

Reinvigorating Karachi's Socio - Economic Dynamism

Rear Admiral Pervez Asghar (retd)
Former Director General of the National Centre for Maritime Policy Research



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Karachi is in many ways a microcosm of the country itself. One finds all religions, nationalities and ethnicities represented here. There is no dearth of good entrepreneurs, businessmen, traders, transporters, educationists, artisans and other professionals, and no shortage of skilled labour either. So why doesn't the city click? An avid follower of the Karachi scene would perhaps frame the question differently: How has the city managed to survive and thrive despite the adversities it is pitted against?

Prior addressing the issue of reinvigorating the socio-economic dynamism of Karachi, it is useful to understand what the city has gone through, what the city is going through and what are the major impediments in its path to glory. At the time of partition, Karachi was a thriving metropolis with a natural harbour. The harbour had been constructed by the British in the mid-nineteenth century to primarily facilitate the export of Punjab's cotton at a time when the world's global supply of the commodity had been throttled by the American civil war. The rail network that the British also developed led right up to the berths from where the cotton could be directly loaded onto ships through cranes. It's still a most cost-effective method, yet it is a further sign of the city's stagnation that it has hardly been used since. I however did see it in action in the mid-1970s, but only for the purpose of embarking and disembarking ammunition onboard warships. The city also hosts an international airport, still the busiest in the country, which used to be a regular pit stop for many foreign airlines; it's a pity that it yielded its position of primacy to Dubai, and later to many others.

Karachi had everything going for it and yet after a brief period of resurgence, it all started going downhill from there. The problem was that the city had a mind of its own, because of which it always ended up on the wrong side of the political divide. The first sign of trouble arose when it was stripped of its status as the country's Capital. The post-1971 nationalisation policy, owing to which the city's elite businessmen were reduced to nonentities and management passed on to inept bureaucrats, also hit it hard. The unique quota system introduced was presented as sort of a temporary golfing handicap for the city

urbanites to enable the rural areas to catch up. The problem again was that since it was a political ploy, no effort was expended in the catching up part and the system has kept on being renewed ad nauseam. When the town of Kolachi was annexed by the British after the historic battle of Meani in 1843, the Mithadar-Kharadar area constituted the town's core. The city's population of 400,000 at the time of partition kept swelling as waves after waves of immigrants from undivided India, Bangladesh, Burma, Iran, Afghanistan and even from within all corners of the country, most lately from FATA, filled its ranks. The city has even attracted refugees from Poland during the Second World War and job seekers from Central Asia, Sri Lanka and Philippines. The communities which came in significant numbers in search of livelihood formed their own squatter settlements which badly strained the city's planning and organisational capacity.

The Karachi of the sixties was still a very different place, serene and yet lively, with a bustling nightlife. People were polite, traffic was orderly with a tram line operating throughout the length of Bundar Road, streets were clean, and no graffiti nor any disorderly public conduct was visible.

If I were to put a timeline on when the city changed for the worse, irretrievably rather than gradually, that would be the period soon after the eastern wing broke away from the Federation. A host of factors like the sudden inflation generated in the wake of the disastrous '71 War, rampant unemployment and most notably, the opportunities the city presented, attracted a lot of people into its fold. The rickety and slow moving public buses got replaced by the recklessly driven minibuses nick-named 'yellow devils'. While a lot of construction and manufacturing activity was taking place all around, the soul of the city got transformed for the worse. Graffiti, dirtiness and ethnic fault-lines all became a part of the city's landscape.

If we trace the city's history since partition, one lesson comes across very clearly: whatever the city has been able to achieve has been because of its people and conversely, whatever evil has befallen it has been because of political machinations. The resilience of its people alone has warded off the severest of adversities. And believe me, the city has been through quite a bit. The worst period was from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s when the city was wracked by ethnic riots, punctuated by sectarian killings orchestrated by radical mullahs who had descended in droves for this very purpose.

To my mind, Karachi's biggest strengths, namely its diversity, its prosperity and the opportunities it represents, have turned out to be its greatest liabilities. Its diversity resulted in ethnic turf battles for a greater share of the spoils and the systematic killings of Shia professionals. Its prosperity resulted in a culture of exploitation and the phenomenon known as kidnapping for ransom. Its opportunities resulted in a mad scramble by the powerful to get their 'own men' employed in lucrative state enterprises to the detriment of the organisations themselves. The fact that the city of Karachi has, despite this inherent madness, been able to prosper and generate as much as 20% of the country's revenue and 40% of its tax receipts is no small cause for wonderment.

But while going on to discuss the reinvigoration part, we may do well to remember that the city has long suffered from a lack of ownership. So the only two classes one could see were the exploiters, which were legion, and the exploited, which again were legion. From the official side, there have been some silver linings though. The setting up of the CPLC, which improved civil-police liaison as well as the recovery rate of stolen vehicles and busting kidnapping gangs, was one. The reduction of religious graffiti inciting violence at the turn of the century was another. The greatest success by far was the recent Intelligence and Rangers led clampdown on terrorists, target killers, extortionists and gangsters, which brought about a semblance of normalcy to the city. The reason this push succeeded where others floundered was because it was perceived as even-handed. Focus should now be on curbing street crimes, which show no sign of abating.

It is however obvious that the city continues to suffer from systemic and administrative problems, which the state has not displayed much interest yet in addressing. Civil society has had to take on the burden of showing the way. A major part of the responsibility in terms of education, healthcare, ambulances, food and shelter for the underprivileged, has already been assumed by philanthropists and NGOs. The contributions of the Edhi, Chippa, Saylani and Aman foundations cannot be ignored. The city has no dearth of civil rights activists either. It has been well served by people like the late Ardeshir Cowasjee and Arif Hasan, who sought to bring some sanity to the city's planning process. If the city's former glory is to be revived, education should be accorded the highest priority to enable its citizens to understand their civil rights and be able to agitate for them. The education network can only be expanded through public-private partnerships or through outsourcing as being successfully

undertaken in Punjab. Given political will, there will be no dearth of funding from international donors for this purpose.

Governance constitutes a major black hole. The provincial government had of late been very hesitant to hold local bodies elections, but when forced to do so, has stripped the elected mayor of both funding and powers. Not a very tenable situation, considering that all major cities are being administered by elected mayors with full fiscal and enforcement powers. The physical environment is always an area of great concern. Problems however get aggravated when a lack of ownership becomes apparent. Around 400 million gallons of untreated sewage gets dumped into the sea and nobody appears concerned. The sea is knocking on the doors of Malir, the breadbasket of the city, and nobody appears pushed. Setting up of a 1320 MW coal-based power plant at bin Qasim is also bad news. Water and sewerage lines have still not been laid in many localities. Garbage hasn't been cleared in years. Not a single solid waste disposal plant is working. In many areas, sewage is carried in open nullahs, euphemistically called nehr in Clifton, which themselves are hemmed in by encroachments. The high level of toxicity in Karachi harbour creates maintenance headaches for ships in harbour and their berths.

Individuals and communities can however do little when the whole city as well as its adjoining sea has become a huge garbage dump. Setting up of modern waste disposal and recycling plants in sufficient numbers is the need of the hour. All waste, inclusive of domestic, hospital, oil products and industrial effluents, need to be disposed off in an environmentally safe manner. A lack of interest at the official level is palpable. Naming and shaming officialdom aside, communities should band together to do whatever they can. Alamgir Khan, also known as Mr Fixit, has shown the way. There are others who try to make a difference by painting the unkempt walls of the city or undertake beach cleaning. The best possible example of an impoverished community solving its own sanitation, healthcare, housing and microfinance needs is the Orangi pilot project initiated by a visionary, Dr Abdul Hameed Khan, with equal credit going to the late Parveen Rehman, who not only took the project forward but stood up to the land grabbing mafia despite receiving death threats.

Apart from a greener environment as discussed, the other prerequisites for both social and economic regeneration are the easing of traffic congestion and the creation of an enabling environment. Though baby steps are being taken for

reducing congestion in the form of flyovers and underpasses, vital ones like mass transit initiatives had been inexplicably put on indefinite hold. The Karachi circular railway always used to be bustling with commuters but was apparently running at a loss due to mismanagement. But rather than fix the mismanagement part, the easier route of scrapping it altogether was taken. A JICA loan was always on the table till Japan lost interest. KCRs revival is now being planned under CPEC, but the Centre-Province tussle again threatens to derail the project. Karachi enjoys the dubious distinction of being the only mega-city without a mass transit system. After a few decades in limbo, construction work has at last commenced on one of the lanes from Surjani town to Tower. The number of buses currently plying on various city routes is moreover woefully inadequate, which has resulted in brisk motorcycle sales, adding further to the chaos. The construction of an expressway linking the port directly with the Northern by-pass is under serious consideration. This, along with the long overdue shifting of the oil tanker fleet at Keamari to the new Zulfikarabad terminal at bin Qasim would considerably reduce the city congestion. The most significant step by far in this direction would be to redirect all container-based traffic, straight from ship berths to the inland terminals, to the railway network, which would also result in considerable cost-cutting.

Karachi's entrepreneurs and businessmen have showed time and again how to survive in such a volatile business climate. All that is required now for the economy to flourish is to ease bureaucratic bottlenecks, ensure security and availability of utilities at competitive rates. Experience has shown that public sector enterprises by contrast need extensive state patronage to stay afloat, and in the process denies an even playing field to the private sector.

Social spaces in such a vast metropolis are virtually negligible. People normally hit the beaches to beat the summer heat. For quality plays, it's just the Arts Council or the NAPA auditorium. The ideal thing would be for each locality to have its own recreation spaces and community centres so that long distance travel is avoided. The only way this can be done in heavily built-up areas is by retrieving the land that has been illegally grabbed through unauthorized encroachments or 'China cutting'. There are hopeful signs that such a clearance operation is being contemplated. There is no doubt that the city is huge by any standard and its challenges equally complex. Its population has gone way beyond 20 million and the ongoing mega schemes like DHA City and Bahria

Town as well as those being planned like Zulfiqarabad and Keti Bunder may well take it to the topmost tier of the world's most populous countries in less than a decade. The official population census does not unfortunately take into account those not in possession of CNICs nor for that matter those who have indicated their permanent address upcountry as their place of residence. Many outlying squatter settlements also appear to have been missed out. Accurate data compilation is vital if the city wishes to resolve the multifarious issues it is plagued with.

Despite the city's decaying infrastructure and civil services, it has not only maintained a lively facade, but has lived up to its reputation as a city of lights. Resilience is one thing, but the fact remains that for the city to realize its full potential, the state has to own up to its responsibilities. What Karachi needs is what most big cities take for granted: a clean environment, security, efficient public transportation system, availability of adequate health, educational and recreational facilities, public utilities, a public administration responsive to people's' needs and an enabling business and social climate. For this to happen though, the state would need to be convinced to take on responsibilities it has never seriously undertaken before.



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