

DAWN

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SOCIETY: THE AMBIVALENCE AROUND AFGHANS

Kalbe Ali | Published November 12, 2023



Afghans gather to board buses as they plan to return “home” | Reuters

The largest concentration of Afghan traders and workforce in Islamabad is in the Sabzi Mandi area and Rizwan Farooq, president of the Markazi Anjuman Wholesale Fruits and Vegetable Market, blames the new generation of Afghans for being “undisciplined”. “They do illegal acts for fun,” he says.

“They are rich only because of American dollars spent during the wars, but it does not mean there will be any loss of investment or workforce if they leave this place,” he adds. “They even had been making fun of us all after the Pakistani team lost to Afghanistan in the [cricket] World Cup.”

Farooq is not alone in such anti-Afghan sentiments, heard frequently since Pakistan decided on October 7 to deport “illegal” Afghan residents.

Most of this sentiment arises from the difficult economic situation in Pakistan at the moment, and Afghans are an easy scapegoat as a “burden” on Pakistan, even if not borne out by evidence. However, there is much ambivalence within Pakistanis around the move and reports are also surfacing of corruption on the part of officials involved.

*Does a visible lack of protest
against the government’s
decision to deport ‘illegal’
Afghans back to Afghanistan*

suggest support for the decision or apathy?

Sources at the helm of affairs say that, contrary to the current impression that the returning Afghans would be a serious burden on the Afghanistan economy as well as its infrastructure, the fact is that these one million citizens hold the key for rebuilding their own country.

“Skilled and semi-skilled workforce plays an important part in building and maintaining the shape of any society, but people of Afghanistan have been moving out, leaving a gap of workmen,” says a senior official, on condition of anonymity. He claims the move by the government of Pakistan will eventually help stabilise the Afghan economy and society in the long run.

Analysts partially agree with the notion that the Afghan government could become the beneficiary of Pakistan’s decision to deport, but they caution the reaction from the Afghan masses could be very hostile, even if the incumbent Taliban government is docile — which it is currently not.

“The arrival of workmen and helping hands might be a boost to local development work, but the risks are also very high, especially as winters are approaching,” says Imtiaz Gul, executive director of the Islamabad-based Centre for Research and Security Studies. “There could be a food and fuel shortage in the coming months.”

However, Nasir Sherazi, executive director at the Centre for Pakistan and Gulf Studies in Islamabad, blames the

Taliban government for fanning the flames of regional politics through its aggressive reactions to the deportations, possibly to appease the local populace.

“A large map of ‘Greater Afghanistan’ is on display in Kabul for several months, showing all the area up to Attock as part of that country,” says the specialist in Middle East and Afghan affairs, claiming it is a provocation similar to the Modi government’s idea of ‘Akhand Bharat’ [Greater India], that is meant to undermine Pakistan.

“The current move to deport all illegal Afghans is also to give the message that Pakistan is not a borderless state, nor is it any extended land of Afghanistan,” adds Sherazi.

Not everyone agrees with this take, however.

Senior journalist Tahir Khan criticises Pakistani policymakers for a lack of direction over the last 40 years, which has led to confusion as well as strained relations between Pakistan and all Afghan governments.

“Now things are visibly moving in the wrong direction for Pakistan,” he says. “Even the pro-Pakistan Taliban leaders are issuing statements against Pakistan. Eventually it could mean creating a more tense and pro-Indian border with Afghanistan.”

Unlike previous attempts at the repatriation of Afghans, this time, the authorities seem far more determined to follow through on their words. This is visible even in Islamabad. The Capital Development Authority (CDA) conducted an operation in the I-12 sector of the city and demolished over 800 houses of the “illegal immigrants.”

The Islamabad capital police has also taken into custody those Afghans who have failed to produce documents regarding their stay in Pakistan, whether a valid visa, a Proof Of Registration as a refugee (POR) or an Afghan Citizen Card. A team of the Federal Investigation Agency and the police have been transporting these detained people to centres at the border, under strict security.

However, there are reports that the forced deportations have opened up new doors of corruption for the relevant authorities. Police personnel in many areas have, for example, allowed only select junk dealers to buy the old belongings of Afghans at throwaway prices.

Accusations of extortion by the police came to light in Islamabad recently when the Station House Officer and the administration officer of the Shalimar Police Station were suspended for not returning the belongings of Afghan immigrants, seized from them at the time of their arrest.

Similarly, Ahmed Shah Yarzada, an Afghan businessman who lives in Hayatabad in Peshawar with his extended family, claims that the harassment of Afghan traders continues despite them having PORs. The raids conducted to check Afghans' documents has opened the doors to a "golden lottery" for officials because each raid gets them millions of rupees, he claims.

"The strange part is that the relevant police station in Hayatabad is usually not aware of these raids," says Yarzada.

Yarzada came to Pakistan with his father in 1985 and possesses the Afghan POR card, but believes the caretaker

government's October 3 decision to deport Afghans will only benefit places such as Dubai, Turkey and Central Asia. "Turkey is offering citizenship to those who invest dollars through the purchase of properties," he points out.

Most Afghan traders have bought properties in Pakistan in the names of their Pakistani business partners, as they are legally not allowed to do so in their own names. Now many are facing difficulties in selling those properties, as even the buyers know they can bargain with the Afghans under the prevailing conditions.

While there has been limited public and political reaction against the deportation decision, a strong show of power was made recently in Quetta at a public rally organised jointly by the Awami National Party, the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement and the Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP).

Talking to Eos, PkMAP leader Mehmood Khan Achakzai says Pakistan has much to lose from this ill-considered move. Apart from a strategic loss — insofar as how the deported Afghans will eventually hate Pakistan — Pakistan too will face an economic loss, because of the gap created by the departure of a skilled workforce and efficient farm workers, who have managed lands across the country on a sharing basis.

But neither the Peshawar Chamber of Commerce and Industry nor the business community of Islamabad has opposed the government's move.

While civil liberties activists have been pushing the human rights cause forward, unlike in the past, public support for

their positions is almost negligible.

Former senator Farhatullah Babar, head of the Pakistan Peoples Party's Human Rights Cell, has filed an application in the Supreme Court against the forced deportation of Afghan refugees, but the date for a hearing has yet to be fixed. Babar acknowledges a significant number of people in the country support the government's decision to deport Afghans.

"But we have our human rights perspective," he says, adding that the main reason for the silence or limited voice of the activists in this regard is the caretaker government's repressive attitude.

After highlighting several instances of the use of state power against gatherings and even against activists' attempting to establish contact with Afghan women being deported, Babar says people's disinterest in this issue was also due to the overall depression and frustration in society.

"There is a gloomy atmosphere locally and internationally, and people feel broken," he admits.

The writer is a member of staff

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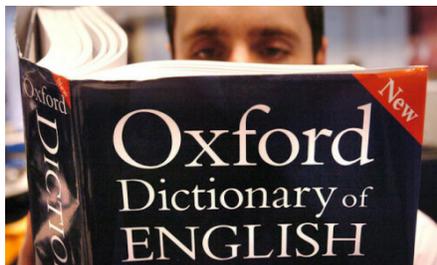


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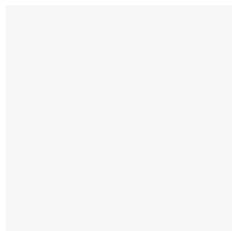
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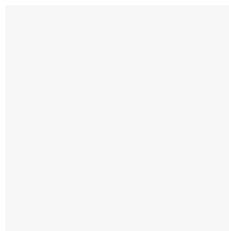
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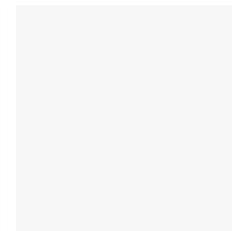
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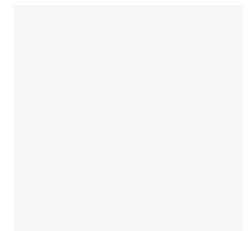
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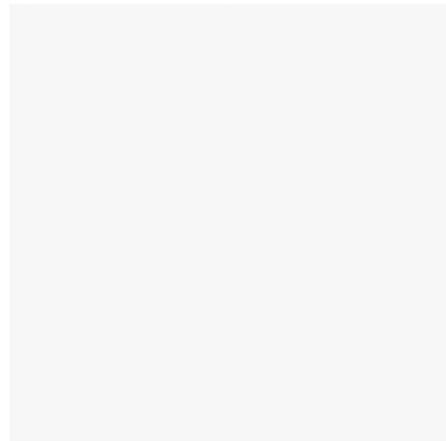
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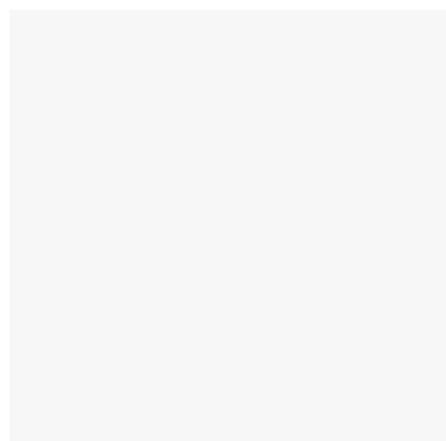
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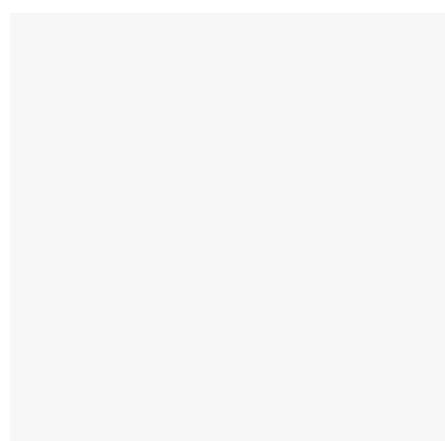
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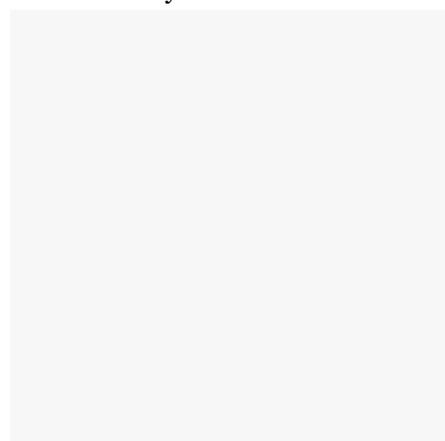
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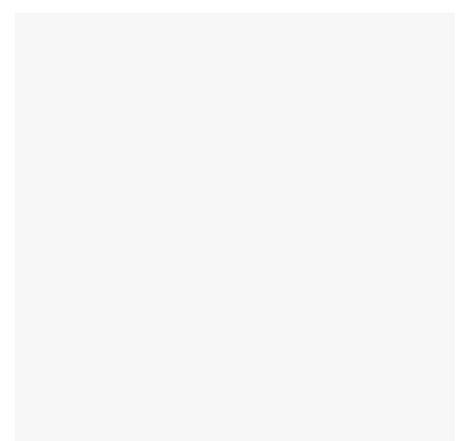
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