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The Microfoundations of Identity Politics in Pakistan's Megacity

The megacity of Karachi is home to millions of people from all of Pakistan's major ethnic groups. It is also a site of endemic intergroup conflict; many of its neighborhoods are ethnically segregated, and ethnic violence intermittently punctuates the young metropolis's brief history. Ethnic political parties – i.e. parties that primarily advocate for the interests of a particular ethnic group – make bids for power in every local and national election, and turf wars between these parties create a troubled and uncertain milieu for the city's residents. Unsurprisingly, then, scholarly and journalistic accounts of the sprawling port city tend to characterize it as an “ungovernable, utterly unpredictable urban mass.”¹ In this view, the lines in Karachi have been drawn: each ethnic group is concentrated in geographic enclaves and is represented by its own ethnic party. And as the population continues to grow exponentially and the demographic balance shifts, hostilities are only expected to rise.

Systematic research into the workings of Karachi's politics, however, is scarce. While Karachi is indeed a city divided, a closer look at the dynamics of ethnic voting reveal a less simplistic picture than the one painted above. My dissertation project leverages variation in ethnic voting across space and time in order to improve our understanding of a complex and changing urban landscape. In particular, it explores

¹ This observation was made by Laurent Gayer in a 2014 interview that can be found [here](#).

differences in political behavior between and within Karachi's two largest ethnic groups: the Muhajirs and the Pashtuns.

In support of the above research agenda, I have conducted three field trips to Karachi in order to collect rich qualitative evidence on the political opinions and behavior of the relevant populace. Most recently, with the help of the Center for South Asia, I spent the Fall Quarter of 2017 in the city in order to conduct in-depth interviews and focus groups with the voting-age population, journalists, politicians, civil society actors, and security personnel. These data collection methods were designed to help answer questions such as the following: How do individuals from different ethnic groups think about the political options available to them? When and for what reasons do they choose to exercise the right to vote, and what are their expectations of how political engagement will affect their lives? And how has ethnic violence and state discrimination impacted their willingness to engage with the political process?

I will now spend the Winter Quarter of 2018 poring over and synthesizing material from over 100 in-depth interviews. The insights gained from time in the field will be a crucial component in the design of survey experiments to be conducted ahead of the 2018 General Elections. These surveys will help detect systematic differences between and within ethnic groups in how they view their relationship with the city, how they understand the political process, and how state discrimination and violence has influenced their opinions and behavior.

I am grateful for the Center for South Asia's generosity and encouragement in helping me forward an interdisciplinary project that draws on both ethnographic

fieldwork and quantitative data analysis. This work would not be possible without their support.

Purani Sabzi Mandi, a Pashtun-dominant locality of Karachi



A rally for a new political party (the PSP) vying for the Muhajir vote

