

Establishment's Karachi-minus-MQM Plan

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Last week, two parties with their primary support amongst the Mohajirs in Karachi - MQM-Pakistan and Pak Sarzameen Party came together to announce an alliance. It caught everyone by surprise, as they have been bitterly fighting for the last many months. Led by Farooq Sattar and Mustafa Kamal respectively, the MQM-PSP alliance fell apart within a day!

After bitterly fighting for months, why did they come together? And why did the alliance crumble, before the news could be printed and read by the rest of us?

A few days later, as the political dust settles in a volatile Karachi, one could see a larger game plan by the Establishment. While some of us would like to interpret the latest strategy by the Deep State as a failure in Karachi, the larger un-democratic political engineering plan for the province should be frightening. If one has to take a larger bird's view of politics across the provinces, especially Punjab, then one could understand a larger sinister plan at the national level. The Deep State seems to have a plan. Will it succeed?

This commentary focuses only on the recent developments in Karachi.

The MQM-P and PSP: A Brief Background

Last week, the MQM-Pakistan (MQM-P) led by Farooq Sattar and Pak Sarzameen Party (PSP) led by Mustafa Kamal at a press conference, said that they would like to forge a "One Manifesto, One symbol, One Party" strategy in facing the elections in 2018.

The MQM-P came into being in 2016, after the local leaders in Sindh, denounced Altaf Hussain, following the latter's diatribe against Pakistan in August. Addressing a huge Karachi gathering from London, Altaf Hussain called Pakistan as a cancer and said: "Pakistan is headache for the entire world. Pakistan is the epicentre of terrorism for the entire world. Who says long live Pakistan...it's down with Pakistan."

The local leaders of the MQM were already under pressure from the Establishment. The Deep State was engaged in a covert and overt war against the MQM's leaders and cadres. Started during Gen Raheel Sharif's tenure, the Deep State has been building a case against Altaf Hussain in London, and rest of the

party leaders and cadres in Karachi. Political pressure was exerted on the UK government to extradite Hussain. The murder of Imran Farooq, another MQM leader in 2010 along with an investigation by the British Police further pressurized the MQM leadership in London and Karachi.

In December 2015, Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) had formally registered a terrorism case against Altaf Hussain. The Deep State, then pursued a media campaign against him. Leaders from the MQM were made to say in front of the media, that Altaf Hussain was an Indian agent. Some of the second tier leaders of the MQM in Karachi were presented as having links with the R&AW.

Outside the media campaign, there were targeted killings and disappearances involving the MQM leaders and cadres. Clearly, by August 2016, the second and third tier leadership in MQM in Karachi were under tremendous pressure.

Meanwhile, the Deep State was also trying to split the MQM. Mustafa Kamal returned to Pakistan in 2016 to announce a new political party – Pakistan Sarzameen Party (PSP). It was too much of a coincidence. When Kamal started speaking that the MQM should give up its ethnic identity and look beyond Karachi and urban Sindh, many in Pakistan were convinced that the PSP was a part of the Deep State's Karachi strategy.

Mustafa Kamal has a following in Karachi. He served as Karachi Mayor between 2005 and 2010, and then later as a Senator from Sindh in Pakistan's National Assembly. He abruptly left the MQM and also Pakistan in 2014, but returned to Pakistan in 2016 to float a new party – the PSP.

It was in this context, a frustrated Altaf Hussain made those remarks in August 2016, and fell into the trap. The Deep State moved in for the kill. The MQM offices were raided and the leaders arrested. Local leadership in Karachi had no other option other than to disown Altaf Hussain, and announce a new party – the MQM-Pakistan.

The Cold War between the MQM-P& PSP: Enter the PPP

While the PSP is widely believed to enjoy Deep State's support, the MQM-P witnessed the going tough. First, it had to disown Altaf Hussain, an eternal "bhai" until then for the MQM. It should have been a tough task for the FarooqSattar and other MQM leaders in Karachi. Though the MQM-P may have dis-associated from Hussain politically, the latter's presence should be emotionally there with the new party and its followers. Perhaps, a section within is even expecting the return of Altaf.

For the MQM-P, the problems have just started. It had to project itself as not having links with Altaf Hussain. The second and third tier leaders in Karachi will have to secure themselves from any covert raids by the Deep State. Also, they have to get their cadres released.

The MQM-P had legislators both in Sindh Assembly and also in the National Assembly, thanks to the 2013 election results for the erstwhile MQM. Within Karachi, the MQM also had its presence in the city administration. Unfortunately, there was a political squeeze; they had the seats, but did not have the

funds to spend for their wards and constituencies.

On the other hand, the PSP was projected as a party enjoying the support of the Establishment. Slowly, there was a trickle from the MQM-P into the PSP, and the process started expanding in mid-2017.

In this context, there is a widespread belief, that Zardari entered the scene. His objective is to win over a section of the MQM-P into his side. For the PPP, it will reap substantial political benefits in the forthcoming elections – both provincially and nationally.

The Deep State strikes: The Rise and Fall of Mohajir Alliance

In retrospect, one could conclude that the reason for the shocking alliance between the MQM-P and PSP last week should have its genesis in the PPP's attempt to break away the MQM-P.

The Deep State was working on a different strategy – to wean away leaders from the MQM-P, effectively leading to its merger with the PSP. For the Deep State, Mustafa Kamal was speaking the language, which it wants to hear – anti-Hussain and MQM shunning away ethnic politics.

For the Deep State, a stronger PSP has another strategy to fulfil – to counter the PPP in Sindh. Outside the MQM, there are few pockets of influence for the religious political parties in Karachi, and also for the PTI, thanks to the Pashtun votes. However, in the event that the PTI and ANP contest separately, the Pashtun votes will get divided. Whereas, the Mohajirs have always voted as a block in Karachi, and also in other urban centres of Sindh.

So when Zardari started reaching out to the MQM-P, the Deep State should have panicked and arranged for a quick alliance between the PSP and the MQM-P. Can there be another explanation?

Will the Deep State succeed in its Karachi Plan?

Clearly, the Deep State has two objectives in Karachi. The first one vis-à-vis the Mohajirs, and the second one vis-à-vis the PPP. Perhaps, the designers of the plan want to achieve them both with a single strike – merging MQM-P with the PSP without realizing an inherent contradiction.

Can the “Mohajir” be taken out of the MQM? This is an emotional and a sociological issue, which the intelligence agencies could never understand, in a deeply polarised and scarred ethnic environment. Even on Altaf Hussain, the MQM-P may have severed its links with the former, but deep down, emotionally, he still remains the “Bhai”.

Can the PPP be made irrelevant in Sindh? This is Establishment's single point agenda from the days of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Like the Mohajirs, Sindhis also have their ethnic emotions – that is driving them back to the PPP repeatedly, despite charges of corruption and mis-governance by the latter. Language and ethnicity is a stronger bond than the federation, and at times, even the religion.

This would, however, not stop the Deep State from trying again. And fail again. Even if it succeeds, it

would be a limited time edition. As was the case between the PSP and MQM-P.