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Taliban flex muscle in Karachi ahead of May 11 poll

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The threat of Taliban attacks hangs over Pakistan's historic election, but not in some parts of the financial capital Karachi, where the militants hold sway after chasing secular parties away.

A little over six months ago, what should have been the headquarters of the Awami National Party (ANP), an ally of the outgoing government, in the working class district of Sohrab Goth were abandoned.

"A small group of Taliban came to the ANP office and told them to leave quickly. They didn't even have to force them," a neighbour said. ANP activists complied immediately. That was well before the start of the campaign for Saturday's polls and they have not been seen since.

The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an umbrella militant group which has been waging a domestic insurgency for nearly six years, has launched numerous bloody attacks across the country against what it calls the "un-Islamic" polls.

The ANP, which like the other secular allies of the outgoing government have been singled out for Taliban attacks, has had to close around 50 offices, some attacked in bloody strikes, in Pashtun areas of Karachi.

In Sohrab Goth, a TTP stronghold in Karachi, the militants have allowed others to campaign, notably religious parties such as the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F), reputedly close to the militants.

"Religious parties have no problem, they can campaign. We see their supporters regularly," said Qari Ahmadullah, a trader in Sohrab Goth's Al Asif market. Mullah Karim Abid, the JUI-F candidate, was happy at how things were going. "Our campaign is good, there is interest among people. In Sohrab Goth, they vote for religious parties," he told AFP.

"Taliban? What Taliban? There are no real Taliban on the ground. All these things are fabricated by authorities." Karachi is beset by ethnic tensions between Mohajirs, the Urdu-speaking core support base of the party that controls the city, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), and the Pashtuns who have migrated to escape violence in the northwest.

Haji Rahmatullah, a TTP cadre, will not vote on Saturday but approves of Maulana Fazlur Rehman, the head of JUI-F, who is very hostile to the US. In general, Rahmatullah said: "TTP leadership support anti-US candidates."

Pashtun districts are not a major electoral factor at this stage. Many of their inhabitants, who arrived in recent years from the northwest where they fled fighting between the army and the Taliban, are not even registered to vote. Others are Afghans, so cannot vote.

Pashtuns are also spread out over voting districts, restricting their power to elect candidates from their own fast-growing community. "Authorities have drawn red lines around Pashtun neighbourhoods," says Abdul Latif, a preacher from Sohrab Goth.

"They say they are full of criminals, and do nothing to save people from misery. The people feel rejected, and the TTP is given a chance."

Tens of thousands of Pashtuns have migrated to the area in recent years, especially from the Mehsud clan of Waziristan, where the TTP is headquartered. Their arrival has helped fanned deadly ethnic and political tensions in Karachi, and seen the MQM vent about alleged Talibanisation.

The authorities say the Taliban commit robberies and other crimes in Karachi to fund their attacks. "This is not an ideal situation. But government affiliates are targeted, and it helps in getting money or prisoners freed," says TTP cadre Rahmatullah. But the militants' criminal activity pales in comparison to that of the main political parties and even the police, who,

according to the country's supreme court, are heavily implicated in the daily crime that swamps the city.

According to Karachi police, about 7,000-8,000 Pakistani Taliban are living in the city, compared to a few thousand in 2008-2009. They are also now better armed and able to deal with police in Pashtun areas. Apart from fighters themselves, the arrival of preachers from Waziristan has brought with them Islamic courts, Koran schools, and recruit young fighters.

Mobile, efficient, and incorruptible, the Taliban's Islamic courts are popular in the districts. But not all Pashtuns are convinced. "Support among people is still limited because they still extort money from people and act like mafias," says Abdul Latif, the preacher. "But if they control themselves and deliver to people, they can become quite popular".