

And then they came for me
18th March 2007

A hundred beats

By Fatima Bhutto

First they came for the katchi abadis. The slums that house between 40 to 60 per cent of Karachi's residents were among the first to be hit. Families lost their homes, their neighbourhoods, their schools, and their inalienable right to simply exist. The residents of our katchi abadis live on the fringes of our society while carrying out the burden of ensuring that the rest of us live comfortably by sweeping our streets, running our shops, serving our food, and driving our cars. They are not only denied the right to housing and the right to choose their place of accommodation, but are also denied the right to information by the city government which routinely refuses them sufficient notice about evictions and their status in relocation efforts, should any exist.

The residents of Karachi's katchi abadis -- Hindus, Muslims, Mujahirs, Sindhis -- were told that their homes and communities were eyesores. City officials had a job to do -- they were going to 'beautify' Karachi. The slums, and their dwellers, just would not do. Nor would the residents of the katchi abadis be asked to participate and share in the progress of a beautiful Karachi. They were told that they had a weekend to vacate the only lives they had ever known. When they protested, their demands fell on the city's deaf ears. We said almost nothing in their defence and refused to share in their suffering. The forced evictions did not concern those who mattered, we do not live in katchi abadis and so those who live in what we pejoratively call 'rotten populations' were defeated and discarded.

Then they came for the women. The usual targets. Miss Mukhtar Mai, Dr Shazia Khalid, Ms Shazadi, Ms Safiya, Ms Naseema, Miss Asma, Miss Nasimah -- all victims of honour killings, gang rape, revenge meted out by tribal jirgas and justice courtesy of the Hudood Ordinances. And we did nothing. Because it was their family's problem. Because it wasn't our women who were violated, our women were safe. Because someone decided that they were whores. Because they deserved it. I saw it with my own eyes -- in Larkana city one year ago standing in a small room in Civil Hospital. The room had a gauze curtain as a substitute for a door. The woman lying on the hospital bed was curled up into a foetal position and she had blood running across her thighs. There were bandages covered in blood underneath her bed and she could not speak because of her pain. The police would not file an FIR and refused permission for a rape test to be carried out. 'She must have been a prostitute' someone whispered, as if that excused the violence done to her. Government officials eventually put the word out -- 'there's no such thing as rape, it doesn't happen in Pakistan' they said. There were protests, small ones. Mainly women attended them. They carried the placards and raised the slogans. But where was the rest of the country?

Then they came for the activists, the intellectuals, the students, and the provincially disenfranchised. Their voices had been heard too clearly, their meetings attended by too many like minded people, and their pamphlets incited the rumblings of political change. Their noise was unacceptable. Men in uniforms, or plain clothes at times, knocked on their office doors or

woke them from their slumber and carried them away. There were no warrants. And there were no trial dates. They simply vanished. Disappeared. And while the families of the disappeared held daily vigils for their loved ones and showed their pictures to the press and public, we were safe. We weren't being carted off in the middle of the night and our gates are guarded by chowkidars. It wasn't our grief. And so, we did nothing. We who can read and write and can lobby for the cause of our countrymen, we did nothing.

Then they came for the minorities. The Christians, the Hindus, the Shias. They killed doctors because they prostrated themselves to God slightly differently than we did. A member of parliament is known to have called Shias infidels and proposed a jail sentence of 15 years as punishment of their apostasy -- killing them all would take too much time. The parliamentarian had nothing to fear; he was part of the holy pro-government alliance. Not too many people took to the streets, certainly not those who were protected by their non-infidel status. We were safe. So, we did nothing. It wasn't us they were gunning for.

Then they came for the poor, the peasants, the fishermen. See above. We are the privileged so we stayed at home and read the social pages of a magazine.

Martin Niemoeller, a German theologian and anti-war activist, was made famous by a poem he wrote during the Nazi takeover of Europe: "First they came for the socialists, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak up for me".

Now they've come for the lawyers. In an unprecedented and unconstitutional move the president suspended the chief justice a week ago. The president's actions have made the lack of judicial independence and the non separation of powers in this country dangerously clear: a small reminder to those who fete his rule that this is, above all, a military dictatorship. The chief justice dismissed by the president has been instrumental in highlighting the regime's human rights abuses and has been active in hearing cases related to political disappearances.

An advocate and TV personality, two professions that should rouse the highest of suspicions when placed alongside each other, wrote an inflammatory open letter to the chief justice accusing him of corruption and receiving kickbacks. The letter was meant to buoy the president's latest egregious decision. Pakistan's legal community didn't buy it. Lawyers have been protesting and rioting on the streets of Lahore, Peshawar, and Karachi since the chief justice's illegal dismissal. The rule of law has effectively been suspended in Pakistan, but the call to take to the streets has been heeded primarily by lawyers -- we've got nothing to do with it, us non-lawyers, we're safe aren't we?

The situation today is tense; it could be the press who gets attacked next. It could be the professors after that. And maybe then, if we do not stop thinking of our struggles as separate from each other and make the mistake of not banding together, there will be no one left...
Monday, March 19, 2007,