

The Vulnerability of Karachi

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(1 January 2008)

The wound inflicted on the body politic of Pakistan by the judicial murder of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto has not healed despite the passage of twenty-eight long years. Benazir was a balm for that wound, and her assassination has not only removed the balm but has opened a new wound for which there is no obvious salve.

Her assassination and the “law and order” situation it has created have brought into focus a number of issues that a simple resolution of the constitutional crisis will not overcome. I have pinpointed these issues many times over the last decade, especially in times of crisis, but neither the media nor the establishment or the politicians have taken them seriously. Two of these issues are important. The first deals with the nature of the “law and order” situation and the second with the vulnerability of Karachi. Both are closely interrelated.

First, the looting, arson and destruction of property that has taken place is not a simple “law and order” situation. It must be understood that you cannot create small islands of insensitive and arrogant affluence in a sea of increasing poverty and deprivation on the one hand, and a ruthlessly manipulated political and judicial dispensation on the other.

In the eight years of Musharraf’s rule, already inadequate public health and education systems have collapsed. Private education is far too expensive for the poor to afford and so is public sector higher education. This has effectively curtailed social and economic mobility in an era where social values are changing and new aspirations are surfacing. In the last eight years, there has been no investment in social housing and so people are now forced to live on the streets, which they did not do before. Unemployment has doubled in low-income areas, and with it organised street crime has increased enormously. Inflation has broken the back of the poor while all around them are symbols of affluence and consumerism, promoted by the media, billboards and aggressive advertising by banks and leasing companies. The world of Pakistan has, in the last few years, been clearly divided between the haves and those who can-never-have as opposed to the have-nots.

Interviews with persons standing in long queues at the utility stores tell us that people wait there for hours just to save Rs 50 per month, while above the utility stores are hoardings advertising Toyota cars and luxury items. Other interviews inform us that an increasing number of people who previously took a bus to work now walk six to eight kilometres to and from work just to save Rs 15 per day, while they are surrounded by an increasing sea of new cars and motorcycles. One news item that the press has not carried is that during the recent disturbances in Karachi, not only cell phones but a number of bicycles were also snatched. This is the situation in Karachi, however the situation in the rural areas and small towns of our province is much worse. To add salt to these wounds, our President and Prime Minister have informed us on more than one occasion that Pakistani society is rich and affluent since it has purchased more cars, TV sets, motorcycles and cell phones than ever before in its history!

Travelling in different parts of Karachi and from the city to beyond Ghagar Phatak via the National Highway as I did on 30 December 2007, you see nothing but burnt-out cars, trucks and trailers; universities and schools that have been attacked; factories, government

buildings and banks, petrol pumps and “posh” food outlets that have been destroyed – all symbols of exploitation: institutions where the poor cannot afford to study; businesses where they cannot get jobs; government offices where they have to pay bribes and where they are insulted and abused. This is not a “law and order” situation but an outpouring, not only of grief but also of anger against corruption, injustice and hunger. Many of the food-carrying vehicles were looted, and around their burnt remains you can still see what is left of the *atta* and sugar they were carrying. It is important to note that along the Highway, no *khokhas*, small eating places or modest shops had been burnt or damaged.

The second issue is the vulnerability of Karachi. It must be understood that unless issues related to political relationships, poverty, justice and equity are resolved, this vulnerability will grow. The city depends on its hinterland for everything: for water, food and the livelihoods of a large section of the population who work in the wholesale markets and the services sector. Government institutions, especially federal ones that control much of the land and employment-generating assets of the city, have looted these assets for their own benefit. The persons who man these institutions and the politicians who support them have to realise that Karachi is the capital of Sindh and, as such, its resources are primarily for the people of Sindh, especially for the betterment of the province’s less-developed regions. They have to realise that the city cannot survive a four to five day closure of the highways that supply it with food and the conduits that supply it with water, and in the absence of these there will only be looting and anarchy, the beginnings of which we have witnessed in the last few days. Politicians have to realise that in the long run, dependence on the army to guarantee the continuation of these supplies is not an option that should be pursued, for it damages the democratic process and skews the relationship between the different actors in Sindh’s political drama. The only solution lies in striving for a broad-based consensus on how the province is to be governed and developed. This consensus should not be based on political opportunism and so-called pragmatism but on an understanding of history, and on moral and ethical values which alone can guarantee development and relationships based on justice and equity. In the absence of such a consensus, Karachi will remain vulnerable and the rest of Sindh will remain alienated from it.