Enclavisation and violence in Karachi

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Sobia Ahmad Kaker describes Karachi's enclaves and considers implications for security in one of the world's 'most dangerous' cities.

The story of life in Karachi could very well be a tale of two cities. The megacity of over 20 million residents is an extremely polarised city. The prosperous live in well serviced, securitised enclaves, frequent exclusive clubs, and shop in glittering malls. The urban poor, meanwhile, are relegated to auto-constructed, unplanned slum settlements. The two cities however, are not distinct. They intermesh with each other through the routines of everyday urban life. This interaction is usually mundane, but it creates paradoxes of inclusion and exclusion. More pertinently, it creates conditions that propel urban conflict and violence.

Present-day Karachi is widely reported to be one of the most dangerous places in the world. The city is prone to frequent bouts of murderous violence at the hands of political activists, land mafias, and other criminal groups. More recently, the threat of terrorist violence has also reared its head after militant groups such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Al Qaeda, and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi have started operating in Karachi. As a result, Karachiites live in a constant state of fear from terrorist attacks, extortion, muggings, violent burglaries, and kidnappings.

In these circumstances, state security forces have made a visible effort to fortify and militarise strategic places such as embassies, consulates, military compounds, and government buildings. In the spirit of defence, random policed check-posts also pepper the city streets. Despite this, the majority of urban residents consider state policing inadequate and have decided to take security into their own hands. Residents across the city are therefore bunkering down in privately securitised enclaves.

In residential enclaves, circulation is restricted through a combination of physical enclosures, CCTV camera surveillance, guarded booms, and also by discursive intimidation and force. As the city continues to splinter into privately governed, policed, and securitised enclaves, it becomes apparent how fear of the untoward actively shapes politics and social life in the city. Tension is palpable at the various cross-over points between enclaved spaces and the city. The routine checks at barriers that restrict the movement of people raise questions about who is being secured and against what?

I spent five months in Karachi between 2011 and 2013, asking these very questions. In this period, I made observations in various enclaves, including affluent neighbourhoods, *katchi abadis* (unplanned, low-income settlements), malls, and five-star hotels, and interviewed state representatives, security personnel, and residents of the enclaved spaces under study. My fieldwork in Karachi revealed the paradoxes of insecurity and highlighted how processes of securitisation criminalise the city's urban poor.

Securitisation is especially paradoxical in Karachi's affluent enclaves. On the one hand, residents feel comforted knowing that they have an extra layer of security to shield them from the 'feral city', while on the other they feel more vulnerable because they do not fully trust the guards who they have entrusted with their security. The sense of mistrust is rooted in news reports about guards who have abetted criminals. The private guards under suspicion largely hail from the city's underclass. Although they work inside enclaved spaces, they are still considered outsiders. Ghulam, a private security guard in one such enclave, expressed his frustration over the prevalent attitude of suspicion: "We protect [residents] from criminals, putting our lives at risk. But we are poor people coming from *katchi abadis*, and that makes us criminals."

Maids, guards, drivers and cleaners working in affluent enclaves feel doubly vulnerable because in addition to the city's criminal and militant elements, they are also threatened by state violence, which is usually perpetrated on behalf of upper-class Karachiites. As Shahbaz, a private security guard, explained, "In the case of any untoward event, us servants are always the first suspects." In various affluent residential enclaves, interviews revealed how enclave managers (usually volunteers from within the community) take support from the local police to visit *katchi abadis* and weed out suspects from their homes. Often, suspects are brutally beaten until they confess knowledge of the incident. Formal crime reports are rarely filed, but suspects are still penalised by the police or their affluent accusers.

This vigilante system of justice is encouraged by local police, and is widely accepted by residents of the city. According to Iqbal, a senior superintendent of a local police station, "If [people] can take care of their own security needs, we support them. We simply do not have enough resources [to do otherwise]." A senior member of the Citizen-Police Liaison Committee, which provides technical support for community policing in Karachi, echoes this sentiment. "Sometimes, it is okay if people are forced to take the law into their own hands. They know our justice system is slow."

However, this support for enclavisation is selective. While Karachi police encourage the process in affluent parts of the city, similar processes of enclosure, private securitisation, and vigilante justice in the city's *katchi abadis* are treated with violent reprisals. Speaking on behalf of Karachi Police, SSP Iqbal vehemently states that "we simply cannot tolerate no-go areas! They are hubs of criminal activities. We have to open up these spaces up for the sake of peace in this city!" The discourse surrounding securitisation of Karachi targets these *abadis* as hubs of criminality that have slipped out of government control. Indeed, in a bid to restore peace in Karachi, state security forces have initiated military operations in more notorious settlements.

However, there is little reflection on why these enclaves emerged in the first place, and how their raison d'être echoes that of newer enclaves in affluent areas. In the absence of state support and protection, such settlements have flourished indigenously with the help of local strong men who offer personal security as well as security of tenure to the urban poor. The strengthening of mafia groups and the creation of political bosses in such spaces is a by-product of this informality.

Such processes of enclavisation create conditions that heighten the vulnerability of marginalised groups, especially the urban poor engaged in alternative forms of enclavisation, i.e. the production of no-go areas in the city's sprawling slum settlements. In no-go areas, non-state actors are popularly empowered as they provide an alternative system of justice. The media attention that no-go areas attract as sources that export criminality and violence to the wider city further provides impetus to the urban elite who resort to enclavisation as a reaction to the relational sense of danger. Therefore, evidence in Karachi suggests that enclavisation is in fact a relational and self-perpetuating process, which creates a spiral of violence.

My broader research highlights that enclaved urbanism is a common phenomenon across global megacities. In cities as diverse as Sao Paolo, Johannesburg, Beirut and Los Angeles, enclaves are spatial manifestations of a crisis of urban governance. In Karachi, I find that processes of enclavisation fragment the social fabric of the city by creating divisions between various social groups, and creating tensions and contests of space. While simplistically presented as a consequence of urban insecurity and violence, enclavisation is in fact directly responsible for stoking urban conflict and violence.

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