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Afghans in Pakistan face a perilous future

By Sanaa Alimia

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Living in Pakistan has become increasingly difficult for refugees from the war-torn state.



Afghans living in Pakistan say they face discrimination and harassment from authorities
(Sanaa Alimia/Al Jazeera)

Millions of Afghan refugees in Pakistan fear attempts to force them from homes in which some have lived for more than 30 years. They say they have dealt with discrimination and harassment at the hand of Pakistani authorities, who no longer "find them useful", and are anxious for them to face mass deportations before official residency permits expire at the end of this year.

Mass arrests and deportations already took place three years ago. Now individual arrests and deportations, as well as daily humiliations - seen through stop and searches, verbal and physical abuse, and requests for bribes - continue unabated, in what can only appear to be efforts to "encourage" continued repatriation - a policy that is in line with broader US-led aims of winning "hearts and minds" in Afghanistan through "reconstruction" efforts.

Many Afghans in Pakistan cannot return to Afghanistan and are in fact an integral part of Pakistan. However, once revered as the heroic "mujahid", Afghans in Pakistan are now constructed as the destructive "talib" - a complete 180-degree turn from the 1970s-90s, when Afghan migration was actively encouraged by Pakistan, the US and other international actors to defeat the Soviet "menace". Having a sizeable Afghan population in Pakistan, including militarised resistance groups, was strategically beneficial. One former engineer and mujahideen fighter from Kunar province, now a daily wage labourer, told me how Pakistani-sponsored announcements on local Afghan radio promised "free land in Pakistan for Afghans to settle on", and that "at that point, it was a big deal to be an Afghan refugee. We had recognition - we had the attention of the world on us".

Now the situation is starkly different. "[Why is] there is no legitimacy to our status? [Is it] because the war [in Afghanistan] is directed by the US?" the former fighter wondered. "Now these people say that our land is free so we should return [to Afghanistan] ...but we have been here for over 30 years!" As state relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have deteriorated, so too has the status of Afghans in Pakistan.

Mass arrests and deportations

Surprisingly, little is reported about the shift of Afghan experiences in Pakistan. All too often commentators assume the hospitality that the Pakistani state engendered throughout the 1970s-90s has continued, albeit grudgingly because of the protracted burden on Pakistani state resources. However, the reality is more startling.

In 2009 and 2010 mass arrests and deportations took place, amid discussions of renewing identity cards. That experience has left many Afghans worried this could happen again in the coming months. One Afghan community elder in Karachi who works in the transport industry told me how "many of us were arrested in 2009. I went to a prison to try to bail people out and there were 210 people there, including women. They [the police] would look at our cards and say we had no right to be here. They would either be satisfied with a bribe or, for those of us that could not pay, we were arrested."

In another discussion with a man who has been living and working in Pakistan since 1982 with his family, he said: "There was a time last year [2010] when people were constantly being arrested, one elder had to go and get 150 people released who were arrested at one time. At another point, 40 people were taken! The police said, 'Pay us Rs 10,000, Rs 20,000 [approximately \$100-\$200] and you can go'. Who had this money?" For those who were deported to Afghanistan, many had no option but to return to Pakistan because of violence, lost land, and poor opportunities in Afghanistan. "I was deported," a trader living in Peshawar said,

"but I had to come back. My brother and family are still here. It is difficult here, but it was worse for me there."

Legally speaking, Pakistan has become more stringent against Afghans. Only registered Afghans with a valid computerised Afghan Citizen Proof of Registration Card (PoR) are considered legal persons in Pakistan, of which there are 1.7 million, according to the UNHCR. The remaining 450,000 to 2.2 million, by a 2009 study's estimate, are unregistered and considered illegal immigrants. Even the PoR card, which was introduced in 2006-2007 and designed to last until December 31, 2009 before it was agreed to renew to 2012, will in fact not be renewed, according to Pakistani officials.

While education campaigns and government initiatives have stopped police from conducting mass arrests, discrimination and harassment continues. The "Global War on Terror" has itself transformed Pakistani cities into fortress towns, which affects all people living in Pakistan. For Afghans, it's much worse. At security checkpoints, now a permanent feature of the Pakistani landscape, identity cards are a must.

Perversely, this means that the PoR card, initially designed to ease "refugee management", has combined with increasing hostility towards Afghans to facilitate targeted humiliation. For those Afghans without a PoR card, usually the poorest of the poor, life is even tougher. In an interview with one such family, Abdul Qader, the main breadwinner, says he only moves within his neighbourhood for fear of being arrested. Often, even buying food is difficult. "Sometimes we eat the potato skins from local waste," he told me, sitting in his informally constructed house. For him and his family, return to Afghanistan is not an option, and now remaining in Pakistan is also problematic.

"The police say things like 'this is your tax'. It is a problem for us; without a card it [is] even more of an issue. We are fed up. If you have no card they hassle you. If you have a card they hassle you. If you need to go anywhere they hassle you. They harass you on your [daily] routes," said Abdul Qader.

Deteriorating Afghan-Pakistani state relations

One cannot help but suspect this targeted harassment is a side-effect of deteriorating Afghan-Pakistani state relations and an effective way of humiliating and disciplining the remaining Afghans in Pakistan - or even a tactic to "encourage" repatriation. Whatever the case may be, Afghans in Pakistan sure don't feel welcome anymore.

These experiences should not continue - nor should they remain ignored, silenced and forgotten by history. For Afghans who wish to return to Afghanistan, as many do, this national right and choice must be supported. However, the reality of a continued Afghan presence in Pakistan and of emerging transnational realities in the region cannot be ignored. The majority of Afghans who continue to live in Pakistan are an integral part of the fabric of the state. Many Afghans teach, research, are artists, run successful businesses, trade and work as labourers (which has shaped urban growth in the country).

Through solidarities of friendships and hospitality between Afghans and Pakistanis, the Afghan position in Pakistan has, on the whole, been without inter-community conflict. Many live in shared neighbourhoods, trade, work, marry and study together. One Afghan father in Peshawar notes how when his 15-year-old son was arrested by the police when playing cricket, simply by virtue of being Afghan, it was his son's friends, Afghan and Pakistani, who pooled money together to bail him out: "They all put together whatever they had and got him out of the police station. I did not even know until they told me afterwards".

These realities, and the importance of Afghans in Pakistan, must be acknowledged in practice and law. Afghan rights in Pakistan must be protected and improved.

Pakistan itself faces numerous challenges. It has a huge number of internally displaced persons, is facing crippling issues of power shortages and continues to be engaged in a cancerous alliance with the US in the ill-informed war in Afghanistan. Pakistan has also shouldered the weight of the refugee crisis, while the developed world has only ever tightened its own borders and immigration policies.

Yet this is no justification for the current attitude towards Afghans in Pakistan. The discrimination and humiliation that has played out on the bodies of Afghans to suit changing foreign policies and state-level rivalry between Afghanistan and Pakistan must end. And as discussions regarding the fate of Afghans in Pakistan continue, a repeat of 2009 must not be allowed to occur. This reality must now translate to Pakistani state practice and law.