

Pakistan: Islamabad's 'stain' - Informal settlements and real estate market

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Calling the poor 'terrorists' is ignoring the elite's failures.

THE decision by Islamabad's Capital Development Authority (CDA) to demolish at least a dozen informal settlements in the capital area starting the last week of March has been met with protest outside its offices.

Islamabad's bulging informal settlements have been long considered a stain on the 'planned' city's master plan. When Islamabad was conceived by Greek architect Constantinos Doxiadis in 1960, it was conceived as a city without the poor. The city's elite planned to keep it that way.

Nonetheless, the mushrooming of informal settlements was their own doing. The country's top bureaucrats could not do without household servants and so the first wave of informal settlements built up in Islamabad's vast empty lots were inhabited by Christian workers, who formed the bulk of the city's garbage disposal and household labour.

No city can exist without housing for its working underclass: from construction workers to shopkeepers to beauticians to street vendors to its drug dealers and commercial sex workers. Doxiadis could be forgiven for conceiving a city without residence for the working class poor. The architect expected the new capital to be inhabited by technocrats who could do their menial tasks themselves.

If he knew the cultural context of Pakistan, he would've known that the elite can't survive without an underclass. Doxiadis's planning failure still haunts Islamabad's elite.

This has meant that 150,000 of Islamabad's population of 500,000 live in informal settlements. Of the 31 katchi abadis in the city, the CDA has refused to regularise at least 20, playing up the Afghan refugee card. This is the same elite that backs Pakistan's Afghan policy, that brought the two waves of an estimated 1.8 million Afghan migrants in the 1980s and 2000s.

After 30 years of mostly peaceful coexistence with these migrants, who integrated themselves into the Pakistani economy without asking for much from the state, they are suddenly being called 'terrorists'.

In this context, the interior ministry's claims that 98,000 people are 'unregistered' and therefore 'suspect' appear ludicrous. That Afghan migrants are unregistered after three decades of migrations is not their fault, it is the interior ministry's fault. And being 'unregistered' doesn't make one a 'terrorist'.

The Islamabad High Court ordered NADRA not to issue CNICS to anyone without a title or lease document. If the problem was being 'unregistered', why aren't they being allowed to register in the first place?

The real reasons are to do with Islamabad's burgeoning real estate market. Islamabad in its first three decades had a bare minimum real estate market. Most land was allotted to civil and military officials. In the 1990s, they could be allotted extra plots for as little as Rs600,000 per kanal. Now those prices have swelled to between Rs10-20 million per kanal and MNCs are looking to build hotels and shopping plazas. The CDA is looking to displace the city's poor to make way for high-end housing and commercial projects.

This is why it must contradict the guidelines of the 2001 National Housing Policy, which protected informal settlers against displacement until appropriate resettlement plans were formulated and advocated the development of low-income housing schemes. With both conditions not fulfilled in Islamabad, it is in contradiction of federal policies.

Similarly, the PML-N government is in contradiction of the policy measures it implemented when it announced the Regularisation of Katchi Abadis Scheme 2012, which were said to "recognise all katchi abadis in the province".

The claim that katchi abadis are 'illegal' is legal fiction. It is a discourse maintained by elected and non-elected officials in public that goes against the laws and policy guidelines developed by the state over the last three decades that legalise informal settlements.

Moreover, we must ask the larger question: what is the purpose of state land? Why do we not consider 'state land' as a trust granted by the people of Pakistan so it can make the best use for citizens? Following that logic, one would think that if the state is not able to guarantee its citizens affordable housing, is it not fair that we reclaim land that was being held in our trust. When officials tell katchi abadi dwellers that "it is state land, should they not respond, "No, it is the people's land."

This raises an interesting question of rights: if the state fails to fulfil its duties to facilitate people in the land that has been granted to it, do we have a right to take it back? Should people not be constantly monitoring the state's land use policies and determining whether they are in 'public interest' or not? This should be the real question of Islamabad's katchi bastis.

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P.S.

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