Karachi. Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City

, London, Hurst & Co 2014, 336 p., bibl., index

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Laurent Gayer, *Karachi. Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City*, London, Hurst & Co 2014, 336 p., bibl., index

- 1 KARACHI, a city of 21,2 million inhabitants, is Pakistan's largest and most important commercial hub, and its politics can impact the stability of national governments. In this fascinating and beautifully crafted political history of post-colonial Karachi, Gayer tells the story of how the city became the violent and fragmented place it is today : a place riven by murderous ethnic, sectarian, and gang related turf-wars. In 2011, a bookseller tells Gayer that « today so many people are dying that [whenever someone is killed], we are less affected than if a flea was creeping over our ear » (p. 241). It is a city where innocent bystanders are now the casualties of increasingly militarised political contests waged with assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades (RPG's), where residents seeking to escape the violence are confined to their homes for days on end, and those who venture into the wrong neighbourhoods risk being kidnapped, killed, and mutilated, merely because they belong to the wrong ethnic group.
- 2 Nevertheless with a murder rate of 13 per 100,000, Karachi is not the most violent of the largest cities in the world and lags behind cities like Caracas and Guatemala City with murder rates of over 100 per 100,000. Karachi also remains less violent than war torn societies like Guinea Bissau because social change has not been so drastic as to prevent the institutionalisation of politics. Gayer's central claim is that Karachi has escaped total breakdown thanks to the existence of certain fragmented but durable patterns of domination in which the Muhajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) – a political movement representing the large proportion of the city's population that moved from India and replaced the Hindu population of the city at partition – has been the pre-eminent player, and because the Pakistani state retains the ability to restore order

through its coercive might. The emergence of new players, such as the Baloch bandits (*dacoits*) from the poor and criminalised district of Lyari and the Pakistani Taliban, during the first decade of the XXIth century, disrupted the equilibrium established over the latter half of the XXth century, but Gayer plausibly suggests that Karachi remains too prone to state intervention, and its political landscape far too atomised, for it to descend into « utter chaos » or civil war.

- 3 In Chapter I, Gayer notes how members of the elite who grew up in the city during the 1950s and 1960s idealise it as having been filled with butterflies and fruit-bearing trees. One thing this image conceals is the fact that a large proportion of Karachi's population at the time consisted of refugees from India who were living in informal and insecure settlements. These settlements, and the protection rackets they gave rise to, would eventually become the norm. Gayer reports that nowadays 61% of the population lives in unofficial settlements, 45% of water is distributed by the « tanker mafia », and 45% of the population is illegally connected to the electrical grid. The elites' idealised memories also ignore the fact the city was already the site of labour unrest, and student movements that later morphed into the Muhajir Qaumi Movement (subsequently renamed the Muttahida Qaumi Movement).
- 4 Chapter's II and III provide a detailed account of the contingent manner in which the MQM emerged out of student campuses to become the dominant political force in the city by 1988. In chapter III, Gayer argues that MQM discourse was, and remains, primarily based on the idea of revolt by the plebeian masses against the establishment and the Sindhi feudal elite. The MQM combines this « politics of passion » with pragmatism grounded in the control and allocation of public resources. Somewhat like the Shiv Sena in Mumbai/Bombay⁸, it possesses a large parallel state consisting of a formidable disciplinary machine – complete with private armies, surveillance networks and torture cells – and an equally formidable distributive machine that provides people with access to health facilities, water, electricity and jobs.
- 5 Chapters IV and V move on to trace the emergence of the groups that came to challenge MQM's dominance during the first decades of the XXIth century. Chapter IV describes how Baloch « bandits » extended their influence over Lyari thanks to « semi-overt political patronage » (p. 159), muscle power and extortion rackets, and through the creation of a parallel social apparatus including schools and hospitals. Here Gayer shows how the group's political patrons – including the leadership of Pakistan People's Party – were unable to control it completely, and he uses this fact as grounds for a somewhat brief critique of Paul Brass's theory of institutionalised riot systems in India⁹. Finally, chapter V describes how while religious groups like the Pakistani Taliban and the Sunni Tehreek (a movement led by the followers of the Barelvi Sunni sect) may not have much electoral clout, they have nevertheless gained significant social ascendancy. These groups compete with each other, and with the MQM, for control of mosques, and even hospitals. Others, including the Taliban, have set up their own parallel Islamic courts. As elsewhere in Pakistan, ordinary people often deem these to be more efficient and legitimate than the state courts¹⁰.
- 6 In chapter VI Gayer argues that one consequence of the fragmentation of the political scene is that citizens and their businesses are increasingly insecure because they are now subject to the demands and extortion rackets of a growing number of sovereigns. This is a plausible and interesting claim, but a difficult one to assess given that the book is not, and does not claim to be, an ethnographic account of the changing nature of

protection and political mediation in the city and hence provides no historical benchmark with which to compare the present. It would also have been interesting to learn more about what happened to the labour movements that were emerging in the 1950s, and about how Karachi's various sovereigns have incorporated – if at all – the demands of labour into their agendas. However none of this detracts from the fact that Gayer has produced a unique account on an important topic. Moreover it is a narrative that provides a necessary corrective to reports on Pakistan that emphasise state failure, rather than taking the time to carefully document – as Gayer has done – the local dynamics that have contributed to the survival of Pakistan as a political unit, seemingly against all odds. The book will be of interest to all scholars of South Asia, but also to anthropologists and political scientists studying violence and « ordered disorder » in urban contexts and beyond.

NOTES

8. See Thomas Blom Hansen, *Wages of Violence. Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001.

9. Paul Brass, « The Development of an Institutionalized Riot System in Meerut City, 1961 to 1982 », in Ian Talbot, ed, *The Deadly Embrace. Religion, Politics, and Violence in India and Pakistan 1947-2002*, Karachi, Oxford University Press, 2007 : 725-740.

10. See Mariam Abou Zahab, « Sectarianism as Substitute Identity : Sunnis and Shias in Central and South Punjab », in Soofia Mumtaz, Jean-Luc Racine & Imran Anwar Ali, eds, *Pakistan. The Contours of State and Society*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002 : 77-95.