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## THE UNDERCITIES OF KARACHI

**T**HE LARGEST PORT on the Arabian Sea, Karachi today has a population over 20 million, on a par with Mumbai, and ranks as the world's eighth biggest city. Commanding the north-east quadrant of the ocean, with a hinterland stretching up the Indus Valley to Afghanistan, it has been the principal entry-point for US arms and supplies in the 'war on terror', while refugees—and heroin—have flowed in the opposite direction. From the bloodstained birth of Pakistan with the Partition of British India, the city's explosive growth has more often been fuelled by the 'push' of geopolitical, agrarian and ecological crises than by the 'pull' of economic development. Life in its sprawling *katchi abadis*, or 'unpaved settlements', has much in common with that of other giant undercities, such as Mumbai's, with the exception that violence plays a significantly greater role here. The vast majority of Karachiites are not only entangled in competition with each other, in a desperate struggle for survival, but must also contend with a brutal climate of aggression fuelled by gangsterized political groupings, the most influential of which also control the armed force of the state. In what conditions do its inhabitants live and what could drive increasing numbers of newcomers to try to survive here?

On the eve of Independence in 1947, the seaport of Karachi had fewer than half a million inhabitants, mostly Hindus, living within the old city walls or in fishing villages along the coast. The British had built up the docks and warehouse districts, constructed a military cantonment and laid out tree-lined streets for themselves to the south of the 'native' city, areas still known as Clifton and Defence. Partition led to an exodus of some of the city's Hindus to India, and the arrival from that country of a much larger number of Muslims: around half a million Urdu-speaking

Mohajirs (refugees), who abandoned property and possessions south of the new border to flee to what was now the capital of Pakistan. Initially the Mohajirs were settled in temporary shelters, in parks and on open state land. With the conservative modernization policies that began in the early 1950s, and intensified under the military regime of General Ayub Khan from 1958–68, new satellite townships were built around the city and heavy industry developed, with the aid of foreign loans. The different sectors of Karachi's fast-growing working class had distinct ethnic bases: dock workers were drawn from the Makrani-Baluch labourers of old Karachi; Mohajirs predominated in heavy industry and multinational firms; villagers from the North-West Frontier, Hazara and southern Punjab were recruited by jobbers for the textile districts, where numerous small factories operated in intolerable conditions.

These upcountry migrants congregated with their fellow Sindhi, Seraiki, Pashtun, Swat, Hazara or Punjabi speakers, on vacant land close to the industrial areas. If their precarious status made them ready prey for particularist political manipulation, there were nevertheless tentative moves towards horizontal solidarity across ethnic lines in the late-60s labour protests in Karachi, which coalesced with the student agitation that overthrew Ayub in 1968. Militancy reached a peak in the years that followed.<sup>1</sup> Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party campaigned on the slogan of *roti, kapra aur makan*—bread, clothing, shelter—and declared war on the 'twenty-two families' said to control Pakistan's capitalist manufacturing (though not on the few dozen families that owned most of the country's land). But once in office, after the 1971 break-up of Pakistan—the western wing's leaders having refused to accept the eastern Awami League's majority—Bhutto changed tack: while some workers were enrolled in pro-PPP unions and awarded benefits and wage rises, elsewhere strike-breaking and union-busting were the norm. Bhutto's 1973 Constitution introduced a federal system with four provincial-level governments. Agitation broke out in Sindh Province—now run from the Governor's mansion in Karachi by Mumtaz Bhutto, a cousin of the Prime Minister and one of the country's large landowners—for the use of the Sindhi language in schools, alongside Urdu; counter-mobilizations were organized by Mohajirs. A quota system was introduced, with public-sector workers hired on a regional and ethnic basis, entrenching

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<sup>1</sup> For a fuller account, see Kamran Asdar Ali, 'The Strength of the Street Meets the Strength of the State: The 1972 Labour Struggle in Karachi', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2005.

divisions and creating vertical, ethnically denominated links, in place of the fragile class solidarity that had emerged in the course of the 1968–72 labour militancy. Under the 1977–88 dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq, Karachi's Mohajirs were organized by the increasingly powerful Mohajir Qaumi Movement led by Altaf Hussain, the son of Urdu-speaking refugees from India, who had emerged in the 1980s as a Mohajir student leader, opposing quotas for Sindhis.

Karachi has become a microcosm of all the ethnic fault-lines running through town and country in Pakistan. The separate communities populate districts which they consider to be their own domain, fenced off from intrusion by outsiders. Each has its separate identity, a specific way of life bolstered by culture and language, a claim to a particular niche in the labour market and a specific, clientelist form of political representation. Migrants from the countryside of Sindh are mainly supporters of the PPP, led by Bhutto's daughter Benazir after Bhutto himself was framed and hanged by Zia. Benazir, too, was killed—shot while campaigning for the 2008 election. Her husband Asif Ali Zardari is now in charge, having manoeuvred himself into the job of the country's President on the basis of the grief for his assassinated wife. During the 1990s, both PPP and Muslim League governments in Islamabad—the new capital, built hundreds of miles to the north-east in the early 60s—made attempts to cut the gangsterized MQM down to size.<sup>2</sup> Altaf Hussain fled to London in 1992; convicted *in absentia* of killing MQM dissidents, he continued to run the organization from afar. With its substantial Mohajir vote bank, the MQM bloc in the National Assembly has regularly played the role of king-maker in PPP or ML-led governments. In Sindh it holds around a quarter of the seats in the Provincial Assembly, on a par with the PPP.

### *Powermongers*

In Karachi, the MQM and PPP now rule the roost and, under the adage of winners take all, have been able to short-change all other contenders. Newcomers have to use force of arms to gain access to the closed political arena. An illustration of this is the huge police operation that took place in May 2012, aimed at wiping out gangsterism in Lyari, one of the older settlements, north-east of the old city. Lyari's inhabitants,

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<sup>2</sup> The MQM changed its name from 'Mohajir' to 'Muttahida' (united) Qaumi Movement in an attempt to 'go national', keeping the same acronym.

predominantly of Sindhi and Baloch stock, are packed into congested neighbourhoods lining the banks of the Lyari river, a maze of small streets and alleys. The population of the district is estimated at 1.7 million, though reliable figures are difficult to come by in Pakistan. Tiny two-room dwellings house husband, wife, children and a few close relatives. Domestic overcrowding is one reason why the men prefer to be outside in the street rather than stay at home; every neighbourhood has a market which is the central meeting point. Most households have to get by on around 10,000 rupees or \$100 a month, with women and children contributing to the family budget through a wide variety of chores. It is an income of less than \$1 per capita per day and keeps the breadwinners, together with their dependents, strangled in poverty. The supply of labour is much higher than the fluctuating demand for it. Youngsters, even with a couple of years of secondary schooling, find it next to impossible to qualify for a regular job. They hang around in the local market, waiting for somebody to hire their labour power.

In these conditions, a large-scale criminal economy has arisen. At the lowest level, those engaged in it operate on their own account as thief, snatcher, trickster, pickpocket, fence of stolen goods, porno artist, counterfeiter; or as an intermediary in all sorts of shady deals. There are conglomerates of smaller and larger gangs in every neighbourhood, specializing in gambling dens, vice rackets, trafficking in arms, drugs or hard drink. More profitable but also more risky than this illicit trade is extorting protection money from big stores and other enterprises, or renting out gang members as bodyguards to VIPs. The provision of security is required to keep extortion within bounds, an activity that may belong to the core business of the same gang. Kidnapping of well-to-do people for ransom also fits this pattern of robbing the have-mores. The youngsters recruited for this industry start their career as part-time members on the fringes of the gang and have to work their way up before being entrusted with the serious work. Once in, it is next to impossible to back out. The scale of the criminal economy allows the gang leaders to live in great style and their nicknames are spoken with awe. But they cannot move around freely because of the rivals surrounding their territory, and are constantly embroiled in fights to defend or expand their reach. Arms are abundantly available; in Karachi it is not only the police and paramilitary patrols who drive around in armoured cars with rifles and stenguns poking out. Wedding feasts, religious festivals and party rallies will be celebrated with wild firing into the air—not just high spirits but

also a show of power, meant to impress on bystanders that these men are not to be taken lightly. After 1989 a number of *jihadi* mercenaries, recruited and armed by the US and Saudi Arabia against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan, went into private business on their return to Pakistan. Since 2001 they have been doing well from the large-scale shipments of arms and other goods that arrive in Karachi, to be sent on overland to the NATO-ISAF forces in Afghanistan. On a conservative estimate, no less than a quarter of these provisions disappear into the underground economy; in Quetta, an open black market is known as Nato Bazaar. The leakage is a result of teamwork between mafia and police, a pilfering aided and abetted by the Navy and Customs who control the docklands. In the city, arms are part of daily life.

The police action on Lyari was carefully planned. The aim was to storm the headquarters from which the gangs operate, seize their weapons and take the leaders into custody—or eliminate them, if that was more feasible. On the first day of the raid the district was cordoned off: no fresh food supplies were allowed to reach the markets; water, electricity and gas were cut off, as well as internet and mobile phones. Loudspeakers instructed the inhabitants to remain indoors, or risk being dealt with as combatants. The people had to suffer the summer heat—temperatures of 40°C or more—cooped up in their unventilated dwellings. An invasion force of 2,000 police and paramilitary troops moved in, on foot and in armoured vehicles. The enemy showed itself more than equal, attacking police posts and exchanging gunfire in the streets. The gangs had stocked up on heavy weaponry, including machine-guns, long-range sniper rifles, tear gas, grenades and even rocket launchers, which scored some hits on the armoured vehicles. The battle lasted for eight days and killed many dozens, though very few gangsters. Most of the wounded were bystanders, who remained deprived of medical care; the ambulance service was not allowed to ferry them to the city's hospitals. More embarrassing for the city's rulers than the failure of the police operation was that the people of Lyari sided with the gangs and turned openly against the state. In neighbourhoods where the fighting was fiercest, local inhabitants came out to demonstrate and shout slogans against the troops. Confronted with popular resistance, the police opened fire on the protesters, a response that fuelled the anger in the neighbourhoods against the agents of law and order.

What needs to be foregrounded, however, is that behind the façade of crime-fighting a totally different scenario, one of political powermongering, was at stake in the police operation in Lyari—hence the burning of the flags and banners that political parties distribute in these localities. Portraits of PPP politicians were torn up and trampled upon, their property in the district set ablaze. Gangsters killed a PPP party boss; the relatives of others, who had made themselves scarce, were murdered. Clearly, more is at stake than the enforcement of law and order, the ‘clean sweep’ of criminal activity trumpeted by the local media. Many gangs originated as, or have transformed themselves into, the armed militia of political parties. They provide bodyguards for the party leaders’ protection, if necessary eliminate their patron’s rivals, take care of any dirty business, intimidate the party cadre into unconditional obedience and extort ‘donations’ from real-estate operators, builders and other businessmen who depend on local political officials to authorize their dealings. Their reward for these services rendered to those in office takes the form of permission to practice their own brand of criminality, as well as intercession with police and courts if they get into trouble.

Above-ground and underground are thus intertwined to such an extent that it is well-nigh impossible to figure out where the one begins and the other ends. To give an example: the former Home Minister of Sindh’s provincial government authorized every member of the regional Assembly to distribute thirty gun licenses every month, for the protection of their party workers. In other words, Zulfiqar Mirza has authorized the urban mafia to carry weapons. The current Sindhi Minister for Police and Security has expressed his regret for the loss of life during the Lyari campaign, adding that damage to property will be duly compensated. But he has not dared to show his face in the district, even with the state’s protection. By approving the operation the PPP, once the leading political force in Lyari, has irretrievably lost its vote bank there.

The largest gang in Lyari is of Baloch origin, a fast-growing minority in Karachi. The gang boss realized that, instead of merely dealing with the fixers of the PPP, it would be more profitable to gain political power independently. With this objective in mind he transformed his gang into a social movement, the People’s Aman (‘Peace’) Committee. Angered at the emergence of a new stakeholder, the PPP and MQM provincial government charged the police with carrying out the Lyari operation in order to bring this upstart back into line. The two parties operate both as

above-ground partners in the ruling coalition and as underground rivals, engaged in gang-fights with each other; they have teamed up to neutralize a common danger: a new allegiance attracting their own former mercenaries. While the battle for Lyari was in full swing, a PAC spokesman managed to escape from the district, with help from within the police force. He surfaced a few days later in London to give a press conference at which he denounced the brutal assault on a genuine people's movement that wants, for the sake of the common man, to get its fair share of power. In reality, this type of political activity is not about serving the interests of the people but amassing money as fast as possible, since you never know how the cards are going to be stacked tomorrow. Karachi's rapid expansion has involved major infrastructural works. To win the contracts, real-estate dealers and construction magnates have to pay a price far above the tender; these huge levies never show up on the city's books. It is no different at the apex of the state: President Zardari has long been known as Mr Ten Per Cent, though that is surely an understatement. His loyal Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani was only ousted in June 2012 after the Supreme Court had found him guilty of refusing to mandate the Swiss authorities to reopen the corruption investigation against Zardari, who has stashed some of his accumulated loot in bank accounts there. In August the Court summoned Gilani's replacement, Raja Pervaiz Ashraf—also known as Raja Rentals, thanks to his pecuniary habits—to explain why he too had so far failed to comply with its ruling.

### *Working lives*

Since the early 1990s, the population of Karachi has more than doubled. Many of the new arrivals are from the immediate hinterland, mainly land-poor and landless peasants who have been pushed out of the rural economy. They are joined for the same reason by migrants from the poverty-stricken lands of Balochistan. Pashtuns from the tribal regions on both sides of the Afghan border have fled the war ravaging their homelands, and even those who would prefer to stay may be driven away by US drone attacks and the Army. For the most part they have settled in the city's sprawling *katchi abadis*: Korangi in the south-east, Baldia and Orangi in the north-west, Lyari, Malir and many others. The *katchi abadis* mainly consist of two-room, tin-roofed dwellings built from concrete blocks, housing a family of eight or nine; the older settlements have densified over time and now have two- and three-storey houses. Sewage



and waste water often run in open drains; acquiring water and electricity involves political intervention, entangling the inhabitants in the party system. Some of the worst conditions of degradation and overcrowding are in the old villages that have been swallowed up in the city's sprawl.<sup>3</sup>

Each wave of newcomers has to fight its way into the city's job market. Employment in the informal economy is highly nepotistic in nature, and access to work is largely determined by family or regional ties. This makes it harder for outsiders to succeed. In Korangi there are many thousands of factories producing textiles for export. They vary in size, from dozens to hundreds of employees. The working day is fixed at eight hours, but obligatory overtime can make it twelve hours during busy periods. The craftsmen here are experienced workers, mainly men, although young, unmarried women have also become eligible. Children are employed as helpers. The workforce is mixed: largely Sindhis and Punjabis, but there are also Baloch and Pashtuns, Bangladeshis and groups of Rohingya from Burma. The factory owners leave recruitment and supervision to their subcontractors, who act as managers and pay the wages. The subcontractor, in turn, can choose who to favour with more work assignments, better pay, identity cards or help with medical care. The monthly wage bill for one subcontractor's team of 27 workers was 150,000 rupees, but while some were paid 7,000 rupees or more, others earned less than 5,000. Monthly rent for a single room shared by two or three young men is around 2,000 rupees; a two-room dwelling for a family of six or seven costs up to 4,000 rupees a month in fixed expenses. There are also a great many small, informal workshops in the *katchi abadis* and the old-city slums: the garment and leather industries, light engineering, construction, waste sorting and recycling, and so forth.

Any stability in the lives of factory workers is likely to be temporary. Factory closures are common; illness or the subcontractor's whim can lead to the sack. Karachi's frequent power cuts cause acute crises in the industrial areas; interruptions—'load-shedding'—do not follow a fixed schedule and workers have to hang around until the electricity comes back on, not knowing whether they will be able to meet their piece-work quota. Tension in and around the sheds runs high, not due to heavy workloads but to low ones. To cope with the erratic rhythm of work,

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<sup>3</sup> For a survey of *katchi abadi* conditions, see Arif Hasan and Masooma Mohib, 'The Case of Karachi', Study for UN *Global Report on Human Settlements 2003*.

*gutka* or *charas* (marijuana) is widely used. But addiction is expensive. The few trade unions that exist within the informal economy are helpless to improve working conditions. Six foremen who organized a strike in Faisalabad in 2010 have been sentenced to life imprisonment under anti-terror laws, convicted on charges filed by the factory owners, 'to set an example'.

### *Land flight*

Although they live in poverty, factory workers are significantly better off than many newcomers from the countryside, who struggle to find work at all. The repeated flooding in the central Indus Valley due to the heavy monsoon rains of the past few years has displaced large numbers of people from the interior of Sindh and the Punjab. Some have been housed in the new sparsely serviced high-rise apartment blocks thrown up on the outskirts of Karachi—at Gulshan, for example, not far from the road to Hyderabad. But many have no option other than to camp in fields or along the roadsides in makeshift *jhupris*, hutments constructed from torn branches, bamboo, plastics, straw and rags. All the signs are that these migrants have come to stay. They constitute part of a roaming labour stock that has been pushed out of the agrarian milieu without having found a place in Karachi's economy. They reach the city's outskirts but remain stuck there, languishing at the bottom of the informal economy.

To understand why they come, one needs to take into account what they are leaving behind. Earlier this year I visited the small village of Mir Hot, in an area of Sindh that was flooded for most of 2011. At first glance there was little sign of the disaster. The country road leads through a bleak and dusty terrain; it is mainly cash crops, wheat and cotton, that are cultivated, but the fields lie untended during the hot summer months. The settlement consists of fifty dwellings, mud huts with flat roofs. The only stone building is a derelict school; its roof caved in with the last round of flooding and since then the education of Mir Hot's children has come to an end. They will probably remain illiterate, as their parents are. Electricity is rented from a neighbouring village, supplied via a tapped line, and only a few households have a light bulb or two. Nobody owns a television set. One of the dwellings has a small shop; apart from this, agriculture provides the only means of subsistence. The nearest government services are eight miles away, in the town of Badin. The man

who functions as head of the village has some 25 acres of land, half of which he cultivates himself, while the rest is let out for sharecropping to the villagers, who have at most 2 to 4 acres to work—too little to live on, so they are obliged to lease additional plots from the large landlords in the region. The poorest households in Mir Hot are entirely landless, though some at least retain the necessary minimum of farming tools and a few head of cattle, setting them above those who are deprived of any agricultural capital at all and barely scrape 200 rupees (\$2) a day for their families.

Poverty in rural Sindh is exacerbated by the starkly inequitable hierarchy of land ownership. On top are the *jagirdars*, who lay claim to many tens of thousands of hectares; a much larger number of big landowners, whose possessions vary from 500 to 1,000 hectares, are also part of this rural elite. Below them comes a long chain of intermediaries, down to the small landlords who issue the acres of land for farmers to work on. Agriculture across this vast plain, with its desert-like climate, is dependent on large-scale channel irrigation that brings the waters of the Indus and her tributaries to these estates. This raised the value of the land, but the downside has been to increase still further its excessively uneven distribution. The landed elite has a strong interest in maintaining the sharecropper system as the pivot of the agricultural economy. The lease-law that came into force in 1950 awarded the *hari*, or agricultural worker, a mere half of the crop he produced; in practice the *hari's* share remains far below this, since most landlords will give up no more than a quarter of the yield, and then deduct from it the costs of the sowing seed, fertilizer and water tax. The share-crop contract effectively downgrades the farmer to a field labourer, yet makes him bear the responsibility for providing the necessary equipment and draught-animals to work it, and carry the risk of harvest failure, without paying him for this on top of his labour. Landless farmers have no choice but to offer themselves as full-time sharecroppers; the contract entails a loan, partially given in kind—usually cereals—but treated as cash with interest, requiring onerous repayments. In one respect the Mir Hot farmers are slightly less vulnerable than most, in that their dwellings do not belong to the landlord. More often, the landlord-*hari* relation is closer to serfdom, with economic-power relations extending into the home, not least in the form of *droit de seigneur*.

Against this background, what has been the effect of the repeated flooding of the past two years? If at first sight the disaster left no visible

traces, this may be because it was scarcely possible for the majority of villagers to live in worse conditions than normal. 'We had so little that we couldn't lose much', as one of them put it. There had been no crops in the fields, so the farmers had not paid much in cultivation costs. The huts were flooded, but not so badly that the villagers had to be evacuated; they were provided with food supplies from outside, by way of assistance. After two months the water level dropped and allowed their meagre belongings to dry. The biggest setback was the absence of cattle fodder; lack of grazing forced many to slaughter their animals. Replacing them meant incurring fresh debts to the landlord, the sole supplier of credit. What was striking was the laconic tone of the villagers as they discussed the flood. For many, the cyclone that hit Mir Hot in 1999 was a bigger disaster; nearly everyone saw their homes destroyed. Pakistan's National Disaster Management Authority has already announced flood warnings for 2012 in 29 districts, twelve of them in Sindh, affecting some thirty million people. Reading between the lines of the official reports, it is clear that a contributing factor has been poor maintenance of dams, bridges, locks and canal banks, due to a combination of inadequate resources and bureaucratic lethargy. The Sindh provincial authorities promised to compensate victims who could prove their losses, but the installments distributed so far have mainly gone to the landlords, rather than the sharecroppers and agricultural labourers, who should have been the first to be paid.

Even so the *jagirdars* had reason to feel threatened by the floods. Whole regions in Lower Sindh were inundated and hundreds of thousands of poor farmers had to leave their submerged villages, often with little more than some crockery and the clothes on their backs. They were accommodated in emergency camps set up by the authorities, dependent on NGOs for rations and health care. The landlords' substantial mansions are usually located on higher ground and few were forced to leave. However, they risked losing their hold over their sharecroppers as a result of the floods; the camp-dwellers had got away, out of the reach of their masters, and the *jagirdars* had good reason to fear that they might flee altogether from their agrarian bondage. The large numbers of migrants that seized the opportunity to escape to the urban economy after the flood shows their suspicion was well founded. To minimize the risk, the large landowners demanded that the Sindh provincial government close down the camps prematurely. The authorities naturally agreed. The *jagirdars* are the descendants of old and prominent families that are well connected

to the powers that be. Many members of the Provincial Assembly in Sindh are *jagirdars*, and they have a far-reaching say in filling bureaucratic posts, both high and low, and on how the civil service handles its day-to-day business. After the camps were dismantled, a majority of the sharecroppers returned to their subordinate existence, lacking any alternative prospect. It was back to square one, now burdened with even more debt to replace their few goods and chattels.

### *Rule of the jagirdars*

It would be a mistake to think that the farmers in Sindh had been impoverished by the flooding. Their misery is caused by the agrarian regime in which they have often been locked from one generation to the next. Their subjugation is legitimated by a cruel form of bookkeeping, administered by the landlord or his bailiff, in which receipts, expenditures and an exorbitant interest for pending receivables are accounted in ways calculated to confound the largely illiterate sharecroppers. The *jagirdars* do not invest in their property to enhance its productivity but content themselves with taking as large a portion as possible of what the sharecroppers produce; conversely, the *haris* know they will not themselves profit from any attempts to improve efficiency. The sharecropping system here is not only a form of superexploitation, but maintains an agrarian regime that has harmful effects in a general economic sense. The landlords' political lobby remains as powerful as ever, and there is no sign of the thoroughgoing land reform that is so urgently called for.

But it would be wrong to assume that the *haris* passively accept the miserable fate that has befallen them. Resistance has long been raging in the depths of rural Sindh, and social tensions have undeniably increased during the past decade. This escalation is fed by political agitation but even more by growing population pressure and the worsening person-land ratio. Ten years ago, the amount of land allotted to most *hari* families had in many places fallen from the accustomed eight acres to half that size, below the level that is economically viable. Consequently, they have no option but to ask for further loans.<sup>4</sup> This amounts to converting what still passed for a sharecropping contract into a labour

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<sup>4</sup> On debt dependency in Sindh, see Kristoffel Lieten and Jan Breman, 'A Pro-Poor Development Project in Rural Pakistan', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2002, p. 336.

arrangement—a process of coercive agrarian proletarianization accompanied by growing indebtedness.

Powerless to negotiate a less onerous agreement, the *haris* have little other option than to try to flee their bondage. I visited a camp for runaway farmers operated by a human-rights organization in rural Sindh. These refuges are not safe shelters, as landlords have been known to raid them to recapture deserters. I spoke with Dehraj, a former *hari* from Sanghar district who decided after the floods of 2011 to break his master–servant relationship. On his return from the emergency camp, where he and his family spent six weeks, the master informed Dehraj that his debt had risen to 200,000 rupees. When the *hari* refused to agree to this, the landlord insisted the family work for him without payment. The dispute simmered for months, finally resulting in a rift that led to Dehraj's departure, with 24 members of his joint family, in a truck hired for the occasion. They knew where to go, as the refugee colony is well known in the district. But two members of the family—his nephew's wife and young child—were held captive in the *haveli* of the landlord during their departure. Dehraj and his brothers get occasional work in a neighbouring brickyard, loading bricks onto trucks for a few hundred rupees per day. Another resident at the camp has been taken on as a jobber for the brickyard and may be able to get Dehraj an advance, or *peshgi*, of 5,000 rupees or more. All the workers in this rural industry are recruited on the basis of advances—in other words, of debt dependency, which prevents job seekers from moving freely and ensures the owners have enough labour for the next season. The teams are paid such low wages—430 rupees for producing 1,000 bricks per day, sold by the yard owner for 4,000 rupees—that they are obliged to ask for new loans. The terms of employment are little different from the contract that keeps the *hari* captive.

Land flight from the Sindh countryside is becoming increasingly widespread, driven by an outmoded system of production, an agrarian regime in which power rests with a small layer of great landowners to whom millions of land-poor farmers are bound in servitude, and rising population. A natural disaster that temporarily drives the *haris* away from their villages simply makes the underlying crisis manifest. This is how the floods that have ravaged Lower Sindh in the past two years should be understood. Hundreds of thousands of agricultural workers were relocated to emergency camps, and this exodus away from their

familiar habitat helped to stimulate the urge to end their rural servitude. The social workers in the camps, no strangers to scenes of poverty, were deeply shocked by the *haris*' state of misery and deprivation, caused not by the flood but by drastic malnourishment, diseases and exhaustion. Many will end up bivouacking by the roadside in Karachi, free at least from the *jagirdars*.

### *At the apex*

Karachi is the financial and business headquarters of Pakistan, and the city's economy contributes more than a quarter of the gross national product. This means there is a lot to cream off, and the political class does so with a vengeance, acknowledging no other priority than its own self-interest. Granted, this is common enough elsewhere, but the vulgar avarice of the political supremos in Pakistan takes some beating. Their *dolce vita* is screened off from public view in the tightly secured zones of Clifton and Defence, where they can retreat behind the high walls and impassable gates of their palatial mansions to the comforts of their extended family. As an extra safeguard, Zardari has bought up large amounts of property surrounding his own sumptuous home. For the owners and managers of corporate business, enough of the surplus is left to live in equal splendour. At the Sindh Club, preserve of the Karachi elite, not least the Haroun family, which also owns the Dawn Media Group, deals are cut beneath the chandeliers as if the colonial era had never ended. Once in a while I get the opportunity to observe life at the top, as a foreign guest brought along to one of the parties thrown by these barons for each other. A typical *soirée* took place in a beautifully laid-out garden. Beside a huge swimming pool, a fine recital of classical music was held under the moonlight. The sitar player had been flown in for the occasion from Germany, where he is a big hit. French wines flowed, with a choice of hard drinks. 'Catering has been taken care of by my friends at the docks', joked the congenial host, to knowing laughter.

The country's foreign debt is mind-boggling; it is sustained largely thanks to the geopolitical considerations of the United States. The small portion of the 'aid' that reaches the state kitty is not spent on building up civil society, let alone addressing the subsistence crisis that defines life for the utterly poor, a major segment of the population. In the public eye, the political sphere is one of turmoil, rife with muscle flexing; but backstage the bosses share the spoils. To appropriate wealth the political

parties cannot do without the gangs, and these armed mercenaries also come in handy when the electorate shows signs of restiveness. Criminality and politics are two sides of the same counterfeit coin. While criminality surfaces as a political force of its own, the parties resort to underground violence in order to gain and consolidate their share of power. It is not so much that the Pakistani state has failed, but that it is run by a bunch of powermongers as their personal fief and criminal holding. It is a regime that could not care less for the dire predicament of the people. One begins to understand why many of the destitute are increasingly lured by the obscurantism of the Taliban. They are tempted to see it as a way out of what is for them a dead-end.