**[Grim Islamabad](https://www.dawn.com/news/1810556/grim-islamabad)**

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SIXTY years after it was created, Islamabad is still said to be 10 kilometres from Pakistan proper, an oasis of greenery, prosperity and technocracy insulated from the grime, poverty and chaos of the rest of the country. The city’s administrative and propertied elite alike indulgently call it Islamabad the beautiful.

It certainly is — or perhaps it is more accurate to now say, was — a pretty city. For the past few weeks, the Margalla Hills within which the metropole nests have been barely visible, a low-hanging and thick cloud of smog generating debate amongst the chattering classes whether the capital is now beating Lahore, Karachi and Peshawar in the AQI stakes.

Once known for its trees and quiet, Islamabad is increasingly the site of incessant road and real estate-related construction. The city has expanded at exponential rates, the Capital Development Authority (CDA) making billions from land auctions whilst dispossessing historical villages. Gated housing schemes are all you see for miles in suburban geographies, and purchasing a motor vehicle is the only way to get from one end of the metropolis to the other.

Since the turn of the millennium, Islamabad’s population has tripled from approximately 800,000 to 2.5 million. The majority of those who have migrated into the capital are young and working class. There are low-caste workers from villages in central Punjab and the Seraiki Wasaib, Pakhtuns who have fled their homes due to the ‘war on terror’, and any number of Baloch, Sindhi, Gilgit-Baltistani and other young people who have come to study or find jobs.

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There is no public transport for them, while health and education are hostage to the dictates of profit. Potable water is drying up. Those who aspire to white-collar lives survive in rented accommodation, while the wretched of the earth can only find shelter in katchi abadis. This working-class majority is not responsible for destroying the ecosystem — that credit goes to property developers, big contractors and the civil-military oligarchy — but it bears the primary costs of environmental despoliation.

Long before this winter’s smog made clear that Islamabad is headed on a similar trajectory to the rest of metropolitan Pakistan, Islamabad’s working people routinely dealt with violent dispossession from homes and livelihoods. The irony is that katchi abadi dwellers, young students and youth as well as daily wage workers and street vendors face the big stick of the CDA and Islamabad administration in the name of ‘legality’.

Forget the land grabbing and other violations of the law by real estate moguls, propertied classes and khaki-led bureaucratic overlords running the city. There is no democratic institution that exists in the capital, with the sole local government poll in 2016 making almost no dent on the city’s bureaucratic temples. There are three National Assembly seats in the capital and most bourgeois parties put up high-profile candidates with little connection to the city’s working masses — and that is if one doesn’t even account for the farcical nature of the coming (s)election.

Islamabad has certainly grown a reputation for hosting protestors from across Pakistan, but the recent treatment of Baloch women who led a long march into the city clarifies how genuinely democratic voices are treated in what is supposed to be the symbol of the federation.

For all of its narcissism and lack of concern for working people, Islamabad’s — and Rawalpindi’s — parasitic ruling class and those who live on its coattails won’t be able to fully insulate itself from the downward spiral over which it is presiding. The disaffection felt by Baloch, Gilgit-Baltistani, Pakhtun, Sindhi, and so many young politically conscious people both in their home regions and as migrants in the capital is intensifying. The dastardly killing of a political youth leader in Bajaur shows how little changes in the peripheries. In the capital itself, katchi abadi dwellers and rehri-wallahs are still being ghettoised.

Islamabad’s environs are wasting away at the altar of profit and power with no care for the needs of future generations. The tyranny of a socioeconomic order in rural peripheries that forces working people to migrate and massive demographic pressures mean that young people looking for livelihood and dignity will continue to stream into the capital. An ossified administrative centre proudly founded by Gens Yahya Khan and Ayub Khan will continue to benefit from the labour of this mass while grimly refusing to shed its dictatorial essence. Progressive political mobilisation will be the countervailing force and our only hope that Islamabad — and the rest of metropolitan Pakistan — does not become a total graveyard for the working people that make it tick.

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