

Opinion

Islamabad (Pakistan): The Truth about Katchi Abadis - Informal Settlement Facing Demolition

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

A conflict is brewing in the capital city - invisible to most, pitting the urban poor against the state. Bureaucrats, politicians, and the judiciary have joined hands to launch eviction drives that will affect over 100,000 residents of the katchi abadis of Islamabad.

The issue has a long recurring history, but the recent episode began last year when the PML-N government came into power. Surveys were conducted, eviction notices were issued, and search operations were launched in katchi abadis. The situation escalated this February when the Islamabad High Court issued an order (not a judgement) for the removal of "illegal settlements" from Islamabad.

The officials claim that the 30-odd katchi abadis of Islamabad are illegal settlements that have emerged due to encroachments on private and public land, and these abadis harbor criminals and terrorists.

These are of course blatant and outrageous lies designed to make state violence somewhat palatable, by simultaneously criminalising the poor and denying the state's own wrongdoing.

Consider the issue of criminality - the interior minister has repeatedly called residents of katchi abadis criminals and terrorists. That is a joke. The real criminals occupy large mansions in posh neighbourhoods and we are suffering the consequences of their ideological and material support to terrorist outfits. We are suffering at the hands of their white-collared crimes.

And surely any menial crimes originating from katchi abadis can be addressed using regular and community policing. Why are we meting out wholesale collective punishment to the urban poor?

Now consider legality. Let me be clear: there are no illegal katchi abadis. Several constitutional provisions, laws, and policies deal with them, including provincial katchi abadi acts, the National Housing Policy and the National Katchi Abadi Policy of 2001. According to these documents katchi abadis are 'informal settlements comprising more than 40 houses', which can be registered and regularised based on when they were built. The preferred official policy is to improve the abadis where they are, but if any abadi is to be removed for extraordinary reasons, that can only be done after working out a detailed resettlement plan in consultation with the residents.

These laws are not sufficient to address the real issue. But as it is, the CDA's horrific plan to bulldoze the abadis, load the residents into trucks and take them 'back' to their places of origin is outrageous, illegal and morally indefensible.

But the CDA also raises two specific techno-legal points. First, they claim that these are Afghan abadis. This is false according to the latest UNHCR data. Only a handful of Afghan nationals

constitute a small minority in one or two katchi abadis. Second, the CDA claims that they are only targeting unregistered and already-relocated abadis. It is true that the CDA had registered 11 abadis and offered relocation plans in the past. But the registration process left many families unregistered and the alternatives offered lacked even basic facilities. This means that not everyone from the regularised abadis was relocated. Furthermore, what about the abadis that were never registered in the first place?

Registration is a strange business. The current official cut-off date for the capital city is March 23, 1985 which is the arbitrary and archaic leftover of the Zia-Junejo government. In Rawalpindi all katchi abadis established before 2012 are eligible for regularisation because the PML-N provincial government recently amended the Punjab Katchi Abadi Act. The same principle must apply to Islamabad.

It is also worth pointing out that recognition and registration of the 11 katchi abadis of Islamabad did not happen due to the benevolence of our leaders and bureaucrats. This was a result of the long struggle by the people and the All-Pakistan Alliance for Katchi Abadi (Apaka). This offers a real possibility of moving forward, but ignorance about the real issue results in divisions among the people.

For example, the CDA ignores the housing needs of the poor and sells the katchi abadi public land to unsuspecting buyers. The new owners are also victims, but they see katchi abadi residents as illegal encroachers. Various victims end up blaming each other.

To understand encroachment, consider the scale of the problem. By 2030 two billion people worldwide will be living in urban informal settlements (pejoratively called slums). In Pakistan nearly half the urban population, an astounding 30-40 million people, currently live in katchi abadis. Informal settlements emerge as a result of rising poverty and lack of housing for the poor. In Pakistan only a third of the total housing needs are met by the formal sector, which caters mostly to middle and upper classes. Left to their own devices, the urban poor and working classes display amazing resourcefulness to meet 25 percent of the housing demand on their own.

Rising poverty and informal settlements are linked to the ways in which the state and capitalist-feudal-military classes use public land for private profit. Our military is the largest landlord in the country and controls farmland as well as urban property. Why is this land given to generals and brigadiers in colonial-style land grants and not to the poor? Surely, a case can be made to dispossess our last dictator General Musharraf and use his farmlands to provide housing for Islamabad's poor.

Large civilian bureaucracies are no better, and the collaboration between the military-civilian bureaucracy and feudal-capitalist elites has resulted in an alarming increase in the number of posh housing societies. These housing societies are built on land that is aggressively acquired either by manipulating the land market or by simply using brute force. As a result of this process the rural and urban working classes are dispossessed and displaced.

And where do you think they go? A katchi abadi is probably situated within walking distance from your house or office.

Unlike capitalist-colonial elite encroachments, the everyday struggles of working classes result in the 'quite encroachment of the ordinary'. These struggles must not be romanticised – the competition for survival and dignified living drives people to opportunism and selfish behaviour. But by and large katchi abadis are the only housing available to daily wage labourers, domestic workers, sanitation workers, maids, cooks, hawkers, transporters, and workers of the informal sector. The whole system depends on them and profits from their miserable living conditions.

If these everyday struggles for survival can be transformed into collective action, then we will have the makings of a people's revolution. This revolution is unfolding right now in the streets of Islamabad. Women, men, children, and the elderly are staging peaceful protests, sit-ins, and demonstration rallies - organised by the Alliance (Apaka) and the Awami Workers Party(AWP).

This is a struggle to forge a new politics based on truth and justice, not violence and legality. And we must pick a side.

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P.S.

* "The truth about katchi abadis". The News, Sunday, April 06, 2014. From Print Edition:
<http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-9-242588-The-truth-about-katchi-abadis>

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