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Denouncing Party Politics: Indignation and Domestic Confinement in Karachi[1]

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Delivering her lecture as part of the 2012 York Centre for Asian Research (YCAR) Urban Asia Series, Dr. Tania Ahmad examines the events surrounding the 12 May 2007 Karachi riots, the discourse of self-described "ordinary residents" who were compelled to stay indoors during the conflict, and their sense of indignation towards party politics and the political violence. Ahmad suggests that the shared experience of non-participation during the incident was not an instance of depoliticization for these residents, but rather a mode of political engagement. The sociality formed around discourses of non-involvement through domestic confinement was shaped by the denunciation of events occurring in the streets.

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The basic theme of this talk revolves around the aftermath of an episode of city-wide political violence in Karachi, Pakistan in 2007, where a discourse of indignation and denunciation, mediated in part by live television, was produced and claimed by precisely those Karachi residents who had retreated in-doors as they anticipated the possible escalation of a political rally into a conflict over symbolic turf. I argue that their active non-participation in the political animosity, marked especially by their domestic confinement, constituted a form of politi-cal engagement. This tentative and ultimately fleeting form of urban sociality points toward a potential emergent public that pitted self-identified 'ordinary people' against political conflict. I am trying to argue that even as 'bystander tactics' contribute to their own subjection to the very violence they avoid (which I have argued elsewhere), it is important that this tentative, fleeting and ultimately minimally effective sociality is not mistaken as merely a form of *depoliticization*. Instead, I am trying to think about it as a *mode of participation*, shaped by the discourse that represented staying at home during vio-lent political conflict and waiting for the worst to be over as a shared experience.

Given what has happened since, the events precipitat-ing this public staging of indignation in May 2007 as a morally outspoken response to violence between political enemies have particular significance. In the ensuing four years, politi-cal turf wars reemerged as issues of contention, both through regular target killings as well as through conflict that provoked an association with ethnic animosities. The peak of this vio-lence was in August 2011, but allegations of ethnic conflict underplayed the alliances between smaller parties with mul-tiple ethnic, religious and secular platforms against a powerful common enemy: the MQM (Muttahida Quami Movement), which I will talk about more later in my lecture. The allegations also failed to take into account that violence occurred in those areas where several parties competed over turf and, most importantly, that the claim of ethnic solidarity as a justification for violent conflict had not been consistently effective in Ka-rachi's history. The event I will discuss today constitutes a key turning point and will take you back to May 2007. This event is

a watershed for its failed attempt to recuperate ethnic differ-ence as a justification for urban violence,[2] and for the frank denunciations made by those who would cast themselves as ordinary residents—bystanders who were neither perpetrators and, only indirectly, victims. It reminds us that ethnic poli-tics are neither consistent nor ubiquitous and, perhaps more importantly, that ethnicity is not always deemed a plausible explanation for political violence by people in Karachi. Instead, in this case, residents denounced one party directly, maintain-ing that its actions could not be justified on a moral basis. Only infrequently do such denunciations become explicit: they contain clear allegations that identify perpetrators, transcend localized rumour and circulate in the public sphere. Here, live television coverage mediated the indignation of viewers and began to make a palpable, short-lived solidarity among people who claimed to be non-participants, ordinary residents and those who had stayed at home.

An episode of city-wide unrest in Karachi in May 2007 left over 40 dead, main roads littered with burnt vehicles, and ample news television footage of gunmen on rooftops and pe-destrian bridges. On May 12, 2007, when a renegade judiciary collided with the scales of federal and city politics, the strate-gic avoidance of party politics by Karachi residents slipped, for a brief moment, into a noisy clamoring of overt denunciations. Violence had spilled onto the main roads and was captured on live news television channels when the visit of the ex-chief justice, who had been dismissed by President General Pervez Musharraf, devolved into a series of armed altercations be-tween opposition party supporters and those allied with the central government. The subsequent indignation of Karachi residents claimed the position of the non-participant as a sub-stantive distinction shaped by the denunciations and domestic confinement of these residents.

This instance of urban unrest led to the formation of a sociality based on the common experience of being driven from public space, where self-described 'ordinary people' were compelled to stay inside their homes until the worst was over. Residents articulated a rejection of party politics in fa-vour of adamant claims for moral decency and compassionate humanity, contrasted with the 'filth' of ostensibly democratic

institutions. As fleeting as it was unprecedented, open vitriol against party politics was expressed, experienced and mediated through live television coverage, which was outlawed by government censorship soon afterwards. These vocal critiques constituted a moment where angry residents interpellated millions of others who had retreated into the safety of domestic space on a city-wide scale. Such opinions were expressed by people with diverse class, ethnic and religious backgrounds, across those lines generally described and politicized as dividing them. Their tirade was powerful, especially given that sideways glances and oblique references had been the most common modality of criticizing political violence in the past. More often, when describing unruly political organizations, news media had feebly masked urban dynamics by referring anonymously to 'a certain political party'. Although the elaborate landscape of political parties in Karachi, with various ethnic and/or religious orientations, was considered with leery distaste, the party known as the MQM was by far subject to the most emphatic denunciations following the events of May 12th. Of the other parties, most of which had sided with the representatives of the dissenting judiciary, live television footage had shown that their workers had also been heavily armed. Nonetheless, the MQM occupied the most forcefully symbolic space in an imaginary of power, threats and the instigation of urban violence. Historically, the party had operated on a platform of class and linguistic identity. Although its name and official platform had changed since the late 1990s, the genealogy of identity politics remained embedded in its operations and in the ways that it had been imagined (Baig 2008; Naqvi 2006; Verkaaik 1994, 2004). The denunciations of party politics explored here, and of the MQM in particular, are intended to complement the scholarship that focuses on the party as an institutional entity.[3] In condemning the brutality of political parties in general, and of the MQM in particular, residents generated a discursive space constituted through negation.

Context: MQM

The historical trajectory of the MQM has in recent years included involvement in municipal administrations and government, but also in what Tahir Naqvi (2006) has referred to as "counter-nationalism," linked to a history of organized intimidation and armed turf wars. The acronym MQM stands for the Muttahida Qaumi Movement, or the United Nationalist Movement, which until 1997 was known as the Muhajir Qaumi Movement, or the Muhajir Nationalist Movement. The MQM is a Karachi-based political party, founded in 1984 with a platform aimed expressly at a middle-class, Urdu-speaking identity, articulated in terms of a new ethnicity that collapsed Urdu speakers with the historical category of Partition-era migrants from India–*muhajirs*. Although the party claimed to mobilize muhajirs as an ethnic category, it is important to note that they did not do so consistently or uniformly. As Nichola Khan (2010) and others have noted, the descendants of Partition-era *muhajirs* in Karachi are neither politically, religiously nor socioeconomically homogenous. Their political involvement is distributed among religious and secular political parties, and their degree of identification with the category *muhajir*, as it is used by the MQM, is highly variable. Nonetheless, the political platform of the MQM continues to signify a particular impetus to politicize *muhajir* identity in an implicitly ethnic register.

Between 1985 and 1995, the activities of the MQM were associated with popular support, gruesome turf wars and ethnic conflict. In 1992, government attempts to suppress urban violence in Karachi resulted in *Operation Cleanup*, where for 29 months military forces occupied and purged the city of young men who were allegedly party activists. Following the military operation, the MQM's radicalized side was tempered by being gradually incorporated and integrated into mainstream politics through a series of coalitions and negotiations with the federal government. Beginning in 2005, the MQM led Karachi's elected city government for six years, under the local government system that was in force until 2011. During that time, the party accrued a reputation for effective governance through infrastructural renewal and service provision. It also represented the majority of the city constituencies in

the Provincial and National Assemblies. Despite this newfound strategy of progressive moderation and municipal governance, the MQM continued to maintain antagonistic relations with standing historical rivals over turf and territory.[4] The criticisms directed toward the party in the aftermath of May 12th accused the MQM of reiterating violent approaches to familiar animosities between political parties in Karachi and of using its municipal resources to plan and organize a partisan conflict, rather than exert restraint as responsible leaders of elected government.

The event

May 12, 2007 was supposed to be an experiment in fostering national, public solidarity with the then-ex-Chief Justice of Pakistan, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, and the lawyers who supported him in the name of an independent judiciary, against the executive branches of government, specifically the regime of then President General Musharraf. After his summary dismissal by the President General in March 2007, Chaudhry became the figurehead around whom lawyers and opposition parties rallied for the independence of the judiciary from the executive branches of government. A series of rallies, each larger than the last, gave a loose community of lawyers and judges from different associations across Pakistan an unprecedented status as a collective of politicized actors. Newspapers and television screens were filled with images and stories of jubilant, defiant and rowdy lawyers, who called very loudly for Chaudhry to be reinstated as chief justice, arguing that his dismissal was unconstitutional. NGOs and other organizations joined in the opportunity to demonstrate the efficacy of civil society protest.

Political parties of the opposition—keen to capitalize on an opportunity to contest the current government, but also to support the principle of an independent judiciary—quickly lent their support to the ex-chief justice. The swell of crowds and array of familiar party flags waving in the background became visible features marking the momentum of Chaudhry's supporters in Islamabad and Lahore. The images of those crowds exhilarated the people in Karachi, who hoped that civil

society and a rebellious judiciary would be able to bring trans-
formative change to a military government.

On May 12, 2007 the ex-chief justice was invited to
address the Sindh High Court in Karachi. He was never allowed
to leave the Karachi airport, however, and returned instead to
the capital, Islamabad, several hours later. That day, blockades
were set up at the airport and along Karachi's main arteries,
gunfire was exchanged between members of political parties,
and vehicles were torched as security forces looked on without
interfering. Upwards of forty casualties were officially reported
at the city morgues and ongoing rumours and reports were
full of news of scuffles, injuries and deaths over the following
week. Many residents did not venture out of their homes until
several days afterwards. Ultimately, the events of May 12th
brought about urban violence on a city-wide scale for the first
time in twelve years, dredging up memories of past political
violence in the process. Although indignation in the aftermath
was directed at politically orchestrated violence in general, the
majority of residents' angry words were directed towards a
single party: the MQM.

The MQM was not only the current leader of Karachi's
municipal city government, but also one of the very few par-
ties allied with Pakistan's ruling coalition, Musharraf's party
(prior to 2010, the Pakistan Muslim League–Quaid). Although
the party was widely believed to have transitioned into a mod-
erate and progressive party at that time, the MQM was also
primarily associated with an era of volatility and armed street
violence in the 1980s and 1990s. The MQM gave the federal
government a potentially threatening ally in Karachi, in whose
presence it would be less easy to scathingly criticize Mush-
arraf's administration.[5] Through this role as well as through its
historical precedents of grisly tactics of intimidation, the MQM
was figured as the gatekeeper of the city.

Party representatives planned and held an MQM rally
on May 12th, set up blockades inhibiting access to and from
event venues, and draped banners painted in party colours
over pedestrian bridges and billboards on the former chief
justice's procession route. Despite this ominous suggestion
of competition in terms of territoriality and media attention,
no one had anticipated that on May 12th, armed MQM party

workers would be stationed on these same overpasses and pedestrian bridges, ready to fire into the processions below, or to return fire. The chief justice's procession through the main boulevard that connected the airport to the Sindh High Court was a highly contingent attempt at peaceful demonstration, consisting of supporting parties, civil society organizations and groups of lawyers. The symbolic threats made by the MQM in the days preceding the planned rally were played out through the presence of armed gunmen in the spaces overlooking the procession route, amongst demonstrators affiliated with various parties and in neighbourhoods on the routes leading to the concurrent MQM rally.

The first provocations were the cars and motorcycles waving MQM flags in the airport parking lot. Unidentified, but presumed-to-be MQM gunmen opened fire on a group of largely Pashtun lawyers as well as the Pashtun political party, the Awami National Party (ANP), in a nearby neighbourhood. The ANP was allied with Chief Justice Chaudhry and with their long-standing opponents, the MQM, on this occasion. Television reports of this event seemed to instigate immediate outbreaks of street violence and shootouts in different parts of the city, notably along the chief justice's planned, and now blockaded, procession route; in areas considered symbolic MQM strongholds, especially intersections near the proposed MQM rally; and in neighbourhoods where ANP turf bordered MQM turf.

Two major turning points in live media coverage intensified the explicit critiques articulated by news commentators, and thus mediated the sense of indignation as a shared experience. The first coincided with the moment that gunmen of all affiliations, who had originally been shooting at each other from rooftops, began bombarding the Aaj TV studios as cameramen and journalists reported from the balcony. The continued images of a crouching journalist, filmed by a crouching cameraman, as he angrily described the circumstances of being compelled to take cover, became iconic. The channel's coverage of these events made the various hosts outspoken, critical and unguarded. The second major turning point was the candid commentary of news commentator, Dr. Shahid Masood, who on the evening of May 12th explicitly

and calmly, in impeccably articulate Urdu, stated baldly that violence was not an acceptable political strategy. There was no fear in his language, only the righteous moral high ground of a reprimand: violence would no longer be tolerated.

I do not describe the events of May 12th in order to excavate violence as an object of analysis. Instead, I use the conjuncture it presents in order to mark a public, temporarily constituted and articulated in relation to it. This methodology builds upon efforts that use spectacular crises as starting points for investigating what they exclude, occlude and produce (e.g. Krupa 2009: 21; Daniel 1996; Tambiah 1996). In the aftermath of May 12th in Karachi, the denunciations of non-participants distinguished involvement in urban unrest from their domestic confinement. The indignation of residents in this framework thus presents a mode of sociality, enacted and staged by claiming domestic confinement as both a shared experience and an explicitly moral position.

I want to take this issue in a number of different directions. First, I'd like to emphasize that this argument is, in many ways, a response to Pakistani scholars who consider the vague category of the masses to be depoliticized, terrorized or fearful. Some of my previous work has tried to articulate the complex and ambivalent tactics of avoiding involvement in political violence that also operates as subjection; where retreating from urban public space to evade vulnerability also makes room for or cedes that space to the same conflict that many Karachi residents are trying to somehow get away from (cf. Ahmad 2011). Although several authors have written about a discourse of fear, I found that fear (*khauf*, *darr*) was almost entirely absent from the narratives I heard. Instead, I heard indirect modes of attributing actions to party workers alongside a discourse that emphasized a tactical navigation of a fraught social field. Second, I'd like to emphasize that the denunciations were iterated in an explicitly moral register that overlapped with the social distinction of middle-class respectability. Any involvement in politics was filthy and implicitly lower-class, while the scolding exhortations to decency, humane compassion (*insaaniyat*) and sustaining civil relationships claimed a moral righteousness that I had learned to recognize as a sign of cultivated, articulate, well-mannered middle-class

aspirations. Here, respectability became a moral orientation that was invoked and addressed through what Michael Warner has referred to as the "social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse" (2002: 90-92). Although I had heard the conjuring of an 'us' and a 'we' through appeals to being 'ordinary people' on several occasions, in the aftermath of May 12th this claim seemed to accelerate, to pick up speed and to begin to suggest that it was grounded in shared experiences that could be publicly staged.

In addition, it is important to note that this sociality was tentative and emergent. It was by no means fully formed or explicitly articulated. It was a powerful, if fleeting, suggestion. This is why I limit my discussion to the word 'sociality' rather than committing to any one of the plethora of stronger terms to describe solidarities, movements or constituencies. Ultimately, this faltering foray into public discourse receded, perhaps into more occasional references and everyday comments, possibly due in part to the government-imposed censorship that had by June 2007 outlawed live television, images of politically sensitive violence and supposedly exaggerated criticism of the government in the media. Nonetheless, I suspect that the aftermath of May 12th generated a memory of how those people who stayed at home and waited for the worst to be over could imagine each other as a moral community, connected by their disapproval of political violence, their active tactics of avoiding it, as well as their shared subjection to it.

Domestic confinement

Although dozens died on May 12th and thousands participated in rallies and events, millions of residents had stayed in their homes until the worst was over before tentatively venturing out to resume everyday errands and routines. In 2007, Karachi's population was estimated to reach up to nineteen million inhabitants. If urban unrest is one social fact of May 12th, then the overwhelming absence in the city streets of the vast majority of residents is another.

Staying indoors during periods of possible urban unrest was a common experience for many Karachi residents. Most

frequently, this was induced by strikes called by political parties or last-minute 'holidays' announced by the government in anticipation of possible disturbances in the city. The strikes had variable effects, depending on how seriously residents and business people in a particular neighbourhoods judged the veiled threats of a party trying to enforce the closure of shops and the prevention of traffic circulation. In party strongholds, strikes would be observed for a few hours, whereas in more affluent areas, disregarding city politics was embedded in elite prestige. In general, life returned to normal by the afternoons once the symbolic point of the strike had been made and shopkeepers opened to compensate for the morning's losses. Official 'holidays' were declared to minimize the presence of schoolchildren on the roads, to provide justification for employees not to go to work, and as a warning that the government would not be held responsible for people who opted to venture into public space despite the subtle injunction not to.

During my research in 2006 and 2007, friends and relatives repeatedly and forcefully insisted that I respect these official hints to stay out of public space, although I knew several colleagues who still went to work, attended classes, went shopping or attended their mosque, despite the warnings. Their movements, however, took particular circuits and distances into consideration, where mobility within a neighbourhood that seemed fairly quiet was easier to gauge. Their affiliations were also a consideration, where some judged that they could plausibly claim to support the striking party if asked. I was a single woman marked as a foreigner traveling with a driver, who regularly traveled long distances across several neighbourhoods and whose immediate circumstances would be difficult to anticipate. Like many others, I also lacked the cultural capital to talk myself out of any situation or to know from experience when exactly, for example, university campuses would go into lockdown and what its implications would be.

May 12, 2007 was a Saturday, a half-day of work for most people. Almost everyone I knew stayed at home, precipitated not only by the 'holiday' announced by the government the previous evening just before midnight, but also by the several days building up to it. The news reported that political

rallies had been called by opposing factions on the very same day. The planned procession route of one group had been populated with banners of the opposing faction. In addition, the opponents had expended massive efforts to block off exit routes from the same procession route by installing metal containers at major crossroads. These were very threatening acts that foreshadowed a highly charged showdown.

All evening and for the next few days, my relatives and I stayed glued to the independent television news channels,[6] which featured live footage, looped images, correspondent reports, analysis and ample call-in responses from viewers. This heavily mediated experience was complemented by a steady stream of text messages: "Are you watching Geo?", "Switch to Aaj", "My mother won't let me step outside", "3 dead at Patel Para", "All of this was planned by MQM". Disbelieving phone conversations took place with relatives and friends in different parts of the city—"How is it where you are?", "Did you see what is happening at the airport?"—and with the two cousins who had gone to work that morning—"Please come home now", "Why did you go?", "You see, no one else was that stupid". Looking out the windows revealed a deserted neighbourhood. Even though our street was in an affluent neighbourhood well away from the main roads, I did not see any of the usual cars, pedestrians, vendors or groups of children playing makeshift cricket. Members of the extended family from downstairs would intermittently come over to watch television with us and narrate the rumours and happenings they had heard about from the people they had texted or spoken with.

Some stayed home all day, whereas others quickly retreated after encountering blockades or hearing reports and rumours while on early morning errands. In the days following the event, I heard stories about a friend who had taken his father-in-law to the airport on his motorcycle, but had found the route home blocked on the way home and found himself trapped for several hours. I also heard stories about relatives of acquaintances who had tried and failed to convince security forces to let them through. The decision to stay at home or not was often influenced by upset relatives, and to leave one's house could mean tense negotiations with the disciplinary strategies of alternately authoritative and tearfully pleading

household members. Because I lived with relatives through-out my research, I was subjected to the ruthless intimacy of domestic surveillance on a scale that, I eventually learned, was comparable with other Karachi residents, whose relatives and friends occasionally forbade them to step outdoors. In this case, I understand my own domestic confinement on May 12th, and the situated perspective thereof, as a form of participant observation. In doing so, I draw on the commentary of Jessica Winegar (2012) on domestic experiences of revolution during the Arab Spring in Egypt, where she focuses specifically on her own participant observation of domestic confinement to suggest that "fieldwork on major political change can and should take place in the home" (2012: 68). Like Winegar, I contend that domestic experiences are critical, not only in their potential to support or impede the publicly staged claims of dramatic events, but that excluding what she terms "the hidden majority" of those men and women who could not, or did not, go to Tahrir Square conflates the iconic occupation of public space with spatial assertions about "the true locus of transformative politics" (2012: 68, 69, 70). As such, considering experiences of domestic confinement during the events and aftermath of May 12th in Karachi is important not only for the purposes of documenting diverse experiences of political conflict, but also because it marked what I argue was an emergent occasion where precisely that quality of domesticity was itself staged as a political claim.

In addition, it is significant that the very regularity of the practice of retreating indoors, of relying on heavily mediated accounts of public space through television and communicating with relatives, friends and neighbours, enfolds the violence of exceptional events into everyday family relations. This observation draws on the work of Veena Das and Naveeda Khan, who emphasize that the 'ordinary' is where critical events are lived through the fabric of everyday experiences, which are shaped by the broader contexts that configure their potentialities (Das 1995, 2007, 2008; Naveeda Khan 2006, 2010). By this, they mean that anticipating domestic confinement as a result of publicly staged political claims, deciding when or whether to tentatively re-emerge to resume more conventional routines, and negotiating with pleading rela-

tives, all shaped the quality of staying at home, waiting for the worst to be over. The centrality of television, texting and telephone conversations mediated the experience of cautious, self-imposed restrictions on mobility. More than a source of information, then, live television viewership marked the spectator as not being in public space. Thus, the particular sociality constituted by watching news television mediated a surrogate perspective, where the domesticity of viewing emphasized a boundary between those who felt entitled to use public space outside their homes, on the main roads, and those who watched footage of that space from the safety of being inside. As events unfolded, the television journalists, reporters and anchors reinforced that distinction by vocally contrasting themselves and all other decent people who had retreated from public space from those who had occupied it and perpetuated violent conflict.

Sociality of indignation

The outrage expressed by residents who had stayed in their homes, journalists and victims caught in the crossfire of political violence, fashioned a sociality articulated on the moral ground of non-participation and domestic confinement. The notion of this indignation as something shared, recognized, circulated and communicable drew attention to the formation of a fragile and tentative public constituted through a circulating indignation, through its expression, recognition and reiteration. As such, May 12th marked a significant, if short-lived, turning point that allowed angry words to be explicit rather than hidden in oblique references and abstract formulations. The direct quality of critique, as well as its specific directedness towards an unruly MQM, sanctioned by the Musharraf government, indexed reflexivity for Karachi residents who were otherwise much more cautious.

Live television broadcasts asked where the thousands of security forces, who had allegedly been deployed in Karachi for this day, were. My aunt was furious that the chief justice had supposedly refused the offer of helicopter transport to the Sindh High Court, where he was supposed to deliver an address. "Now so many people will die", she said, "he should

have returned to Islamabad as soon as he realized what was happening". My uncle paced through the house, saying that the MQM people were keeping the chief justice from leaving the airport. Later, photographs of flag-bearing groups of men on motorcycles in front of the airport, and magazine articles about shootouts on the airport grounds made this assertion difficult to refute. Scathing television commercials blended tracks of the national anthem with a hopeful patriotic poem wishing Pakistan progress and prosperity, laid over looped footage of politicians, people bearing different party flags running away or beating others, bleeding civilians and burning vehicles. Karachi University student Farid Bhai texted me to ask who I thought was responsible for all this. He did not agree with my feeble post-structuralist notion of a polysemic, conjunctural causality, asserting instead: "All of this is planned by MQM."

Most significant was that although their reactions were shaped by media images and media discourses, combined with the self-imposed if cautious restriction of being domestically confined, these words anticipated MQM tactics that live television only suggested. Their targeted denunciations and vocal disgust were apparent hours before the journalists were shot at, hours before the MQM rally was televised and hours before Dr. Masood bluntly stated his opinion on-screen. They drew on memories of violent tactics from the 1990s, and in the weeks following May 12th several people commented: "Yes, but it was nothing compared to 1992." The audience combined the news provided by journalists with their own understandings and interpretations of contexts. My cousin returned from his brief morning stint at work to report that several dozen of his coworkers had camped out at the office because they didn't think they could get home safely. Many of them lived in or nearby one of the many areas where there had been shootouts, or where all roads crossed the blockaded procession route of the chief justice. Farid Bhai maintained that only the MQM, with its access to municipal resources and long history of organized street violence, could have mobilized the resources to arrange blockades on such short notice. My uncle, who had been a journalist for the Urdu press since the 1970s, made shrewd observations based on what seemed to me to be snip-

pets of information. I eventually realized that this audience had lived through long periods of state censorship and were thus accustomed to reading between the lines.

Over the following week, I heard dozens of accounts from a wide range of Karachi residents. For acquaintances, informants and television personalities, the orchestration by the MQM was obvious. Party activists were accused of setting up the blockades of cars, trucks, buses and metal containers along major traffic arteries and around the Sindh High Court building in the evening before May 12th. They were also perceived as having instigated violence through a series of provocations, which included opening fire on processions of the supporters of the ex-chief justice, both by targeting particular party delegations and posting gunmen on pedestrian bridges. People shared the stories about threats, blockades and rumours that they had heard through neighbours, relatives and co-workers. A common thread maintained that the MQM had been responsible for the violence and deaths through their prompting and, thus, instigation of the conflict.

In the eleven months that I had already spent in Karachi, people had been much more wary; although they had been critical of the MQM in the safe spaces of homes, offices, through whispers and vague allusions, this bravery had been accompanied by furtive glances over shoulders and through windows, or comfortable conversations abruptly stopped when someone of unknown political affiliation came into a room. Now they shared stories that were never on television. Cars on Shahrah-e-Faisal had been flagged down and asked their political affiliation; if their answer was 'wrong', they were shot at point-blank range. Privately owned vehicles had been used for the blockades at the Sindh High Court. The political animosity was being allowed to slide into an ethnic register that pitted *muhajirs* against Pathans, who were associated with particular political parties, as well as with the bus drivers' union. MQM gunmen on pedestrian bridges had fired into procession crowds. Opposition-party gunmen had returned fire with semi-automatic weaponry. Party workers apprehended by rivals had been tortured. A man had been told that it was better to remove his trousers and shirt and go home in his underwear than risk being taken for a *muhajir*. This implied

that everyone else wore *shalwar kameez*, the loose traditional men's garment associated with piety and labourers.

Farid Bhai, himself an Urdu-speaker who occasionally attended MQM rallies for fun rather than out of sympathy, explained why the events of May 12th had come as such a shock. "People thought that the MQM had changed," Farid Bhai said, echoing the commentary on television talk shows. For the past four years, he said, they had stopped taking *bhattā* (protection money), or at least they were demanding it with far less frequency than before. "I thought they changed," he reiterated, "once they entered the city government". "But I was wrong," Farid Bhai said listlessly, "they organized everything". The story he told repeated the disillusionment of many Karachi residents who, prior to May 12th, had thought that armed conflict over political territory was a thing of the past. Farid Bhai was disappointed and, like many others I had spoken to, frustrated.

Other Karachi residents described the operation of an economy of intimidation. Reiterating an assertion common in interviews conducted after May 12th, a Punjabi resident aged in his 60s and from a middle-class neighbourhood seen as an MQM stronghold said that the party had been wrong to hold a rally on the same day as the chief justice. He explained that the MQM got votes on the basis of *dahshat* (terror) and *khauf* (fear). He did not describe this fear as paralyzing, but rather as something requiring particular tactics of navigation. He described how on that day, the bazaar on the main road had been closed, but the small shops in their neighbourhood, deep inside the maze of alleys, had eventually opened up. Then, he said, "*laṛke motorcycles pe ā gaye the*" (the boys on motorcycles came) and told them to close the shops again. This happened three times—the shops would tentatively re-open and the boys would tell them to close. He explained to me that this was the type of hold that the MQM had in the neighbourhood—that they could threaten to shoot people and keep them scared and send boys on motorcycles to close the shops. People were afraid of them. However, I noted that they were clearly less wary about expressing this situation than they had been about naming the terror that moved them and identifying the party by its name as well as its actions. In previous conversations, this man had made only the vaguest allusions

to the party whose turf he lived on. By describing his subjection in terms of the neighbourhood, through the shops and the residents who lived among them, he identified domestic confinement as something that many residents in the vicinity had shared. This was a tentative, emergent and yet unprecedentedly articulate enunciation of an implicit sociality—it began to imagine a 'we' and it named an agent enforcing the common experience of choosing to, but at the same time being compelled to stay inside. In sharing these details, openly and directly, sitting beside two open windows of his small home, he was contributing to the circulation of a broader critical discourse of indignation.

Conclusion

I have talked about this indignation as tentative, fleeting, emergent and, ultimately, the suggestion of a public constituted through the claim that domestic confinement was a shared experience, political violence was morally reprehensible and the MQM deserved to be denounced for its actions. This was an unusually explicit set of assertions among Karachi residents who were otherwise much more cautious and oblique in their criticisms. It located the possibility of a sociality in the distinction of morally decent persons who had been compelled to stay indoors and had not gotten involved in inter-party conflict. Rather than see only subjection and depoliticization in these practices, I would like to suggest that non-participation is a form of political engagement. That is, I would like to recuperate rather than dismiss this range of specifically located, if ultimately ineffective discourses of indignation. I would like to do this very briefly, in three ways.

First, scholars of the anthropology of democracy—notably Julia Paley (2001)—have focused on the quality of *participation* as the object of ethnographic analysis. Non-participation and domestic confinement are frequently taken as evidence of a lack of politicization, but political participation, I'd like to emphasize, is a relation. It is more useful to try to look for modes of participation than to consider a discourse of not-being-involved as the absence of it. The tentative, fleeting socialities of the sort that I have described may be marginal-

ized in metanarratives of democratization, but it is precisely to a diversity of participatory modalities that we should look if we are ever to account for the millions who were compelled to wait until the worst was over before re-emerging into public space after May 12th.

Second, these denunciations, as well as their domestic confinement in moments of crisis, evoke Wendy Brown's formulation that draws on Nietzschean *ressentiment* as "the moralizing revenge of the powerless" (1995: 66), where injustice is articulated affectively through pain, injury, suffering and retribution:

> *Ressentiment* in this context is a triple achievement: it produces an affect (rage, righteousness) that overwhelms the hurt; it produces a culprit responsible for the hurt; and it produces a site of revenge to displace the hurt (a place to inflict hurt as the sufferer has been hurt). Together these operations both ameliorate (in Nietzsche's term, "anaesthetize") and externalize what is otherwise unendurable." (1995: 68)

Identities structured by such reactive pathos become "invested in their own subjection" and "feast on generalized political impotence" (Brown 1995: 70-71). Focusing on American identity politics, she asserts that investing in liberal state structures of rights and grievances does not, by itself, guard against depoliticization. Furthermore, Brown asserts that this formulation of justice reinscribes bourgeois ideals that emphasize educational and vocational opportunity, upward mobility and relative protection from arbitrary violence (1995: 59-60). The denunciations of political parties that circulated among Karachi residents, in their exhortations to 'ordinary decency,' seemed to appeal to precisely the elements that Brown describes as depoliticized. Whereas Brown critiques politicized identities for their reliance on the very universal normative bourgeois ethos they aim to unsettle, Karachi residents appear to reject the very processes of politicization through a moralized bourgeois ethos that distinguishes itself from a state apparatus that both reiterates and defies a project of democratic

representation. I refuse, however, to relegate these denunciations of political violence to the unpolitical. They are important, if limited, modes of critique relying on explicitly affective frameworks that both generate collective effervescence and underscore a fundamental subjection.

Finally, I want to end with a point that draws on the work of Paul Kelly, whose work also focuses on ambivalent discursive formations that are tentative and difficult to place between subjection and active uptake. "Perhaps," he says, "we can know discursive practices not only by the effect of their power, but also by the entailments as one seeks an effect. [...] The point here is not another (r)evolutionary ripening but the creation of the opponent, the transformation of the obligatory into the contestable" (Kelly 1991: 24-5). This is exactly where I want to leave you, with the suggestion that a particular discursive moment in the aftermath of May 12th began to transform the idea of domestic confinement from something obligatory into something contestable. The particular condemnations of party politics in the aftermath of May 12th, not new, but suddenly audible and overt, fashioned a sociality that interpellated imagined others through their circulation. Discourses posited non-involvement in urban unrest through domestic confinement as a collective experience and indignation as a participatory modality. Outrage, however, did not develop into movements following liberal forms of collective territorial mobilization through processions and dissent in public space. The casualties and injuries of May 12th had resulted precisely from an attempt to engage such fantasies of peaceful civil society protest; instead, the indignation that followed was located precisely in domestic confinement, framed as moral terrain that opened up the suggestion that being compelled to stay inside during moments of crisis could, perhaps, become contestable.

ENDNOTES

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²This failure is significant because it marked a new strategy to re-animate ethnic animosity that seemed to gain traction in the ensuing four years. This developed through the ongoing, if sporadic, occurrence of target killings—with victims ranging from Shia doctors to Pakhtun shopkeepers—that were eventually, but not initially, reported in the news media in terms of ethnic and sectarian conflict rather than as a takeover of resources (*qabza*) or a way to provoke retaliation. On the conceptual significance of *qabza* in Pakistan, see Ewing (2010); Hull (2010) and Naveeda Khan (2012).

³ The research is based on thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Karachi, Pakistan, between July 2006 and July 2007. For more on the MQM, see for example Ahmed (1998); Gayer (2007); Kennedy (1991); Nichola Khan (2010); Naqvi (2006); Shaheed (1990); Tambiah (1996); Verkaaik (1994, 2004). Print journalism between 1985 and 1996, notably in the Karachi-based weekly English-language news magazine, *Herald*, is especially informative and analytically rich. For an excellent account of the development and transformation of the MQM, including an overview of scholarship on the party, see Baig (2008).

⁴ Long-term rival political parties include the Jamaat-e-Islami

(JI), the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), and Pashtuns as an ethnic and political category through the Awami National Party (ANP). Following federal elections held in January 2008, the MQM has been both in and out of a coalition with the PPP at both the national and provincial levels. At the municipal level (the City District Government of Karachi) the MQM remains in power.

[5] By this, the MQM was considered threatening to anti-government critics, which included members of the openly dissenting judiciary described above, as well as both its long-standing political rivals (who largely vocally supported the judiciary) and the civil society organizations who were compelled to voice their support of the dissenting judiciary. This, of course, reverberated with memories of the impunity with which both MQM workers and the extrajudicial military forces that had suppressed them acted as unpredictable agents of violence in the 1980s and 1990s. I also want to suggest that such precedents also symbolically mobilized a powerful, precisely because diffuse and indeterminate, sense of imminent street violence among Karachi residents who were not directly implicated in any active support of the dissenting judiciary.

[6] Privatized since 2000, but officially broadcasting content from outside Pakistan (cf. Yusuf 2012).

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