

Muttahida Qaumi Movement: An Overview

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Abstract

Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) has been drawing the attention of policy-makers and academicians alike since its inception in March 1984. The party presents a unique case study in terms of its creation, performance and policies. The party initially emerged as Mohajir Qaumi Movement focusing primarily on the middle-class, urban-based, Urdu-speaking Mohajirs. Generally no ethnic party in Pakistan operates with its ethnic name as it poses the question of legitimacy for working under the state. Ethnic name essentially corners a party and greatly limits its social base to only its respective ethnic group and decreases its chances of success at the national level. However, the MQM under the leadership of Altaf Hussain defied this general rule and took to represent the Mohajirs with gusto, and despite its claims of having transcended the ethno-linguistic boundaries, it does not shy away from reverting back to Mohajir-centric politics. Apart from the nomenclature and the shift that emerged in the late 1990s, it remains an enigma and invites serious deliberations for political scientists. The journey of MQM is quite interesting and reveals how the interplay of domestic and international factors severely affects the state of affairs in a particular region and how does ethnic elites exploit the

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situation to suite their interests. The present study aims at explaining the emergence of that how the MQM, its organisational structure, ideological base and especially the role of Altaf Hussain's leadership is in shaping the ideological and strategic policies of the party and how his leadership has determined the path this party has taken over the years?.

Introduction

An historical overview of the party and its leadership is prudent in order to predict any likely outcome stemming from the currently unfolding situation. This paper, therefore, seeks to understand the formation of the MQM, its organisational structure and especially the impact of Altaf Hussain's personality in shaping the party's ideology and policy orientation over the years. The underlying assumption of this paper remains that a range of factors are significant in the path the MQM has taken over the years since its inception in 1984. The MQM is a classic example of how the social, political, and economic milieu shapes the fate of an ethnic movement and how does movement leadership hold the reins of its followers and determines the policy and ideological interpretation of that movement?

The MQM was formed by a group of young men who had been spending their days in relative anonymity prior to the party's creation. Predictably the party and its leadership came under attack of severe criticism of having been aided by the establishment. However, the MQM was able to prove its relevance and worth among the Urdu-speaking Mohajirs [Urdu: Migrants] when it succeeded in winning majority seats from Karachi in the General Elections of 1988. Since then, the MQM became a force to be reckoned with in urban Sindh. Successive governments were forced to include the MQM in government, particularly in Sindh, and the situation remains much the same to date. The initial years of the party were spent citing genuine concerns and demands of their community to the state. However, gradually, urban Sindh, especially Karachi, began facing an increase in criminal activities: killings, kidnappings for ransom, extortion, ethnic

and sectarian violence etc. and incidentally MQM began forming in the equation with each passing day. Consequently, The party laced itself heavily with arms of all kinds and its workers became virtual killing machines that ruled the streets of urban Sindh, proudly displaying their skills with the weapons against not only their fellow citizens of different ethnic backgrounds but also the state itself.¹ The 1990s saw a sharp rise in violence that crippled the life and economy of the largest city of Pakistan. Such brutal ethnic conflict that claimed hundreds of lives prompted the state crackdown against miscreant elements.

Eventually, the Operation Clean-Up was launched in 1992 by the military that used heavy force in an attempt to rid urban Sindh of violence and crime. It is not surprising that the operation soon became one that primarily targeted the MQM, as the general perception was that the party was involved in much of the violence spreading in urban Sindh. In 1996, another operation began but this time it was conducted by the civilian law enforcement agencies. The then Interior Minister, Gen. (R)Naseerullah Babar, headed the operation and despite criticism from some sections, this operation was declared successful by and large and effectively curtailed the bloodletting in urban Sindh.²

In 1997 a new development took place in which the MQM leadership announced their decision to change the party's name to Muttahida Qaumi Movement in a bid to move away from ethno-militant to a national agenda. The party began its attempts to attract members of other ethnic groups within its folds and to expand its social base. The party rhetoric was also altered to incorporate the changing trends in the Pakistani political landscape.

1 For detailed accounts, see: Oskar Verkaaik, *Migrants and Militants: Fun and Urban Violence in Pakistan* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004); Nichola Khan, *Mohajir Militancy in Pakistan: Violence and Transformation in the Karachi Conflict* (New York: Rutledge, 2010).

2 Umar Cheema, 'What Experts of the '92 Operation Say about Karachi Today', *The News*, January 18, 2011, Retrieved on March 13, 2014 <https://www.thenews.com.pk/archive/print/280637-what-experts-of-the-%E2%80%9992-operation-say-about-karachi-today>.

Creation of MQM

Various scholars have propounded different theories to explain the sudden rise and strength of the party and its instant electoral success. For some, the changing demography of Karachi and the consequent increase in competition with other ethnic groups compelled the Mohajirs to create a party representing their rights. Karachi being the economic hub of the country offered better opportunities that attracted people from other parts of the country. With the increased number of Pakhtuns, Punjabis and migrants from Afghanistan, Iran, Bangladesh and elsewhere, the Urdu-speaking Mohajirs felt the pressure of competition for the limited resources of the city. Whereas in the early decades after independence, the Mohajirs enjoyed monopoly in the industrial, education and government sectors, they felt insecure with the growing number of new-entrants. The quota system introduced by Z.A. Bhutto effectively curtailed their share in government jobs. This led to resentment among the Mohajir youth, who believed that they were being discriminated against by the state. It was in this backdrop that the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (then Mohajir Qaumi Movement) came into being. Since then the party has established a remarkable presence in urban Sindh, both in terms of electoral politics and street power.

One of the underlying reasons behind the formation of a single Mohajir identity was their gradual marginalisation and discrimination. Historically, the Urdu-speaking Mohajirs have been religious-minded and are known to have been ardent supporters of religious parties, in particular the Jama'at e Islami (JI) with urban Sindh as its basic constituency. Islami Jamiat-e-Tuleba (IJT), the student wing of the JI, was also one of the most active student political groups and had a huge support base in Karachi University. However, with the increasing number of Punjabis in its fold, the Mohajirs began to feel the need for a party that would be committed exclusively to their rights. This was in conjunction with the increasing feeling of victimisation of state policies among the Mohajirs. Consequently, in 1987, a group of Mohajir students

headed by Altaf Hussain, decided to establish a party of their own. The group named their party All Pakistan Mohajir Students Organisation (APMSO), which became a forerunner to the MQM. An awareness campaign was started to highlight the woes of the Mohajirs and the discriminatory behaviour adopted by the state against them.³ Majority of the youth behind the creation of the APMSO belonged to middle-class, urban-based, Urdu-speaking families and were fiercely proud of their heritage. These youth actively propagated their distinct identity and urged the Mohajirs to unite under one banner to defend their common legacy. However, the APMSO failed to garner success in its initial years and became popular after Altaf Hussain had returned to the country from USA. Hussain along with his fellow activists used anti-Punjabi rhetoric to attract the sympathies of the Mohajirs and to unite them under a common identity.⁴

The MQM was created with three basic aims: countering the Punjabi hegemony; securing the rights of Mohajirs; and providing better jobs for its youth. The party adopted a Mohajir-centric agenda and worked to preserve their interests against other ethnic groups. The MQM succeeded in gaining the votes of even those Mohajirs who had hitherto supported the JI and IJT. The reason behind MQM's success was its Mohajir-centric policies. It gave the Mohajirs a confidence and pride in their identity and convinced them that the traditional platforms of representation had proven to be a failure in fulfilling their expectations and they needed a new, common platform that would represent their demands and protect their interests.

In 1988, the party achieved its first electoral success with a landslide victory in urban Sindh and became a coalition partner of the PPP government. The

3 Oskar Verkaaik, *Migrants and Militants: Fun and Urban Violence in Pakistan* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), 60.

4 Noman Baig, "From Mohallah to Mainstream: The MQM's Transformation from an Ethnic to a Catch-All Party," (Dissertation, University of Central Oklahoma, 2005), 92.

party successfully obtained a constituency in urban Sindh and weakened the support-base of the religious parties. The party entered Pakistan's political scene with a predominantly ethno-political agenda, catering to the middle-class, urban-based, Urdu-speaking Mohajirs. The MQM continued contesting elections since 1988 (except when it boycotted the National Assembly elections in 1997) and interestingly, remained part of the ruling alliance in Sindh and the centre till the 2013 elections.

As to how MQM was created, scholars take different positions. According to some critics, the MQM was created by Gen. Zia to counter the Sindhi nationalists, in particular the PPP. However, a close study reveals that the MQM was an unintended consequence of the policies adopted by Zia.⁵ After assuming power, Zia banned student politics, and encouraged party-less politics. He promoted religious parties to legitimize his rule. Zia also appeased the Sindhi nationalists to counter the PPP. Therefore, the Quota System was extended for another ten years. In case of recruitments and admissions, preferential treatment was given to the Sindhis. The Mohajirs resenting such discriminatory policies reverted back to the fold of MQM.

By the late 1980s MQM had become the prominent party in urban Sindh. The strength of party's workers enabled MQM to rule Karachi, prompting critics to refer to it as a militant, even fascist organisation.⁶ The deteriorating law and order situation in Karachi compelled the state to take action against the MQM. Consequently, two successive operations were conducted against the party.

5 Tahir Amin, *Ethno-National Movements of Pakistan: Domestic and International Factors* (Rawalpindi: IPS, 1988), 281.

6 Declan Walsh, Matthew Taylor, 'The Karachi Ruling Party 'run like the mafia' from an Office Block in London', *The Guardian*, Retrieved October 12, 2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jun/02/uk.pakistan>.

Organisation and Structure of MQM

The organisational structure of the MQM is hierarchical and consists of four levels: Headquarter (Markaz), Sector, Zone and Unit.

In 1993, the party's structure was changed as Markaz was replaced by the Rabita Committee (Coordination Committee). It was patterned in which the *Quaid-e-Tehreek* (leader) occupies the top-most level, followed by the conveners, and lastly the Rabita Committee. In early 2016, the party announced the restructuring in line with the city's local government. Therefore, the unit and sector system was abolished and a new organisational set-up introduced whereby 'union committee' replaced the unit and 'town' replaced 'sector'. Prior to this, the MQM had already abolished its Karachi Tanzeemi Committee. The changes were allegedly carried out due to the pressure on the party by law enforcement agencies who had initiated an operation in Karachi as a follow-up to the Operation Zarb-e-Azb.⁷

The commanding structures mentioned above authorised eight wings that include the youth wing (APMSO); labour wing; seniors' wing; religious wing; and the philanthropic wing. The party is sub-divided into zones and units for each region. Presently there exist five zones for Karachi and one for Hyderabad. The division of the party structure into small units ensures that the party office-holders maintain exceptional amount of power on their workers and respective neighbourhoods to an extent that they even wield power on the party's elected representatives of the provincial and the National Assembly. A personality cult was established around Altaf Hussain and people viewed him as a "Pir" (Saint) and a "Quaid" (Leader).⁸ The party does not possess any formal policy structure, legislative proposals or program to fulfil the objectives that it

7 Azfar-Ul-Ashfaque, 'MQM Abolishes Unit and Sector System', *Dawn*. Retrieved October 12, 2014 <http://www.dawn.com/news/1233730/mqm-abolishes-unit-and-sector-system>.

8 Baig, "From Mohallah to Mainstream," 68.

espouses. The MQM was established essentially to provide jobs and not to promulgate political reforms and legislation.

Oskar Verkaaik has summarized MQM's political style as:

The practice of forcing people to pay "voluntary donations" (*bhatta*) to party members had spread widely. Within the neighbourhood, MQM workers acted as the legislative, executive, and judicial powers all in one. They strongly dissuaded people to consult state institutions such as the city court in case of conflict and advised people to come to them instead. Some people found the MQM way of administering justice a lot quicker and more just than the way of the state, but others complained that justice continued to be as arbitrary as ever.⁹

In 1980s, the party presented itself as an ethno-militant party but in the 90s, the party faced series of challenges that prompted the leadership to revise its earlier policy in light of the changing political realities. With the failing political alliances, the successive state operations were conducted against it, the effects of the Afghan Jihad and the decrease in voter turnout in the 1997 elections etc. prompted MQM's leadership to accept the reality that if the party was to be successful in the future, it needed to shed the ethnic stigma attached to it.

The rapidly changing demographic situation of the city forced the party leadership to expand its social base and to open itself for members of other ethnic groups in order to maintain its electoral supremacy in urban Sindh. The 1997 election results proved a significant cause behind the change in leadership's outlook. The low voter turnout and the decrease in number of seats won in the National Assembly (from 15 to 12) compelled its leadership to take serious action to salvage itself in the future. Consequently, on July 26, 1997 the MQM's nomenclature was formally changed to Muttahida Qaumi Movement as a first step in expanding the party's social base. The change in the party's name was the acceptance that Mohajirs were no longer the only dominating community in Karachi, rather there were

9 Verkaaik, *Migrants and Militants*, 147.

also some other ethnic and lingual groups that were of considerable significance in any electoral outcome. It was the realisation of the fact that if the party wished to succeed, it would need to reform itself and cater other ethnic groups too.

The Table1 shows the party position in National Assembly elections between 1988 and 2013 and the Table2 in the Sindh Assembly.

Table 1: PARTY POSITION IN NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS OF PAKISTAN 1988-2013

Party	Number of party seats won in 1988	Number of party seats won in 1990	Number of party seats won in 1993	Number of party seats won in 1997	Number of party seats won in 2002	Number of party seats won in 2008	Number of party seats won in 2013
MQM	13	15	Boycott	12	17	25	18
PPP/PDA	92	44	86	17	80	127 (PPPP)	31 (PPPP)
PML	-	-	75	134	18 (PML-N)	91 (PML-N)	125 (PML-N)
IJI	54	106	-	-	-	-	-
PML (Q)	-	-	-	-	118	54	2
MMA	-	-	-	-	59	7	-
ANP	-	-	-	-	-	13	1

SOURCE: <http://www.ecp.gov.pk>

Table 2: PARTY POSITION IN SINDH ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS OF PAKISTAN 1988-2013

Party	Number of party seats won in 1988	Number of party seats won in 1993	Number of party seats won in 1997	Number of party seats won in 2002	Number of party seats won in 2008	Number of party seats won in 2013
MQM	31	28	28	42	51	37
PPP/PDA	67	56	36	67	93 (PPPP)	63 (PPPP)
PML (N)/IJI	1	6	15	-	0(PML-N)	4(PML-N)
PML (Q)	-	-	-	18	9	1
ANP	-	-	-	-	2	0
MMA	-	-	-	10	0	-

SOURCE: <http://www.ecp.gov.pk>

Role of Altaf Hussain

The role of leadership in the development of a party cannot be ignored. Undoubtedly, much of the success or failure of a group depends on the leader's skills and decision-making capabilities. Therefore, a study about MQM would remain incomplete and lacking in substantial information if due attention is not paid to the party leader i.e., Altaf Hussain. Altaf Hussain continued to command respect and influenced his party's workers despite being in exile for many years. He was born in an Urdu-speaking family on September 17, 1953 in Karachi. His father, Nazeer Hussain, had migrated from Agra to Karachi where he worked as a station master. In Karachi, he began working as a clerk in a local mill. Hussain's grandfather, Maulana Mufti Ramzan Hussain, was a distinguished Islamic scholar in Agra, whereas his maternal grandfather, Hafiz Raheem Bux was also renowned for his religious scholarship.

In 1969, Altaf Hussain studied in Government Secondary School for Boys in Karachi situated at Pir Baksh Colony. During the 1971 war, Hussain was eager to join Army. However, his enthusiasm was proved short-lived. During the training programme, he faced discrimination on the basis of ethnicity. His superior looked down upon him for belonging to Karachi and went so far as to call him a Hindutva.¹⁰ This incident disappointed Hussain and he got the impression that other ethnicities viewed Mohajir community with disdain. After the war, he applied for admission in the Department of Pharmacy at Karachi University. It is worth mentioning here that the problems he faced at the time of admission were not, as some scholars perceive, due to the quota system, rather were because of the fact that the admission date to the department had already passed by the time the results of the batch that included Altaf Hussain were announced. However, Altaf Hussain accompanied by his fellow students succeeded in getting admission after some

10 Altaf Hussain, "Safar-e-Zindagi: MQM Ki Kahani, Altaf Hussain Ki Zubani," (Lahore: Jang Publishers, 1988), 11.

campaigning.¹¹ Interestingly, it was the first time that the Karachi University held classes of two different batches in the same year. The successful admission campaign instilled confidence in Altaf Hussain who immediately began working on an organisation that would represent the Mohajirs and would raise its voice for their rights. On June 11, 1978 the APMSO was formed, and Altaf Hussain became its chairman while Azim Ahmed Tariq became the vice chairman. Hussain left the leadership of APMSO when he left for Chicagoto work as a taxi-driver in the early 1980s. However, soon he returned to Pakistan during Zia's rule. When Zia banned student politics, it was decided to convert the APMSO into a full-fledged political party by the name of MohajirQaumiMahaz (MQM) in March 1984.

Hussain became the sole leader of the Mohajir community despite being little known before his rise to power. A personality cult was developed around him and by the 1990s his influence and power had reached such heights that one witnessed numerous walls in streets of Karachi sporting the slogans of: *joquaidkaghaddarhai, womautkahaqdaarhai* [Urdu: He who betrays the leader deserves only death].¹² Hussain projected his character traits, relating to all segments of the Mohajir community and transforming himself into "a living symbol of the Mohajir nation."¹³ Verkaaik asserts that Altaf Hussain ensures that his supporters can relate to him as a saint, a saviour, a victim and a brother simply by presenting "himself as an ordinary man, almost without character traits of his own".¹⁴ In his autobiography, Hussain urges his people to follow his lead by asking the question, "Is Altaf Hussain a landlord or a son of a landlord? Is Azim Ahmed Tariq an industrialist or a son

11 FarhanHanifSiddiqi, "The State and Politics of Ethnicity in Post-1971 Pakistan: An Analysis of the Baloch, Sindh and Mohajir Ethnic movements," (Ph. D. thesis, University of Karachi, Karachi, 2010).

12 Nadia Khan, 'Slogans of MQM', Retrieved on 17 June, 2011 <http://nadiakhaan.blogspot.com>.

13 Verkaaik, *Migrants and Militants*, 68.

14 Verkaaik, *Migrants and Militants*.

of an industrialist? None of us is a son of a *nawab*, landlord, or an industrialist. We belong to the oppressed class and we have completed and paid for our education by way of imparting tuition to primary and high school students.”¹⁵

Although being a Barelwi Sunni himself, Hussain readily drew inspiration from Shiite Scholars such as Allama Rashid Turabi and Syed Akhtar Rizvi and adopted their oratory styles while addressing his followers. Generally, he would start his address by reciting verses from the Quran, followed by a detailed discussion of the issue at hand and would end his address by paying tributes to the martyrs of the Mohajir community and highlighting the sacrifices made by the Mohajirs in the formation of Pakistan and indeed the MQM. Hussain would promptly burst into tears when the injustices against the Mohajirs were mentioned, thereby increasing his credibility among his audience who could easily relate to their leader. The way MQM incorporated Islamic Sufi traditions while maintaining its image of a secular party is extraordinary and Hussain effectively used this tactic to gain legitimacy for his party among the common people of Pakistan and abroad.

In order to keep constant control over his followers, Hussain made use of incitement of anger and hatred towards not only the establishment but also used anti-Punjabi rhetoric to increase his credibility among the Mohajirs.¹⁶ Sacrifices made by the Mohajirs were greatly highlighted while the discrimination and injustices against the Mohajirs were exaggerated to a great extent and undoubtedly remain the recurring tactic adopted by the

15 Hussain, *Safar-e-Zindagi*, 11.

16 In its earliest days, one would regularly hear slogans such as ‘*Sindhi Mohajir Bhai Bhai, Dothi Naswar Kahan se aaye*’ [Urdu: Sindhis and Mohajirs are brothers. Where have these Punjabis and Pukhtuns come from?]. Interestingly, initially there emerged two groups within the MQM: one predominantly anti-Punjabi and the other anti-Sindhi. In the immediate aftermath of the end of Zia’s rule, however, the anti-Sindhi group seemed to prevail. For details, see Adeel Khan, “Mohajir Ethnic Nationalism in Pakistan: El Dorado Gone Sour,” *Asian Studies Review*, 28 no.1, (2004): 41-56

leadership of MQM. This tactic effectively transformed him into a symbol of the sufferings borne by the Mohajirs.¹⁷

Taking severe steps, he prevented any kind of dissent within the party's rank and file and promptly downgraded and even sacked anyone who appeared to challenge his authority, irrespective of the individual being an ordinary worker or from the Coordination Committee. IdreesBakhtiar summarises this aspect as, "The MQM phenomenon has baffled political analysts as it has no parallel in Pakistani political history. No other organization, or as in this case, no other political leader, commands such unquestioning devotion as Altaf Hussain does."¹⁸

Ideology and Strategic Policy

The best way to understand the ideology and strategic policy of the MQM is to study Altaf Hussain's speeches. Hussain's speeches over the years are quite significant to the discourse of the party and a close inspection of the text reveals not only the ideological basis but also the strategic decisions undertaken by the MQM. The following section entails MQM's discourse from its creation in 1984 to the present, the various stances it has adopted and its political rhetoric in light of Hussain's statements and various speeches.

During the initial years, Altaf Hussain stressed the basic reason and thought process involved behind the creation of the MQM. Hussain's rhetoric was full of phrases such as "mazloomMohajirin" [Urdu: innocent migrants] and the injustices against the Mohajir community. Hussain stressed social justice and the elimination of corruption as the party's main political ideology. A new discourse on Mohajir nationalism emerged which identified the Mohajirs as being the victim of state policy. Unlike other mainstream parties such as the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan

17 Oskar Verkaaik, "Inside the Citadel: Fun, Violence and Religious Nationalism in Hyderabad, Pakistan," (Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 2000) 52.

18 IdreesBakhtiar, "Boycott Blues," *The Herald*, December 1993, 44.

Muslim League (PML), the MQM did not have feudal landlords within its fold. "I am the biggest example. I am not a landlord. Listen to me: you can become leaders in government; you don't have to be from these [landed elite] classes. I am not."¹⁹ Expressing his dislikenessdislike for the ruling elite, he exclaimed to a large crowd at Lahore's Iqbal Park:

What has been done in twenty years by the government? [...] Today we (the country) have our hands spread out, faces change, but the policies are the same [...] why haven't people changed anything against the *Jagirdars* and *Waderas*[Urdu: landed elites]? We (the Mohajirs) will work hard, day and night [...] build our own cars, build everything within this country by ourselves [...] our youth will take this country to the point where we don't have to beg in front of people.²⁰

In 1987, Altaf Hussain presented a Charter of Resolutions of the MQM that gave a detailed explanation of the party's demands and basic ideology. The charter explicitly equated the Mohajirs and Sindhis as having equal rights to claim Sindh as their homeland. It stressed the need for greater participation of the locals in state affairs. He demanded the provision of Sindh's domicile certificate to only those who had been living in the province with their families for the last twenty years. He also called for the easy availability of weapons licences for the Mohajirs and Sindhis. The charter demanded that the Afghan refugees be sent back to their camps along the Pak-Afghan border. Moreover, any non-locals in government and semi-government sector jobs should be transferred back to their respective provinces, making way for locals to take their place. This charter basically outlined a brief *détente* between the Mohajirs and the Sindhi nationalists, and was an attempt by Hussain to reach out to Sindhi nationalists especially G.M. Syed. Syed, on his part, also began to tame down his anti-Mohajir rhetoric and claimed that both "old Sindhis" and "new

19 Altaf Hussain, Iqbal Park, Lahore, 1989, Retrieved on March 12, 2012 <http://bit.ly/r1q8pz>.

20 Hussain, Iqbal Park, 1989.

Sindhis” had a right to Sindh province provided the Mohajirs quit their demand for a separate nationality.²¹

Gradually, Hussain moved his rhetoric from explicitly pro-Mohajir stance and demands to incorporating the minorities as a whole. From here onwards, phrases such as “innocent Mohajirs” transformed to “poor people of Pakistan” and “middle-class segment of the society”.²²

The last decade of the twentieth century witnessed some of the bloodiest conflicts in urban Sindh ranging from inter-ethnic, sectarian and even intra-ethnic riots. Hussain exploited these events to garner support for the MQM as a representative of Mohajir interests. Hussain “proposed a bullet-for-bullet approach as the only way to establish political authority. His charisma, coupled with the intelligent use of the ethnic card and militant philosophy, proved to be an instant success.”²³ MQM was able to relate to the feelings of isolation and resentment faced by the ordinary Mohajir youth and succeeded in building its street power by incorporating the raw talent and strength of the youth. During this phase, the recurrent theme in MQM’s discourse remained that of sacrifice and victimisation. By presenting the Mohajir community as the victim of state repression, Hussain created the “Us vs. Them” dilemma. Accusing the Punjabi-dominated ruling elite of deliberately formulating discriminatory policies, he gathered support of the Mohajir middle-class. On more than one occasions, he accused the state of alienating the Mohajirs and ignoring their sacrifices for the country. During an interview with Ayesha Jalal, Hussain recounted the significant contribution of the Mohajirs to the state of Pakistan. He stated: “Pakistan is the gift of the sacrifice of our elders. [...] Hindustan’s minority province Muslims sacrificed two million lives. We are the

21 Theodore P. Wright, “Centre-Periphery Relations and Ethnic Conflict in Pakistan: Sindhis, Mohajirs and Punjabis,” *Comparative Politics*, 23, no. 3 (April 1991), 306.

22 Altaf Hussain, Lahore, 1990, <http://bit.ly/p2leQN> Retrieved on March 10, 2012.

23 Zaffar Abbas, “The Fatal Flaw,” *The Herald*, January 1993, 68.

heirs to those two million. [...] We are the Mohajirs, the founders of Pakistan. [...] We gave blood for it.”²⁴

However, after the Operation Clean-Up, Hussain mellowed his rhetoric. He no longer explicitly talked about representing the Mohajirs. Rather, he aimed at expanding his social base to include those away from the traditional constituency of urban-based, middle-class, Urdu-speaking Mohajirs. Hussain’s speeches also reflected shift of mindset. In an attempt to appeal to a broader range of listeners, Hussain stated, “I’m not saying everyone in government is like this [authoritarian], but many are. They are against their own people. These landlord elites are even oppressive toward the people who work for them!”²⁵ Incidentally, this was the first speech in which Hussain referred to the MQM as Muttahida.²⁶ In another address, Hussain claimed that, “...people can be from the elites, but they must be there [in government] on merit, and be ready for the long haul of politics.”²⁷

By the late 1990s, the MQM’s transition to a national mainstream party was in full swing. By now, Hussain settled in London since his self-exile in 1992. He did not let this distance come between his success and popularity. He utilized innovative methods to appeal to his constituency. Hussain started regular meetings and rallies to reach out to the Pakistani Diaspora based across UK in an attempt to secure support from their families in Pakistan. Reaching out to the Kashmiris, Hussain questioned, “What are we doing about Kashmir? Only we [MQM] can sympathize. We have experienced similar hurt. We should let the Kashmiris decide

24 Ayesha Jalal, “Conjuring Pakistan: History as Official Imagining,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, (1995): 83.

25 Altaf Hussain, London, 1994, Retrieved on March 12, 2012 <http://bit.ly/o2lsen>.

26 Bilal Baloch, “The Role of Leadership and Rhetoric in Identity Politics: Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) A Case Study,” *al Nakhlah Paper*, 2012, 6.

27 Altaf Hussain, London, 1994, Retrieved on Mar 12, 2012 <http://bit.ly/o2lsen>.

what they want! I want the same for the ill-treated Balochis, Pakhtuns, and Punjabis.”²⁸

Likewise, the MQM takes the credit for being the first party to utilize and incorporate the IT revolution within its strategic policy. Tele-conferencing and later on video-conferencing are some tools regularly used by the party leadership to stay in touch with party workers across the globe. In an online interview with *India Times*, Hussain claimed, “Indeed, the telephone and the IT have never ever been used the way I have used them”²⁹. The MQM’s senior party leader, senator Nasreen Jalil pointed that:

Altaf *bhai* is more available to the people over here, because he’s constantly in touch with us, otherwise in Pakistan there were limitations. He himself remains in touch with everybody else. He can have conferences in several different countries the same time...we are in Europe (Belgium, France, UK), America, Middle East, South Africa, Japan, Philippines, Korea, and Australia... The Mohajirs there are working and, sometimes, Altaf Hussain addresses a dozen stations simultaneously through conference telephone calls and here in Pakistan he’s been addressing rallies of hundreds of thousands of people on telephone. This shows the kind of attachment that people have for him and the party, that despite the fact that its head is in a remote place, people follow him...³⁰

After the 9/11, MQM aligned itself with the rest of the world in combating terrorism. The MQM’s journey began to seek legitimacy for itself contrary to the prior allegations of it being an ethno-militant fascist organization. Efforts began to re-brand itself as a national, mainstream party that transcended ethno-linguistic boundaries and catered to the needs of individuals irrespective of their ethnic background. Hussain took back these words: “We do not support anything which does not contain the word Mohajir,”³¹ and announced to

28 Altaf Hussain, Birmingham, 1997, Retrieved on March 12, 2012 <http://bit.ly/rcaDVA>.

29 Transcript of Altaf Hussain’s online chat with *India Times*, July 5, 2001, Retrieved on March 10, 2012 <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/pakgovnetwork/message/8062>.

30 Nasreen Jalil’s *Interview* with Christophe Jefferlot, Karachi, January 31, 1999.

31 Personality Interview, *The Herald*, September 1987, 130.

move away from the party's ethno-ideological agenda towards politics of pragmatism.

The decision to change MQM's nomenclature was not mere a propaganda tactic, rather it was in reaction to the changing social milieu and the requirements to fit into the new political settings. This step was the recognition of sorts that in order to compete with other groups, the party needed to expand its constituencies and cater to other ethnic groups. Consequently, the party altered its rhetoric to suit its new policy. Phrases such as "Urdu-speaking Sindhis" began creeping in the party leadership's rhetoric and official documents.³² The MQM leadership urged the Mohajir community to learn Sindhi and Hussain encouraged intellectuals to create such literature that would promote brotherhood and unity among the old and new Sindhis.³³

In order to expand the party's base in other areas of Pakistan, huge investment was made to establish the party's offices in different cities of rural Sindh, Punjab and Azad Kashmir and members of other ethnic groups were awarded tickets to contest elections on MQM's platform. Although, establishing offices across the country does not prove MQM's popularity, yet it does reveal that the leadership was serious in its ambitions to contest elections across the country.

In the post-1997 era, the MQM also adopted a new strategy whereby it focused its attentions on maximizing its votes. For this purpose, the strict adherence to Mohajir-centric politics was replaced by a general and pragmatic politics. In order to propagate the party's image focusing solely on ideological rhetoric, the MQM published its revised policy of "Reality and Practicality".³⁴ Changing the rhetoric also had the consequence of transforming the party's strategy. Therefore, in the post-1997 era, the MQM shifted

32 Salman Hussein, "MQM Plays Sindhi Card," *The Friday Times*, May 25-31, Vol. XIII, No. 13.

33 "Altaf Urges Intelligentsia to Promote Unity in Sindh," *The Nation*, December 18, 2005.

34 Baig, "From Mohallah to Mainstream," 131.

from agitation to appeasement and acquiescence. The party has traditionally been infamous for the fast pace at which it shifts loyalties to suit its interests, however now the party adopted a more central position. As opposed to its prior strict adherence to ethnic politics, it started forming alliances based on broad goals such as demands for greater provincial autonomy, moderation and so on and so forth.³⁵ The MQM no longer held any qualms against forming alliances with the military establishment, something that it has always opposed in the past.

This break from excessive focus on ideological politics provided the party with the room for more political manoeuvring. For example, the MQM was a coalition partner of Nawaz Sharif's government in 1998 when the issue of Kala Bagh Dam emerged. As opposed to severe criticism on the matter by opposition parties and the nationalist parties including the ANP, the PPP and the Jiye Sindh, the MQM opted to remain neutral. This strategy benefited the MQM as it was a coalition partner of the incumbent government. However, true to its past tradition of changing loyalties, the MQM quit the government and reverted back to its earlier stance of anti-Punjabi rhetoric to gain the sympathies of nationalist parties.³⁶

The MQM again played to the situation when it decided to ally itself with General Musharraf whilst the latter was in power in 1999. The party fully supported the army dictator's policy of enlightened moderation and sided with him in the fight against religious extremism. In the post-1997 era, the MQM aligned itself closer to the establishment including the military and did not hesitate in embracing the realities, it had once severely criticized. The party now became an ardent supporter of the *status quo* and formed alliance with the military General in becoming a defender of "enlightened

35 Retrieved on June 02, 2011 <http://www.mqm.org> .

36 Muttahida, JSQM Vow to Fight Jointly for Sindh's Rights', *Dawn*, Friday July 17, 1998, Retrieved on September 02 13, 2011 <http://www.mqm.org/news-1998-07-17e.htm>.

Islam". In return, Musharraf welcomed the party in government.

The MQM once again shifted its alliance after the 2008 elections and joined the PPP as a coalition partner in government. Despite being an ally, it continued to criticize the government on a range of issues including the rise in POL prices and electricity and even quit the federal cabinet. However, the party again joined the cabinet in May 2011, but it did not last long and the MQM quit the federal and the provincial cabinet when the PPP postponed the elections for the Azad Kashmir Assembly in July 2011.

This policy of quitting and re-joining the ruling alliances has rendered MQM unreliable.³⁷ Consequently, the party faced criticism for its hypocritical stance as it criticised the ruling elite and yet remained in alliance since 1988. In an interview in 2010, when asked, why Hussain supported the Mursharraf's Martial Law, he replied:

I didn't support it, but I did say that the country loving Generals should seek to change the country through some strong action, similar to martial law: there's a difference. [...] I haven't invited martial law. MQM is a democratic party; we will never endorse martial law. Four times martial law has come into the country, and each time the country has been ruined. [...] *Waderas* and *Jagirdars* have sat on the lap of Generals during martial law and the educated, qualified people within the country have never been able to rise.³⁸

Hussain further justified: "There is no point leaving government. What will be the alternative? Another government will be built by the same *waderas* and *jagirdars*."

37 MQM quit the government and re-joined it no less than six times during the PPP's last tenure and continued its policy when it again became its coalition partner in Sindh after the 2013 Elections. Azfar-ul-Ashfaq, 'MQM decides to quit Sindh Govt' *Dawn* October 20, 2014. Retrieved on September 5, 2016 <http://www.dawn.com/news/1139155>. Also see, Zarrar Khuhro, 'Altaf Hussain: Politics on Mute', *Herald*, August 23, 2016, Retrieved on October 12, 2016. <http://herald.dawn.com/news/1153349>.

38 Altaf Hussain, Interviewed on GEO TV, 2010, Retrieved on March 12, 2012 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JsOq1yTjWDE>.

I want to bring to light, and change, the corrupt nature of the system. I can only do so by being in the system”.³⁹

Challenges to Hussain’s Leadership and the Trifurcation of the MQM

The downslide of MQM began in 2010, when one of the party’s top leaders, and Altaf Hussain’s close aides, Dr. Imran Farooq was murdered in London and the Scotland Yard began its investigations. Thereafter, in 2013 following the murder of a Pakistan Tehrik-i-Insaf worker and deteriorating law and order situation in Karachi, the London Metropolitan Police announced that it started investigations against Hussain for money laundering and incitement of violence. The situation further worsened when the Rangers filed a case against him for ridiculing them and threatening their lives in 2014.⁴⁰ The government subsequently announced its decision to pursue the case and to cooperate with the British authorities.

For almost the past three years, the MQM’s senior leadership was effectually reduced to firefighting, reacting and covering up Hussain’s gradually erratic behaviour and political statements. In a way, the eventual ‘relegation’ of Hussain to mere founder status in the party is the culmination of a process that began in the nineties when the party changed its nomenclature and decided to expand its support base. The gradual side-lining of Altaf Hussain while in part has been due to the immense pressure of the state and its security apparatus; other aspects such as the internal rifts within the party have also remained significant. For example, one of the core justifications given in the early 1980s for the pivotal role of Altaf Hussain’s towering personality and the concentration of unlimited powers in his hands was urgency of the situation and the fact that the party faced times of crisis. Therefore such a decision was

39 Hussain, Interviewed on Geo TV.

40 ‘Altaf Hussain’s Statement Tantamount to Waging War against Pakistan: Nisar’, *Dawn*, August 2, 2015, Retrieved on September 18, 2016 <http://www.dawn.com/news/1197958>.

considered rational by all means. In contrast, the situation that the party faced in summer this year heralded a justified parallel strategy i.e., distancing the party from Altaf Hussain and the transfer of powers to the Coordination Committee.

Yet another factor contributing to the denunciation of the party leader may be the mushrooming of numerous media outlets and the onslaught of digital, electronic and social media that intrusively cover all aspects of politics being conducted in the country. It has also snatched Altaf Hussain's mysterious aura that captivated the youth in the 80s and 90s and reduced the myth that has been the MQM.

Conclusion

The MQM is an exceptional phenomenon, revealing how a community is mobilised in reaction to injustice and discrimination prevalent among them. The MQM was formed in reaction to the policies of successive governments that mistreated this community. The community stood united in a struggle for their rights. The MQM was formed in this environment and exploited sentiments of the Mohajirs as a means to unite them under its banner. The party gave the deprived youth an outlet to express their woes and gave them the additional leeway in terms of arms. However, by the 1990s, continuous violence and calls for more sacrifices led to disillusionment and increased isolation of the Mohajir community in general. This caused a decrease in the MQM's popularity among the Mohajir community it had claimed to be a representative of, since its inception. The changing patterns of demography of urban Sindh, specifically Karachi, also posed a number of challenges for the party and it was in this background that the MQM decided to relinquish its earlier stance of explicitly Mohajir-centric agenda and moved towards becoming a national party that would appeal to the members of other ethnic groups as well. The two operations by the state against the party in 1992 and 1996 also had an impact on the leadership's decision to change the nomenclature. Nevertheless, the MQM owes its success and popularity to Altaf Hussain. Undoubtedly, the ability to project his political mindset through speeches and addresses

effectively mobilised the Mohajir community and encouraged identity consciousness among them.

However, following the decision of the MQM Coordination Committee based in Pakistan to split from the London Secretariat and Altaf Hussain, the party has reached a crossroad. The split has been in part due to the immense pressure of the state and its security apparatus to rid itself of militant wings and miscreants and coupled with the changing trends in electoral politics.

The MQM today faces tough competition and despite securing considerable position in the local government elections, the future of the party would depend on the new leadership to galvanise support of the disillusioned Mohajirs while also catering to the large non-Mohajirs. Other ethnic groups continue to view the MQM as a party of the Mohajirs with a formidable militant wing and if this image is to be reversed then the party should consider issue-based politics. The party's success in capturing the attention and votes of other ethnic groups would depend upon its success in promoting its image as a truly national, issue-based party and a genuinewillingness to work for the interest of Pakistan.