

**SPECIAL SECTION**

# From one flooding crisis to the next: Negotiating ‘the maybe’ in unequal Karachi

Sobia Ahmad Kaker<sup>1</sup>  | Nausheen H. Anwar<sup>2,3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Sociology, University of Essex, Colchester, UK

<sup>2</sup>Cities Cluster IDS, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

<sup>3</sup>Institute of Business Administration (IBA), University of Karachi, Karachi, Pakistan

**Correspondence**

Sobia Ahmad Kaker, Department of Sociology, University of Essex, Colchester, UK.

Email: [s.kaker@essex.ac.uk](mailto:s.kaker@essex.ac.uk)

**Abstract**

Every few years, Karachi floods during the summer monsoon. The flooding brings latent manoeuvrings by political actors looking to establish their hold over the city to the surface. Politicians, urban administrators, and relevant state and non-state institutions blame historical planning failures, informal and illegal constructions, institutional conflict, incapable municipal governance, and widespread corruption for the flooding. They move quickly to establish authority and consolidate power while offering ‘fixes’. Eviction drives against ‘illegal settlements’ built along storm-water drains, heavy taxes, fines, and demolitions of non-conforming constructions, institutional reforms, budget allocations, and project approvals for new infrastructure all happen at once. Once the emergency ceases, key players in urban politics – resident groups, community associations, political parties, municipal authorities, land developers, planners, international non-governmental organisations, and military institutions – start working on projects of accumulation and entrenchment, in preparation for the next crisis. In this paper, we look at the space–time of Karachi’s certain and yet uncertain flooding crisis as a moment to study the politics of the maybe in the Pakistani megacity. Outlining marginal and affluent residents’ lived experiences in a flooding city and relating their politics with governmental responses to immediate and possible future floods, we study the conditions of inhabitation, citizenship claims, and governmental relations in Karachi. We argue that the monsoon’s expectant arrival becomes a locus for articulating and modulating different kinds of popular vernaculars, governmental practices, and political manoeuvrings for institutional and individual actors seeking profit and power in and through Karachi. The politics of the maybe hinges on actors entrenching their political positions without care, taking away any possibility for a shared, coherent worldview for all Karachiites. In conclusion, we argue that distant interests and logics of this politics of governance and inhabitation are inherently exploitative, threatening to pull apart the very city they thrive on.

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**KEYWORDS**

citizenship, ethnography, governance, Karachi, urban ecology, urban politics

**1 | INTRODUCTION**

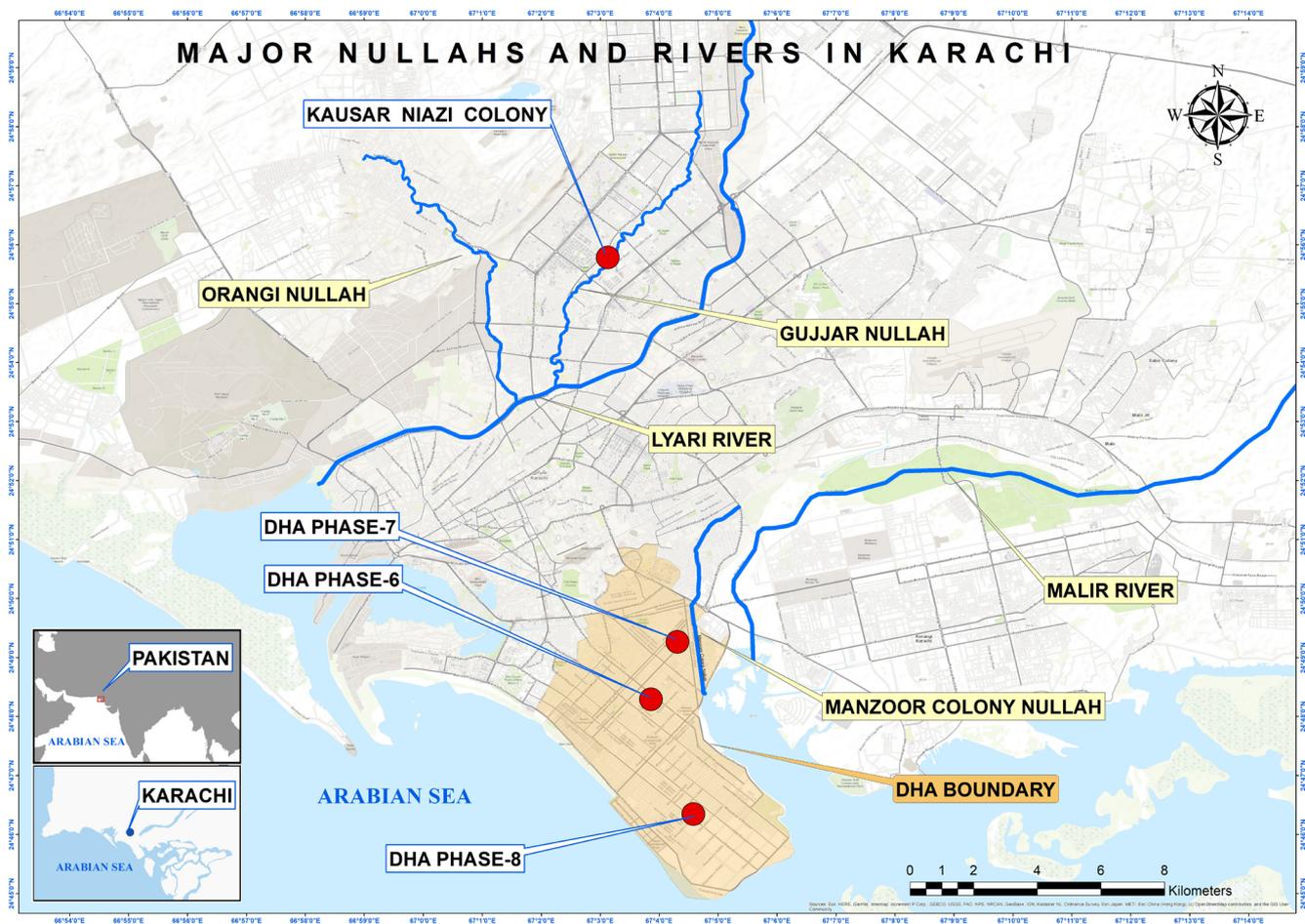
Every few years, Karachi floods during the summer monsoon. Whenever floods occur, residents and governors are taken by surprise. In the aftermath of the floods, there is public outrage. Politicians, planners, urban governors, and citizens blame each other. They cite historical planning failures, politically motivated institutional conflict, incapable municipal governance, and widespread corruption for infrastructural failures and blockages of natural storm-water drains running through Karachi into the Arabian Sea. Under heavy political pressure, urban governors move swiftly to find quick fixes. A cacophony of action commences. The city government orders eviction drives against ‘illegal settlements’ built along the city’s storm-water drains. It levies heavy fines and taxes, or even demolishes non-conforming constructions. Bureaucrats immediately approve funding and permission for previously contested infrastructural improvements at critical points of the storm-water drainage. As normal politics resumes, urban planning and development decisions ignore the city’s ecology once again. A couple of years later, with unexpected monsoon rainfall, the floods, emergency, and charade of outrage and efficient action resumes.

In this paper, we present urban flooding as an inevitable and unpredictable event in the rapidly urbanising megacity. We argue that the space–time between flooding crises becomes a perfect moment to study the ‘politics of the maybe’ in Karachi. The expected arrival of floods becomes a locus of articulating and modulating popular vernaculars, governmental practices, and political manoeuvrings. We understand the politics of the maybe as a politics that relates to uncertainty (Amoore, 2013; Datta, 2016; Kaker et al., 2020; Simone, 2013; Zeiderman et al., 2015). This is the politics of anticipatory action, and our discussion of it acknowledges the rich literature in urban studies that engages with specific forms of anticipatory action (Kemmer & Simone, 2021; Newhouse, 2017; Simone, 2008, 2013; Thieme, 2018; Zeiderman et al., 2015). This is also the politics of knowledge that shapes anticipatory action through the production of scientific knowledge and popular narratives (Paprocki, 2021). In Karachi, the violently contested megacity, democratically appointed political party representatives and the powerful state military use technical knowledge produced by selected urban planners, engineers and consultants to mobilise popular support for disaster risk mitigation strategies that reshape urban landscapes and communities. They consolidate their financial and political gains by framing these strategies as necessary for disciplining unruly ecologies. In this moment, alternative narratives that rest grounded knowledge produced by community-based activists, scholars, planners, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – all of whom are better informed about local ecologies – is shunted to the margins.<sup>1</sup>

Our understanding of the politics of the maybe relates to Kemmer and Simone (2021) notion of cities as ‘promising machines’. The authors articulate this promise as one where cities enable moments of potentiality that allow fragments of hope for urban actors to stand by. We understand the productive potential of Karachi as a promising machine to operate as a gamble where the odds are carefully weighted. Different urban actors – resident bodies, political parties, state and non-state institutions, some of whom are intersectional as both residents and urban governance workers and officials – stay in the game, leveraging their risks in the face of uncertainty. They wait for the perfect moment to raise their bids or fold their cards and rake in the profits. The capacity to stay in the game for poor, low-income residents, municipal security officers, bulldozer drivers, or even urban elite residents, high-ranking government officers, and consultants is contingent on their positionality. In the case of people, ethnicity, class, gender, and social capital matter. For institutions, patronage, financial solvency, and political power structure the ability to profit from the gamble or to absorb losses. This is a politics of self-interest, even for people with allegiance to the neighbourhood or the city. It is a politics of little thought of what will remain if the city and its ecologies are ruined. What would be left of the city as a promising machine then? We argue that the recurrent flooding crisis is a manifestation of the absurdity of Karachi’s urban condition, which is shaped by this politics of the maybe. For what is left to play if the outcome of this politics puts life at stake? Life of the people, politics, institutions, and the city itself.

**2 | INTERSECTIONS ACROSS A DIVIDED CITY: READING KARACHI’S POLITICS THROUGH ITS ECOLOGY**

In the coastal city of over 20 million people, through which rivers and nullahs<sup>2</sup> flow to meet the Arabian Sea (Figure 1), processes of land development and settlement are tied to the norm of the dry season. The 15 different land-owning



**FIGURE 1** Map of major rivers and nullahs in Karachi, in relation to Kausar Niazi Colony and Defence housing authority (Muhammad Toheed, 2022).

bodies<sup>3</sup> regard Karachi's nullahs as seasonally unruly, but largely disciplinable. Akin to similar politico-geographical contexts (Mathur & da Cunha, 2017), Karachi's intensifying processes of urban expansion flout the ecologies and weather systems that undergird the city. In the last 40 years, city officials and politicians have challenged the nullahs' flows by inventively 'settling' land along their banks. Notably, illegal infrastructural developments and poor infrastructural planning for newly developed middle-class localities have failed to account for seasonal water flows. With climate change intensifying already heavy monsoons, water running through rivers and nullahs has progressively found it difficult to flow into the Arabian Sea.

The messy processes of urbanisation and settlement in Karachi are structured by dynamics of power formation and value creation (Akhtar & Rashid, 2021; Anwar, 2018). Illegal population settlement along Karachi's nullahs has been shaped through formal and informal practices of land development (Anwar et al., 2021). These practices take advantage of fragmented governmental authority, institutional corruption, and frequently shifting jurisdictions over municipal functions (Hasan, 2015). Land development and settlement have often been exercises in manipulating electoral constituencies in an economically and politically strategic city (Gazdar & Mallah, 2011). Municipal officers historically complied with requests by local political parties looking to create vote banks. Promising their votes, marginal urban residents willingly inhabited flood-prone zones of uncertain legal-spatial permanence to lay claim to homeownership in an otherwise out-of-bounds city.

Just as the nullahs have become cannibalised by intensifying urbanisation, the border between the sea and the shore is shifting outward to make way for human settlement. In south Karachi, the sea is being colonised by the powerful Defence Housing Authority (DHA), a military land-development enterprise that wields state power through its connection to the Pakistani Army. The DHA is a fairly new player in the well-documented game of value creation through urban land development in Karachi (Anwar, 2018; Hasan, 2015). What started in the 1980s as a 0.30 km<sup>2</sup> housing society for serving and retired armed forces officials (Pike, n.d.) is now a fully-fledged commercial enterprise spread across

approximately 35.82 km<sup>2</sup> (Phases I–VIII). By creatively stretching colonial laws on cantonment land administration (Jaferii & Maher, 2020), the DHA has presented itself as a juridical-legal/administrative structure of a housing society that operates under the control of the Cantonment Board Clifton (CBC). The CBC is a military body responsible for master planning, municipal, water and sewage management, and collection of property taxes within the area developed by the DHA.

Sandwiching Clifton, Gizri Creek, and the Arabian Sea, the CBC paid little attention to developing underground drainage channels so the rainfall can follow natural drainage paths from the nullahs and rivers to its north to the sea to its south (Maher, 2022). To maximise revenue, new extensions such as Phase VIII have been built by cutting down mangrove forests and filling the shifting border between the Arabian Sea and shore with layers of sand, rubble, and plastic (Mazhar et al., 2020). The new land, some of which stunted the flow of water while other areas remained unstable and high risk, is an ultimate lifestyle destination for the upper middle class. Even though the DHA encompasses a few low-income areas, it is better known for housing a concentration of the city's elites.

Power matters. While Karachi's local and provincial governments have launched regular eviction drives to demolish low-income, informal settlements built along the nullahs' banks (Anwar et al., 2021), the DHA's profit-driven encroachment of land through illegal reclamation and politics has continued unchallenged (Zaman & Ali, 2016; Ali & Zaman, 2014). Affiliated with the powerful state military, the DHA has avoided political, journalistic, and legal scrutiny in acquiring land through questionable deals (Zaman & Ali, 2016). The two processes are interlinked. In 2021, evictions were backed by a Supreme Court order that dovetailed with the announcement of a strategic plan to mitigate climate-change risks, published by the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA). Instituted in 2007, the NDMA is a national-level authority that works towards disaster preparedness, mitigation, risk reduction, relief, and rehabilitation. Stakeholders include government ministries, armed forces, UN agencies, and local and international NGOs. The chairman of the NDMA is always a high-ranking serving military officer.

Local government bodies such as the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation (KMC) legitimise the displacement of communities along the Gujjar Nullah, citing Supreme Court orders and the NDMA's flooding risk mitigation plan. Related evictions, part of a series of dispossessions carried out since 2018 (Anwar et al., 2021), signal a shift in the politics of urban development in Karachi. A now militarised 'hybrid' state has built a narrative urging the need to reorganise Karachi through 'rational planning' and 'rule of law'. The state presents this as a necessary undoing of decades of planning chaos solely focused on furthering strategic interests of ethno-political parties. Channelling 'world-class aesthetics', politically weakened local government bodies are now inviting public–private partnerships to develop real estate, transport projects, and tourist attractions amid COVID-19 shocks and a back-breaking austerity regime. The 'world-class aesthetic' has an older genealogy rooted in Karachi's Muhajir or Urdu-speaking intellectual elites reminiscing about 'their' city as a carefree 'city of lights', as known in the 1950s and 1960s. Urban governors and even Supreme Court judges (Anwar et al., 2021; Anwar & Viqar, 2014) invoke a sense of nostalgia in returning Karachi to its 'past glory', and to reclaim its uniqueness of place in a global world.

### 3 | RESEARCHING THE MAYBE

The two waterfronts, the nullah and the sea, symbolise the contrasts of the massive city (Patel, 2020; Karachi Beach Radio, 2022). The nullahs have long been viewed as problematic spaces. They regularly overflow during monsoon seasons, as the rainwater mixed with sewage escapes its channels and stagnates in the streets for days. This disobedient waterfront does not serve any purpose for the affluent, except as a dump and a drain. Plastic bags, garbage, debris all accumulate on and along the nullahs.<sup>4</sup> The nullahs' lack of economic value for city governors and urban elites has allowed poor, marginalised communities to incrementally lay claim to it. In contrast, the seafront is a symbolic icon for Karachi – the only major city in Pakistan with a beach – but the affluent mostly reject it as a space of leisure because of its polluted water and 'public-ness'. They do, however, like to be proximate to it to lay claim to the place of high socio-cultural and economic value in Karachi. The socio-political engagement with land and its value for housing along urban water bodies is therefore very different for the working classes and the upper-middle classes.

The otherwise divergent fates of the residents living along the banks of nullahs and along the coast of the Arabian Sea occasionally merge with the floods during the monsoon seasons. The flood indiscriminately submerges houses and lanes in 'formally' planned DHA settlements and 'informally' planned settlements along nullah banks. The floods reveal intersections between the material landscape and urban politics of divided Karachi. In our prolonged engagement with Karachi, as researchers and residents, we found that monsoon floods bring to the fore latent political manoeuvrings by political actors trying to establish their hold over the city. The space–time between floods is laden with projects of

accumulation and entrenchment on the parts of brokers, land developers, and urban residents. During this time, key players in urban politics – resident groups, community associations, political parties, municipal authorities, land developers, international non-governmental organisations, and state institutions – all work to strengthen their interests. The poor who extend their settlements along the nullahs do so to hold on to their place in the city, while the affluent who buy land along the expanding coast do so to maintain their privilege. The contrasting positions are essentially linked to Karachiites' relationship with the city as a place where they can establish themselves and their future. The politics of the maybe hinges on actors continuing to entrench their positions. The city is their only hope for survival or for making a massive profit.

Working for over a decade on processes of urbanisation and how these intersect with risk and uncertainty in Karachi, both authors have a long-standing engagement with local communities. This paper was written collaboratively through a series of discussions on our individual knowledge and analysis of urban politics in Karachi. We focused on case study individuals, taking their lives and positionalities as fragments of the urban condition. We selected Samina and Nilofer (pseudonyms), two long-standing interlocutors who straddle a class divide, as representational urban actors from whose perspectives we could understand and conceptualise the politics of the maybe and its intersections. Samina and Nilofer are representative of the diverse subjective politics of land, housing, and citizenship. The politics of the predominantly working class, poor, and low-income residents settled along Gujjar Nullah, and the affluent residents of the DHA, respectively.

Samina has been living for several decades in Kausar Niazi Colony, a low-income settlement that was built in the 1970s through political patronage on the banks of the Gujjar Nullah on government-owned land (Gazdar & Mallah, 2011). The colony's past patronage had not ensured tenure security, because even residents with leases have been evicted. Belonging to Kausar Niazi Colony's Christian-Punjabi community, Samina is often at the forefront of anti-eviction campaigns. On the other hand, born and raised in Karachi, Nilofer is representative of the many professional middle-class Karachiites who take pride in being 'Karachiites'. Despite being an active citizen who participates in local initiatives towards community safety and improvement, Nilofer defines herself as 'a-political'. In the aftermath of the 2020 floods, she actively participated in protests against the DHA and CBC, demanding delivery of improved infrastructure and an audit of and return of 'development charges' taxed on DHA residents.

As feminist political geographers (Parker, 2011; Truelove & Ruszczyk, 2022) remind us, cities are built, maintained, and developed through embodied infrastructural configurations that reveal intimate dimensions of everyday politics. Women literally embody the associated inequalities and disadvantages of invisible infrastructural violence. This is especially pertinent for low-income women, whose grounded experiences directly influence perceptions of risks for coping and adapting to their potential loss of home. As significant sites of social reproduction, houses and homes are central to the learning, contestation, reproduction, and re-working of gender, class, and other social relations. Therefore, Samina's and Nilofer's expectations, struggles, and anxieties about making home in the context of the city's unruly ecologies and politics are symbolic of the different mobilisations of the politics of the maybe that happen across scales: from the family, community, civil society, and state to the local, provincial, national, and international scales of future-making. The two women's knowledge of urban flooding risks, rationalisation of urban politics, and anticipatory political organisation in relation to their class position and broader urban political machinations allow us to understand the politics of the maybe in Karachi in detail.

### 3.1 | Gujjar Nullah: Living and knowing the urban ecology

Samina, 37 years old, is a home-based worker who has lived in Kausar Niazi Colony for the past two decades. She occupies a two-storey house with her husband, two children, her widowed mother, two sisters, and nephews and nieces. Built on 80 square yards, the house is near the Gujjar Nullah and at risk of flooding during the monsoon season. When the nullah overflows, the ground floor of the house is entirely submerged in water and sewage. This risk of submersion is expressed explicitly and implicitly in Samina's story: 'It's very difficult but that's how it is; when you live near the nullah, you can't escape the flood when it rains heavily.' Samina's knowledge of annual rainfall and associated risks indicate that she has 'adapted' to the recurrent episodes of flooding. This knowledge provides the basis on which Samina pre-emptively acts to save household possessions, moving furniture and documents to a safe location – such as her parents' house in a different neighbourhood – to mitigate loss or damage.

While the extent of damage the annual flooding event causes is uncertain, the event itself is a certainty. The politics of the maybe is apparent through Samina's will to live with this certainty of loss and damage to her property. She

knows the nullah will overflow and that the water will rise to a certain level on the ground floor: 'Each year the water leaves a mark on the walls. After a few months, the walls have dried, and we repaint them.' From one flooding to the next, Samina inhabits a temporality where her experiences of risk shift between being 'risk capable' – able to manage the recurrent floods through her own knowledge of the urban ecology – and 'at risk', given her subject-position (of disposal) as a working-class Christian. In the current moment, state-led eviction is the tipping point of a threshold where she has lost the gamble of digging in and holding on. State proxies, bulldozers, demolition men, and the police have arrived on the scene. The resulting evictions have left thousands of people without shelter and have disrupted livelihoods. Samina knows her house – built on public land without a lease – is next in line for demolition. Demolition men from the municipal entity, the KMC, have left an ominous red mark on the front wall of her house: 'Our house has been marked and the KMC man says the demolition will go on. My cousin's and grandfather's houses have been demolished; they used to live a bit further down this lane.'

This shift is signalled by engineers, city government, and the NDMA's strategy as a technical matter of 'cleaning the nullahs' and rebuilding the embankments to surmount future cycles of urban flooding. Everyone in Samina's household, the neighbours, and the many activists who have been protesting for months to stop the evictions along the nullahs vehemently assert the state's anti-encroachment drives are a ruse. They underscore the flooding occurs because municipal authorities have abrogated their responsibilities to maintain the nullahs, and the evictions are just a cover-up for this failure. They cite other reasons too: the state's plan to reclaim public land for future urban renewal and real estate projects, and the World Bank's pressure on the provincial government to upgrade the nullahs so funding for such projects can be released in a timely fashion.

As marginal people, the Kausar Niazi Colony's residents have little or no power to confront the state and when confrontations do occur the results are violent. Samina's younger sister, Anila, was organising and leading anti-eviction protests. During a protest, their younger brother and several young men were arrested. They were released after a leftist political party – the Awami Workers Party – and various activists and lawyers intervened. The event left an indelible mark on Anila:

After that protest, the community turned against me. They said my actions caused the arrest of the young men even though the government is responsible. I've taken a backseat. It's very hard to organise protests when the community becomes suspicious of one's intentions. I was protesting for everyone's good. We are all in this together. Besides, it's hard to fight the government. This time it wasn't just the police who came; there were also army people involved. The politicians have not supported us.

Despite bearing heavy losses, Samina's family and others inhabiting similar class-positions have benefited from settling along the Gujjar Nullah. Their precarity has value in terms of the rising price of land, just as the rising value intensifies Samina and her family's precarity. Inhabiting flood-prone spaces offered Samina and her family the option of owning a home in the out-of-bounds city. As Christian migrants from Punjab, they felt a close affinity with other Christian families living in Kausar Niazi Colony for decades. More to the point, Samina's father – now dead – invested in an 80-square-yard plot of public land that the broker assured would rise in value given its proximity to public transport, schools, churches, and hospitals. That the investment assured a good return in the future, even though the land was never regularised, is a point Samina's mother emphasised during conversations: 'This land is worth over 30 lakhs now; what my husband purchased for 40,000 rupees over 30 years ago.' She hailed her husband's decision as intelligent and thoughtful, as surety for the children's future.

Samina and her family live with the certainty that the front portion of the house will be demolished soon and, in this process, the kitchen and bathroom will be destroyed, and the plot will likely shrink to 40 square yards. The partial demolition will be without compensation and will leave the remaining structure unstable. The 'freed up' land will be officially designated for infrastructure development purposes. After months of deliberations about whether to move to another location where they could rent a small flat, the family decided to stay put in the Kausar Niazi Colony house. Samina explained:

If we move to a flat, the space will be smaller because rents are so high. All of us will be squeezed into a tiny space. Despite the demolition of the front half of our house, the upper floor will be intact. We will adjust by installing a makeshift bathroom and kitchen on the ground floor. We will put up with the discomfort. We are hearing in the media that the government plans to build a paved road in front of our house, and builders might buy the land around here to construct apartments. If this happens, the price of our land will rise four to five times.

### 3.2 | DHA: Distanced relations with urban ecology

Nilofer, an upper-middle-class professional, lives with her husband and two daughters in a 500-square-yard plot in DHA Phase VI. DHA Phase VI is sandwiched between Gizri Creek and the Arabian Sea. It is near DHA Phase VIII, an area developed on land reclaimed from the sea. The streets within Phase VI were flooded during the 2020 monsoon. Nilofer ascribed the cause of the 2020 floods to excessive and unprecedented rainfall, while omitting the possible relevance of the geography of the locality. Despite her home remaining dry, Nilofer described her broader neighbourhood as 'that part of Karachi that was most adversely affected by the floods'. She mentioned how her street and drive were submerged in rainwater mixed with overflowing gutters for weeks. She recalled how cars floated in neighbouring streets, suffering irreparable damage. 'I couldn't believe this was DHA', Nilofer remarked. Her disbelief stemmed from military-backed DHA's reputation for offering residents premium infrastructural and municipal service delivery – a reputation that had encouraged her to move there from PECHS (Pakistan Employees Cooperative Housing Society) in 2007.

The DHA's catastrophic flooding in 2020 was not an anomaly. In the summer of 2007, just before Nilofer purchased her house, Karachi had suffered similar flash floods. Streets within DHA were submerged for days (Dawn, 2007). The flooding made visible the DHA's and CBC's substandard and inadequate infrastructural investments for storm-water drainage in the locality. But Nilofer had no recollection of previous floods in the DHA. Despite her heavy investment in an expensive family home, Nilofer's non-knowledge of the DHA's flooding history was testament to her family's capacity to absorb significant financial risks. It also signified buyers' confidence of investing in real estate in the DHA. The Pakistani military holds significant power over state politics and local government resources (Akhtar, 2018), and up until the 2020 floods Nilofer (and others like her) felt that buying land in the DHA and building on it was a safe bet in a city in perpetual turmoil. Nilofer stated: 'all of Karachi has its problems. But despite everything, the DHA is the only well-planned and well-administered housing authority. Its reputation offers security. That was an important factor in our choosing to live here.' For those who could afford to purchase land in the DHA, the risk of potential flooding was not off-putting. Property prices in Phase VI have doubled in the last decade, rising by approximately 60% between 2015 and 2020. At present, the price of a 500-square-foot property in DHA Phase VI is estimated at Rs. 10 million.

Nilofer is worried for the future, however. She was upset with the CBC's delayed response in draining stagnating water during the 2020 floods. Complaining how CBC had struggled to source drainage pumps from the KMC (the municipal body responsible for the city outside cantonment areas), Nilofer demonstrated her ignorance of the historically contested relations over infrastructural maintenance between the two institutions. The KMC faces significant funding constraints, while its performance is historically more closely linked to electoral politics in Karachi (Gazdar & Mallah, 2011). The DHA is an outlier. It tops up its institutional funding by heavily taxing residents and business owners. And its middle-class citizenry does not engage in vote-bank politics.

In contrast to Samina's intimate knowledge of the flooding, Nilofer's knowledge was learnt from a distance. She understood the flooding crisis as a technocratic problem tied to impeded flows of water. This knowledge was gained from news articles and discussions with friends who were planners, architects, and linked to civil society organisations. Nilofer did not talk about the flood in terms of present or future impacts on her property, but more so in terms of what it signified for urban and governmental dysfunction. Nilofer spoke at length of how 'china cutting' (illegal subdivision of land), encroachments, and the flouting of construction by-laws had caused flooding to occur in 2007 and 2020. She laid blame on city planners, working-class settlements, untouchable builders, and super-elites who contravened planning rules to build in ways that blocked drainage channels or disregarded the need for storm-water drainage. She explained this was due to a lack of both collective and political care towards the city: 'No one gives a shit about Karachi. Where is the money that Karachi earns going?' Just as the monsoons were underway in 2021, Nilofer feared another disaster that season. She was especially worried about how the DHA had invested to set up their own solid waste management infrastructure, without linking it to broader urban infrastructures. 'DHA have cancelled solid waste management contracts with contractors to profit from the job themselves. But where will they connect their drains and pumps? They've cleaned the nullahs since May/June, but the rubbish is sitting alongside it. Why hasn't it been cleared away?'

Since the 2020 floods, Nilofer explained how she was now forced to 'take action'. Nilofer had joined DHA-wide WhatsApp and Facebook groups to organise collective political efforts and communally learn of individual risk-mitigation strategies to fortify her home against water. She participated in protests against the DHA and CBC to publicly voice

criticism of the powerful institutions. She spoke with despair about her democratic and political rights, given how vocal protesters had been silenced through coercion:

From being called Defence Housing Corporation, this place is now called Defence Housing Authority (DHA). The Authority is a bully – those who raised their voice against their corrupt extortionist practices have had a First Information Report (FIR) slapped on them. We are intimidated. If we dare raise our voices, our leases are cancelled! We live in a different Pakistan now, no one can mess with the Army.

If anything, for Nilofer the flooding crisis revealed the limitations of her political agency in making political demands of an institution like the CBC/DHA.

The feeling of limited political agency in the aftermath of the floods had shaken Nilofer's privilege. She communicated a wider dejection about life in Pakistan: 'What is left in this country for us? Our future is not safe here'. In the period between the 2007 and 2020 floods, political power in Pakistan shifted as the country transitioned from a decade of military rule to democratic government. The shift in power at the national level had repercussions for the local government in Karachi, as structures of municipal governance were recalibrated. Power struggles between urban governance institutions drawing power from politics, bureaucracy, and the military displaced affluent residents' privilege as a-political 'right-bearing citizens'. The floods, in fact, exposed the messiness of local politics to Nilofer in a way that she had not previously encountered. Despite her heavy financial investment in the DHA, Nilofer realised that the military was no saviour after all. She had to resolve her problems privately:

We are doing the best to save our homes from being flooded this time. While we cannot fix the wider [infra-structural] problem, we have fixed our windows, put sandbags outside our house, and cleaned our drains. We are learning from each other [through organically formed community groups].

The relationship of DHA residents to their homes, and their approach towards the floods, is in stark contrast to that of residents along the Gujjar Nullah. Their middle-class positionality in relation to urban politics and their ongoing experiences of living with uncertainty (Kaker, 2014; Zeiderman et al, 2015) allow DHA residents to believe that all problems are not only external to their choices, but also solvable through a combination of their personal efforts and social capital. They are unable to connect their political and investment choices as having an impact on the current ecological crisis. As the problem seemingly lies beyond their capacity, they feel victimised to have to abide by the rules of absolute authority. 'In this city, you don't have rights over anything but your own property', says Imtiaz, a DHA Phase VII resident. 'Even that is taken away from us!', he said, referring to the rule in the wake of the 2006 floods restricting Phase VII residents from selling property or extending leases unless they contribute to the DHA's costs in building storm-water drains. 'You can only protest or critique, but that comes with the risk of being arrested!'

DHA residents' have realised that the DHA and the CBC (its municipal body) are not different from the much-critiqued Karachi Development Authority and its linked KMC. The problems of inadequate water supply and poor planning they hoped to have left behind in the city outside the DHA had followed them to their new locality. The only difference was that here their influence as 'middle-class citizens' counted for nothing. The DHA's authoritarianism amounted to what Imtiaz called 'ghunda-gardi' (strong-arm tactics), suffocating residents' political rights to protest. Living in the DHA revealed the limits of power of the upper-middle-class, a population that was not familiar with political marginality.

### 3.3 | The contrasting politics of the maybe

Samina's and Nilofer's narratives draw attention to the social, political, material, and ecological relations that assemble contemporary Karachi. Drawing on David Harvey's idea of the city as a palimpsest, where urban spatial forms are built layer by layer over time, their shape being defined by relational social and political processes tied to the production of space (Harvey, 2014), we can understand that the production of spatio-temporalities in the city is tied to a 'politics of the maybe' played on by differentiated urban residents, competing municipal governors, and varying state and non-state institutions. The floods simply work as a moment that makes this politics become both possible and visible. They modulate different kinds of institutional and popular vernaculars, governmental practices, and political manoeuvrings. Even as the floods are increasingly difficult to deal with, for the different institutional actors, the floods are essential – the city cannot simply do without them.

For Samina and Nilofer, the politics of the maybe pivots on a gradation of probability situations and calculations about what is knowable (Knight, 2006; Runde, 1998) about the city in relation to its flooding crisis. While the experience of precarity is extremely different for each, their lives are entwined in Karachi's ongoing socio-spatial and economic transformations, which have been unfolding in violent and uneven ways over the past few decades (Anwar, 2011; Anwar et al., 2019; Gazdar & Mallah, 2011; Hasan, 2015; Kaker, 2014). This follows global urban trends, where economic opportunities have increased for some, but natural and human-induced disasters, violent political ideologies, biological threats, and increasing inequalities have created crises in which ordinary citizens' lives are caught up, with prolonged periods of disruptions marked by contingency and unpredictability for the majority (Rolnik, 2019; Simone, 2019; Simone & Rao, 2011). During the 2020 flooding event, Samina and Nilofer have had to encounter the potential upending of their efforts of establishing or even entrenching their positions in urban life. In the time in between past and present flooding crisis, Samina and Nilofer encounter shape-shifting politics from political actors who have historically brokered their relationship with the state (Maqsood & Sajjad, 2021). Samina experienced abandonment by her community's political patrons, while it dawned on Nilofer that political investment in a non-democratic institution had created some of the mess that she and her fellow DHA residents found themselves in. Inhabiting the time-space of the maybe, both are gathering knowledge, organising, protesting, coordinating legal action, and possibly making deals. All options are currently on the table.

For marginal people like Samina, is it even possible to determine a priori the outcome of house holding in the future, especially as the state is willing to upend her life and the lives of others residing near the Gujjar Nullah? These lives are at stake in the provincial government's bid for World Bank loans and foreign investments for infrastructural development. Is staying put or digging in a game of chance? In the time between this flooding crisis and the last, 'disposable' populations such as those living in the Kausar Niazi Colony had ultimate power as kingmakers. As long as the previous (devolved) electoral system was in play, colonies along Gujjar Nullah became possible through vote-bank politics. Settlements and evictions were methods to manipulate constituencies. In 2010, the system of democratic urban governance under the institution of the City District Government Karachi was dissolved. In 2015, the state initiated a military operation against Karachi-based militant ethno-political parties to reinstate its power over Karachi. In the process, the 'political society' (Chatterjee, 2004) living along Gujjar Nullah were transformed into a violently vulnerable precariat, a population that is atomised, forcefully disassociated and disembedded from political processes they previously found essential for their survival. The breaking of democratic politics in Karachi has rendered Samina and others like her disposable derivatives, subject to the interests of powerful state and institutional actors who move them around to fulfil their financial interests. Samina still hopes, perhaps, that ongoing political manoeuvrings with the help of brokers and activists may lead to some form of survival.

But it is incorrect to state that it is just the poor who form the political society in Karachi. Nilofer and other middle-class Karachiites have long served as a support base for successive military regimes. As Nilofer found, their allegiance brings them favour at the heavy cost of severing access to legal recourse. In divesting their interest from the political state, residents like Nilofer had incrementally allowed the military to gain confidence and power to occupy the state. The outcome of the 2018 general election in Pakistan demonstrated that the country's elites had had enough of popular democratic politics. It cemented the formation of the 'hybrid regime', a political system that incorporated democratic and authoritarian characteristics (Talbot, 2021). The new government led by the Pakistan Tehreek Insaaf, tacitly understood to be backed by the state military, emerged as Karachi's biggest party.<sup>5</sup> The election followed the forceful disbanding of ethno-political organisation in Karachi through military action (Ur Rehman, 2015). The electoral win signified the upper-middle-class's rejection of democratisation and what they regarded as 'unruly political systems of governance' in Karachi – democratisation that had opened opportunities for people like Samina to invest in making permanent claims on Karachi.

In the present moment, both Samina and Nilofer are hanging on to their property values. For Samina, 'digging in' is a mode of endurance in the remains of a form of inhabitation whose very foundations have become shaky. As the state reclaims public land and clears 'encroachments' along the nullahs to mitigate risk of future flooding, and purposeful Samina's life-time is necessary to absorb the risks on which real estate speculation or property investments depend for people like Nilofer in the DHA, who are deemed the 'real' risk takers and 'rightful' propertied citizens. Nilofer is content with holding on. In re-claimed DHA, the flood risk does not threaten ownership or tenure. The instability and breakdown of the CBC's command and discipline, instead, is what might put the property investment at risk. The state (in this case military) suppresses Nilofer and other DHA residents' right to protest to add exchange value to property values in the DHA. If Nilofer and other DHA residents want to protect their investments, they either must take on the impossible task of revolting against the political system, or the easy road of trying to forget (and make the public forget) the damage that

the monsoon rains cause their local streets within the DHA. Apart from being subject to political risks, Nilofer's situation is nowhere near as precarious as Samina's. Her politics, however, actively contribute to Samina's marginality.

#### 4 | WHY KARACHI FLOODS: KNOWLEDGE, RULE, AND SURVIVAL

We see that the politics of the maybe plays out in the space-time between recurrent yet unpredictable floods. There is confusion, chaos, and murkiness which marks and masks governmental and political action in response to the crisis. The different governmental bodies – Sindh government, bureaucrats, technocrats like the World Bank, military agents, local NGOs, and activists all emerge with competing narratives and self-serving agendas to consolidate power. The NDMA proceeds with reclaiming land along Gujjar Nullah in the name of 'development, progress, disaster management'. This takes away any possibility for a shared, coherent worldview for all Karachiites. In fact, the ideal of Karachi as a 'world-class city' grounds the capacity for competing narratives to emerge. In the Karachi context, this politics, what we refer to as the politics of the maybe, is 'absurd'. Taking the absurd as an experience of contradictions tied to the condition of modernity and capitalism as conceptualised in sociology and geography (Bowker, 2013; Phelps, 2018), the absurd politics manifests in everyday experiences of flooding in Karachi. The flooding itself is a moment that brings all the contradictions of governance, rule, and subjectivity in Karachi to the fore. But to whom does this assault make sense?

The politics of the maybe signals not only the underlying contradictions of capitalism (Phelps, 2018) but also the messy fragmentations and violence that define the postcolonial state in Pakistan. Historically, the enunciation of state sovereignty has been tied to the empowerment of the military (Jalal, 1999). The Pakistani state is largely a sovereignty-obsessed state whose encounter with development has 'created an exuberance of politicization'; it is a country where people understand truth is a manifestation of power (Daechsel, 2015: 299). We can understand this argument considering the competing sovereignties and voices that emerge in the wake of flood disasters in Karachi. The floods offer an opportunity for competing local, provincial, and national authorities (KMC, DHA, CBC, NDMA) to build relationships with different segments in the population. The political and civil society are not binaries as Chatterjee (2004) suggests but are intersecting or interwoven with the notion of the state as a hybrid, heterogeneous actor. The violence and irregularities of urban governance and the assault on 'political society' have become an almost ever-present characteristic of Pakistan's politics since independence. Pakistani courts and the judiciary function like a privileged enclave in a hybrid regime where the assault on political society must be complicated: the affluent too have become a form of political society for the autocratic actors within the hybrid regime. Hence, Nilofer's and Samina's experiences are anchored in geographical arrangements of contemporary life that play against each other, but also against the city itself.

Connections between governments and local urban planners and architects on the ground have been lost. The World Bank, previously side-lined through the knowledge-based efforts of the Orangi Pilot Project, has now re-emerged as a major player in Karachi's infrastructural development and upgradation. The World Bank has come in with force, promising hundreds of millions of dollars and the possibility of massive urban renewal. In its wake, the potential funding has produced a highly politicised terrain of expulsions, evictions, and state violence, in which politicians, governors, and ministers are hoping to maintain their vote bank and futures. These political expulsions have been orchestrated by the military, who used the judiciary to enable a violent purge of territorial and militant political actors such as the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) through the notorious 'Karachi Operation'. In doing so, the military created a political vacuum in areas along Gujjar Nullah which were important vote banks for the MQM. The decimation of the MQM in Karachi, coupled with judicial orders to demolish encroachments along Gujjar Nullah, allowed the KMC to finally carry out a previously shelved plan of widening access roads along the nullah to allow its cleaning.

The demolitions, far removed from the actual problem of flooding in the DHA, were deemed necessary. It is rumoured the military pushed for evictions along the Gujjar Nullah to facilitate a road-widening scheme that will ultimately connect with an expressway for faster connectivity between central Karachi and the newly developed DHA city and Bahria Town on its north-eastern outskirts. So who is being cleared out and who is not brings us back to the politics that is routine to governing Karachi. It is a politics that is representative of a living history of patronage, political participation, appropriation of state resources (Farooqui, 2020), and negotiations with politicians and state institutions for sewerage lines, paved streets, sanitation, and the establishment of schools and clinics, and above all, for access to affordable land and housing. But vote-bank politics in Karachi is a rapidly shifting terrain that has both exploitative and empowering dimensions. Political losses of the MQM in the 2018 elections of its long-standing vote bank in places like Kausar Niazi Colony have disrupted community expectations. In these parts of the city, low-income, marginalised residents like Samina have experienced the brunt of evictions since 2018, as community activists have struggled to secure political support. But none

of the elected members of the National or Provincial Assemblies have offered support at the time of eviction (Anwar et al., 2021).

The flooding keeps the politics of the maybe alive for all of Karachi's political actors. It keeps the money coming in a time of municipal financial crises (Maher & Khan, 2021), especially as flooding now dovetails with climate change risks and disasters, thus increasing the size of the external aid/funding package. It is in urban and state elites' interests not to fix the problem of flooding. The cycle of demolition and rebuilding that emerges after each flooding crisis speaks to a securitisation of the majority. The premise on which the city now runs foreclosed the possibility of any settlement for all. Low-income residents' lives undergird the valued liveliness of the middle classes and the elite. This requires the constant circulation and repositioning of the majority. The disposability of their lifetimes allows the continuous 'resettlement' of property values and the creation of 'new forms' of material and asset-based land itself. The state leads this process in an exercise of its power over an unruly city. But to placate discontented urban elites, the state must perform action, 'do' something. Demolishing homes along the nullahs is a visible, swift, activity. It is easier to demolish homes than it is to clean the nullahs. It is likely Karachi will flood again. And again.

## 5 | THE CITY AS AN ABSURD POLITICAL

The floods were a hopeful moment. For a little while, the problems of the Christians in Kausar Niazi Colony were linked to the Hindu, Bengali, and Burmese residents in this Colony and in other settlements along the Gujjar Nullah. Their problems were suddenly linked to the problems of the *katchi abadis* in Mehmoodabad and the Sunni Muslim, Punjabi, and Sindhi middle classes in the DHA. As Karachi's wastewater and sewage mixed, flowing along the city's polarised localities to meet in the streets that joined them, indiscriminately flooding the homes of the affluent and the poor, the affluent and poor came out to protest. Hope was briefly visible in intersectional protests organised by the Karachi Bachao Tehreek (Save Karachi Movement). Karachiites understood that the urban ecology was threatened by both man-made interventions and urban mismanagement. The more ethereal issue of climate change suddenly connected to the problem of illegal urban constructions, and badly maintained storm-water drainage systems.

In the time since the 2020 flood, governmental management of the flood was disconnected from the atmosphere of displacement, loss, and anger that hung over Karachi. As the 'government' pacified the rich and cracked down against the poor, it destroyed the emergent possibility of a common politics, a coming together of the public to hold the government accountable and to demand a better functioning city. As the absurdity of the urban condition and of urban governance is internalised by Karachiites, it undermines possibilities of developing a progressive politics of care. It gets in the way of forming a cohesive public, one that is both urban and issue based. It stops any meaningful politics from being possible. Once the floods ended, so did the camaraderie. It was back to urban politics as usual. The indeterminacy of the event meant that those living along the nullahs, who have no other alternative, continue to build lives in the hope the event does not destroy their lives. In the meantime, those living close to the coast try to come together thinking of ways to exercise their power as rule-following, tax-paying, 'good citizens' who 'deserve' governmental protection.

Class differences and political divisions re-emerged in Karachi. Post-flooding demolitions along Gujjar Nullah made standing houses within the locality more structurally vulnerable (Pakistan Observer, 2022). Meanwhile, the CBC pacified the elite in the DHA with assurances of protection from future floods and the help of special machinery. Disillusioned by what the DHA has to offer, some decided to move to Bahria Town or DHA city in the northern outskirts of Karachi. These far-flung gated communities, built on forcibly and violently claimed land (Ali, 2022; Anwar, 2018), are soon to be better connected with the anticipated expressway built on the back of demolitions along Gujjar Nullah. Those unwilling to leave the city centre find Emaar, an upscale apartment complex developed along the Sea View coast, to be an attractive alternative. Built through 'dirty deals' (Hasnain, 2006) by the Dubai-based real-estate Emaar Properties on ecology-destroying reclaimed land (Mazhar et al., 2020), Emaar offers a luxurious lifestyle with a private stretch of beach in the heart of Karachi.

In July 2022, as we finalised this paper, Karachi flooded once again. Water filled the usual streets in the DHA, trapping some residents in their homes without access to emergency supplies, electricity, or medical help. The vulnerable in the DHA were 'rescued' by 4×4 vehicle-owning 'offroad club' volunteers. In settlements built next to nullahs, where many of the working class live, paths were indistinguishable from open storm-water drains. Anyone taking a wrong step risked being washed away and drowned in flood water. In Gujjar Nullah, charity-owned boats rescued drowning residents. Meanwhile, cooks and maids in Gujjar Nullah and similar settlements were unable to go into work to service the affluent living in the DHA and elsewhere. Demand for food delivery was high on these days. In pouring rain, splashing through

inundated streets, daring delivery riders on motorbikes risked their lives to transport takeaways to homes of the affluent. They expected a heavy tip in return. An Urdu meme circulating on social media fittingly described Karachi's absurd urban condition: 'In the same water, drowned DHA and Surjani (a low-income locality). Neither existed Xanders (upscale continental restaurant), nor Madni Biryani (a local street food chain).'

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## ORCID

Sobia Ahmad Kaker  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0853-6374>

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> These include Perween Rahman, the Orangi Pilot Project (OPP), and the Technical Training Resource Center (TTRC), and the Karachi Bachao Tehreek.
- <sup>2</sup> Open streams/natural rainwater channels.
- <sup>3</sup> Operating at different tiers of national government – local, provincial, and federal.
- <sup>4</sup> The poor also use the nullahs as a dump, in a city where waste management is a poorly run business.
- <sup>5</sup> Displacing the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), Awami National Party (ANP), and Muttahida Majlis e Amal (MMA), parties heavily involved in a politics of patronage with working class and marginal Karachiites.

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