

MQM and the Politics of Ethnicity in Sindh: A Case Study of Benazir's first Government (1988-1990)

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Abstract

When Benazir came into power in 1988, the ethnic violence was at its peak. The Muhajirs, Pashtuns and Sindhi nationalists were at daggers drawn with each other. The MQM was demanding a separate province for the Muhajir community. The MQM was also engaged in armed conflicts with the Pashtun community. The violence also reached in universities where the student unions of these ethnic groups were also involved in armed conflicts against each other. So, the ethnic conflicts were one of the major challenges for Benazir's government. Benazir took different steps to resolve the issue. She made an alliance with the MQM and formed coalition government with it in Sindh and at Centre, in order to subdue the ethnic violence. On the other hand, she also brought some Sindhi Nationalists in the government. But efforts to appease all did not bore desired results. The alliance with MQM did not last long due to clash of political interest and due to the pressure of hardliners in both parties. The present study is an effort to bring into limelight the politics MQM in spreading ethnic violence in Sindh. It also highlights that how did Benazir's government deal with ethnic violence and how far she was successful to address the ethnic conflicts in the province. The paper also analyses the causes of ethnic violence and its impact on Benazir's first government.

Keywords: Benazir, MQM, Muhajir, Sindh, Sindhi, Nationalists

The Beginning of Ethnic Conflict

The bloody partition of India had displaced millions of people from their homes. The most affected province was the Punjab where indiscriminate massacre had compelled the Muslims to migrate towards Pakistan. The people who migrated from the Indian Punjab were rehabilitated in the province of Pakistani Punjab. But there are a good number of people from north India who flew to Pakistan on their own choice. Unlike their Punjabi counterparts, they were well educated people, and they had played a key role in the formation of Pakistan. Perhaps they were looking for a good prospect in the new country. A good number of these migrants were in the bureaucracy and the military. Moreover, many of them were also businessmen and they dominated over the economy of the country until the first decade of the independence. Unlike the migrants from Punjab, these Urdu speaking Muhajirs did not assimilate in the local culture and maintained their separate identity.¹ These migrant people chose the word *muhajir* for themselves. They nourished the claim that Muslim refugees fleeing India for Pakistan were engaged in an act of heroic sacrifice comparable to that of the Companion of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in seventh century who left their homes and property in Makkah for the sake of Islam and migrated to Medina.²

The ethnic conflict in Sindh began since the arrival of migrants from after the partition of sub-continent in 1947 and their settlement in urban parts of Sindh like Karachi, Hyderabad and Sukkur. The local people suspected that the influx of migrants would turn them minority in their own province, therefore they objected on their mass rehabilitation. The local people did not accept the migrants wholeheartedly and the conflict between them was deepened over the time on different issues. The first major issue which largely annoyed the local people was the separation of Karachi from the rest of the province. Sindhi Nationalists objected but they were too weak to assert any pressure on the government.³ The muhajir were more powerful because they occupied key positions in the government. Liaquat

Ali, the prime minister, also belonged to Muhajir community. The *Muhajir* community which was well educated (the literacy rate in muhajir was 70% while in local Sindhi it was just 10%) as compared to local Sindhis founded employment in public sector and elsewhere while the local people complained that emigrants were recruited on their place. They demanded separate quota for both communities at national and provincial level. Language was another big issue between both ethnic communities. The local wanted Sindhi to be the provincial language and they demanded that it should be the medium of instruction at least till primary level. On the other hand, the *Mujahir* community opposed the movement and insisted that only Urdu which is the national language should be the medium of instruction at all educational level.⁴

ZA Bhutto's Policy towards Muhajirs

ZA Bhutto was the first prime minister of the country who was from rural Sindh. The emergence of ZA Bhutto as prime minister of the country had changed the fate of muhajir community. The muhajir families like Bohra, Khoja and Memon were the vanguard of the industrialisation and were dominant in the business of the country.⁵ They largely benefited from the economic policies of President Ayub Khan during 1960s and amassed a large sum of wealth. ZA Bhutto broke their dominancy by nationalising their industries in 1970s. He declared Sindhi as a compulsory language in Sindh at par with Urdu.⁶ The muhajirs did not like this move and violence broke out in Karachi and Hyderabad.⁷ The Urdu speaking students of Karachi set fire the record of Sindhi language department. ZA Bhutto also fixed job quota for urban and rural Sindh which decreased the entry of muhajirs into civil bureaucracy and elsewhere in public sector. The muhajirs who were not affiliated with a single political party were in fact began to organise as a political force during the era of ZA Bhutto. Their politics before the era of ZA Bhutto largely relied on the religion and many of them were against to use the ethnic identity for their political gain.⁸

Arrival of Pashtun Community

The ethnic conflict in Sindh was further escalated due to the arrival of Pashtun community. A large number of Pashtuns had come to Karachi to seek employment while some of them also started their own small businesses. These people later permanently settled in Karachi and emerged as a large ethnic group. Karachi became the largest city of Pashtun population in Pakistan. Far away from their homeland, the Pashtun community became more united and well organised as compared to the other communities residing in Karachi. The community was also deeply involved in the continuing ethnic conflicts among the different groups. The ethnic conflicts turned violent, particularly during President Zia ul Haq's regime and the Pashtun community was also involved in it.⁹ During Zia regime many Afghan refugees came to Karachi where they were patronised by the Pashtun community.¹⁰ The Muhajir raised objection on this illegal settlement of Afghans. The Pashtun community turned violent against the muhajirs because its stance against the settlement of Afghan refugees. The escalation of ethnic violence compelled the Muhajirs to get united on the bases of ethnicity.

The policies of President Zia ul Haq were also instrumental in creating ethnic violence in Sindh province because it suited him to perpetuate his rule.¹¹ As he earlier did in Punjab, now he wanted to create political leadership which would challenge the supremacy of the PPP in Sindh.¹² He encouraged the Muhajirs to create their own political party on ethnic basis and get united under the leadership of Altaf Hussain. So, in March 1984, a group of young Muhajirs, led by Altaf Hussain, converted the All-Pakistan Muhajir Students Organisation (APMSO), which they had formed in 1978, into the Muhajir Quami Movement (MQM), an exclusively Muhajir political group advocating the rights of Muhajirs.¹³ Backed by the establishment in its early days, the MQM became the Master of Urban Sindh. Its politics had the strong sentiments of violence since beginning. The party obtained overwhelming victory in the non-party based local elections held under Zia's regime in 1987. As the national political parties including PPP had shown lack of interest in the

elections because it was held on non-party based, so the vacuum was filled by the MQM.¹⁴ The creation of MQM reduced the PPP's support base in big cities. Earlier, the vote bank of muhajirs was divided into different political parties such as *Jammat-i-Islami* (JI) and *Jamiat-e- Ulema-e- Pakistan* (JUP). But now the MQM emerged as the sole representator of the Muhajir community and in a position perform well in electoral politics. The Victory of MQM in local bodies was the vivid proof that the Muhajirs were rallied behind the MQM. However, the MQM victory in the election increased the ethnic tension in Sindh. Having enough protection of the government, the MQM workers began to target the Sindhi and Pashtun community.

Inheritance of Ethnic Violence

Benazir inherited the ethnic violence of Sindh from Zia's government. The tension between different ethnic groups was in its peak before the election of Benazir as Prime Minister. On 30 September 1988, just two months before she took power, around 200 muhajir were indiscriminately killed in Hyderabad.¹⁵ This incident led to a series of ethnic violence elsewhere in the province. In retaliation, the MQM supporters killed several Sindhis in Karachi. The violence spread hatred between Sindhi nationalists and Muhajirs.

The outcomes of the 1988 polls were clear indication that PPP would be the next ruler of the Sindh. The PPP obtained 67 out of 100 seats but the performance of MQM in urban Sindh was also astonishing. It emerged as the second largest party in Sindh by securing 27 seats. It also managed to secure of 13 seats in the national assembly and emerged as third largest party in the National Assembly.¹⁶

In spite of this overwhelming victory, in the case of Sindh, Benazir had to work under dual pressure. Since Sindh was the main support base of the PPP, and the local Sindhi had firmly stood with Benazir during her political struggle against the Zia's regime. It was the only province where Movement for the Restoration of Democracy" (MRD), launched by the PPP and other anti-Zia parties in 1981, got some success. Hence, Benazir was careful not to take such policy measures which would have

annoyed the people of interior Sindh and put adverse effect on the PPP's popularity. On the other, there was the problem of the maintenance of law and order which was largely disturbed due to the ethnic rivalry among the different groups.¹⁷ Besides Muhajirs and Pashtuns, the Sindhi nationalists were also responsible for that conflict. In this regard, Benazir had to take calculated steps to reduce the conflict. Her tilt in favour of one ethnic group would have annoyed the others and could further mount the ethnic tension.

Benazir's cooperation with the MQM

Despite its absolute majority in the Sindh provincial assembly, the PPP decided to form coalition government with the MQM because it needed the MQM's support in the national assembly to get elected Benazir as Prime Minister.¹⁸ Besides, Benazir viewed that MQM's participation in Sindh government was important for mitigating ethnic tension in Sindh. A 59-point agreement, called the Karachi Accord, was signed, between PPP and MQM on 2 December 1988 to achieve united and unstratified society and reunification of rural and urban population of Sindh.¹⁹ The agreement contained several demands of MQM including repatriation of about 250000 Bihari who were living in Bangladesh and the release of MQM workers and supporters who were arrested during ethnic riots. The alliance seemed essential for both parties; the MQM needed the dominant strength of the PPP in Sindh to achieve its demands. Besides, the MQM had been at that time indulged in violent conflicts with other ethnic communities of the province such as Pashtun, Baloch and Punjabi. It found it a better opportunity to strengthen itself politically.²⁰ While the PPP had to keep the MQM on its side in order to not lose its control over the national assembly and to run the affairs of Sindh province smoothly.

However, the PPP's coalition with the MQM was not smooth sailing. The central committee of the MQM issued a statement in March 1989, just few months after the formation of coalition government expressing their extreme dissatisfaction over the non-implementation of the Karachi Accord. Among their grievances were that the MQM prisoners had not been released,

that the joint committee to oversee the implementation of the Accord had not been set up, and that important decisions were being made behind the back of the MQM ministers. Encouraged by PPP-MQM differences, Chaudhary Shujaat Hussain and Sheikh Rashid, the then close associates of Nawaz Sharif went to Karachi to convince MQM to break its alliance with the PPP. However, they failed in their mission. Altaf Husain reaffirmed to continue the alliance despite MQM differences over certain issues with the PPP.

Politics of Sindh National Front

Benazir had to face strong resistance from the Sindhi nationalists during her first tenure who were instrumental in promoting ethnic violence and disturbing the law-and-order situation in Sindh. Particularly, Sindh National Front (SNF), headed by Mumtaz Ali Bhutto, the paternal uncle of the Prime Minister, and *Jiye Sindh*, headed by Ghulam Murtaza Syed, an octogenarian nationalist, was at the forefront. Particularly, G.M. Syed was known his demand of Sindhu Desh and for his fiery and controversial speeches that had often fuelled ethnic rift in the province.²¹ The ethnic Sindhis accounted for only a little more than 50% of the provincial population and were fearful of dropping to a minority status in their own native land.²² They were already a minority in urban Sindh. For example, in Karachi their population was below 10 per cent. Sindhi nationalists had expressed their resentment over the growing power of the *Muhajirs* and considered them a potential threat to local Sindhis. The Sindhi nationalist were unhappy because *Muhajirs* had maintain their separate identity and they did not merge in the local society. There was a growing fear among the local Sindhis that Muhajirs had planning to separate the urban territory from the interior Sindh and wanted to declare it a separate province. That was the backdrop of Sindhi- Muhajir conflict.

During Sindhi- *Muhajir* conflict Benazir tried to be neutral. The Muhajirs were the part of her coalition government while local Sindhis were her support base and the PPP obtained overwhelming victory from the interior Sindh. However, this non-interventionist policy did not work for long. The situation in

the province was going from bad to worse with the passage of time. The ethnic violence erupted with intensity when GM Syed tore the flag of Pakistan at Sukkur airport and hoisted the flag of independent Sindh in December 1989.²³ In his fiery speech Syed alleged that they were treated like red Indians and the only solution is the independence of Sindh. Mumtaz Bhutto also demanded the abolishment of cantonments from Sindh and transfer of sovereignty to the provinces.²⁴ The government finally acted against GM Syed and other party leaders and arrested 3000 followers of *Jiye Sindh*.²⁵ The arrest of *Jiye Sindh* leadership subdued the ethnic conflict for a short time.

Beginning of Conflict with MQM

The marriage of convenience between the PPP and MQM did not continue long. Although the top leadership wanted to cooperate with each other yet the hardliners in both parties were not happy with the alliance and they tried to sabotage the Karachi Accord. Benazir was committed to coordinate with the MQM and wanted to see coalition government work but some PPP leaders who had sentiments of Sindhi nationalism wanted to part ways with MQM. They believed the alliance with MQM would reduce the vote bank of the PPP in interior Sindh and people would vote for nationalist parties in upcoming elections. The PPP provincial ministers also began to ignore their coalition partners. On the other hand, Altaf Hussain was also under increasing pressure from his party leaders and workers who were exasperated over the PPP for not releasing the MQM prisoners and non-implementation of the Karachi Accord in letter and spirit. The hardliners in both parties had made it difficult for Benazir and Altaf Hussain to resolve their issues through discussion.

Altaf Hussain finally succumbed to the pressure of his party fellows and started talks with the IJI over several unsettled issues. The MQM was resented when the first flight of Biharis from Bangladesh to Pakistan was cancelled in January 1989 due to the protest by Sindhi National Alliance (SNA) and *Punjabi Pukhtun Ittehad* (PPI).²⁶ He decided to seek help from the IJI on Biharis issue. The IJI leadership and MQM demanded the

repatriation of Bihari from Bangladesh forthwith and their settlement in the Sindh province.²⁷ The nationalist parties in Sindh expressed their strong disliking over this demand and threatened to start protest in the province if the government had tried to acquiesce this demand. This put Benazir in a difficult situation. It was difficult for Benazir to accept the MQM's demand of rehabilitation of Biharis because it would badly affect the PPP vote bank in the interior Sindh. The reluctance of Benazir to accept such demands of the MQM finally led towards the breakup of the alliance.

Widening the Gulf

A few days after the breaking-up of the PPP-ANP coalition in the NWFP (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) in May 1989, the MQM ministers in Sindh resigned from the provincial cabinet alleging that their voices were not heard in the cabinet. The efforts of the PPP provincial government failed to persuade the MQM leaders to postpone their resignations. Although it was now out of the Sindh cabinet, the MQM promised, as the ANP did in the NWFP, to continue to support the PPP government in Sindh and at the Centre and pledged to adhere to the Karachi Accord. But by the end of May 1989 in a major setback for Benazir, the MQM agreed to cooperate with the IJI in the debate on the national budget.²⁸ The MQM, along with the ANP, asserted that Benazir had failed to honour the promises she had made in return for their support when she came to power. This time, it was Nawaz Sharif himself who went into negotiation with the MQM leadership. He had avoided a meeting with Altaf Husain on his two previous visits to Karachi for fear of annoying his ally in IJI, namely, the *Punjab-Pakhtoon Ittehad* (PPI). But now he overcame his earlier caution upon arriving in Karachi. He went straight to Altaf's house at Azizabad and held four hours of talk with him.²⁹ He tried to wean Altaf Husain away from the PPP and prompted his support for the IJI's opposition to the federal budget. The PPP's difficulty with its partners in the NWFP and Sindh had encouraged Nawaz Sharif to try to topple the PPP government during the budget session. The joint press conference by the two parties also confirmed that the main topic of their discussion was the strategy during the budget session. It was announced that the

MQM members would vote on the budget independently, considering every issue on merit. Imran Farooq, MQM General Secretary said that his party may vote against it if it does not reflect the aspirations of the people. The Accord had nothing to do with our meeting. Altaf Husain said when asked about the Karachi Accord that this was a meeting between two patriots, and no one should object to it.³⁰

Within twenty-four hours of this meeting, a delegation of three PPP ministers went to Karachi to have a talk with Altaf Husain. After prolonged negotiations, spread over several days, a new memorandum of understanding was signed by the Chief Minister Qaim Ali Shah and MQM Chairman Azeem Ahmed Tariq. The issue which required several rounds of negotiations and Benazir's personal intervention twice was the release of MQM prisoners. Both *Muhajir* and Sindhi activists had been involved in cases of ethnic violence, including murder, arson, kidnapping and other crimes. The PPP government in Sindh was inclined to overlooking or treating more gently to local Sindhis involved in these offenses, but it was prone to treating the MQM loyalists more sternly and harshly. The MQM, basing its argument on this partial treatment of the arrested activists, wanted its men, held on charges related to ethnic violence, released.

The two sides agreed on that those held on police complaints would be freed immediately and those held on complaints of private individuals would be let off within six months under a prescribed legal procedure. Among the other MQM demands were protection of non-Sindhis in the interior, guarantee of admission, giving real powers for the MQM ministers and transferring out senior bureaucrats in Sindh appointed by previous regimes. By the end of the talks the PPP ministers managed to reaffirm MQM's support for their party as long as it implemented key *muhajir* demands. While banking on continuing MQM unhappiness about the non-implementation of the Karachi Accord, the IJI lacked a critical element in its bargain with the MQM. The MQM problems concerned Sindh, and the IJI had nothing to offer there.

Parting of the Ways

It was very difficult for Benazir to keep the poles apart Muhajirs and the Sindhi nationalists in her pocket at the same time. Consequently, with the passage of time, she failed to fulfil the demands of MQM. Finally, they had to part their ways. Particularly, MQM was furious for Benazir's denial to bring the Biharis into Pakistan.³¹ Furthermore, they were disappointed over the appointment of Sindhi nationalists on key positions, such as the appointment of Ghulam Mustafa Shah as minister for Federal Education. Shah was earlier the editor of *Sindh Quarterly*, known for anti-muhajir views. Moreover, MQM alleged that many muhajirs officers were removed from important positions and made OSD (officer of special duty), while the Federal placement Bureau had appointed many Sindhis on important positions in bureaucracy, by passing the Federal Public Service Commission while Muhajirs were completely ignored.³² Finally, MQM made a secret agreement with the leadership of IJI and parted its ways 24 October 1989 and joined hands with the IJI in its effort to driven out Benazir by no-confidence movement.³³ The IJI was certain to de-seat Benazir with the support of the MQM, but it failed narrowly.

The MQM legislators vote against Benazir in no-confidence movement further fuelled the ethnic violence in the province. In February 1990, the MQM called for a strike which was turned violent and around 57 people were died.³⁴ The People Students Federation (PSF), a student wing of the PPP which was also backed by some PPP nationalists indulged in violence with All Pakistan Muhajir Student Organisation (APMSO), the student wing of MQM. Hundreds of people were killed due to the riots among two student groups in Karachi and Hyderabad.³⁵ To maintain law and order situation, the PPP used the state machinery to curb the MQM leadership and workers. The security forces began search operations in muhajir dominated areas of Karachi and Hyderabad. Against the government's anti-muhajir policies, Altaf Hussain went on to "fast until death".³⁶ The hunger strike of Altaf Hussain led to a series of violent strikes in the muhajir dominated parts of the Sindh. The government virtually lost control over Karachi. Finally, on the

assurance of Fakhruddin G Ibrahim, the then Governor of Sindh to address the MQM concerns, Altaf Hussain agreed to break the fast.

The situation turned worse on 26 May 1990 when security forces opened fire in a rally at Hyderabad in which sixty people including children and woman were killed and two hundred people of muhajir community was injured.³⁷ The killings in Hyderabad fuelled the ethnic violent and riots broke out in Karachi and other urban parts of the province. The PPP government failed to control the situation and finally it invited the military troops to maintain the law-and-order situation in Karachi and Hyderabad.³⁸ The army demanded to carry on operation in the interior Sindh for the sustenance of law-and-order situation. But Benazir was not ready to allow army operation its strong base of interior Sindh because she knew that the local Sindhis would not forgive her if she did so.³⁹

Dismissal of Benazir's Government

Amid this critical situation of Sindh, the government of Benazir Bhutto was dismissed by the President Ghulam Ishaq Khan on 6 August 1990 on the charges of corruption and nepotism.⁴⁰ The President also charged Benazir for her inability to maintain law and order situation in Sindh and overcome on the ethnic violence in the province.

Conclusion

The ethnic conflict in Sindh is not a new phenomenon and the province has been facing this issue since the formation of Pakistan. Benazir wanted to settle the issue during her government, but she had to face strong resistance from the muhajir community and the Sindhi nationalists. Her decision to make agreement with the MQM and to include it in federal and provincial government was a sensible step to achieve the political harmony and to redress the ethnic conflicts. But the Sindhi nationalists and the muhajir were so divergent that the agreement with the MQM was not effective since it came in to being. Moreover, the IJI also played a pessimistic role and

instead of helping the government to achieve stability in the province and to overcome on ethnic violence, it tried to widen the gulf between the local people, Punjabis, Muhajirs and Pashtuns. IJI leadership was instrumental in encouraging Altaf Hussain to break agreement with the PPP. The MQM was also responsible to diffuse the policies of Benazir for achieving the ethnic harmony. MQM was not ready to compromise with the local Sindhis and it declared that the muhajirs are the fifth nation of the country. On the part of Benazir, her reluctance to take any action against the extreme Sindhi nationalist had annoyed the other ethnic groups in the province. Had she kept the separatist and those involved in fiery speeches against the muhajir and Punjabi communities at bay, the ethnic disparity could be improved. But her reluctance to allow the security forces to launch operation in the interior Sindh against the culprit who were involved in ethnic violence made the other communities doubtful that she was prejudice in favour of local Sindhi people.

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