

A Historical Analysis of the *Sindhī-Muhājir* Ethnic Conflict (1947-2000): Struggles and Shifts

Dr. Ahmad Hassan

*Associate Professor, Department of History, Government Mian
Muhammad Nawaz Sharif Associate College, Sargodha*

Abstract

This research paper is a historical analysis of the Sindhi-Mohajir conflict in Sindh, since the creation of Pakistan to the end of the twentieth century. The paper argues that after independence in 1947 the influx of immigrants from India was officially diverted from Punjab to Sindh, resulting in a drastic ethnic transformation in the region. The increased number of Urdu-speaking immigrants with strong economic and political status caused sense of deprivation among the local Sindhi-speaking people. This deprivation paved the way for the ethnic political parties that gave rise to the ethnicity-based conflicts. The central argument claims that the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM)'s politics played the most significant role in intensifying the Sindhi-Mohajir conflict in Sindh. To support this argument qualitative research method is used and the historical analysis is weaved with the help of secondary sources.

Key Words: Ethnicity, Migration, Mohajir, Pashtun, Sindhi

Introduction

Sindh's ethnic disputes have persisted since the Pakistan's creation in 1947; thus, they are not a recent development. Because Sindh is Pakistan's most ethnically varied and multifaceted province, it is more fluid and different in

terms of ethnic conflict than other provinces. In a similar vein, the socioeconomic implications for the entire country combined with the province's desperate ethnic makeup further fueled the ethnic blaze. Ethnicity has always been at the core of violence and unrest in Sindh, despite the fact that there are numerous other causes. The democratic, secular, and nonviolent cultures of the province of Sindh have made it stand out in the history of the region. With around 24 percent of the total population, it is the second-largest province in the country.¹ The Sindhis and Urdu-speaking people never really clashed before 1947, but the Sindhis have always stood up for their political and democratic rights. The area's residents' bitterness about being a part of the Bombay presidency led to the creation of Sindh province in 1936.² The province has always maintained its unique character and existed as a separate political entity.³ Although Sindh was not an area with a purely ethnic identity, neither the Baloch nor the Punjabi settlers were felt to be the target of significant hostility.⁴

Large-scale cross-border migration began as soon as the nation gained independence in 1947 and persisted until the start of the second decade in 1950. An estimate of immigrants in Pakistan in the middle of 1963 showed that the country had welcomed almost 10 million immigrants, or roughly 11% of the total population. However, this influx was not balanced. Just 0.7 million of the 7.2 million migrants who were expected to have reached Pakistan by 1951 landed in East Pakistan, while 6.5 million made their home in West Pakistan.⁵ Since most migrants came from East Punjab, India, West Punjab bore the brunt of the migrations in West Pakistan. Because of this enormous migration, it became a common perception that Punjab had made the greatest contribution to the rehabilitation of the migrants. However, other provinces like Sindh and NWFP are now in charge of rehabilitating the refugees.⁶ On the Governor-General's orders, the federal government ordered Sindh and Khairpur state to accept refugees in August 1948.⁷ As a result, 100,000 migrants were moved to the state of Khairpur and 200,000 to Sindh. In addition to housing the highest number of refugees in the nation,

Sindh had significant upheaval due to migration, which fundamentally changed the region's ethnic makeup whereas Punjab remained largely unaffected.⁸ The migration of around 800,000 Hindus from Sindh and Khairpur to India after the partition left their assets behind, which were seized by the refugees, leaving the native Sindhis feeling deprived.⁹ While the population increased by 11.9 percent between 1941 and 1951, the proportion of people whose native tongue is Sindhi fell from 3,563,000 to 3,349,000, or 5.3% in the province of Sindh and the state of Khairpur. In contrast to other languages, the proportion of people whose native tongue was Urdu increased from 32,000 to 479,000 throughout this period.¹⁰

This huge ethnic transformation of Sindh, laid the foundation of Sindhi-Mohajir ethnic conflict, paving the road for the emergence of ethnic political parties. This paper is an analysis of the rise and development of ethnic tension in the region with special focus on the role of political parties, especially Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), and PPP's government in intensifying this issue.

Post-Partition Internal Migrations to Sindh

Karachi, the capital of Sindh and the economic hub of the country, remains the city most contrived by migration. The Mohajir community constituted 57% of Karachi's population, although comprising only one-fifth of Sindh's overall population. The Mohajir community initially gained reputation, since they were from Muslim-minority areas and had suffered greatly during the Pakistan movement as well as after their migration to the newly established country.¹¹ The Mohajirs' strong participation in the Pakistan movement gave rise to the perception that they had more educated and polished intellectual tastes.¹² The 6.9% of Urdu-speaking people who migrated to Pakistan from the Muslim minority areas of India, were absorbed into Pakistan in 1947. Despite still being a minority, these Mohajirs continued to dominate politics, bureaucracy, and national business because of their esteemed intellectual standing. Due to their ownership of seven of the twelve main industrial groupings in Pakistan, immigrants from Bombay, particularly the Gujrati-

speaking Bohra, Khoja, and Memon communities, were the forerunners of the country's industrial sector.¹³ The growing industrialization of Sindh until the late 1950s drove Punjabi domestic migrants to Karachi in pursuit of employment opportunities. In the 1960s, Pashtuns from NWFP had a second wave of migration to Karachi and other urban regions in Sindh.¹⁴ Both of the immigrant groups saw economic prosperity, with Punjabis controlling the majority of civil and police administration and Pashtuns succeeding in the building and transportation industries.¹⁵ In addition to being the majority community in Karachi, the Mohajirs made up roughly 67% of the population in Hyderabad, 55% in Sukkur, 68% in Mir Pur Khas, and 55% in Nawab Shah. These numbers come from the 1951 census.¹⁶ These numbers show that the Mohajirs dominated Sindh's urban areas while native Sindhis dominated the province's rural areas, creating a clear demographic division.

The competition between local Sindhis and the immigrant Urdu-speaking migrants, for jobs and employments, made Sindhis suffer socially, culturally, educationally, and economically. The local Sindhis found it extremely difficult to keep up with the quickly shifting trends from Urdu to English, which caused them to fall behind in the competition.¹⁷ The implementation of the One Unit system in 1955 not only worsened the educational and economic disadvantages faced by the Sindhis, who were already facing the threat of Mohajir supremacy, but it also dealt a blow to their ethnic identity.

Deprivations Turning into Political Mobilization

It became vital to create political forums outside of the Muslim League where the problems of Sindhis from Mohajirs, Punjabis, and Pashtuns could be debated, addressed, and voiced due to their growing sense of economic and ethnic estrangement. G. M. Syed, a Muslim Leaguer since 1947, was among the first to question the dominance of Mohajirs and Punjabis in the country. He strongly objected to Sindhi being replaced with Urdu in Karachi and other Sindhi cities. The Sindhis were very fond of his ethno-nationalist ideas.¹⁸ In 1947, he founded the Sindh Progressive Party, which is now known as SPP, and in 1953, he founded Sindh *Awami Mahaz*, also known as

SAM. The latter was made up of four parties: *Dastoor* Party, Sindh *Awami Jamat* (SAJ), Sindh Jinnah Awami League (SJAL), and Sindh Hari Committee (SHC). The Jeeyay Sindh Movement, often known as JSM, was founded in the early 1960s and was made up of a number of group organizations operating under various identities, including a range of cultural enterprises. JSSF, or the Jeeyay Sindh Students Federation, was founded in 1966.¹⁹ These political platforms were all created to preserve the language and culture of Sindh, which were in risk of being replaced by Punjabi and Urdu, as well as the province's autonomy. The party structures, strategies, and objectives of all these platforms underwent incremental changes. The demands that changed over time and influenced Sindhi politics were those for a confederation, the breakup of One Unit and the restoration of Sindhi as the official language of the province, and the rights of Sindhis to be protected against Mohajir-Punjabi and Pashtun hegemony.²⁰ During the Bhutto administration (1971–77), the JSM split into two factions: Rasul Bakhsh Paleejo's Sindh Awami Tehreek (after known as Awami Tehreek) and G. M. Syed's Jeeyay Sindh Mahaz (previously known as the Sindh United Front). Two major events that radically altered the structure of Sindh's provincial politics occurred in 1970. The first thing that helped mitigate some of the alienation and deprivation was the establishment of the central government and the triumph of the Pakistan People's Party in the elections of the 1970s. The Sindh Provincial Assembly's July 1972 Sindhi Language Bill, which required Sindhi to be taught and promoted at the official level, was the second contributing element. Significant strife resulted from this, particularly between the Mohajirs and Sindhis. A second language riot occurred in July 1972, following the urban language riots that broke out in early 1971 over Sindhi language instruction for Mohajir pupils in Hyderabad's secondary schools.²¹ Although Urdu and Sindhi language instruction was mandatory from class 9 to class 12, language historian Tariq Rehman asserts that clause 6 of the language bill caused great concern among the Mohajirs because it allowed the use of Sindhi in government offices, court cases, and legislative

sessions. Z. A. Bhutto gave this measure his resounding support in passing it. 'We have offered our homes, our lands, and our lives to people from all over the world, including the Mohajirs of Sindh, the Pashtuns, and the Punjabis. What more can we do to express our love, devotion, and respect for our Mohajir brothers and for Pakistan?'²²

Due to Sindh's 19% representation in the federal bureaucracy and the division of this share into urban and rural categories for federal and provincial bureaucracies, the PPP government's policies were slanted towards Sindhis. The Mohajir community found this to be concerning as there was a 40% proportion of the population living in urban areas and a 60% share living in rural areas.²³ Mohajirs suffered a great lot in 1972 when Z. A. Bhutto nationalized industry in eleven key areas, including petrochemicals, electrical engineering, iron, steel, and basic auto assembly factories.²⁴ The government's actions deepened the divide between the Sindhi and Mohajir people. Karachi turned into a war zone starting in 1985 as a result of the language riots and other similar episodes, which further heightened tensions between the two ethnic groups.²⁵ Pashtuns in Karachi seldom had any opportunity to participate in politics or be represented in the legislature. In the 1971 elections, the Awami National Party (ANP) failed to win a single seat. Even though the PPP won the 1977 elections, it was unable to demonstrate strong performance in Sindh's cities and was unable to secure any seats from non-Sindhi areas. The Pakistan National Alliance (PNA)'s anti-Bhutto movement widened the chasm between the opposing Sindhis and Mohajir groups. The declaration of martial law in 1977, the supposed non-Sindhi affiliation with the military takeover, and the Movement for Restoration of Democracy (MRD), which was especially strong in rural Sindh in 1983, all served to emphasize the divisions between Sindhis and non-Sindhis. Mohajirs and Punjabis even moved from higher to lower Sindh as a result of it.²⁶

The Sindhi-Mohajir Ethnic Conflict

The objections of Sindhis were partially addressed by the PPP's 1988 election victory, but the conflict's multilateral ethnic components persisted. The Mohajir and Sindhi middle classes, who were headed toward conflict even before they showed up on the scene of ethnic communal strife, emerged during the 1970s and 1980s. It was concerning that there would be more violent riots as a result of the newly formed middle classes in both communities not having a political platform to air their growing ethnic concerns.²⁷ In 1978, the Mohajir community established the All-Pakistan Mohajir Student Organization (APMSO) to provide a unified forum for voicing their complaints. The PNA leadership's unfulfilled pledges to end the quota system and protect the Mohajirs' lives and property from Sindhi violence and oppression prompted Altaf Hussain to create the APMSO. The Mohajir Qoumi Movement (henceforth abbreviated as MQM) was started in 1984 by APMSO. During that period, student organizations affiliated with political parties and ethnic groupings dominated nearly all of Karachi's academic institutions.²⁸ Rumors circulated about a partnership and collaboration between the MQM and JSM leadership. The contentious reports on the meeting between G. M. Syed and Altaf Hussain created significant concerns about MQM within the establishment.²⁹ Although he never confirmed it, MQM leader Altaf Hussain described their alleged December 1985 encounter as a non-political get-together. Altaf Hussain articulated strong anti-Punjabi sentiments in Sindh during Zia's martial law government in August 1986. Along with accusing the center of being pro-Punjabi, he recommended that Mohajirs and Sindhis band together to resist Punjabi control. It was the first time in Sindhi history that there was a suggestion to join Sindhis and Mohajirs against a common peril.

During this period, the Russo-Afghan War caused an increase in the migration of Afghan refugees to Karachi, and Punjabis and Pashtuns saw a rise in success in the transportation and commerce industries.³⁰ In Pakistan, the Afghan Jihad made it simple to obtain firearms. Additionally, the growing numbers of firearms and the presence of Pashtuns and Punjabis in the

economic and transportation sectors heightened concerns about the Mohajir community's marginalization. Karachi was on the verge of ethnic unrest when popular local ethnic groupings were weaponized and turned into organized crime networks. These networks were even more enraged by Zia's military regime's anti-PPP actions. Karachi was a powder keg ready to blow by the mid-1980s. Owing to the Afghan Jihad and the influx of refugees, Karachi also absorbed the drug and armament culture, which developed into a mafia throughout the nation, but mostly in Karachi. The drug and guns mafia easily preyed on the youth, destroying the city's intellectual culture in the process. The spark that ignited Karachi's racial powder keg began in 1985 with a deadly traffic accident that claimed many lives. The incident later descended into riots that were manipulated by a wave of ethnic violence that grew more and more violent over time. Following this, there was an upsurge in violence involving the guns and drug trafficking mafia, Mohajirs, Pashtuns, Punjabis, and Sindhis. The targeted assassinations that took place between 1986 and 1987 divided Mohajirs from Punjabis and then from Pashtuns, hiding the real scope of Sindh's problems. According to Akmal Hussain, the Pashtun and Mohajir groups' susceptibility to being emotionally drawn into an ethnic conflict stems directly from Karachi's "transport problems"³¹ The MQM's political career started in 1987 when it won the local elections that were held under the military rule of Gen. Zia. The MQM won local, provincial, and national triumphs in 1988 when it secured the majority of seats in Karachi during the general elections. It was the first time MQM had the chance to run for Hyderabad and Karachi mayor-ships. The MQM's hold on power exacerbated the issue and made the province a battleground for unrest. Following the sniper attack in Hyderabad in late 1988, which claimed hundreds of lives, the MQM's policies sparked violent ethnic rioting between the Mohajir and Sindhi communities. Between May and June of 1990, hundreds of lives were lost as a result of the PPP and MQM split. The degree of unrest and violence in Sindh decreased when the PPP government, led by Benazir Bhutto, was overthrown due to allegations of corruption and

misbehavior.³² For the first time, the central government became involved in the conflict during this violent phase. There were three stages to the start of the operations against the MQM. To rid the province from criminals and the drug and arms mafias, governmental agencies faced the MQM for the first time in 1990, again in 1992, and a third time between 1993 and 1996. According to non-Pakistani commentators, MQM activists were harassed and staged confrontations throughout the operation. The MQM-Haqiqi faction, which was created by the Army and is now an arm of Pakistan's security services, was one of the breakaway groups known as the MQM.³³ Despite these shifts, the MQM remained a part of the ruling coalition in Sindh in 1988–89, 1990–92, and 1997–98 (with representation in the national government). The Mohajir Quami Movement became the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (unified national movement) after the party renamed itself in 1997.³⁴

Conclusion

Between 1988 and 1999, there were multiple attempts, both successful and unsuccessful, by the military regimes of Gen. Zia-ul-Haq and Gen. Pervez Musharraf, respectively, to contain violent strife. Conflict intensified in urban areas as the MQM fought for political dominance and was utilized by state security agencies and opposition political players to topple civil governments that were in control. From 1994 to 1996, the State security agencies organized a concerted campaign to curb MQM's militant activities. The MQM's military force was seriously undermined after a period of tremendous violence and human rights violations, and the party withdrew from its limited ethnic base in rural Sindh. However, successful operations against some of the most notorious bandit gangs were conducted, and popular support for these operations was bolstered by certain noteworthy instances of the legal culpability of misbehaving state employees. As a result, by the late 1990s, outlaw activity had significantly decreased.³⁵ Nevertheless, the devastating effects of ethnic conflict between Sindhis and Mohajirs in Sindh had taken 5,000 lives between 1983 and 1998. The MQM's electoral victories starting

in 2002 exacerbated Karachi's culture of violence and election manipulation.³⁶ Because to MQM's discriminatory actions with regard to the removal of public encroachments, the conversion of land utilities, and the regulations governing public transit, the non-Mohajir community's sense of insecurity grew more intense. To protect their existence and put an end to the "planned ethnic cleansing" from Karachi, Pashtuns were compelled to form a group.³⁷ It has been said that the fourth military dictatorship strongly encourages MQM strengthening. There are currently three major political parties in Sindh: the PPP represents both Sindhis and Balochis, the *Jamat-i-Islami* is the exclusive voice of Pashtuns, and the MQM represents the Mohajir population. I. A. Rehman and other critics claimed that the MQM and PPP were equally to blame for the growing divide between the traditional and modern Sindhis.³⁸

The major political parties of Sindh, the MQM and the PPP, have exploited ethnicity to their advantage, making the political climate extremely susceptible to racial clashes. If the parties believe that their alliance would benefit them, they will support one another in their struggles; but, if the alliance is not in their best interests politically, they will draw attention to the ethnic differences, inciting unrest and violence. However, the public's awareness of this love-hate relationship has grown, particularly since the MQM's militancy was disrupted by the rangers' operation. Now, the open animosity that existed between Sindhis and Mohajirs has given way to a subdued acceptance of one another.

References

¹ Kavita Tekchandani, "The Discrimination and Denial of Fundamental Rights for the People of Sindh," *Santa Clara Journal of International Law* 3 (2005), 99.

² Moonis Ahmar, "The Sindhī-Mohajir Conflict, Searching for Peace in Central and South Asia," (ed.) Montique Mekenkamp, *European Centre for Conflict Prevention* (London: Lynne Rienner Publisher, 2003), 452.

³ Tariq Rehman, "Language, Politics and Power in Pakistan: The Case of Sindh", *Ethnic Studies Report* XVII, no. I (January 1999). <http://www.apnaorg.com/research-papers.pdf/rahman-3-2-07.pdf>.

- ⁴ Muhammad Mushtaq, "Managing Ethnic Diversity and Federalism in Pakistan," *European Journal of Scientific Research* 33, no. 2, (2009), 279-294, <http://www.eurojournals.com/ejsr-33-2-07.pdf>.
- ⁵ Abbas Rashid and Farida Shaheed, "Pakistan: Ethno-Politics and Contending Elites," *Discussion Paper* no. 45 (June, 1993). [http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/\(httpAuxPages\)\(\)49E58DAD1F9390B6500565470/\\$file/dp45.pdf](http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/(httpAuxPages)()49E58DAD1F9390B6500565470/$file/dp45.pdf).
- ⁶ Khalid bin Sayeed, *Pakistan The Formative Phase 1857-1948* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1968), 266.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ Rashid and Shaheed, "Pakistan: Ethno-Politics and Contending Elites."
- ⁹ Yu. V. Gangovsky, *The Peoples of Pakistan: An Ethnic History* (Lahore: Peoples Publishing House, n.d.), 8.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ¹¹ Yu. V. Gangovsky & L. R. Gordon-Polansky, *A History of Pakistan (1947-1958)* (Lahore: People's Publishing House, n.d), 156.
- ¹² Altaf Hussain, *My Life's Journey: The Early Years 1966-1988* (London: Oxford University Press, 2011), XIV.
- ¹³ Muhammad Waseem, "Ethnic Conflict in Pakistan: The Case of MQM," *The Pakistan Development Review* 35, Part II (Winter 1996), 617-29.
- ¹⁴ Lionel Baixas, "Thematic Chronology of Mass Violence in Pakistan, 1947-2007," *Online Encyclopaedia of Mass Violence* (24 June 2008). http://www.massviolence.org/PdfVersion?id_article=112.
- ¹⁵ Hussain, *My Life's Journey: The Early Years 1966-1988*.
- ¹⁶ Rehman, "Language, Politics and Power in Pakistan."
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Christophe Jaffrelot, "Nationalism without a Nation: Pakistan Searching for an Identity," (ed.), Christophe Jaffrelot, *Pakistan, Nation, Nationalism and the State* (Lahore: Vanguard Books, 2005), 7.
- ¹⁹ Tahir Amin, *Ethno-national Movements of Pakistan* (Islamabad: Institute of Policy Studies, 1988), 64.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Resolution No. 21, 'Resolution about Sindh and Urdu Language Teaching,' Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education, 21 December 1970.
- ²² Jaffrelot, "Nationalism without a Nation."
- ²³ Arshi Saleem Hashmi, *Conflict Transformation from Ethnic Movement to Terrorist Movement: Case Studies of Tamils in Sri Lanka and Urban Sindh in Pakistan*, (Islamabad: Institute of Regional Studies, 2008).
- ²⁴ Waseem, "Ethnic Conflict in Pakistan."
- ²⁵ Rehman, "Language, Politics and Power in Pakistan."
- ²⁶ Shahid Kardar, *Polarization in the Regions: The Roots of Discontent* (Lahore: Progressive Publishers, 1988), 10.
- ²⁷ Jaffrelot, "Nationalism without a Nation."
- ²⁸ For details, Amin, *Ethno-national Movements of Pakistan*.
- ²⁹ Hussain, *My Life's Journey: The Early Years 1966-1988*.

³⁰ Yunas Samad, "In and Out of Power but not Down and Out: Mohajir Identity Politics in Pakistan," (ed.), Christophe Jaffrelot, *Pakistan, Nation, Nationalism and the State* (Lahore: Vanguard Books, 2005), 68.

³¹ Akmal Hussain, "The Karachi riots of December 1986: Crisis of State and Civil Society in Pakistan," Veena Das (ed.), *Mirrors of Violence. Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 188.

³² Ahmar, "The Sindhī-Mohajir Conflict," 457.

³³ Sudhir K. Singh, "Ethnicity and Regional Aspirations in Pakistan," (31 December 2001). <http://www.jammu-kashmir.com/insights/insight2002010d.html>.

³⁴ Haris Gazdar, "Brief Note on Violent Conflict in Sindh Ethnic, Sectarian, Tribal and Party-Political," (May 2008). http://www.researchcollective.org/Documents/Brief_Note_on-Violent_Conflict_in-Sindh.pdf.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Monty G. Marshall, "Major Episodes of Political Violence 1946-2011," *Centre for Systemic Peace*. <http://www.systemicpeace.org/warlist.htm>.

³⁷ Gazdar, "Brief Note on Violent Conflict in Sindh."

³⁸ I. A. Rehman, "Mirza's fruitless labour," *The News* (September 11, 2011). <http://www.jang.com.pk/thenews/sep2011-weekly/nos-11-09-2011/enc.htm>.