

From Ethnic Identity to Fragmentation: The Political Evolution and Transformation of MQM (1984–2023)

Mah Para Iqbal 

MS Scholar, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore, Punjab-Pakistan

Corresponding Author: i.mahpara@yahoo.com

Abstract

Muttahida Qaumi Movement has a distinct place in Pakistan's political history. It evolved as a group that spoke for the Urdu-speaking Mohajir community. Later, it became a major political party in big cities. Over time, it also became divided into many factions. This article studies how MQM changed from 1984 to 2023. It looks at its historical development, its ideology, its fragmentation. This article uses a qualitative historical-analytical methodology using secondary sources such as books, journal articles, reports, and electoral data. It explains how MQM became main party for Mohajir community. It also discusses MQM's alliances with different federal governments in 1980s and 1990s. Later, the party began to weaken because of internal fights and changes in the state's policies. The article identifies important turning points in MQM's political journey including its use of ethnic identity to mobilize support, its partnerships with central governments, and its involvement in situations related to state repression. The article explains that MQM changed its ideology from ethnic nationalism to a more urban and liberal approach. The findings show that ethnic identity can help a party grow fast but cannot create strong democratic systems. MQM's fragmentation shows ethnic unity weakens when state gains more control.

Key Words: MQM, Mohajirs, Ethnic Politics, Pakistan, Urban Governance, Party Fragmentation, Nationalism, Identity Politics.

Introduction

MQM was not an isolated case. It was part of a bigger history of ethnic mobilization in Pakistan. MQM emerged in the 1980s. It evolved from a student group into one of the most organized urban political parties. But same factors that helped it rise also caused its fragmentation. Since Pakistan was created in 1947, ethnicity has played an important role in politics and power. The new state had many regional, language, and class differences which repeatedly challenged national unity.

Mohajirs came to Pakistan during the large migration after Partition. They brought education, administrative skills, and a strong cultural identity. In early years of Pakistan, they held important jobs in government. But by 1970s, things began to change. New rules for government jobs and quota systems reduced Mohajirs' earlier advantage. Rise of Sindhi, Punjabi, and Pashtun identities also weakened their position. This economic and political decline created frustration. It pushed Mohajirs to gather around ethnic identity. During this time, Altaf Hussain formed All Pakistan

Mohajir Students Organization (APMSO) in 1978. In 1984, it became Mohajir Qaumi Movement.

The rise of MQM brought a major change in urban politics. Party talked about problems of Mohajirs, especially in Karachi and Hyderabad. Mohajirs felt they were pushed aside by a Punjabi-led national government and a Sindhi-led provincial government. MQM's message of unity and strength attracted many young people. These young people did not have jobs and felt ignored by state. In ten years, MQM changed politics in Karachi. It gained power in municipal offices, trade unions, and student groups. This change re-conceptualized ethnicity in Pakistan as an urban, class-based identity rather than rural one.

However, MQM's rise also brought controversy. Many critics said the party used violence, extortion, and pressure to keep control. In the 1990s, military carried out many operations against MQM. One big operation was 1992 "Operation Clean-up," which targeted the party's alleged militant wings. These events gave MQM a mixed image. Some people saw party as a victim of state violence. Others saw it as a group that created violence. This cycle continued and affected Karachi's politics for many years.

In early 2000s, MQM tried to change its image. Under General Pervez Musharraf, party followed a more liberal and secular approach. It supported government's urban reforms. This helped MQM control Karachi's local government and grow at national level. But depending on state created new problems. After 2008, when civilian rule returned, MQM's weaknesses became clear. People accused the party of corruption, and there were many leadership conflicts inside party. In 2016, MQM split into MQM-London and MQM-Pakistan, showing that party was breaking apart.

This article explains that MQM's journey from ethnic mobilization to fragmentation, shows close links between ethnicity, state power, and urban politics in Pakistan. Ethnic identity helped MQM grow quickly. But it also stopped party from becoming a large, national movement. Party's decline shows struggles ethnic parties face in a political system that is centralized and focused on security.

This study aims to answer three related questions:

1. How did MQM use Mohajir identity as an instrument of political mobilization?
2. What factors contributed to its rise and consolidation within Pakistan's urban political structure?
3. What internal and external dynamics led to its eventual decline and fragmentation?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Perspectives on Ethnicity

Theoretical perspectives on ethnicity stress the complexity of the concept from a multidisciplinary approach. Smith (1992) sets out ethnicity as based on shared myths of ancestry, collective memory, culture, and symbols that give a group cohesion and identity, emphasizing its historical role as the foundation of modern nations. Gellner (1983) defines, however, that nations are communities intentionally created through

groups with a shared will to exist as cohesive units. He asserts that in nations, actions by the political and intellectual elite create them. In other words, these elites impose a unified culture upon the entire population within a particular homeland, mainly through national education. This was common among post-colonial states like Pakistan, where such policies entrenched ethnic polarization.

Instrumentalist perspective, as developed by Brass (1991) views ethnicity as a flexible identity manipulated by elites to realize political, economic, or social gains, hence not being something given but a tool that responds to specific political contexts. This is best exemplified by the MQM and its use of Mohajir identity as a political instrument or tool within the political exclusion felt in urban Sindh.

Kellas (1998) further shows that the relation between ethnicity and nationalism, ethnicity being culturally rooted but politicized when groups pursued collective goals. The transformation of MQM from a student organization to the major urban political party shows this very transition.

Recent constructivist approaches have focused on the social and historical processes that make ethnic identities fluid and context-dependent. Hutchinson and Smith (1996) believe that even though globalization and modernization have failed to reduce ethnic conflicts, they have heightened the expression of ethnic identities-a fact relevant to the continued presence of the MQM in Pakistan's urban centers despite its rebranding as a "secular" and "modern" political entity.

Ethnicity, Nationalism, and State Power in Postcolonial States

Pakistan, like most postcolonial states, confronts the paradox of governing ethnic diversity through a framework of centralization imposed by colonial centralization. Kennedy (1993) and Ahmed (1998) suggests that nation-building processes suppressed ethnic pluralism in favor of Islam and Urdu, relegating Bengali, Sindhi, Baloch, and Mohajir to subordinate identities. This subordinate status precipitated conflicts and quests for provincial autonomy, which accounted for the secession of East Pakistan in 1971 and current ethnic movements in Balochistan and Sindh, thus demonstrating the failure of centralized governance to accommodate diversity.

Within this context, MQM represents an instance of urban ethnic nationalism, anchored in a literate, middle-class urban constituency rather than in traditional rural structures. Scholars, such as Talbot (2019) and Wright (1991), discussed that the influx of Urdu-speaking Mohajirs into Karachi changed the demographic balance in Sindh and occasioned competition regarding language, jobs, and political representation. Mohajirs had initially attained power through the bureaucratic machinery of Pakistan, but structural changes in the 1970s most prominently, quota system and the rise to power of Sindhi politicians, undermined their privileged status, and it was in this context that MQM came into existence as a strategic response.

Verkaaik (2016) discusses interaction between ethnic identity and violence within a city environment, specifically Karachi, claiming that the politics of MQM are intimately tied to a culture of mobilization and confrontation. He says that violence does not simply express ethnic conflict but may also be used as one means of reaffirming identity and ensuring political space. This interpretation supports Haq (1995), who views MQM's use of ethnic symbolism and coercion as part of the

expression of legitimate grievance twinned with the maintenance of territorial control within Karachi's contested urban environment.

Ethnic Mobilization and Instrumentalism in Pakistan

The instrumentalist school gives a useful way to understand MQM's political growth, as Kataria (2018) explains. This view says that ethnicity is a practical tool that leaders use to gain things like power or status. It views ethnic identity as tool that can change depending on the social and political situation. In Pakistan, where some groups like Punjabis have been given more benefits, ethnic mobilization becomes both a way to protest and a way to seek inclusion.

MQM's leaders used Mohajir identity to turn shared anger into organized political action. Their speeches, rallies, and stories of unfair treatment connected strongly with the urban working class and middle class. This change from an identity problem to a full political idea is what Brass (1991) calls the "institutionalization of ethnicity." The Primordialist view disagrees with the idea that ethnicity is only a tool. Fearon (2006) says ethnic bonds come from deep emotional and social roots. So while MQM leaders instrumentalized identity for political goals, the strong Mohajir unity in the 1980s and 1990s also shows that historical attachments were very important. This means ethnic politics comes from a mix of real discrimination, emotional identity, and smart political leadership.

Ethnicity and Urban Politics in Pakistan

Haleem (2003) links ethnic tensions to Pakistan's militarized politics, which made ethnic gaps worse. MQM's clashes and deals with the state show how ethnic parties act inside a security-focused political system.

Urban growth changed Karachi's politics. As the city grew and became the economic center, millions of migrants arrived, and competition over jobs and land increased. Majeed (2011) says these changes turned cultural differences into political ones. MQM used this urban confusion to present itself as the defender of Mohajirs, the city's earlier residents, against what they saw as threats from other ethnic groups.

MQM's changes during the Musharraf era also show how elites adjust to new state structures. Shafqat (2017) says MQM's attempt to appear modern and secular in the early 2000s fit well with the military's urban plans. But this also made MQM reliant on state. When that support faded, party struggled because it did not have strong institutions of its own.

Conceptual Framework

This article uses a mixed framework that brings together instrumentalism, constructivism, and postcolonial state theory.

- Instrumentalism shows how MQM leaders used ethnic identity to gather support in the city and gain political power.
- Constructivism looks at how the Mohajir identity changed over time as politics changed.

- Postcolonial state theory describes MQM's complex relationship with Pakistani state, which is centralized, military influenced, and challenged legitimacy.

MQM's journey from strong ethnic unity to later fragmentation, comes from identity-based politics and state's efforts to control it. Overall, MQM's path shows how ethnic politics react to unfair treatment but can also help powerful elites keep control through local networks.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative design to understand how and why MQM changed over the years. The goal is not to measure numbers but to understand deeper meanings. Qualitative research is useful for political topics that grow out of history and many social factors (Creswell, 2009). MQM's journey includes complex ideas like how ethnic identity forms, how political deals happen, and how power struggles shape a party, things that numbers alone cannot explain.

This study uses a historical method, as Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (2003) say, because it helps us understand long-term change in politics and ideas. MQM's history covers almost forty years and was shaped by changes in governments, laws, and social and economic conditions in Pakistan. Looking at history makes it easier to understand how MQM developed during these larger national shifts.

The study also follows an interpretivist view, which focuses on how people, MQM leaders and supporters create meaning around ethnicity, injustice, and political power. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) explain that this method shows personal and shared stories that build political identity.

Data Collection

This research uses secondary data, including:

- Articles and books on ethnic politics, nationalism, and urban issues in Pakistan.
- Government reports, Election Commission documents, and MQM's statements.
- Newspaper articles highlighting MQM's developments and internal problems.
- Historical studies on urban Sindh, ethnic conflict, and Pakistan's political system.

Data Analysis

This study uses thematic content analysis, which is a method for finding patterns in textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Both academic work and news reports were studied to find repeated ideas about MQM's identity politics, its way of governing, and its internal changes.

Four main themes guided the analysis:

1. How MQM used Mohajir identity as a political tool.
2. How MQM dealt with local and national governments, sometimes facing oppression and sometimes working together.
3. Why MQM moved from ethnic nationalism to a more secular and urban modern identity.

4. What are internal disputes, leadership crisis, and external pressures that weakened party over time.

The political growth of MQM from 1984 to 2002 is one of the biggest changes in Pakistan's urban politics. The party began as a student group, All Pakistan Mohajir Students Organization (APMSO), in 1978. It later became a strong ethnic political party that changed the politics of Karachi and Hyderabad. During this time, MQM built a strong base among Urdu-speaking Mohajirs and challenged old patterns of ethnic power and state control in Pakistan.

The trajectory of MQM in these years can be divided into three distinct but interconnected phases:

1. Emergence and mobilization (1984–1988),
2. Consolidation and confrontation (1988–1992), and
3. Survival and strategic adaptation (1993–2002).

Emergence and mobilization (1984–1988)

The emergence of MQM in March 1984 was an important moment in Pakistan's ethnic politics. Altaf Hussain and his group from APMSO created party to turn Mohajir complaints into organized political action. MQM changed the meaning of "Mohajir." The word first meant "migrant," but MQM used it as a separate ethnic identity, different from Punjabis, Sindhis, Baloch, and Pashtuns. (Ghosh, 2001)

In Pakistan's early years, Mohajir community had many jobs in government offices. But this changed in the 1970s when the Bhutto government started a quota system in the provinces. This system reduced the number of Mohajirs in public jobs (Talbot, 2019). At the same time, there was a language controversy in Sindh. Sindhi was made an official language along with Urdu. Many Mohajirs felt more ignored and pushed aside because of this change (Rahman, 1996). These events created the conditions for political action based on ethnic complaints.

MQM's early message showed Mohajirs as victims of unfair treatment. It said the community wanted recognition and a proper place inside Pakistan's federal system. Party talked about unity, merit, and justice. It also used emotional language about the shared pain of Mohajirs. This mix of grievance and pride helped MQM quickly gain many supporters in Karachi's lower-middle and middle classes, especially among educated youth.

MQM strength came from grassroots mobilization and strict discipline. MQM took ideas from student politics and built neighborhood groups called sectors and units. These groups helped party communicate fast and organize people quickly. To increase loyalty, MQM used central control, a charismatic leadership, and a strong group identity.

By 1988 general elections, MQM had changed from a student group into a strong political party. It took part in elections as the "Mohajir Qaumi Movement," clearly speaking for the Mohajir community. However, slogans like "fifth nationality" and "Mohajir Power Super Power" raised doubts. MQM grew because many Urdu-speaking people felt deprived and believed their rights had been taken away. MQM

presented itself as a modern, urban, and secular force, standing against provincial feudalism and Punjab's central control (Chandio, 2009). This anti-elite message attracted many young people who felt ignored in both provincial and national politics.

Consolidation and confrontation (1988–1992)

The years from 1988 to 1992 showed both MQM's growing power and its rising conflict with the state. After winning elections, MQM made a coalition government with Benazir Bhutto's PPP in Sindh. But this alliance soon fell apart because both sides did not trust each other. PPP saw MQM's growing strength in urban Sindh as a threat, while MQM said the PPP favored Sindhis and ignored Mohajir problems (Haq, 1995).

By 1989, tensions in Karachi were increased. There were violent clashes between MQM workers and Sindhi nationalists, as well as fights with the police. Karachi, being Pakistan's main economic city, became a center of ethnic and political violence. Scholars like Kennedy (1991) and Verkaaik (2016) note that MQM's street mobilization and its use of violence in political meetings made the line between activism and militancy blurred.

In 1990, MQM shifted its political alliances and joined Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI), led by Nawaz Sharif. This move showed that MQM was flexible and ready to work with any party that supported Mohajir rights. At first, MQM–IJI alliance helped improve relations with the federal government. But soon, this partnership started to decline. Problems grew because both sides disagreed on local government matters and issues related to law and order (Haq, 1995).

MQM's push for the Mohajirs' separate nationality became a synonym for violence in June 1992. The central government of Nawaz Sharif deployed the Army to Sindh to restore law and order, launching the 'Operation Clean-up'. Army stated that Indian-trained terrorists had infiltrated MQM ranks. As MQM's power declined its leader, Altaf Hussain, fled to the United Kingdom, where he now lives in self-exile. In 1992, a splinter group of underground MQM militants expressed their discontent with MQM's official leadership. MQM (Haqiqi) splinter group formed, which was viewed as a government creation. Haqiqi became active in terrorist activities, allied themselves with law enforcements against Altaf group. Muslim League government adopted a policy of political expediency, seeking its political alliance, MQM (Altaf), to bring down PPP. Meanwhile, Pakistan's dominant feudal elite and government law enforcement agencies increase their campaign against MQM (Altaf) group. The Haqiqi occupied various districts of Karachi, proclaiming them 'no-go' areas for MQM (Altaf) (Dryland, 2000).

Operation Clean-Up marked a watershed moment in Muttahida Qaumi Movement's evolution from a widespread urban movement to an Organisation known for its defensive posture in the face of relentless state pressure. Ironically, this harsh treatment made MQM members feel even more united. The party used this moment to build a strong story of victimhood. It showed Mohajirs as a community that was being targeted but still staying strong. This powerful message increased loyalty among its supporters. As a result, this period helped MQM become not just a political party, but a movement that many saw as fighting for survival.

Survival and strategic adaptation (1993–2002)

The years after 1992 were pivotal for MQM. This period was mainly about surviving and rebuilding. After Altaf Hussain went into self-exile in London, party began working through a central command. He spoke to workers through phone calls, while local leaders handled daily coordination.

In July 1995, another “Operation Clean-up” started in Karachi. This operation involved top security and intelligence agencies. During this time, PPP government was accused of killing MQM workers without trial, using torture, and targeting party. MQM tried to get help from human rights groups, but there were no large protests in Pakistan against government’s actions. By mid-1996, MQM’s power had become much weaker. Still, many Mohajirs continued to depend on party to protect their rights and interests. (Waseem, 1996).

The party appeared in 1997 with a new name, “**Muttahida Qaumi Movement.**” This name showed a clear effort to move away from only Mohajir identity. MQM desired to attract a wider urban audience and present itself as a national and secular party. Altaf Hussain also changed his tone. He began to talk more about good governance, women’s participation, and secular ideas, while talking less about strong Mohajir nationalism. However, this change was limited. MQM still gained most of its votes from Mohajirs, and strong loyalty to Altaf Hussain stopped party from becoming truly democratic. Violence in Karachi also continued, and state often blamed MQM for it. At the same time, new Pashtun migration to Karachi reduced Mohajir majority, which increased ethnic competition. Concurrently, MQM saw a chance to return to formal politics by working with military government. By the early 2000s, MQM had survived a decade of repression by changing its strategies and controlling its narrative. It shifted from an ethnic militant group to a party involved in government. But tensions between Mohajir identity and its national interests still remained.

MQM under Musharraf and Post-2008 Decline (2002–2023)

Duration from 2002 to 2023 was important and confusing time in MQM’s political journey. It showed party’s rise, its attempts to change, and finally its decline. Under General Pervez Musharraf, MQM came back into politics by making an alliance with military government. During this time, MQM tried to present itself as a modern and secular political party. But the same things that helped MQM grow, state support, strong central leadership, and ethnic mobilization, later became reasons for its fragmentation. These factors created internal tensions and pushed party toward division. This section looks at MQM’s role during Musharraf era, how well it performed in local governance, how it acted during the democratic years from 2008 to 2018, and the internal and external pressures that led to its fall and fragmentation after 2016.

MQM’s Strategic Alliance with the Musharraf Regime (2002–2008)

Musharraf was an Urdu-speaking officer and had close ties to Karachi. Because of this, he shared a cultural link with MQM’s leaders. This connection helped both sides. MQM gave Musharraf’s government election support. In return, military government protected MQM from political oppression and gave it a strong role in

governance. A new local government system introduced in 2001 also helped MQM a lot which involved dividing country into smaller districts, and urban centers received more power through elected mayors (nazim) and city councils. MQM used this chance well and became main political force in the City District Government of Karachi (Shafqat, 2017). The Sindh Local Government Ordinance (SLGO) 2001 was designed to give more power to local ethnic groups in Sindh, especially helping MQM in Karachi. The system allowed direct elections at the district and union council levels. This plan greatly increased MQM's power and control from 2001 to 2007.

2002 general elections marked a comeback for MQM. Party won 13 seats in National Assembly and joined provincial government in Sindh along with Pakistan Muslim League (Q) and other allies of regime. During this time, MQM became more active in running urban governance, especially in Karachi. However, MQM's strong dependency on military created structural weakness. Its power stayed knotted to Musharraf's government, and without his support, party's position was weak. MQM tried to show a liberal, and reformist image, but this was mostly a strategy, not a real change in ideology. Even though party did some good administrative work, MQM often faced criticism for its strict and authoritarian leadership, absence of intra-party democracy. Changing its name from "Mohajir Qaumi Movement" to "Muttahida Qaumi Movement" did not change its strong ethnic base. Behind the modern image, MQM continued to be a tightly controlled party led by Altaf Hussain from London.

Democratic Transition and Political Realignment (2008–2013)

After 2008, MQM started to lose political strength. Even though party won 16 out of 20 National Assembly seats in Karachi and first joined PPP government at the Centre and in Sindh but the relationship did not stay stable. From 2008 to 2012, MQM kept leaving the coalition and then joining again. In February 2013, MQM finally left coalition before the general elections. The party said PPP was supporting Peoples Aman Committee and helping Lyari gangs (Ali, 2014). During this time, Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani blamed MQM for violence in Karachi. Zulfiqar Mirza, a PPP minister in Sindh, also accused MQM of kidnapping, extortion, and violence (Shah, 2011).

MQM had authoritarian party structure. Altaf Hussain had full control, and no one was allowed to disagree with him. He was unquestionable, it created frustration among young members and technocrats. Hussain lived in London for many years, which created a big distance between him and workers in Karachi. His long, emotional phone speeches kept his image strong, but they also pushed away many middle-class supporters who wanted normal politics. At the same time, Karachi's population was changing fast. Many Pashtuns from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and northern regions moved to Karachi. This altered the ethnic balance. New political parties like Awami National Party (ANP) and later Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) became stronger. This reduced MQM's influence in the city. Even though MQM joined national governments and held important ministries, but party struggled to balance two goals: keeping its Mohajir identity and trying to become a national party.

Crisis, Fragmentation, and Decline (2013–2023)

The 2013 general elections marked beginning of a decline for MQM. Although party still had support in many urban areas of Sindh, the political and security situation changed rapidly. During Musharraf's rule, MQM worked closely with the security establishment to counter other ethnic and political parties like PPP. Over time, violence broke out in Karachi as MQM's armed groups clashed with ANP and PPP-linked gangs resulting in violence in Karachi. In 2013, Karachi Operation was launched to remove terrorist groups, criminal gangs, and militant wings of political parties. At first, operation reduced militant networks and weakened many local gangs. But by 2015, focus turned mainly toward political groups, especially MQM. Sindh Rangers carried out raids on MQM offices, arrested many workers which were accused of illegal detentions and even extrajudicial killings (Waseem, 2022).

Karachi operation led by Rangers severely damaged MQM's organization. Many party offices were closed, leaders were arrested, and grassroots party networks were broken. Altaf Hussain's leadership also faced strong pressure from the state and even from people inside the party. The final split happened in August 2016, when Altaf Hussain made a controversial speech that was seen as anti-state. After this, MQM leaders in Pakistan publicly separated themselves from him. Consequently, MQM split into two factions. One stayed loyal to Altaf Hussain and became known as MQM-London. The other faction, led by Farooq Sattar, became MQM-Pakistan. MQM-P tried to speak for the Mohajir community, but it could not fully regain power and freedom that the old MQM once had (Waseem, 2022).

The fragmentation of party did not stop there. In March 2016, Mustafa Kamal accused Altaf Hussain of being unstable and said he had a drinking issue. He also claimed Altaf used words like "thok do" to encourage violence against PTI workers. Kamal said that workers gave many sacrifices for Altaf, but Altaf did not care about their lives and only used their deaths for political gain. He then announced a new party called Pakistan Sarzameen Party (Dawn, 2016). MQM further split into two factions 2018. One group was led by Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui (Bahadurabad), and other by Farooq Sattar (PIB Colony). This split happened because the leaders disagreed over the allocating of party tickets in the coming 2018 general election.

By 2023, MQM's role in Pakistan's national politics had become mostly symbolic. Party tried to bring its broken faction back together, MQM-Pakistan, MQM-Haqiqi, and PSP but these efforts did not work effectively. MQM was once a very strong party in Karachi. It had big influence in the streets, in unions, and even in government offices. But today, political situation has changed. MQM is now struggling to stay relevant.

Discussion and Analysis

MQM shows how ethnic identity, urban politics, and state power shape each other in Pakistan. Its rise and fall explain how ethnic parties gain support, face pressure, and change over time. MQM used Mohajir identity to speak for migrants who felt ignored after Partition. Politicians like Altaf Hussain turned Mohajir identity into political power, which matches Brass and Kellas' ideas that elites use ethnicity as a tool. But MQM's support was not only elite control. It also came from real memories

of loss and exclusion. This fits Smith's view that shared history give ethnic politics deeper meaning.

MQM's relationship with the state kept changing between repression, negotiation, and short cooperation. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the state used force and did not allow any ethnic group to become strong in Karachi. Later, under Musharraf, MQM joined hands with government and gained power in Karachi. When civilian rule returned, MQM rapidly lost influence which shows how fragile such alliances are. These events point to a problem in Pakistan: state often uses ethnic parties as a tool for short-term purposes instead of building stable systems which include different identities. As a result, ethnic groups may gain influence for a short term, then face violence again, leading to instability and repeated conflict. MQM's decline after 2008 is an example of this unstable system.

MQM was also different from other ethnic movements because it grew in city, not rural areas. Karachi's diverse environment shaped its politics. Many ethnic groups competed for jobs, housing, and influence. MQM gathered support from lower- and middle-class Mohajirs by linking their daily problems to ethnic unfairness. It also caused violence, because MQM tried to control local areas, and state responded with force. Over time, Karachi became more diverse, and new parties like PTI gained support which weakened MQM's ethnic stance. Urban politics slowly shifted toward issues like jobs, and corruption instead of only identity.

Leadership was both MQM's strength and its weakness. Altaf Hussain's strong personal control kept the party united but stopped open discussion inside the party. This matches Weber's idea of charismatic authority, where power depends on loyalty to one leader. MQM's journey reveals the limitation of ethnic politics in an evolving democracy. Party become stronger under military regime because it received benefits for supporting those in power. When civilian rule returned, MQM found it hard to adjust. It could neither easily expand its base nor effectively compete with emerging political parties. Youngsters began to take interest more in good governance than ethnic identity, so MQM's stance became weaker. When Altaf Hussain faced allegations and lived in exile, party started to decline. New factions like MQM-Pakistan, MQM-London, and PSP appeared. This showed that MQM relied only on one party leader instead of building strong institutions that could survive without him. With diversity, Karachi's ethnic politics became less effective. It can lessen ethnic tension, but it also has risks factor. If state fails to adopt fair and inclusive policies, real community problems may be ignored. MQM's journey shows that in absence of institutions and proper inclusion, democracy and ethnic harmony remain fragile.

Conclusion

The rise and fall of MQM show how ethnic politics in Pakistan has changed, not ended. MQM began as a strong voice for Mohajirs who felt left out, turning their identity into political power. But the same things that made it grow — one-man leadership, emotional identity, and tight control — later stopped it from changing. The 1992 operation exposed its weakness and pushed it into survival mode, even as state pressure kept its "victim" image alive. MQM regained strength under Musharraf, but this also made it dependent on the military. By the 2010s, splits, conflicts inside party, and new parties like PTI weakened it further, while operations in Karachi weakened its street network. MQM's journey shows that ethnic politics

can empower such groups but they cannot stay strong without strong institutions and leadership. It also reveals how state's mix of repression and support keeps ethnic groups mistrustful. Today, Karachi is moving toward issue-based politics, but old inequalities remain there, meaning new ethnic movements may appear again.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

Funding

The authors did not mention any funding for this research.

References

- [1] Ahmed, F. (1998). *Ethnicity and politics in Pakistan*.
- [2] Ali. (2014, April 23). Coalition of convenience: MQM accepts PPP offer, joins Sindh govt. *The Express Tribune*.
- [3] Brass, P. R. (1991). *Ethnicity and nationalism: Theory and Comparison*. SAGE Publications Pvt. Limited.
- [4] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- [5] Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- [6] Chandio, A.A. (2009). Politics of Sindh under Zia Government an Analysis of Nationalists Vs Federalists Orientations.
- [7] Dryland, E. (2000, December). Migration and resettlement: The emergence of the Muhaajir Qaumi Mahaz. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 23(2), 111–142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856400008723417>
- [8] Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2011). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.
- [9] Fearon, J. D. (2006). Ethnic mobilization and ethnic violence.
- [10] Gellner, E. (1983). Theories of Nationalism.
- [11] Ghosh, P. (2001). The Changing Discourse of the Muhajirs. *India International Centre Quarterly*, 28(3), 57–68.
- [12] Haq, F. (1995). Rise of the MQM in Pakistan: Politics of ethnic mobilization. *Asian Survey*, 35(11), 990-1004.
- [13] HUTCHINSON, J. S., & Smith, A. AD (eds.), 1996: Ethnicity.
- [14] Haleem, I. (2003). Ethnic and sectarian violence and the propensity towards praetorianism in Pakistan. *Third World Quarterly*, 24(3), 463-477.
- [15] Kellas, J. G. (1998). *The politics of nationalism and ethnicity*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- [16] Kennedy, C. H. (1993, March). Managing ethnic conflict: The case of Pakistan. *Regional Politics and Policy*, 3(1), 123–143.
- [17] Kennedy, C. H. (1991, October 1). The Politics of Ethnicity in Sindh. *Asian Survey*, 31(10), 938–955. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2645065>
- [18] Kataria, S. (2018, April 30). Explaining Ethnicity: Primordialism vs. Instrumentalism. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*, 5(4). <https://doi.org/10.14738/assrj.54.4394>
- [19] Mahoney, J., & Rueschemeyer, D. (Eds.). (2003). *Comparative historical analysis in the social sciences*. Cambridge University Press.

- [20] Majeed. (2011). Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict in Pakistan. *Journal of Political Studies*, Vol.1, 51–63
- [21] Mustafa Kamal decimates MQM chief Altaf, announces new political party. (2016, March 3). *Dawn*.
- [22] Rahman, T. (1996). Language and politics in Pakistan. (*No Title*).
- [23] Smith, A.D. (1991). *National Identity*. London: Penguin, p. 94
- [24] Shah. (2011, August 28). Karachi gang war prompts intervention by Pakistan Rangers. *The Guardian*.
- [25] Shafqat, S. (2017, September). The MQM as the Liberal Savior of Karachi. *Asian Survey*, 57(5), 791–812.
- [26] Talbot, I. (2019, December 31). Legacies of Partition for India and Pakistan. *Politeja*, 16(2(59)), 7–25.
- [27] Verkaaik, O. (2016, September 20). Violence and Ethnic Identity Politics in Karachi and Hyderabad. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 39(4), 841–854.
- [28] Wright, T. P. (1991, April). Center-Periphery Relations and Ethnic Conflict in Pakistan: Sindhis, Muhajirs, and Punjabis. *Comparative Politics*, 23(3), 299.
- [29] Waseem, M. (1996, December 1). Ethnic Conflict in Pakistan: The Case of MQM. *The Pakistan Development Review*, 35(4II), 617–629. <https://doi.org/10.30541/v35i4iipp.617-629>
- [30] Weber, M. (2009). *The theory of social and economic organization*. Simon and Schuster.
- [31] Waseem. (2022, May 3). A House Divided: Karachi’s Politics Remain in Flux. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.