

**The Karachi Riots of December 1986:  
Crisis of State and Civil Society in Pakistan  
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**Introduction**

The violence that erupted in Karachi during December 1986, both in scale and sheer brutality, was unprecedented since the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. What we saw were bands of men armed with Kalashnikov rifles charging into the homes of people belonging to other communities, with whom they had lived for a generation, killing men, women and children without mercy, burning and looting, until entire housing localities were left in charred ruins. There were counter-attacks against the homes of the invaders, and the battles engulfed the streets of Karachi. For two days there was random killing on the roads by armed marauders on fast motorbikes and cars, machine-gunning innocent bystanders. Subsequently, a curfew was declared and the army moved in, but even then there were scattered scenes of violence, and open violation of the curfew for a week afterwards.

The events of December 1986 have been labelled 'ethnic riots' between the Pathan community and the Muhajirs (immigrants from India at the time of partition in 1947, and later Bihar, or from Bangladesh in 1971). Yet even in the Karachi case what appears as 'ethnic violence' is symptomatic of a deeper malaise in the relationship between the state and civil society. What we saw in Karachi highlighted the trajectory of a crisis of the state.

In this three-part paper, the first section provides a snapshot picture of the environment of violence in December 1986. The second indicates some of the major psychological, social and political factors underlying the so-called ethnic violence in Karachi. In the third I discuss the polarization of civil society in Pakistan as well as the structural crisis of state power .

**The Bloodshed in Karachi: 12 to 17 December 1986**

The spark that lit the fires of December 1986 in Karachi was the now famous Sohrab Goth operation. Sohrab Goth is the name of a locality on the outskirts of Karachi where the drug market is concentrated. A largely lumpenized population associated with the storage of heroin, its local distribution and transfer abroad for export, resides here. The locality is equipped with tunnels in which drugs and weapons are stored. The lumpen residents of the area are mostly Pathans from the NWFP, and some Afghan migrants. Legally, these people in Sohrab Goth are squatters, for most of the land which they occupy has been sold to big real-estate dealers of Karachi. The authorities decided to launch Operation Clean-Upate Sohrab Goth, and on 12 December the area was surrounded by army trucks. Then security forces moved in, bulldozing the homes of the residents, and arranged for them to move out to a new locality. By the

evening the authorities recovered only a token amount of drugs and guns- 150 kgs of heroin, 5 pistols and 2 rifles. The drug operators had apparently been tipped off about this operation in time for them to remove their stocks to safer storage points.

Meanwhile, in another operation in Orangi township on Thursday night, just before the Sohrab Goth operation, the police raided the homes of Muhajirs to seize home-made bombs and explosive material. Whatever the reason for this action, it effectively weakened the ability of the Muhajirs to defend their homes in subsequent attacks by the Pathan community.