

Sindhis and Mohajirs

Profile

Sindhis and Mohajirs are two large ethnic communities living in Sindh province. Sindh is the third largest of Pakistan's four provinces with an area of approximately 54,407 square miles. It borders with the province of Punjab in the north, India to its east, Baluchistan province and the Arabian Sea and the Rann of Kutch in the south. Both Sindhis and the Mohajirs regard themselves as a distinct nation and contest each other's account of recent history and current situation.

Both communities also differ radically on their respective numerical strength. According to Sindhi sources, Sindhis number approximately 50 million and descend from the original Dravidian inhabitants of Sindh. Numbering, according to their own reckoning, some 30 million people, Mohajirs claim to outnumber Sindhis and to be Pakistan's most numerous minority, constituting more than half the population of Sindh. They are concentrated mainly in Karachi and other urban centres. Mohajir nationhood has always been denied, in contrast to that of other nationalities (Punjabis, Baluchis, Pathans and Sindhis).

According to the census of 1998, the total population of Sindh was 30 million and of Pakistan 131 million. These figures established the population of Sindh to be in the region of 23 per cent of the total population. However, the census failed to provide the numbers of indigenous Sindhis and other ethnic and linguistic communities residing within the province. By the mid-2000s the population of Sindh was estimated at more than 36 per cent of the total population, but there were still no reliable estimates of the numbers of Sindhis and Mohajirs.

Historical context

The following account comprises both a Sindhi perspective and a Mohajir one, without seeking to reconcile the evident contradictions.

In 1947, required by Britain (the colonizing power) to join India or Pakistan, Sindhis chose Pakistan, hoping to safeguard their autonomy. With the creation of Pakistan, large numbers of Urdu-speaking Muslims from India were encouraged to settle in Sindh, while Sindhi Hindus were forced by state-sponsored persecution to flee to India. Property vacated by Sindhi Hindus was allocated to the immigrants (the Mohajirs), whereas Muslim Sindhis who remained were prevented by the government from buying it.

Sindhis argue that Mohajirs were given preferential treatment by the authorities. Despite the growth of the urban Mohajir population, Sindhis claim to constitute a numerical majority in Karachi and many other municipalities. They argue that before partition a highly educated Sindhi Muslim majority controlled provincial politics, but that since 1947 Sindhi-language-medium schools have been closed

down or changed to Urdu-medium by the authorities, and Karachi University, formerly a major Sindhi educational institution, is now controlled by the Mohajir provincial administration, with Sindhi students denied entry.

Language and demographic differences

On independence, Pakistan made Urdu the national language, denying Sindhi its traditional status in Sindh. In 1972 Sindhi efforts to regain official status for their language resulted, they say, in ethnic disturbances provoked by their opponents. They blame tensions with Mohajirs on continuing illegal population transfers and on Mohajir demands for a separate homeland and accompanying violence. Sindhis accuse Mohajir militants of numerous killings and other outrages, including a wave of attacks launched in 1992, with the Pakistani army becoming involved the same year.

Sindhis see themselves as threatened by the continued immigration and urban settlement of Mohajirs, and by a rural influx of Punjabis, many of them military personnel, who, they claim, obtain ancestral Sindhi lands unlawfully. Numerous Sindhi activists and intellectuals are reportedly in prison, some detained without trial, many tortured and denied legal or medical aid. Sindhis also consider that they are deprived of their share of irrigation water and that the province's fossil fuels are being exploited by outsiders for commercial gain, while many Sindhis suffer unemployment and poverty. The opposition to the construction of Kala Bagh dam (1999-2006) reflects Sindhi concerns.

Mohajir perspective

According to the Mohajir view, Mohajirs (the term means 'immigrants') helped found the state of Pakistan in 1947, leaving the Indian provinces where as Muslims they had been a minority for the new homeland they had struggled to help create. They claim to have brought considerable educational attainment, skills and expertise to the new state and quickly rose to positions of prominence in commerce and the administration.

Mohajirs state that this early prominence antagonized the existing feudal social order and led to the deployment of various forms of discrimination against them. In the face of continuing discrimination and deprivation, in 1984 Mohajirs founded the Mohajir Quami Movement (MQM), led by Altaf Hussain, to assert their rights. The MQM claims to have won major victories in urban Sindh in every election held since 1987. This success, Mohajirs argue, led to the launching of a military/police operation against them in June 1992 resulting in the unlawful killing and torture of thousands of Mohajirs. MQM offices throughout Pakistan were forcibly closed, and all but three of MQM's 30 elected parliamentarians were in jail, in hiding or in exile.

Split in MQM

Mohajirs state that successive Pakistani governments have waged a costly propaganda war against them and the MQM, branding them separatists and terrorists. All the while, the state law enforcement agencies have continued their efforts to eliminate the MQM's supporters and leadership, and, Mohajirs argue, official conspirators were behind the break-up of the MQM into two factions during 1992 - one led by Altaf Hussain, MQM(A) and the other known as MQM (Haqiqi). In the ensuing conflict and violence in Karachi during 1991, MQM(A) fled the country for London and has not returned. In 1995 and 1996 the government's tactics in Sindh were condemned, Mohajirs report, by the US State Department and by international human rights organizations.

The MQM participated in the general election of 1997, achieving the third largest share of the vote. In

1997, MQM(A) officially changed its name from Muhajir Qaumi Movement to Muttahida Qaumi Movement in order to broaden its base from an ethnic party to social reform movement. Muttahida Qaumi Movement boycotted the municipal elections that took place in 2001, but nevertheless participated in the national elections of October 2002, securing most of the urban areas seats in Sindh province.

Current issues

The Sindhis as well as the Mohajirs make substantial allegations of discrimination and persecution. Their grievances are largely directed at the Punjabis who dominate the bureaucracy and the armed forces. While the military coup in October 1999 was led by General Pervez Musharraf (himself a Mohajir) the persistent bias towards the Punjabis has exacerbated provincial tensions. There is a common concern expressed by Sindhis and Mohajirs on several issues including the lack of regional and provincial autonomy and continuous interference from Islamabad in the affairs of Sindh. Sindhis and Mohajirs also demand a ban on further settlements of Punjabis and Pakhtuns, and insist that restrictions should be placed on the sale of properties and allotment of businesses to those not domiciled in the province.

Different positions of Mohajirs and Sindhis

Despite this there are also considerable difference between the indigenous Sindhis and the immigrant Mohajirs on several key issues. These include, first, that of the status of Urdu, the official language. The Mohajirs wish to maintain the existing status of Urdu. The Sindhis, on the other hand, want to replace Urdu with the Sindhi language. The next divisive issue concerns that of affirmative action policies which, since the period of Prime Minister Bhutto, tended to favour the Sindhis. The Sindhis want to have this system expanded so that they receive a greater share of jobs in the provincial services and institutions of higher education. The Mohajirs oppose this and want to have the existing set-up replaced by another system that would give them preferential treatment in the bureaucracy and in higher educational institutions. Finally, there is the controversial issue of further repatriation of Biharis from Bangladesh. The Mohajirs claim that nearly all of the 250,000 Biharis have a right to be settled in Pakistan. This is unacceptable to indigenous Sindhis, however, who fear an influx of Biharis into Sindh province, resulting in the complete loss of their cultural and linguistic identity. Indeed, the issue of the Biharis - which has been a sticking point in efforts to reach any agreement between the political parties of Pakistan - contributed to the downfall of Benazir Bhutto's government (1993-6) and that of Mian Nawaz Sharif (1997-9). In the early 1990s, less than 1,000 Biharis were settled in Punjab (Okara). There is considerable sympathy for resolving the Bihari issue in the present military government of General Musharraf, added to which is the fact that the Muttahida Qaumi Movement remains an ally of the federal government. However, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement continues to disagree with President Musharraf on the Kala Bagh dam project alleging that it is prejudicial to the interests of people from smaller provinces. Both MQM and Sindhi nationalist parties have claimed a major victory in the decision made by the federal government in January 2006 to suspend the Kala Bagh project for the foreseeable future. The past decade 1996-2006 has witnessed an increasing number of targeted killings and kidnapping in urban Sindh, particularly in Karachi, which has affected both Mohajirs and Sindhis.