**Muhajireen versus refugees**

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The theme of a colonized mindset that cannot think for itself, by itself, of itself is a powerful one. It is a consistent motif for Prime Minister Imran Khan.

Last week, I wrote about the need to avoid stupidity as we seek to shed postcolonial baggage. I argued that we need to assiduously seek more potent and cogent ways of asserting our independence, our sovereignty, and our sense of honour. One of the ways in which we can do this is by thinking more carefully about the language we use in public policy and how this impacts and shapes policy itself.

As the Afghanistan crisis rages on, one of the lesser explored themes of the crisis is the impact it will have on actual people: 40 million Afghans. This is relevant for Pakistan for a host of reasons, but the most urgent is the displacement of Afghans from their homes in Afghanistan, to foreign lands. Which country do Afghans go to the most when faced with persecution, insecurity, disease, hunger, and lack of opportunity in Afghanistan? They come to Pakistan.

Since 1979, there have been several waves of movement of people from Afghanistan and into Pakistan. In ordinary parlance, including in papers, articles and presentations I have made, we refer to this phenomenon as “the Afghan refugee” problem, or challenge. This, right here, the use of the word ‘refugee’ is the beginning of why Pakistan has gotten its policy on refugees wrong – even though Pakistan is, bar none, and with reams of evidence, the most refugee-friendly country on God’s great earth. If this seems to be a consistent theme: Pakistan does the right thing, but does not get any credit (or Pakistan does the wrong thing, but for the right reason, and gets all the blame), there is good reason for it. This is the fate of countries whose public policy is entirely processed through what Lant Pritchett calls “isomorphic mimicry”.

Isomorphic mimicry is the well that sustains what so many Pakistanis are sick of: brown sahib economics, self-loathing historical narratives, and failed public diplomacy. In describing the book Pritchett co-authors with Matt Andrews and Michael Woolcock, isomorphic mimicry is described as: “the tendency of governments to mimic other governments’ successes (sic), replicating processes, systems... This mimicry often conflates form and function: leading to a situation where ‘looks like’ substitutes for ‘does’; ie, governments look capable after the mimicry but are not actually more capable.”

For more than forty years Pakistan has managed the ‘refugee’ problem, arguably better than any country on the planet – affording relatively free passage into the country, nearly complete autonomy and mobility to those allowed in, and a consistent policy of not forcing or compelling returns. The result is a permanent and permanently growing population of a category of people known commonly as ‘Afghan refugees’, currently numbered at 1.4 million, of whom nearly 80 percent were not born in Afghanistan, nor in those bastions of benevolence and grace, such as India, or Edwards Airforce Base, or Doha, Qatar – but rather in the sovereign territory of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

In addition to the 1.4 million UNHCR certified ‘refugees’, Pakistan hosts nearly one million ACC card holders, citizens of Afghanistan, verified by the Afghan government, that have been issued smart cards that verify their identity and allow them virtually indefinite stays in Pakistan. Furthermore, there are estimated to be anywhere from half a million to over 1.5 million Afghans that are living in Pakistan, without the formal paperwork or documentation that the Islamic Republic of Pakistan would like to otherwise insist is necessary for them. In total, there are probably somewhere north of 3.5 million, maybe upwards of 4 million Afghan citizens in Pakistan at any given point in time these days.

The wider term used for them all is ‘refugee’. But this word has almost no meaning to the ordinary Pakistani. For those that it does have meaning for, it has connotations that are negative. What is interesting is, despite being here for decades, and despite the seemingly high distrust Pakistanis are supposed to have of ‘ungrateful’ Afghans, the ordinary Pakistani has never broken out into any kind of sustained movement against the Afghan in their country. Why has this not happened?

First, a caveat. There is no shortage of stories of mistreatment of Afghans in Pakistan. Like any displaced community, many Afghans struggle with both economic opportunity and with an exploitative law-enforcement culture – not to mention an arbitrary and reactive national security establishment. But these challenges are relatively benign, especially when juxtaposed with how ‘refugees’ are treated in most other countries – including places like Turkey and Bangladesh, two equally great, benevolent and brotherly nations for Pakistanis.

Some of the reasons are natural and have nothing to do with public policy. The majority of Afghans in Pakistan are Pakhtun. Shared language, culture, identity, and in many cases, family and tribal bonds, go a long way. Still, there is a certain ‘je ne sais quoi’ about the bond between Pakistan and Afghans in Pakistan that makes it unique and special and capable of lasting another four decades or more. And that special something may be the fact that in local parlance, regardless of the language or ethnicity in question, Pakistanis tend to refer to Afghans in their country, not as ‘refugees’, but as ‘muhajireen’.

Arabic descriptors or adjectives often derive from three consonant root words. My name, Mosharraf, is from the root ‘shrf’ or sheen, rey, fey. Other derivatives of this root include shareef, ashraf, and shurafa. The word ‘muhajireen’ is derived from the root word ‘hjr’ or hey jeem rey. In an anthology on Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), Fitzpatrick and Walker report that ‘hjr’ appears thirty one times in the Holy Quran, in seven different forms. The most potent and historically powerful appearance of the root word ‘hjr’ is in the notion of the great move of the Momineen, led by the Prophet (pbuh), from Makkah to Medina in what we now call the year Zero Hijri.

The centrality of the notion of hijra, or emigration in the Muslim imagination is hard to overstate. We have related the very concept of time (al asr), to the act of the relocation of the beloved Prophet (pbuh), the Prophet’s Rightly Guided Companions, and the Sacred Ahl ul Bayt. It is conceptually very difficult (though possible, as proven by the bhatta-consuming and crime metastasizing elements of the MQM) to establish a permanently negative narrative about muhajireen. It is simply disconsonant with how Muslims imagine themselves and their sense of community.

In this culture, for the government of Pakistan to pretend that it is suddenly Austria or Hungary is not possible. It is especially not possible because PM Khan’s entire basis for entering politics is compassion for the less fortunate than him. And it is politically complicated because the core base support for PM Khan, no matter the protestation by some Pakhtun nationalists, is in fact the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

The reticence on a clear and properly ‘Pakistani’ policy on Afghan muhajireen (one anchored in compassion and faith) is grounded in security concerns about the entry of individuals that may serve the agenda of the terror espoused by Daesh, the TTP and other offshoots and derivatives of Ajit Doval’s impressive array of terrorist proxies. But these security concerns, on the evidence of four decades, apply to a tiny sliver of Afghans in Pakistan. The vast majority of Afghans are like the vast majority of Pakistanis – they’re trying to stay alive and hustle their kids’ path to a better life.

As long as Pakistan fails to articulate a clear, unapologetic open doors policy for Afghan muhajireen, which includes, for those born in Pakistan, a clear pathway to Pakistani citizenship, Pakistan will stay in the hamster wheel of isomorphic mimicry. Pakistanis should be offended that their government system seems more keen to pretend to be a small, scared, insecure European country, instead of representing who the Pakistani people are: large, indescribably warm, all-embracing and welcoming of foreigners.

If PM Khan wants to get Afghanistan right, he has to start with his own head and heart: open the doors, and inform policy with the values that motivated his engagement with politics. It isn’t just the PTI thing to do. It is the Pakistani thing to do.

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