

Political Development Update

Political Violence Shackles Karachi

August 23, 2016

Introduction

On 22 August 2016, at least one person was killed and 11 others, including law enforcement officials and media personnel, were wounded when the activists of Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) resorted to large scale violence following incitement to violence in a telephonic address by the Movement's chief, Altaf Hussain. The violent party workers, which according to media reports numbered about 2000¹, ransacked shops, businesses and offices of private news channels including ARY News, Neo and Samaa, and set ablaze a police van in Zainab Market and Saddar areas of the city.² During the counteractions, the security forces sealed the headquarters of MQM – Nine Zero – located in Azizabad area of Karachi, as well as party offices in different parts of Karachi and other cities like Hyderabad, Mirpurkhas and Tando Allah Yar.³ At least 50 party workers, including some senior leaders of MQM, were also arrested in different parts of Karachi. The security forces also claimed to have recovered arms and ammunition along with anti-Pakistan literature from MQM's party headquarters.⁴ Moreover, the party website has also been shut down.⁵

Situational Background

The violent incident happened following Altaf Hussain's incitement to the MQM activists to attack the media offices during a telephonic address to a hunger strike camp which was setup by the party workers in front of Karachi Press Club (KPC) against the alleged social, economic and political victimization of Muhajir community during the ongoing security operation in the city.⁶ The MQM chief also incited the workers to chant anti-Pakistan slogans.⁷ The MQM chief

¹ Geo News, "Violent Protest by MQM Workers in Karachi, One Killed," *Geo News*, August 22, 2016.

² Imtiaz Ali, "Media Houses Attacked, Vehicles Set on Fire after Altaf's Vitriolic Speech," *Dawn*, August 23, 2106.

³ The Express Tribune, "Nisar Seeks UK Action against Altaf," *The Express Tribune*, August 24, 2016.

⁴ Dawn, "Rangers Take MQM Leaders into Custody, Seal Party Headquarters Nine Zero," *Dawn*, August 23, 2016.

⁵ Geo News, "MQM Offices Sealed, Five Leaders Detained after Altaf Speech," *Geo News*, August 23, 2106.

⁶ Ammar Suriya and Hafeez Tunio, "The strike will Go on: CM Secures Release of Six MQM Workers," *The Express Tribune*, August 19, 2016.

⁷ Mudaser Kazi and Faraz Khan, "Nine Zero Sealed after MQM Workers Attack Media House," *The Express Tribune*, August 22, 2016.

castigated the media channels for not giving adequate coverage to the party workers staging the hunger strike; to the contrary they were blamed for engaging in a vitriolic propaganda against the Party. It is pertinent to mention that the MQM workers had been staging a ‘hunger strike till death’ since August 2016 against the alleged social, economic and political victimization of Muhajir community and the extrajudicial killings and arrests of party workers during the ongoing security operation in the city.⁸

Analysis

Karachi is the largest metropolitan city of Pakistan with a population of about 20 million.⁹ Located on the Arabian Sea, it is the main seaport and the financial capital of the country. Since 2001, Karachi has remained an epicenter of political violence and terrorism and has witnessed frequent bomb blasts, target killings and extortions. The growing violence in Karachi is largely spearheaded by the Islamist militants, sectarian outfits, criminal gangs and military wings of political parties operating in the city. The political violence instigated by ethnic differences among diverse political parties has further wrecked the city’s social fabric, peace and tranquility. Subsequently, in September 2013, the law enforcement agencies, led by the paramilitary Rangers, launched a large scale security operation “clean-up” to eliminate criminal and militant elements operating in the city. The security operation resulted in 70 percent reduction in target killings, 85 percent reduction in extortions and 90 percent reduction in kidnappings for ransom.¹⁰

MQM, an ethnic and linguistic political party dominating the electorate in Karachi comprised mainly of Urdu-speaking people (also known as Ahl-e-Zuban) who migrated from India following the establishment of Pakistan in 1947. Currently, it occupies 24 seats in the National Assembly of Pakistan and retains fourth position among the political parties. It has been wielding political power in Karachi for three decades; however, the sharp demographic shifts of the city have posed challenges to the MQM’s iron grip over the city. The MQM, which has called for national protests against the arrests of their leaders and activists, has long been accused of employing violence, intimidation, extortions and other criminal tactics in order to muster political advantages and to control Karachi. On the other hand, the MQM has persistently been

⁸ Ammar Suriya and Hafeez Tunio, “The strike will Go on: CM Secures Release of Six MQM Workers,” *The Express Tribune*, August 19, 2016.

⁹ Global Security, “Karachi Political Violence,” *Global Security*, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/karachi.htm>.

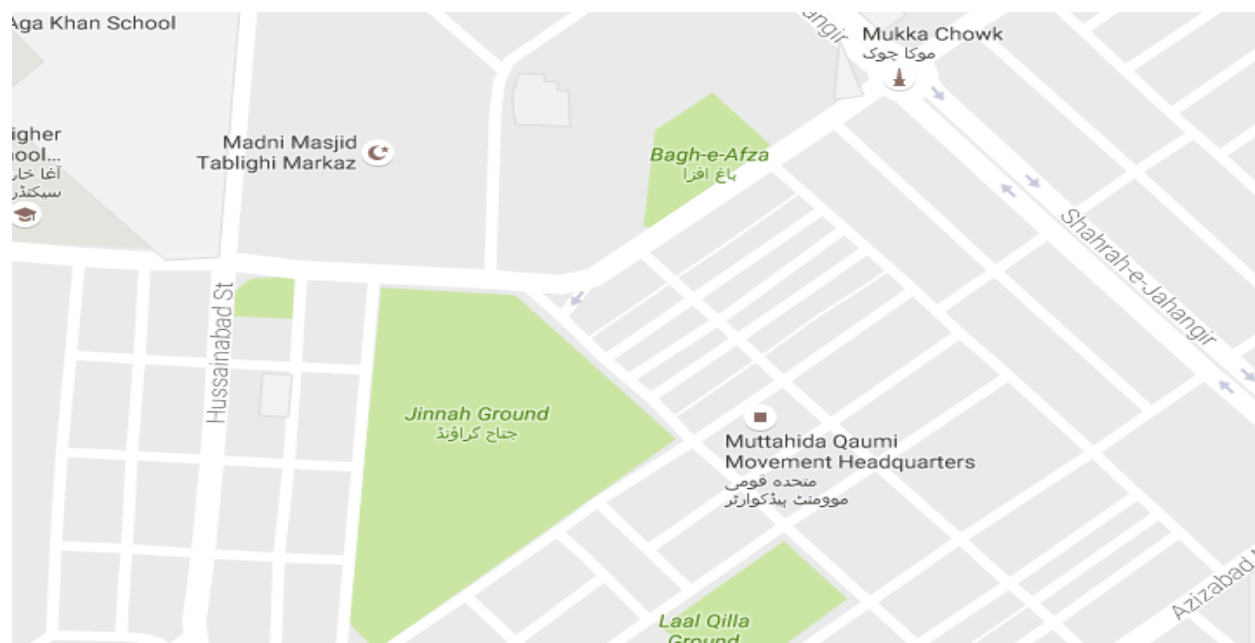
¹⁰ Ibid.

protesting against the alleged victimization of its activists and workers since the initiation of ongoing security operation in 2013. Although the MQM, during its 30-years of history, has remained part of national governments at various occasions; nonetheless, its primo, Altaf Hussain, remains in self-imposed exile in London where he is being investigated for money-laundering charges.

Implications

Following large scale violence stimulated by the MQM workers, both civil and military authorities have expressed their resolve to maintain law and order in the metropolitan city and to bring the miscreants and instigators to justice. Conversely, the MQM has called for a strike across the metropolitan city of Karachi for August 23, 2016. However, the government has urged the people to carry on with their businesses.¹¹ Keeping in view the modus operandi of MQM activists, further violent protest demonstrations and subsequent security swoops by law enforcement agencies to counter likely violent actions cannot be ruled out.

Locations Map



¹¹ Global Times, “Pakistani Authorities Seal Political Party's Headquarters after Violence,” *Global Times*, August 23, 2016.

Photo Gallery



A vehicle set ablaze by violent protesters, Geo News, August 22, 2016.



Violence propelled by protesters, Geo News, August 22, 2016.



MQM leader, Farooq Sattar, taken into custody by Rangers, The Express Tribune, August 23, 2016.



Volunteers helping the wounded, Geo News, August 22, 2016.