

Islamabad (Pakistan): Of collective punishment and dubious excuses - Informal Settlement Facing Demolition

Monday 3 August 2015, by [BERUMEN Jaqueline](#) (Date first published: 6 April 2014).

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The impending destruction of 12 slums in the heart of Pakistan's capital has failed to capture the imagination of Pakistani society in any meaningful way. Little is being asked in the mainstream media or wider society about the dubious legality of the Capital Development Authority's (CDA) executive decision to demolish the *katchi abadis* [see below] without any form of resettlement or restitution (in contradiction of the constitutional right to shelter in Pakistan and the conditions for *katchi abadi* regulation established under multiple policies, including the National Housing Policy 2001), or the questionable morality of evicting over 15,000 families from their homes without regard for their welfare.

The CDA's decision does not only contradict laws and policies, but also presents severe humanitarian risks. If carried out, it would displace over a 100,000 impoverished women, men and children. The loss of housing would produce immense shocks in the populations, affecting their access to livelihoods, education, health and savings, pushing people further into poverty and social marginalisation. Furthermore, the demolition of the *katchi abadis* would also mean the destruction of the communities' entire social fabric, ties and relationships, weaved over decades as networks of social support in circumstances of absolute dispossession and state absence. The same state whose absence forced these individuals into relying on social networks for survival is now intent on destroying the foundation of those networks.

Unfortunately, as a Latin American, I am only vaguely surprised by the failures of exclusionary structures of state power in Pakistan. However, I have been struck much more by what seems to be the complicit apathy of much of Islamabad's middle and upper classes. "But isn't that good?" was the witty response of a colleague to my description of the eviction drive the All-Pakistan Alliance for Katchi Abadis (APAKA) was struggling against. I realised it was good for him. As he drives past the exclusive housing development or shopping paradise in the place where months before stood thousands of people's homes, he can now fully delude himself into believing a first-world fantasy in the pristine bubble of Islamabad, supportive of a dysfunctional state that keeps its visual landscape neat but fails to guarantee fundamental rights for the majority of its people.

For others, perhaps, this indifference is the result of the manipulation of their fears by the state's discourse of 'terrorist threats' amongst the *katchi abadis* to justify eviction. One would imagine, however, that the literate middle and upper classes could see through a discourse of fighting terrorism through the demolition of whole communities; question the competence of a state incapable of identifying supposed terrorists within half a square kilometre in its capital city; and

realise the inconsistency of negotiating with terrorist organisations while rejecting dialogue with innocuous workers and families of the city's abadis. The face of the resistance to the evictions is proof enough of the incongruence of the 'terrorist' stereotypes — in a dignified example of human camaraderie, Pashtun Muslims have been joined by Punjabi Christians in united, peaceful resistance (under the APAKA) beyond ethnic and religious lines, demanding not any absolutist supremacy, but a recognition of their humanity and rights by the state.

One can imagine middle and upper classes' apathy to be the result of the tired and empty discourse of 'illegality', which fails to take account of the destruction of homes, the annihilation of communities and the injustice of taking away the last bit of respect from the most destitute. Surprisingly absent in these understandings of legality, is the responsibilities of a state that evades its legal mandate to provide restitution and resettlement and blatantly neglects its fundamental obligation of providing adequate housing for the working classes of its capital city.

It must be borne in mind that mass evictions are a startlingly retrograde policy when compared to current international standards and practices for dealing with urban slums. Present-day recommendations from international organisations, from the World Bank to the ADB and UN-HABITAT, firmly reject forced eviction and discourage resettlement, particularly when slum dwellers are relocated in the absence of community consultation and consent. Likewise, in order to effectively address the social problems behind informal settlements and the requirement of providing working adults of a city with a place to live, government policies around the world have generally shifted from forced eviction to a combination of regularisation and slum upgrading, participatory resettlement and public housing projects.

These policies could provide a model for cities like Islamabad to follow, with the advantage of developing them in a comparatively more manageable and economically feasible context (given the size of Islamabad's katchi abadis and the opportunities of foreign aid investment).

The popular (and often inconsistent) legal moralism that persists in upper and middle classes in Pakistan does not take into account the complex reasons for the emergence of slums, which have to do with wide-ranging social and economic changes that are beyond the control of the impoverished populations. Pakistan is no exception and its cities are stark representations of the urban inequalities that can result in circumstances of capitalist expansion and rapid urbanisation. Cities are a reflection of the ideal society we wish to create, which in turn shape us and our social values; it is urgent, therefore, for Pakistani society to take notice of the ways in which their cities are developing and to question the ideas of justice, cohesion and well-being they reflect. What ideals are being reflected when our cities have no space for the working classes to live in, despite relying on them to keep those very cities running? What values are we espousing when the right of the poor to shelter and a dignified existence is denied by the very people who employ their labour? Perhaps the discourse that will result from such public reflection will be more complex and comprehensive than rhetoric about tackling 'security threats' through mass evictions and collective punishment.

Jaqueline Berumen

* "Of collective punishment and dubious excuses". Published in *The Express Tribune*, April 6th, 2014: <http://tribune.com.pk/story/691829/of-collective-punishment-and-dubious-excuses/>

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Katchi abadis: Slum dwellers stage another massive rally

As he struggled with his wooden crutches, sixty-year-old Iqbal Masih was scrambling to catch up with other protesters who had taken to the street against a possible operation to clear illegal katchi abadis in Islamabad.

His eyes skimmed through the crowd that fled past him, chanting slogans against the recently-announced Capital Development Authority and Islamabad Capital Territory Administration eviction plan.

“If the shelter above my head is demolished, I will consider this my destiny. I do not have another plan. I will be living on the road,” said Magsi, who has been living in F-6 slums with his wife and three children for the many years.

Hundreds of katchi abadi residents gathered outside the National Press Club on Wednesday for the second time against their possible eviction by the city managers.

Swinging black flags and placards inscribes with slogans such as “what will happen to us? Where will we go?” they said that the government has failed to offer them a viable resettlement plan. Aliya Ameer Ali, a student activist, said that according to the Kachi Abadi Policy 2001, if the government intends to demolish homes in slums, it will have to consult the residents before taking any such step. “They have not done so,” she said.

She said that there were all kinds of housing schemes for middle and upper-middle class people, but there were no such schemes for the poor. “It is unfortunate that, because of their economic stratum, the government calls them freeloaders and encroachers,” she said. There are ten registered and 24 unregistered slums in the capital. The demolition plan covered 12 unregistered slums including the Afghan Basti in I-11, which, according to the Islamabad Police, has become a breeding ground for terrorists and extortionists.

Akhtar, a protester, said that the government was using the Afghan basti as an excuse to carry out operation in other slums. He said that labeling Pakhtuns in the basti as terrorists had a negative impact on others.

Former federal minister J Salik said that the state of Pakistan claims to be a modern and democratic was hollow. He said that the poor, particularly non-Muslims, have no rights whatsoever in the country.

PML-N Islamabad Youth Wing member “Munna Bhai” said that most of the residents had voted for the PML-N during the last elections but the possible eviction decision has disappointed them.

The protestors announced they would take to the streets again next week if their demands were not met.

Correspondent

* Published in *The Express Tribune*, April 3rd, 2014:

City slums: Homes of have-nots, not havens for terrorist

The All-Pakistan Alliance of Katchi Abadis and the Awami Workers Party (AWP) have protested the ongoing propaganda against slum dwellers of the federal capital.

In a statement issued here on Tuesday they said the government was trying to cover up its failure in combating terrorism by labelling the slums as havens for terrorists.

It said that the propaganda against slum dwellers increased markedly in the wake of Monday's attack on the district courts in Islamabad.

Leaders of the AWP and the alliance said that the only crime of the slum dwellers was that they were poor and had little political voice.

They also pointed out that a large number of slum dwellers were Christians, who have been biggest victims of violence.

The Capital Development Authority and the Islamabad Capital Territory administration have conducted numerous surveys of all katchi abadis and have verified records, they said.

While criticizing the government, they said that it had miserably failed to address the terrorism issue in Pakistan.

Correspondent

* Published in *The Express Tribune*, March 7th, 2014:

<http://tribune.com.pk/story/679824/city-slums-homes-of-have-nots-not-havens-for-terrorist/>

Neglected: 'Govt must take more responsibility to protect slum dwellers'

All-Pakistan Alliance for Katchi Abadis and Awami Workers Party (AWP) leaders have called for preventive measures to protect the capital's slums from devastation during the ongoing monsoon season.

Katchi abadis are at risk of destruction during the rains, with incidents of deaths and damage reported during July.

AWP Rawalpindi General Secretary Shehak Sattar said the recent rains have affected slums in sectors I-11 and H-10 and mud structures are in danger of further damage from rains predicted in the future.

The Alliance representatives criticised the PML-N government for its neglect of the katchi abadis, claiming the former has not only ignored the urban poor but also targeted them in selected anti-encroachment drives.

The Capital Development Authority (CDA) maintains some slum dwellers have exposed themselves to damage from flash flooding by building illegal structures near storm water drains. People living in the slums, on the other hand, claim that CDA enforcement staff allow them to build mud structures in return for pay offs — an illegal practice on the agency's part.

The slum dwellers will continue to be at risk of death and destruction until the government develops a plan to permanently house working-class residents of the city, said alliance members.

Correspondent

* Published in *The Express Tribune*, August 8th, 2013:

<http://tribune.com.pk/story/588036/neglected-govt-must-take-more-responsibility-to-protect-slum-dwellers/>

<http://tribune.com.pk/story/679824/city-slums-homes-of-have-nots-not-havens-for-terrorist/>
