**Land struggles**

BY U M A I R J A V E D 2021-06-28

THE most widespread form of political conflicts taking place across the country these days are struggles over land. Within this larger category, there are three types: disputes over the acquisition and conversion of rural land into (mostly) higherend residential real estate; displacement from urban informal settlements; and the right to use urban public space.

In a few cases, the antagonists seeking to repurpose land are state actors on behalf of private sector actors, in others it is private actors on behalf of the state, and in some it is state and private actors working collectively. On the other side of these conflicts are people fighting to retain their source of livelihood, their source of shelter, or, failing that, obtain just compensation from public and private authorities.

Some of these struggles have made it to our television screens. The case of Bahria Town`s takeover of goth lands in Karachi`s outskirts (type 1), the proposed acquisitions for the Ravi Riverfront project (type 1), the Gujjar nullah demolitions (type 2), and the anti-encroachment operations around Empress Market (type 3) are high-profile cases. In previous years, katchi abadi displacements in Islamabad received some attention too.

But there are many more such cases taking place at a reduced scale across the country. Almost every announcement or press release of a local bureaucrat claiming success in `freeing up xyz billion rupees of land`, or the launch of an `exciting new investment opportunity` in a housing development is likely on the back of something similar.

Pakistan`s experience with this is not unique.

Land struggles are a common feature in countries of the Global South. Previously, it used to be the state taking over land for some large infrastructure project like a dam or a highway. In the present, it is usually demographic pressure, the value of land and the desire to profit off it, and the kickbacks, benefits and rents that can be obtained from it that make it a lucrative commodity and a source of conflict. What takes it one step further in Pakistan is land`s role as a source of saving and speculative gain, and the attendant societal greed that flocks to it.

Whatever the configuration, the basic story remains that some people need land to ensure their very existence, either as a source of livelihood, or asa source of shelter, while others desire land to line their pockets. And in most instances, it is the latter that prevail.

Urban public opinion, while being charitable to the poor in rhetoric, is generally ambivalent or indifferent to these struggles. Some go as far as to proclaim the inevitability of such transitions. This almost Darwinian argument suggests that coercive or `market-based` displacement of rural populations and informal settlements is inevitable and even desirable. Take the defence being offered forthe Ravi Riverfront project by well-heeled supporters of the current government, for example. Their argument is that Lahore is facing tremendous amounts of population pressure so establishing a new city on arable land is the right decision for the greater good. Or using a similar logic, how Bahria Town is catering to growing housing demand in Karachi.

Missing from both conversations is a concern over what happens to the literally thousands that are being displaced and who have, through their resistance against the Punjab and Sindh governments respectively, made it clear that they are not on board with this `greater good` The argument that they`re getting money for selling their land doesn`t hold at all either because it equates a one-time payment that is usually much less than the actual value of the land with a perpetual source of livelihood/shelter. And this does not even hold in the case of those being displaced from informal settlements who are often denied any type of compensation.

That said, the burden of taking a morally andethically justifiable position does not fall on random citizens on Twitter. It falls on political parties who are, on paper at least, supposed to represent the interests of all citizens, not just property developers and their investors.

It is here where Pakistan`s case really stands out in stark contrast to most other countries of the Global South. In other places, local movements around land and housing have received tremendous support from political parties and civil society, often forming a key component of their support base. In Brazil for example, the Landless Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra/MST) has grown to be a formidable political and social force in rural areas. In urban areas of the country, activism for the right to decent housing and adequate public services in informal settlements now forms the backbone of support for the Workers Party (the PT), and has led to pro-poor policies being adopted by municipal governments.

Within Pakistan`s immediate neighbourhood, the Trinamool Congress, whose victory over the BJP in recent Bengal state elections was being (rightly) celebrated by all and sundry here, became popular because of its defence of rural communities in Nandigram against forceful acquisition of land for private companies by the government.

Contrast this with Pakistan, where land developers of all stripes are facilitated by all mainstream political parties and the judiciary. Where sitting provincial and federal governments go to great lengths to point out how this rampant conversion of people`s livelihoods and shelter for profits of the few is a central plank of their development strategy.

Where the laundered proceeds of real estate development are given safe passage and an `agreeable adjustment`, and where those resisting this injustice like activists of the Awami Workers Party, the Sindhi rights movements, and the farmers` movements in Lahore and Sheikhupura, are subjected to repression, imprisonment, and coercion. There are many aspects of inequity and injustice in Pakistan`s political economy, and perhaps no other phenomenon puts them in as sharp a focus as these struggles over land. m The writer teaches politics and sociology at Lums.

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