

Urban poor - Justice for Islamabad I-11: Towards housing for all in Pakistan

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Justice for I-11: Towards housing for all in Pakistan

A seminar by the All Pakistan Alliance for Katchi Abadis and Awami Workers Party

Nearly 6 months have passed since one of the largest mass urban evictions in Pakistan's history. On the 30th of July, 2015, over 15,000 men, women and children, all residents of the I-11 katchi abadi were made homeless through a brutal operation led by the CDA and the coercive apparatus of the state. For those that witnessed it, the eviction stood out because it illustrated something fundamental and deeply disturbing about the structure of power in Pakistan. While it is generally taken for granted that the state in Pakistan works solely for the powerful, the eviction offered the starkest of proofs of this truism; entire communities of people were destroyed along with their homes, the poorest were pushed further into destitution and thousands of children deprived of access to education, all through the direct actions of servants paid to protect and serve the public.

The eviction in the heart of Pakistan's Capital did not go unnoticed. In the days and weeks that followed, the backlash was severe, with the issue of katchi abadis and the crisis of low-income housing pushed into the fore as a policy matter worthy of discussion for perhaps the first time. Television anchors berated government representatives for their incompetence and cruelty in the conduct of the eviction. Dozens of op-eds and editorials assailed the state for its brutal attitude toward the poor. The matter was taken up in Parliament as well, with the Senate adopting a unanimous resolution condemning the eviction and calling for the rehabilitation of the affectees. In a telling nod to the legitimacy of the evicted residents' claim to shelter, the Supreme Court admitted the AWP's petition on the right to housing, criticized the operation as inhumane, identified housing as a basic need and ordered the CDA and the federal and provincial governments to come up with actionable plans to rectify the absence of affordable housing for the poor. As amicus curae for the case, prominent low-income housing expert Tasneem Siddiqui has already proposed a number of possible solutions, including a regulatory and upgradation mechanism for existing settlements, long-term framework for land and resource allocation for public housing and an incremental resettlement of the displaced I-11 katchi abadi as a matter of law and a model low-income housing settlement.

However, it still comes as little surprise that next to nothing has happened at the level of the state despite the outcry and criticism. The displaced and impoverished residents of I-11 still await any form of restitution for the brutal violation of their right to shelter. While the Supreme Court's interim orders have stayed further evictions, the in-court responses of the CDA and government have been embarrassingly inadequate, with bigoted scaremongering about the demographic threat posed by minority katchi abadi dwellers replacing any potentially informed, considered policy responses to fulfill their constitutional responsibilities

In the meantime, the displaced residents of I-11 have continued their peaceful struggle for the recognition of their rights, both legally and in the electoral arena. In the recently concluded local government elections in Islamabad, two former residents of the I-11 katchi abadi were elected as councilors from the union council where the settlement once stood. The message from the residents

was clear - that despite the attempts of the CDA and government to deny their existence and term them as Afghans and terrorists, they were Pakistani citizens and would continue their peaceful, democratic struggle for their rights.

Why is the case of I-11 so important? It is so because it has become a symbol for the injustice and exclusion that permeates Pakistani society, yet is rarely made so starkly visible as in this case. Correcting the injustice of the forced eviction of July 30 is not just about compensation for the destruction - it is about ensuring that the state never again actively dispossesses and displaces people on the basis of their class or ethnicity. It is about ensuring that there is dignified housing and shelter in our cities for all classes of people.

The ongoing case in the Supreme Court presents an opportunity for action on Pakistan's crises of housing, rising inequality, and urban decay. The state cannot continue to look the other way while an unaffordable privatized housing market excludes the majority of citizens, who are left to the mercy of exploitative arrangements in the informal sector. Policy action is required that ensures the possibility of dignified shelter for all. Crucially, the just resettlement of the residents of the I-11 katchi abadi is needed to ensure a legal and administrative precedent is established against the practice of brutal summary evictions of communities without providing them alternatives.

Join our panel of experts as they discuss the significance of this moment and call for enduring action for the dispossessed working people of I-11 and the rest of this country.

Our Panelists:

Arif Hasan (Prominent architect and urban planner)

I A Rahman (Secretary General, HRCP)

Farhatullah Babar (Former spokesman, President of Pakistan)

Moderator: Aasim Sajjad Akhtar (Professor/President AWP Punjab)

P.S.

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