The megacity of Karachi is home to millions of people from all of Pakistan’s major ethnic groups. It is also a site of endemic intergroup conflict; many of its neighborhoods are ethnically segregated, and ethnic violence intermittently punctuates the young metropolis's brief history. Ethnic political parties – i.e. parties that primarily advocate for the interests of a particular ethnic group – make bids for power in every local and national election, and turf wars between these parties create a troubled and uncertain milieu for the city’s residents. Unsurprisingly, then, scholarly and journalistic accounts of the sprawling port city tend to characterize it as an “ungovernable, utterly unpredictable urban mass.”¹ In this view, the lines in Karachi have been drawn: each ethnic group is concentrated in geographic enclaves and is represented by its own ethnic party. And as the population continues to grow exponentially and the demographic balance shifts, hostilities are only expected to rise.

Systematic research into the workings of Karachi’s politics, however, is scarce. While Karachi is indeed a city divided, a closer look at the dynamics of ethnic voting reveal a less simplistic picture than the one painted above. My dissertation project leverages variation in ethnic voting across space and time in order to improve our understanding of a complex and changing urban landscape. In particular, it explores

¹ This observation was made by Laurent Gayer in a 2014 interview that can be found here.
differences in political behavior between and within Karachi’s two largest ethnic
groups: the Muhajirs and the Pashtuns.

In support of the above research agenda, I have conducted three field trips to
Karachi in order to collect rich qualitative evidence on the political opinions and
behavior of the relevant populace. Most recently, with the help of the Center for South
Asia, I spent the Fall Quarter of 2017 in the city in order to conduct in-depth interviews
and focus groups with the voting-age population, journalists, politicians, civil society
actors, and security personnel. These data collection methods were designed to help
answer questions such as the following: How do individuals from different ethnic
groups think about the political options available to them? When and for what reasons
do they choose to exercise the right to vote, and what are their expectations of how
political engagement will affect their lives? And how has ethnic violence and state
discrimination impacted their willingness to engage with the political process?

I will now spend the Winter Quarter of 2018 poring over and synthesizing
material from over 100 in-depth interviews. The insights gained from time in the field
will be a crucial component in the design of survey experiments to be conducted ahead
of the 2018 General Elections. These surveys will help detect systematic differences
between and within ethnic groups in how they view their relationship with the city,
how they understand the political process, and how state discrimination and violence
has influenced their opinions and behavior.

I am grateful for the Center for South Asia’s generosity and encouragement in
helping me forward an interdisciplinary project that draws on both ethnographic
fieldwork and quantitative data analysis. This work would not be possible without their support.

*Purani Sabzi Mandi*, a Pashtun-dominant locality of Karachi
A rally for a new political party (the PSP) vying for the Muhajir vote