament and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

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Sindh, the second most populous province after Punjab, is a complex ethnic mosaic. Inter-ethnic tensions in the province, and particularly in its capital city of Karachi, are rising, primarily due to the influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the conflict zones of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the Malakand Division of Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) following the recent anti-terrorist military operation. The arrival of these IDPs in Sindh has triggered a widespread nationalist backlash, placing at risk the stability of the province and Pakistan itself.



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Sindh's ethnic predicament has deep and tangled historical roots. The year 1979 is an important landmark in the manner in which this predicament has unfolded. The December 1979 Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan resulted in a massive influx of refugees into Pakistan. Although the bulk of the estimated three million Afghan refugees took shelter in the NWFP and Baluchistan, thousands fled to Karachi. A segment of the refugee population subsequently became involved in drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and other illicit activities. Afghan drug dealers were involved in the Pashtun-Mohajir riots that erupted in the winter of 1987. Moreover, since the majority of Afghan refugees in Karachi were Pashto-speaking, their links to the local Pashtun community caused insecurity among the Urdu-speaking Mohajir and Sindhi communities. The military regime of General Zia ul-Haq promoted Afghan-Pashtun interests in Karachi and Sindh as a whole in order to neutralize the mainstream political parties, particularly in the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP).

The current manifestation of Sindh's ethnic predicament stems from the inflow of IDPs into the province, which has disturbed anew the fragile ethnic balance. Karachi, which has a population of around 15 million, is under serious threat of ethnic upheaval because of decades-old ethnic polarization among four important ethnic groups: Mohajirs (people who migrated from India at the time of partition and settled primarily in Sindh), native Sindhis, Pashtuns, and Punjabis. Pashtuns constitute the second largest ethnic group in Karachi after Mohajirs, followed by Punjabis and Sindhis. Ironically, the Sindhi-speaking population of the city is barely 5%; the rest are Mohajirs, Pashtuns, Punjabis, or Baluchs. There are also illegal migrants in Karachi from Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Afghanistan, and Iran. A sense of insecurity prevails among native Sindhis, many of whom believe that they will become a minority in their own province if the flow of IDPs into the province is not stanchied. The military operation in Malakand division and FATA led to the displacement of three million people. While the majority of

the IDPs are in camps in NWFP, some have crossed into Sindh.

Many of those who oppose the settlement of IDPs in Sindh also believe that, embedded in the midst of these newcomers will be all sorts of miscreants who will play havoc with the lives of innocent people. They argue that Karachi already faces a serious threat from terrorist groups, drug mafias, and other criminal organizations — a threat that will surely worsen in the event that the settlement of IDPs goes unchecked.

Ethnic tensions have boiled over in Sindh on previous occasions. In the early 1970s, riots erupted between Mohajirs and native Sindhis on the language issue, employment, and resources. In the 1980s, ethnic infighting took place, involving Mohajirs, Pashtuns, Mohajirs, and Punjabis.

Today, as in the past, Karachi is a magnet for migrants, refugees, and displaced persons. This is not surprising. After all, Karachi is the provincial capital, the country's largest city, the home to its only viable port, and an industrial and commercial hub that generates 60% of Pakistan's federal revenue. However, the city's transportation, housing, energy, and water infrastructure are severely underfunded. As a result, these services are straining to meet the needs of the population. These basic infrastructural challenges feed into the fragile ethnic mix.

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Karachi's diversity is evident from the fact that there are more Pashtuns living in this city than in Peshawar, the capital of NWFP. In ethnic terms, Karachi is a microcosm of Pakistan. Despite their history of discord, the Mohajir and Sindhi communities are in agreement that the province cannot bear the burden of a further influx of people from other parts of Pakistan. For the past several years, the leading Mohajir political party, the Muttadha Quami Movement (United National Movement or MQM) has warned of the possible "Talibanization" of Karachi. MQM argues that the influx of IDPs from NWFP and FATA will intensify the threat of religious militancy and terrorism, particularly in the cosmopolitan city of Karachi.

Similarly, organizations representing the Sindhi community have voiced their apprehension about the influx of IDPs into the province, because they regard the province as already over-stretched. They suggest that the IDPs should be settled closer to their original homes. Organizations such as the Sindh Democratic Front, Women Action Forum, and the Sindhi Adabi Sangat have expressed concern that the flow of IDPs into the province is likely to change the demographic ratio and provide cover for terrorists and criminals to operate.

When the military operation was launched in the Malakand Division, particularly in the Swat district, widespread protests and demonstrations against the possible influx and settlement of IDPs occurred in Sindh. The MQM and the Sindhi nationalist forces demanded that either the IDPs should not be allowed to enter Sindh or they should be strictly

confined to camps outside cities. They also demanded the registration of IDPs so that criminal and terrorist elements would be prevented from destabilizing the province.

The Deputy Convener of the MQM Coordination Committee, Dr. Farooq Sattar, demanded that the government make compulsory the registration of all displaced families in Sindh, Baluchistan, and Punjab and restrict the movement of IDPs to their makeshift camps. According to him, “a number of Taliban are also coming to Karachi and other areas in the cover of this migration and they can at any time launch suicide attacks or other acts of terrorism.”

The issue of IDPs also has led to a serious law and order problem in Sindh. The Sindhi nationalist parties, with the support of MQM, called a strike on May 23 to protest against the influx of IDPs. Two people were killed and several injured during the strike.

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In a show of unity, the Mohajir and Sindhi groups and parties demanded that the government rehabilitate IDPs somewhere near Swat in Mardan or Charsadda, arguing that there was no point in rehabilitating such people 1,000 miles away in Sindh. About 50,000 IDPs arrived in Sindh during the month of May and took shelter either in camps or with their relatives. The Pashtun-dominated Awami National Party (ANP) raised serious concerns over the manner in which the nationalist parties in Sindh were trying to

prevent the influx of IDPs. They accused MQM and Sindhi nationalist parties of not acknowledging the plight of IDPs and of pursuing a very parochial approach to an issue which is no less than a human catastrophe.

Ethnicity is a “time tomb” in the ethnically diverse province of Sindh, particularly Karachi. In the battle to gain control of the country’s financial and industrial hub, one can expect more violence and bloodshed. If the IDP issue is not resolved soon, it will exacerbate inter-ethnic tension. But even if it is, the presence of armed groups in Karachi and their nexus with the drug mafia and the underworld will remain a major destabilizing factor — threatening the peace in this large metropolis while jeopardizing Pakistan’s fragile stability.