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PAKISTAN'S
DARK
HEART

Karachi is dangerous, chaotic,
ungovernable—and essential
to global stability



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Karachi is doomed. Karachi is indestructible.

Drink tea with Hussein Hazari at his tiny shop in the city's old quarter, and both statements feel true. Hazari is a neat, guarded man who wears a spotless white robe and a gold-laced skullcap. He sits with his constantly beeping BlackBerry amid shelves stacked with spray paint, car polish and adhesives. Recently Hazari began selling another product: gun lubricant. "I thought it was worth a try, because weapons are so readily available here," he says.

That's an understatement. More than a thousand people died last year in ethnic turf wars fueled by heavily armed supporters of Karachi's main political parties, perishing in street battles fought with assault rifles, machine guns and grenades. Some victims were decapitated. An official likened a Cabinet briefing on the violence to "watching the trailer of a horror movie."

There could be a sequel. Despite the heavy presence of Rangers—the government's internal security force—there are fears the city is entering an even more dangerous era. This is worrying because what happens in Karachi has global implications. With a population of 18 million, it is Pakistan's largest city and commercial capital, providing at least half its tax revenues. "You cannot destroy Pakistan by destroying cities like Islamabad, Lahore and Peshawar," says Mustafa Syed Kamal, the city's fast-talking former mayor. "You have to destabilize Karachi first, because it is Pakistan's economic backbone, its oxygen provider."

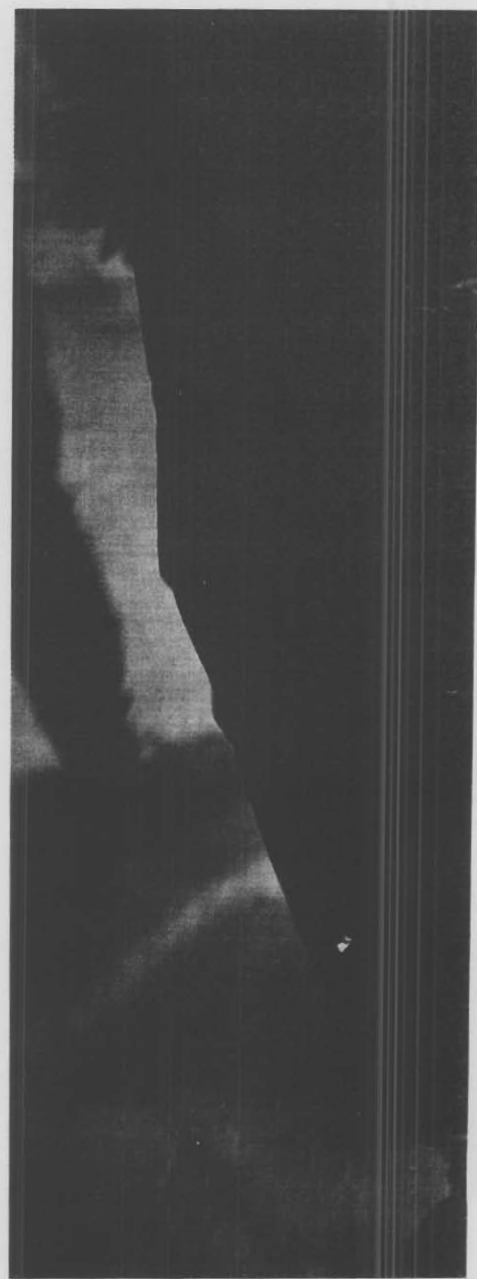
Karachi is a fractured city in a nuclear-

armed and perhaps failing state, and its problems are Pakistan's. And Pakistan's belong to us all. The city's port has been part of a vital supply line to U.S. and coalition troops in landlocked Afghanistan. That route was closed in late November after NATO air strikes killed 25 Pakistani soldiers and pushed U.S. relations with the country—already in free fall since the Navy SEAL operation that killed Osama bin Laden in May—to an all-time low.

Internally, Pakistan is dangerously divided. The ongoing "memogate" scandal has exposed tensions between the country's powerful military and the weak civilian administration of President Asif Ali Zardari. The leak of the unsigned memo, in which Islamabad apparently asks for the Pentagon's help to divert a feared military coup, forced the resignation of Pakistan's ambassador to Washington and could ultimately topple Zardari himself.

Unsurprisingly, British author, academic and terrorism analyst Anatol Lieven calls Pakistan "perhaps the biggest and wobbliest domino on the world stage." And the most dramatic symbol of that instability is Karachi. A recent surge in violence has sealed its reputation as life-threatening and unlivable. In November, global consulting firm Mercer ranked it 216th out of 221 cities in a personal-safety survey that took into account not just sectarian and ethnic unrest, but also terrorist attacks.

Of those, there have been plenty. On May 22, militants from the Pakistani Taliban seized the Mehran naval air base in



Karachi to avenge bin Laden's death. The base was retaken only after a 12-hour battle involving hundreds of Pakistani troops. Four months later, a Taliban suicide bomber killed eight people outside the home of Chaudhry Mohammad Aslam, Karachi's senior superintendent of police. In 2010 the Taliban's military chief, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, was captured not in some stifling mountain hideout but in Karachi.

Take away political violence, and Karachi is still plagued by the common variety—armed robbery, kidnappings for ransom, murder—with only 30,000 underpaid police to tackle it all. And the city is still afflicted by the problems of a fast-growing metropolis: pollution, bad sanitation, slums and a transport system so overburdened that thousands



of Karachiites commute to work on bus roofs. Chronic power shortages routinely plunge the City of Lights (as it was known in a bygone era) into darkness. In September, monsoon rains caused floods that brought the city to a halt. "It is perhaps Asia's worst-governed megacity," says Arif Hasan, an eminent Karachi architect and town planner.

When it comes to buying weapons, however, Karachi is king. That Karachi traders must sell gun lubricant to make ends meet shows just how far the city has sunk. Or it could be interpreted another way: as an example of the indomitable entrepreneurial spirit that makes this filthy, frenetic place a magnet for so many Pakistanis. For as well as representing Pakistan's dysfunction, Karachi embodies

Living in fear *An ambulance crew carries a gunshot victim to the hospital. More than a thousand people died in Karachi's sectarian violence last year*



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its resilience. Wander Hazari's bustling neighborhood and you realize that what energizes Karachi is not religion or ethnicity or politics, but commerce and its universal corollary: the dream of a better life.

A Plague on All Their Houses

WAR, TRADE AND MIGRATION SHAPED modern Karachi and shape it still. Its natural harbor and accessibility to the interior of Sindh province (of which Karachi is the capital) and Central Asia ensured its rapid expansion during British colonial times. By the early 1940s, it was a predominantly Sindhi-speaking city of fewer than 500,000 people, half of them Hindus. Then came the bloody partition of India in 1947. Most of Karachi's Hindus fled to India, while huge numbers of India's Urdu-speaking

Muslims sought refuge in Karachi. By the 1950s this influx had tripled the city's population, which continues to multiply. According to a projection by the Asian Development Bank, Karachi could be home to at least 26 million by 2020.

Karachi's Urdu speakers called themselves Mohajirs, from the Arabic for *migrant*, and in the 1980s formed the political party that dominates the city today. The Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) owes its rise to "efficient organization and willingness to use violence and intimidation to achieve its goals," according to the U.S. State Department. But Karachi's ethnic makeup is changing, and this is challenging MQM's traditional dominance.

The city's relative prosperity has long lured people from across the country. However, military operations against the Taliban in northwest Pakistan have accelerated the influx of ethnic Pashtun and boosted the influence of the Awami National Party (ANP), which claims to represent them. The ANP won two seats in Sindh's 168-seat provincial assembly in the 2008 polls—an electoral first for the party.

MQM's main rival—and also its partner in Pakistan's shaky ruling coalition—is the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which was led by Benazir Bhutto until her assassination four years ago. In Karachi, the PPP traditionally represents the interests of ethnic Sindhis, whose numbers have been boosted by refugees from last year's devastating floods. Many Sindhis accuse the MQM of attempting to separate Karachi from the rest of the province and turn it into a Mohajir enclave.

In short, Karachi is riven by complex ethnic and political fault lines, which intersect bafflingly with local criminal interests and national affairs. And when every resource—every job, house or bucket of clean water—is scarce, and every vote coveted, it is no surprise that the prospect of civic harmony feels remote.

The first battle in Karachi's current turf war erupted in May 2007. After General Pervez Musharraf, then President of Pakistan, suspended Iftikhar Chaudhry as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, anti-Musharraf lawyers sponsored Chaudhry's visit to Karachi. The MQM, which supported Musharraf, was blamed for fomenting what followed: deadly clashes with the lawyers, and PPP and ANP loyalists. Karachi burned and corpses choked the streets.

The MQM's headquarters lie in a middle-class neighborhood, guarded by young men in baseball caps and aviator shades. It was there that I met ex-mayor Kamal. Well-groomed, Western-educated and attired in chinos and navy blue blazers, Kamal is credited with improving the

city's decrepit infrastructure, and embodies what Lieven has called "the dream ... of Karachi as a Muslim Singapore on the Arabian Sea." As an MQM politician, however, Kamal is bitter about the partisanship that is tearing his home city apart.

Kamal blames the city's descent into lawlessness on Zulfiqar Mirza—a Sindh ultranationalist who, as the PPP's Home Minister of Sindh province, controlled the Karachi police. The police, it is universally agreed, did nothing to stop this year's violence. Mirza has railed publicly against the MQM: "For your own sake, for Pakistan's sake, for Karachi's sake, stand up and rid us of these wretched people," he fumed in July. At least a dozen people were killed in the hours that followed. Mirza later resigned, saying, "I have raised my voice against violence in this city and will continue to do so."

Doves and Hawks

THAT THE MQM, PPP AND ANP HAVE MILITANT armed wings is one of Karachi's worst-kept secrets. Their leaders deny this (although Kamal concedes that many MQM supporters own licensed weapons "for self-defense") and, in strikingly similar terms, portray themselves not as perpetrators of violence but as its peace-loving victims. Kamal gave me a VCD titled *Genocide of Mohajir Nation*. Over footage of mutilated corpses, a narrator accused ANP "mercenaries" of joining forces with PPP "terrorists" to slaughter MQM supporters last year. A sign at the entrance to the MQM's headquarters reads STREET OF LOVE AND PEACE.

Across town, at the ANP's office—situated in a mansion in Karachi's poshest district—are a white dove and a sign reading PEACE ON EARTH. Not that Shahi Syed, the president of the ANP Sindh chapter and the mansion's owner, is much of a dove. He is a hulking, square-jawed Pashtun who accuses the MQM of ethnic cleansing, extortion and vote rigging. Ordinary Mohajirs are "good, educated, helpful people," he says. "But MQM is a terrorist group that won't allow us to make peace with the Urdu-speaking community." Hundreds of ANP activists and ordinary Pashtun died in this year's violence, claims Syed.

The gulf between Karachi's politi-

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cal leaders is mirrored on the streets. "Employers only give jobs to members of their own ethnic group," says Abdul Ahad, a Kashmiri resident of the Mohajir-dominated district of Nazimabad. "People have stopped trusting one another." That's also true in Qasbah Colony, where some of the worst bloodshed recently occurred. The neighborhood clings to a dusty ridge in northern Karachi. Hanging from the rebar that sprout from rooftops are tattered ANP and MQM flags. Party initials are graffitied on the walls like gangland tags.

Mohammad Kashif, 18, showed off three bullet holes in his family's tea shop. Fighting broke out after a neighbor was killed and "cut to pieces" while buying bread in a Pashtun area, he says. Kashif hid in his house for three days until the Rangers arrived to enforce a fragile truce. "There's still a lot of uncertainty," says Kashif. "The situation could get bad again."

Achieving peace is not the only critical issue dividing Karachi's politicians. For the past two years, this megacity has been in an administrative limbo, while the PPP and MQM squabble over how it should be run: by a locally elected government or centrally appointed bureaucrats. "Nobody



is talking about how essential services will be provided to the citizens," says Noman Ahmed, an architect and town planner with the NED University of Engineering and Technology. "That appears to be a sideline." Karachi remains a maximum city with minimum governance.

The MQM's decline is inevitable, believes Shahnawaz Farooqi, because despite its political stranglehold the party has done little to improve city life. For Farooqi—a Mohajir who writes for the *Daily Jasarat*, a newspaper owned by Jamaat-e-Islami, Pakistan's oldest religious party—Karachi is proof that "secular forces are failing in every respect" and that "religious parties will emerge as a strong political force on their own merit." He points to post-Mubarak Egypt, where Islamic parties won at least two-thirds of the seats in recent parliamentary elections.

However, Pakistan's religious parties fared poorly in the last national elections, in 2008. The religious coalition known as the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal lost 50 out of 272 seats in the assembly, falling to a total of just six. Even if they were to establish a presence in provincial assemblies like Sindh's, there is no guarantee

Meltdown Commuters wait to pass a street blockade erected in protest against blackouts. The city is beset with infrastructural woes

religious parties would run Karachi any better. A December report by Crisis Group, the Brussels-based think tank, says that they are "committed to a narrow partisan agenda and willing to defend it through violence"—a description that could apply equally to Karachi's secular parties.

Salvation in Growth

SO IS THERE ANY GOOD NEWS? GHAZI Salahuddin, a member of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCPP) who investigated the recent violence, has mixed feelings. On one hand, he takes heart in Karachi's growing civic-mindedness, pointing to successful local nonprofits such as the Citizens Foundation, which has built hundreds of schools across Pakistan, or Shehri, an environmental group that has fought to save city parks from land-grabbers. On the other, he wonders whether such efforts will be

"overwhelmed by the darkness." By that, he means continued political bloodshed. "While gangs of land-grabbers and mafias have tried to exploit the breakdown of law and order," reported the HRCPP in September, "they do not appear to be the main directors of the horrible game of death and destruction; that distinction belongs to more powerful political groups."

If Karachi's future depends upon its politicians, then it's hard to be optimistic. "None of the parties negotiate on principles," says town planner Hasan, who is also chairman of the Urban Resource Centre, a highly respected nonprofit that documents Karachi's many infrastructural challenges. "They negotiate on the basis of guarding their turf, then consolidating and expanding it."

Yet Hasan finds cause for hope in an unusual place: urbanization. The same rapid expansion that has crippled the city might also liberate it by throwing people together, he says, raising expectations and creating "a new world with new freedoms [and] aspirations that are changing the feudal relations and mind-set of Pakistani society."

At Karachi's universities, for example, women students often outnumber men, even in traditionally male-dominated subjects. "I taught a batch of 35 students in which 34 were girls," recalls the architect Ahmed, who is also NED University's chairman. These young women also seem to be marrying much later, as are the men. "For the first time in the history of this city, you have an overwhelming majority of unmarried adolescents, which is enough to change family structures and gender relations," says Hasan. "Project these figures 10 years from now and you will have a totally different Karachi."

The forces of urbanization benefit not only Karachi's middle classes but also its new arrivals. In the past, says Ahmed, Pashtun men worked in Karachi and remitted their earnings to families in the conservative hinterlands. Now they are bringing their families with them—not to "Talibanize" the city, as MQM propagandists put it, but to gain access to jobs, health care and education. "They even send their girls to school, which is not something they'd do back in their hometowns."

Karachi is doomed, Karachi is indestructible. Meet students on the NED campus, and you sense they are battling with the same contradiction. They despair of ever dislodging the politicians they unanimously blame for the city's dysfunction. But they still have hope for their hyperkinetic hometown. When I asked Fariha Sajid, a 21-year-old architecture student, which part of Karachi was her favorite, she shot me a challenging look. "All of it," she replied. ■