‘It’s like crossing a border everyday’: Police-migrant encounters in a postcolonial city

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‘It’s like crossing a border everyday’: Police-migrant encounters in a postcolonial city

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ABSTRACT

How are migrant communities policed in cities of the Global South where racially securitized discourses and colonial institutional legacies shape contemporary police practice? Critical criminologists advise that postcolonial perspectives offer valuable insights on imperial legacies, while allowing us to expand conceptual and empirical analyses of crime, policing, justice, and social order. Building on this agenda, this paper explores the intersection of postcolonial policing and immigration enforcement in the context of urban encounters between police officers and Afghan and Bengali migrants in urban Pakistan. It considers how the securitization of migration and migrants impacts their routine interactions with street-level enforcement officers. Based on ethnographic findings from Karachi, this paper argues that migrant encounters with urban policing can be captured by what I call the “postcolonial condition of policing” wherein prejudiced security policies enable expansions in police power without addressing structural inequalities within the police, facilitating reliance upon informal procedures and practices.

KEYWORDS

Migrants; refugees; policing; postcolonial; informality

Introduction

For us, to cross the local gutter at the entrance of this neighborhood is like crossing a border. The police will pick up our boys and negotiate their lives for 1,000, 2,000, 5,000 rupees. If you have, you give; if you don’t have, they put you in jail. Why? Because we are Bengali. For us, it’s like crossing a border every day. (Bengali resident 02, Machar Colony)

I sat inside an office of the Counter Terrorism Department of Sindh Police, in Karachi—Pakistan’s largest city, its “microcosm” (Almia, 2013), a “city of migrants” (Gazdar, 2005). I was here to ask a police officer about the perceived threats that state officials believed were posed by Bengali migrants and Afghan refugees in the aftermath of 9/11 and Pakistan’s subsequent involvement in the “global war on terror.” Two decades had passed and both communities were routinely framed as threats to Pakistan’s national security, even though their arrival in the decades preceding the war on terror was welcomed under liberal immigration policies (Gazdar, 2005). As I interviewed the officer about the involvement of these two groups in urban crime and militancy, he summoned a 12-year-old Bengali boy. The boy had been detained earlier for stealing a mobile phone outside a katchi abadi (informal settlement). In an informal conversation, the boy revealed that this was the second time he had stolen for money; he was out of school and expected to provide for his family. The meeting highlighted both the destitute socioeconomic conditions of migrants and other non-citizens, as well as the conflation of routine crime and threats to Pakistan’s national security. Because of the continued suspicion of migrant communities, matters pertaining to certain ethnic groups fell not just under the jurisdiction

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of the local police, but also immigration authorities, intelligence agencies, and counterterrorism departments. The presence of a child suspected of being a non-citizen, sans any documentation that could prove otherwise, in the custody of the counterterrorism police, was thus unsurprising.

 Weeks earlier, I had asked a third-generation Afghan refugee about the challenges faced by Afghan children in Karachi, many of whom worked in garbage-collection. I was informed that the police suspect them of trafficking drugs around the city and, therefore, they are routinely stopped and frisked. During these searches, the police were known to confiscate their daily wages for personal gain, a practice, as I discuss below, routinely features in police-migrant encounters. Although such police interactions with non-citizens or other socioeconomically marginalized citizens are not uncommon in the Global South (Azis, 2014; Franck, 2019; Vigneswaran et al., 2010), the securitization of select communities through the narratives of terrorism, organized crime, or even ethno-political violence, exacerbates police bias and racial prejudice toward those communities, a phenomenon to which Karachi has long been exposed (Gayer, 2014; Kaker, 2020).

 Such prejudice is especially common in former colonies where the criminal justice apparatus and legal frameworks were designed to suspect, survey, and suppress communities based on caste, class, and racial divides (Kapoor & Narkowicz, 2019), and where decolonization efforts and armed conflicts following the creation of newly independent states, have had residual effects on how postcolonial states and institutions view neighboring countries and people who trace their origins to these “enemy” nations (Eck, 2018). Given the military conflicts Pakistan has experienced since colonial rule, these enemy nations and “suspect communities” have typically been Indians, but within urban areas these are residents who migrated or continue to migrate from Bangladesh and Afghanistan (Gazdar, 2005). In Karachi’s context, therefore, these “suspicious” or “dangerous” populations have been, among others, Bengali migrants and Afghan refugees.

 State perceptions toward and policing of migrant communities, particularly in urban areas, shape their belonging, identity, and citizenship (Parmar, 2019; Waddington, 1999; Weber, 2013, 2020; Weber & Bowling, 2004). Increasingly, because of ongoing securitization of migration or the “migration-security nexus” (Farani, 2020), there has also been a conflation of immigration enforcement and criminal justice, or what is known as “crimmigration” (Ajil, Jendly & Mas, 2020). Similarly, “alien criminality,” or the designation of entire communities as “foreigners” suspected of being involved in crime, can be traced back to the colonial roots of police racism toward immigrants (Parmar, 2020). Indeed, even Pakistan’s classification of its Bengalis and Afghans as “aliens” is rooted in colonial security laws of British India that racially categorized outsiders as “dangerous populations” (Berda, 2020).

 However, research on the routine, localized, “othering” behaviors by the police does not adequately incorporate macro-level dynamics, such as historical narratives, institutional arrangements, and regime-centric interests, that frame migration as a security threat and shape migrant-police encounters accordingly. To explain these encounters, we must capture the mundane interactions between law enforcement agents and migrants and place them in the context of legacies of colonial repression, racialized policing practices, and conflict-generated migration. In this article, I seek to do just that by studying the relationship between state narratives of migration and postcolonial policing structures, with routine encounters between officers and migrants in Karachi, Pakistan.

 I ask: how does the securitization of migration impact migrants’ routine experiences and encounters with law enforcement agencies in postcolonial cities, and what does this relationship tell us about the state of public policing in postcolonial contexts? This paper argues that insecure postcolonial regimes produce prejudiced anti-immigrant security policies, and expand the powers of, and demands from, the police, in service of these policies, but retain the hierarchical and deeply unequal institutional structures of the colonial police. This combination of discriminatory state policies, expanding policing responsibilities, limited policing capacities, and unequal policing structures, leads to an increased reliance on informal policing procedures. I call this combination of regime insecurity, institutional inequality, and reliance on informality the “postcolonial condition of policing.” Applying this to the context of routine policing of migrants, I further argue that the combination of a securitized approach
to challenges of urban governance, the production of formal racialized and discriminatory governance frameworks, and the incentivization of informal police work in service of this securitized approach, ensures that interactions between migrants and street-level officers are shaped by shared interests in bypassing formal rules and procedures.

To demonstrate, this article considers how the securitization of migrants\(^1\) and other non-citizens (particularly Afghans and Bengalis in Karachi) shapes their everyday urban encounters with law enforcement agencies and street-level officers. In highlighting the impact of the postcolonial condition of policing on everyday police-migrant interactions, this article shows how the postcolonial state’s overarching insecurity and colonial inheritance affects the everyday encounters of the migrant and the policeman, while also impacting migrant struggles for the right to the city (Purcell, 2002, 2014). In what follows, I situate my conceptual discussion within the broader literature on urban migration and policing. Thereafter, I show the postcolonial condition of policing at work in the context of police encounters with Bengali and Afghan communities in Karachi. I rely on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2020 and 2021, supplementing my ongoing research on policing in Karachi since 2014.

**Postcolonial states, urban securitization, and policing migration**

If the urban world is a world of the police and bias (racial or otherwise) is inherent to the world of policing (Owens, 2020), we are sure to find police discrimination in multi-ethnic, polarized cities of postcolonial nation-states, where colonial continuities in areas of punishment, surveillance, and control, can be observed in interactions between the police and those unrepresentative of the state and its elite: the marginalized, the minorities, the migrants. These interactions have exacerbated post-9/11 and the resulting “new military urbanism” (Graham, 2011) seen in postcolonial cities, wherein security policies and military doctrines and techniques permeate urban life and infrastructure, subjecting immigrants to enhanced surveillance and the militarization of internal borders. These processes accompany demands for “world class cities” that prioritize the protection of state, capitalist, and elite interests, reinforcing class-driven and racialized hierarchies (Jaffe & Diphoorn, 2019). Although these cities have seen infrastructures and institutions militarily strengthened, postcolonial institutions (especially bureaucracies) have been unable or unwilling to shed their colonial design and ethos. Hence, we must study police-society relations in ways that consider how reproduction of colonial practices is part of postcolonial governance concerned with urbanization and control (King, 2015). The “postcolonial condition of policing,” that I detail below, connects colonial and postcolonial framings of particular social groups (here, migrants and refugees) and/or political issues (here, migration) as security threats (or securitization) with contemporary policing practices.

**Migration and policing**

An expanding pool of scholarship acknowledges that migration is a “leap of faith,” toward potentially better prospects and better experiences with institutions, public and private (Bradford et al., 2017). Central to these experiences are interactions that take place between migrants and enforcement authorities. There is thus a direct correlation between a migrant’s sense of belonging, identity, and dignity and their encounters with the police. Policing practices can be “identity denying and affirming” and can reinforce or undermine “a sense of security that flows from a feeling of effortless, confident membership of a political community” because of the “cultural work” that is performed by the police that helps establish who are perceived as “full members of society” (Loader, 2006, p. 212; Millings, 2013). Hence, migrants and non-citizens, due to their lack of citizenship and a “complicated sense of belonging,” are particularly vulnerable to unfair policing practices, risk being “overpoliced” and under-protected, unlikely to trust, cooperate with, or seek assistance from the police (Bradford, 2012; Pass et al., 2020).
Such vulnerability to unfair policing styles has been recognized as a product of the “racialization of migration” which disproportionally targets those perceived to belong to “dangerous” and “suspicious classes” (Aliverti, 2020; Arifianto, 2009; Berda, 2020). Such perceptions expose migrants to risk profiling, over-surveillance, and deportation because of their disputed citizenship claims (Parmar, 2019) and uncertain legal status. This uncertainty is a product of conservative legal frameworks and enduring colonial security laws, that designate non-citizens as “illegals,” even when they are not (Berda, 2020; Boon-Kuo, 2018). Indeed, such designations date back to colonial practices of denying citizenship or citizenship rights to people in their own countries (Waddington, 1999; Weber, 2013). And, if we acknowledge the police as “arbiters of citizenship” (Waddington, 1999, p. 41), then a case can be made for the need to trace contemporary policing back to its colonial roots and the colonial undertones of contemporary authoritarian state policies toward migrant communities. This has been especially critical in the aftermath of the “war on terror” and subsequent counterterrorism practices influenced by the colonial suppression of nationalist movements, armed opposition, and resistance, and the securitization policies that have evolved to impact everyday domestic policing in countries around the world to restrict citizenship of “undesirable” subjects (Anwar, 2013; Kapoor & Narkowicz, 2019). To this literature, I contribute a critical perspective on the relationship between migrants (as the “undesirables”) and postcolonial police forces tasked to reinforce racialized controls in urban areas with limited capacity.

New sites of enforcement

Cities offer refuge, freedom, and opportunity, thereby attracting migrants. But when citizenship—or the lack thereof—deprives them of these rights, they are at risk of exploitation and criminalization, which compromises their sense of urban belonging (Bauder, 2016), creating “conceptual borders” (Weber, 2020) between socio-political inclusion and exclusion, and multiple “sites of enforcement” for border control (Parmar, 2019). The need for exploring the policing of migrants in urban areas stems from ideas that immigration enforcement occurs not just on geographically defined territorial borders, but also through “organizational borders” that affect interactions between migrants and employers, schools, security check-posts, law enforcement agencies and other bureaucratic institutions (Weber, 2020). Through these “technologies of border control” (Parmar, 2019, p. 93), race and class are constantly produced and reproduced, reinforcing police bias that produces discrimination rooted in colonial constructions of “good” and “bad” citizens, or the “burdensome migrant” (Alimia, 2013, p. 104). It is in these encounters with racism, discrimination, and harassment, that the degradation of migrants takes place, compromising their human security (Edwards & Ferstman, 2010) and exacerbating their “lived insecurities” in urban areas (Ajil, Jendly & Mas, 2020; Alimia, 2013, 2019). State-mandated law enforcement agencies justify such over-policing of “suspect communities” by conflating national security and internal security (Anwar, 2013). Through such processes, borders are constantly “performed” by the police, among other agencies (Alimia, 2019; Pickering & Weber, 2013).

Policing of migrants in ways that exclude them from public spaces and neighborhoods beyond their immediate residences (such as informal settlements or refugee camps), is also an attack on their right to the city, a right applicable to both citizens and non-citizens (Carpio et al., 2011). Inspired by Lefebvre who argued that the right to the city should apply to all urban inhabitants, irrespective of their citizenship (Purcell, 2002; Lyytinen, 2013) stressed that the right should apply to anyone physically and legally inhabiting cities, including refugees. Because policing can infringe upon such rights, migrants are vulnerable to prejudicial practices that can be understood as a component of “neoliberal urbanism” (Purcell, 2002) as they marginalize in ways that can exacerbate poverty among urban migrants and refugees (Nyaořo, 2010). This happens even though non-citizens frequently contribute to the production and maintenance of public spaces and public goods, an unjust and unrecognized extraction of their labor.
And because the internal, urban borders are the new sites of immigration enforcement, informality in law enforcement (be that through acts of predation or negotiation) becomes a technology through which borders are performed. Consider, for instance, this quote by an Afghan refugee who recounts a form of police extortion experienced because of the junctures at which the police situate themselves to compromise non-citizens’ right to the city, putting a price on it:

When we come and go from Afghan Basti [a refugee camp], the police are always standing en route. They know Afghans cross these routes to go to work. We come in the morning and go back in the evening. At both times, the police are there. They ask us for our identity cards, knowing full well the refugees won’t have these. Then, they will take our money. (Afghan refugee 03, Al Asif Square)

Such routine encounters between officers and migrants, because of the latter’s status, demonstrate that borders are not fixed demarcations (Parmar, 2019). Rather, they are constantly re-territorialized to incorporate not just the urban, but also informal practices often reductively defined as “petty corruption” by state officials. As Franck (2019, p. 251) suggests, and I expand below, such informal interactions and exchanges influence “why, when and where the border is actually controlled.” It is in such interactions that we can critically unpack policing practices that can simultaneously disempower migrants, whilst opening spaces for negotiation.

Existing scholarship offers invaluable insights but focuses on immigrants’ perceptions of the police in Western contexts (Bradford et al., 2017; Pass et al., 2020; Pickering & Weber, 2013). These immigrants are predominantly moving to spaces where, debatably, the “quality of institutions is much higher than their country of origin,” more so if they are escaping authoritarian regimes (Pass et al., 2020). Of late, emerging research has started exploring how migrants and refugees experience policing in non-Western, postcolonial contexts, in the aftermath of south-south migration or internal migration for employment purposes or due to conflict (Ajl, Jendly & Mas, 2020; Azis, 2014; Thachil, 2020). To expand this research, we must recognize that colonial legacies of managing populations and categorizing colonial subjects based on caste and/or ethnicity were driven by a logic of securitization. This has inspired how postcolonial states differentiate between social groups and securitize migrant communities based on ethnicity, observed today most prominently in multi-ethnic postcolonial cities. By looking specifically at south-south migration, we see how the colonial logic of securitizing communities based on their ethnicity, is translated into urban policing of multi-ethnic postcolonial cities such as Karachi, where politics is framed around ethnic contestation over urban space and resources (Gayer, 2014), and migrants entering this landscape are policed based on assumptions that they threaten state and political interests within the city.

Therefore, to contribute to this growing scholarship, and in response to calls for critically expanding the discipline of criminology, this paper focuses on the lived experiences of migrants in Karachi. Below, I outline the framework of the “postcolonial condition of policing” that captures certain traits of postcolonial policing (namely, regime insecurity and resulting securitization policies, and informality on the part of the police) and makes a conceptual contribution to calls for decolonizing criminology and speaks to the increasing interest of criminologists on migration.

A postcolonial condition of policing

Calls for decolonizing and “southernizing” criminology are gaining traction (Carrington et al., 2018). Central to these agendas is the stance that colonialism and decolonization were not simply historical events; rather, they are ongoing processes that constantly dictate how prevailing social orders are shaped. Furthermore, these processes continue to effect contemporary policies that determine whose law applies and what “order” is maintained. Therefore, these agendas demand that we investigate the lingering effects of colonial structures and colonial-era counterinsurgency policies (Eck, 2018), including those relevant to contemporary criminal justice institutions and practices (Agozino, 2003;
Aliverti et al., 2021). They encourage us to move away from positivist notions about crime and criminality and see how racialized, excluded, and oppressed groups are framed as “law and order problems,” face barriers to citizenship, and are criminalized to legitimate authoritarian policing practices, leading to their over-representation within criminal justice systems, and, further, how exclusionary processes of criminalization and securitization are embedded in colonial logics (Cunneen, 2011).

Similarly, postcolonial perspectives on policing help us move beyond positivist understandings of policing and state-centric discourses around organizational reform and security policies, and unpack how contemporary policing continues to be driven by colonial strategies, logics and racialized hierarchies that prioritized extensive surveillance, armed responses to anti-colonial resistance and opposition, and the designation of local inhabitants as national security threats (Bell, 2013; Eck, 2018). Because of this legacy, policing in former colonies continues to be militarized and violent, particularly disadvantaging minoritized and marginalized populations, to ensure the protection of the state elite and maintain the status quo (Anderson & Killingray, 1991). Such “predatory policing” prevails because the police in former colonies have been historically unaccountable to the public (Akinlabi, 2020) and institutionally weak.

Based on ethnographic findings on urban policing in Pakistan, this paper speaks to these agendas by offering the framework of the “postcolonial condition of policing.” This framework captures a state of policing that is both embedded in its colonial legacy but also influenced by postcolonial developments and socio-political trajectories taken by insecure regimes in the aftermath of independence from colonial rule. Hence, the postcolonial condition captures both colonial continuities and localized and contemporary policing dynamics. The findings presented in this paper suggest that the postcolonial condition of policing has two key components: regime security and informality.

First, a focus on regime security has meant that political issues (e.g., migration) are securitized and conflated with national security, internal security, and routine crime, continually developing a state-centric agenda of policing and security. This is particularly so in postcolonial contexts where insecure regimes, after decolonization, frequently face the challenges of contested regime legitimacy, disputed state borders, and limited state authority, thus heightening state insecurity. The result of this insecurity is that postcolonial regimes treat political dissent, demographic changes, urban resource management, and other socio-political issues as threats to their security, and hence, rather than redesigning the hierarchical and repressive colonial structures and practices they inherited, they reemploy them, as convenient instruments for securing the city for the regime. Thus, these postcolonial policing institutions continue materializing a colonial practice of conflating state security with the maintenance of public order. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the “war on terror,” these regimes use the globalized securitization discourses on migration, to label migrants and refugees as sources of “terrorism,” enabling them to treat non-citizens as sources of instability that must be addressed through militarized responses. This has led to expansions in postcolonial policing powers, including the use of force, and the reinforcement of ideas of militarism in policing.

Second, the postcolonial condition of policing also sees public policing institutions ridden with institutional weaknesses and rigid hierarchical structures of former colonial police organizations, while being expected to carry out critical tasks for maintaining regime security (Anderson & Killingray, 1991). These structures are grounded in class-based divides between an elite cadre of officers and a socioeconomically marginalized rank-and-file. Historically, the latter have been trained through drill and discipline to maintain order and suppress dissent as “violence workers,” while simultaneously being dehumanized and disempowered due to their rank as victims of structural violence since the creation of the colonial policing structures (Heath, 2021). This marginalization of the rank-and-file has meant the street-level officers are expected to rely on creative means and methods to meet state (and private) demand. Therefore, when policies (security and otherwise) are conveyed to police officers, they are done so with the tacit acceptance that they will be implemented on the ground through informal procedures and
informal police practices, including petty corruption and coercion (Waseem, 2021). Indeed, scholars have noted the centrality of informality in public policing, suggesting that it cannot be simply reduced to “the catch-all term ‘corruption’” (Hornberger, 2004). Such behaviors and practices need to be understood as the product of both contemporary securitization policies drafted by insecure regimes and the demands they place on colonially designed institutional structures.

The securitization of migrants, signals to policing authorities that these “suspect communities” are threats to state stability and security, as these “aliens,” “foreigners,” non-citizens, irregular migrants, and refugees can potentially harbor individuals (e.g., criminals and terrorists) that can hurt state interests, which must be protected even with resource and capacity constraints. Second, it signals to police officers that exploitation and extortion will be overlooked by both the state and the vulnerable migrants because of their own precarious status and circumstances (Vigneswaran et al., 2010). In this way, informality (or the dependency on informal practices and behaviors) is incentivized by the postcolonial state, remains central to police work, and, as I show ahead, is a recurring feature in police-migrant interactions in urban Pakistan.

The police in Pakistan are the most distrusted state agents because of allegations of rampant corruption, inefficiency, and a lack of accountability (Jackson et al., 2014). Ideas of corruption have resulted in citizens’ perceptions as being unequal before the law and the police (Mohammad & Conway, 2005). The police in Karachi, especially, have been infamous for abuse of force and extra-judicial violence. However, police corruption cannot be adequately understood independent of its socio-political and structural context, which would be a reductive way of capturing police entrepreneurialism. Instead, I propose, that informality helps contextualize certain police practices and behaviors applicable to police-society interactions.

**Methods**

**Site selection**

Karachi is Pakistan’s financial capital and its largest and most ethnically diverse city. In the decades proceeding partition from India, Karachi suffered from a lack of urban planning and development, resulting in the expansion of its informal sector. Since the 1980s, Karachi has also been flooded by arms and drugs from Afghanistan that have fueled multiple ethnic, political, and religious conflicts in the city (Gayer, 2014). Karachi’s political economy has therefore been shaped by both internal instability (e.g., economic deprivation, criminal and political violence, and civil-military tensions) and the external aftershocks of regional conflicts in South Asia. Against this backdrop, the police have struggled to cope, unable to reform neither materially nor ideologically.

The largest urban police department, the Karachi Police, has retained its colonial architecture: a rigid hierarchical structure in which an elite cadre of officers presides over the rank-and-file from less privileged backgrounds. The latter compromises an estimated 98% of the police nationally and consists of constables and inspectors who work largely in the field or within police stations. The elite cadre are made of officers between the ranks of assistant superintendents and the Inspector General (the senior-most provincial officer). In Pakistan, the police report to the civilian governments (both provincial and federal). In Karachi, a paramilitary force (Sindh Rangers) has also been tasked with policing duties, such as preventing or responding to terrorist attacks, gang violence, and political unrest. The Rangers fall under the administration of Pakistan’s most powerful institution, the army. It is in this political and institutional context that the relationship between policing and migration in the postcolonial city of Karachi must be studied.
Fieldwork

The empirical data for this paper draws on fieldwork conducted primarily over a period of twelve weeks, between mid-November (2020) and mid-February (2021). Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in four main neighborhoods: Machar Colony (District Keamari), Ibrahim Hyderi (District Korangi), Al Asif Square (District Malir), and Afghan Basti (District West; Figure 1).

While Machar Colony and Ibrahim Hyderi host a substantial number of Bengali residents, Afghan refugees reside or work in Al Asif Square and Afghan Basti (although many have relocated to other neighborhoods of Karachi, primarily because of their ability to integrate with Pakistan’s Pashtun community). Approximately two weeks were spent in each neighborhood, speaking with local residents and carrying out observations in private residences and public spaces, such as community offices and schools. Extensive handwritten fieldnotes were taken during interviews, in addition to photographs that capture the spatial dynamics and living conditions in which non-citizens are found (Figures 2–5).

Participants from Bengali and Afghan communities were approached through local NGOs, international organizations, and journalists. Most participants did not possess authentic documents to prove their Pakistani citizenship, and some (especially Bengalis) had their identification cards blocked (which restricts mobility and access to jobs and schools) because of problematic processes carried out by public institutions (such as the National Database and Registration Authority or NADRA) (discussed below). Most Afghans interviewed either possessed Proof of Registration cards (PORs) or Afghan Citizenship Cards (ACCs) issued by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and International Organization on Migration (IOM). Some had obtained Pakistani identity cards through informal means, such as bribing state officials. All had experiences to share about their, or their family members’ encounters with law enforcement agencies, based on which I develop the idea of the postcolonial condition of policing.
Interviews

In addition to informal discussions with various stakeholders and community representatives, I rely on 64 semi-structured interviews with members of Afghan (n = 20) and Bengali (n = 24) communities, as well as lawyers (n = 3), police officers (n = 5), government officials (n = 4), journalists (n = 3) and civil society representatives (n = 5). Identities of all participants have been withheld to maintain anonymity due to the routine harassment that Bengali and Afghan residents face in their interactions with public officials. Interviews were conducted in private residences, cafes, offices, and at police stations. All interviews were conducted in Urdu and translated and transcribed by the author. Interview data is thematically analyzed to identify trends and patterns in police-migrant relations.

Limitations

Field research for this study was restricted to a few months due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns that were temporarily in effect in 2020 (all face-to-face interviews took place after public health restrictions were lifted). Nevertheless, while restrictions were in place, supplementary interviews were conducted virtually with lawyers, journalists, and civil society activists who have worked extensively for the rights of these communities in Pakistan. Furthermore, I draw upon newspaper archives, data provided by government sources (e.g., NADRA), the police, and the UNHCR, and...
ethnographic fieldwork that I have conducted in Pakistan between 2014 and 2018. This paper is exploratory and hopes to establish a foundation for further work on the intersection of postcolonial policing, migration, and informality.

“Non-citizens” in Karachi

While there are several immigrant communities in Karachi, the three largest migrant groups whose citizenship remains contested are the Afghans, Bengalis, and Burmese. This paper focuses on Bengalis (originating from Bangladesh) and Afghans, particularly those who have not possessed or no longer possess Pakistani citizenship and are thus marginalized and vulnerable to over-policing. These “non-citizens” have helped established Karachi’s formal and informal economy, working in various sectors, doing “the dangerous, the dirty, and the demanding” work (Sadiq, 2009). Despite this, there is no consensus on the population of Bengalis and Afghans. The “invisibility” of these communities is enabled by their members (especially irregular or “illegal” immigrants) getting absorbed into selected neighborhoods using local and familial networks. It is also enabled by the fact that marginalized groups typically live on the fringes, in densely populated slums or informal settlements (katchi abadis). Above all, their discrimination and invisibility are rooted in the fact that matters of citizenship and nationality remain unsettled in postcolonial South Asia where “[t]he task of negotiating the categories of caste, religion and ethnicities that were constructed under colonial rule has been taken up by the postcolonial state” (Anwar, 2013, pp. 422–423). Because of this unfinished agenda of citizenship and belonging, non-citizens remain particularly vulnerable to state neglect and abuse, continually framed as “risky bodies” because of a “security mindset” that has encompassed Pakistan’s “colonial inheritance” (Alimia, 2019).

Bengali migrants

Bengalis in Pakistan are not considered to be human beings. We are perceived to be kuttay (dogs). Whether it’s the police or NADRA, if there is this perception, a Bengali can never prosper or progress here. (Bengali activist, Machar Colony)

Karachi has witnessed several waves of migration in the aftermath of the India-Pakistan partition in 1947. In 1971, after a brutal civil war with East Pakistan (now, Bangladesh), thousands of Muslim migrants from Bangladesh joined the existing population of Bengalis in Karachi. This was allowed on the basis that prior to 1971 they were Pakistanis and could choose to live in Pakistan if they left Bangladesh (Gazdar, 2005). Nevertheless, their citizenship rights have been undermined and denied because of racial discrimination meted out to Bengali migrants. In the mid-1990s, then government of Benazir Bhutto attempted to deport hundreds of Bengalis from Pakistan to Bangladesh, denying that they were Pakistani citizens and calling their presence “illegal.” When Bangladesh refused, and local religious political parties in Pakistan protested, the deportation was halted (Anwar, 2013). Bhutto’s apprehension about Bengalis stemmed from official reports that defined Bengalis as “illegal aliens” and a “threat to national security” (Shigri, 1996), because of their alleged involvement in “heinous crimes,” a convergence of national security, internal security, and urban crime (Anwar, 2013). Their classification as “aliens” rendered them stateless, which was arguably an act of securitization that has subjected them to discriminatory immigration measures. As Bosworth and Guild (2008) write, non-citizens and migrants subjected to “the most stringent controls have invariably been the poorer, the less skilled, the darker skinned,” all of which applies to Bengali migrants. Today, a majority live in neighborhoods that lack necessities such as electricity and water, and work primarily in fisheries or the garment industry.

In 2001, a military government established the National Alien Registration Authority (NARA) to register non-citizens and regulate “irregular” and “illegal” migrations. Although tasked with operations across Pakistan, it remained largely restricted to Karachi, initially targeting both Bengalis and Afghans. The following year, its focus shifted exclusively toward Bengalis, as the registration of
Afghans was assigned to the Afghan Refugee Repatriation Cell (ARRC), overseen by the UNHCR (Collective for Social Science Research, 2005). When NARA officially started functioning, it demanded that Bengalis register for citizenship, showing documents that could prove their links to Pakistan, or those of their parents. Many did not possess these and protested. During this time, reports of police harassment and torture of Bengalis in Karachi soared (Dawn, 2003a, 2003b, 2004a) as the police were empowered under draconian citizenship laws to arrest illegal migrants (Anwar, 2013), the presence of whom is still connected with terrorism, organized crime, and national security. It also became known that police and immigration officers constituting an infamous “Bangla Cell,” or “Bangladesh Cell” were working with NARA to forcibly detain Bengalis from poor areas, take their biometrics and register them as “aliens” (“Dawn” 2003c, 2004b). This effectively blocked any identification cards they already owned which had been procured through informal means, such as paying dalaals (brokers or middlemen)⁶ (Anwar, 2013).

More than a decade later, many second and third-generation Bengalis continued to lack identification cards, hindering their academic and economic prospects, and leaving them vulnerable to police abuse. NARA was merged into NADRA, but the latter continued to deny them citizenship, asking for documentation they did not necessarily possess which allowed NADRA to continue classifying them and their families as “aliens” (Anwar, 2014). Because of this, Bengalis remained suspicious of NADRA and resentful of the decades of discriminatory and dehumanizing state practices.

**Afghan refugees**

Afghans as non-nationals are increasingly constructed as “anomalies,” “undesirables,” and “remnants” of society . . . morally excluded as a dangerous ‘sub-human Other.’ This includes being subjected to negative stereotyping and being blanket-blamed for issues of drug trafficking, suicide bombings, and criminality in Pakistan. (Alimia, 2013, pp. 27–28)

Like Bengalis, Afghan refugees were initially welcomed through liberal immigration policies in the 1970s and 1980s (Gazdar, 2005). They were glorified as “heroes” who fought against the Soviet Union (1979–1989). In interviews, they remembered being able to cross the Pakistan-Afghanistan border without checks, during the Afghan-Soviet War in which Pakistan played a critical role in training and arming the Afghan Mujahideen (with the support of the United States). However, as Alimia’s (2013, 2019) research on Afghan refugees in Pakistan shows, once these policies were revised due to evolving geopolitical considerations, and because of perceived political threats that these migrants posed to Pakistan’s changing ethnic demographics (a product of growing regime insecurity), Afghans were subjected to as much, if not more, policing and surveillance as Bengalis. This is because Pakistan shares a border with Afghanistan and maintains military and political interests in the country, which is no longer the case with Bangladesh (Alimia, 2013, pp. 271–272). However, it may be argued that the everyday police harassment has been a dominant issue in both Bengali and Afghan lives because both communities have been seen, at various points in Pakistan’s political trajectory, as threats to internal peace and security.

Post-9/11, Pakistan’s perception of Afghan refugees as threats to domestic and national security intensified. As migrants moved between the two countries and terrorist attacks escalated, Afghan settlements were frequently described as “safe havens” for non-state actors, criminalizing the spaces of refuge and further securitizing the issue of migration (Farani, 2020). The suspicion and policing directed at Afghan refugees transpired sans any evidence that linked refugees to crime and terrorism in Pakistan (Khattak, 2015). Despite this, in 2015, after the drafting of Pakistan’s first formal counter-terrorism policy (the National Action Plan), Afghan refugees were increasingly targeted by police stop-and-search, surveillance tactics, and intelligence-based operations. This was partially the product of the inclusion of Afghan refugees as a point in the domestic counterterrorism policy that classified them as a “security concern” and prompted fresh calls for their registration and repatriation (Farani, 2020).⁷
In Karachi, Afghan refugees are ethnically diverse, constituting of Pashtuns, Tajiks, and Uzbek Afghans, among others. Of these, Afghan Pashtuns have assimilated into Pashtun areas and progressed socioeconomically. Others, however, continue to reside on the outskirts of Karachi, in informal settlements (such as Al Asif Square), or refugee camps (such as Afghan Basti). Predominantly, they work in markets, restaurants, hotels, and sanitation. Afghans who are non-citizens but registered either possess Proof of Registration (POR) cards (issued by NADRA and funded by UNHCR) or the Afghan Citizen Card (ACCs) (issued by IOM). In Karachi, an estimated third of Afghan refugees have registered for these; a majority remain unregistered and are legally classified as “alien.”

**Between security, insecurity, and informality**

The following sections present and analyze the findings gathered through my fieldwork. I first explore how racialized perceptions and securitized discourses toward migrants manifest in the everyday conversations of public officials. Thereafter, I show how such discourses have influenced policing policies and practices toward migrants. Finally, I show how, due to such racially securitized discourses on migration, both migrants and state officials have come to mutually depend on informality.

**Racialized perceptions**

Machar Colony is also known as machera (fisherman’s) colony. Literally, machar translates to “mosquito,” a reference to the mosquitos that infest the mangrove swamps in the area (Gazdar, 2005; Figures 2 and 3). I asked a senior police officer in charge of the district at large about policing practices in Machar Colony. He shook his head and said, "I only go if there’s a big operation. Have you been inside? It’s like a big shithole; it stinks.”

When NARA was established and Bengali residents were instructed to get themselves registered for citizenship, residents of Machar Colony witnessed numerous raids of what they described as the "Bangla Cell."

My brother and son were both detained by NARA officials and the police - the Bangla Cell, in 2003. They had identity cards. Nevertheless, NARA and police forcefully made them [alien cards]. In 2009, when we went to get ID cards made for our children, who were born here, we found out that all our existing cards had been blocked.

(Bengali Resident 03, Machar Colony)

By 2015, NADRA had absorbed NARA, and the process of forceful registrations had stopped. Nevertheless, during the years of the Bangla detention cell, forced registrations victimized Bengali migrants. When one member of a family was registered as an alien by NARA, his data was scanned and all family members were automatically rendered “aliens,” effectively becoming stateless, even if they possessed Pakistani identification cards. When NARA ceased to function, these migrants remained “aliens” according to official records. When I asked NADRA officials about the forceful registrations carried out alongside police raids, I was told this was done because the Bengalis were reluctant to voluntarily register themselves with NARA. In a lengthy explanation, the official criminalized the entire migrant group, an aftereffect of years of state policies that have framed Bengalis as “foreigners” and “criminals”: “Because of their reluctance to our registration process, we too had life threats. When we would go into the field, like Machar Colony, to talk to them and hold meetings, they would be standing their wielding swords and knives” (NADRA official).

The official went on to refer to Bengali migrants to as namaaloom afraad (unidentified assailants), a term popularly used to refer to suspected criminals who cannot be identified in government databases and who are believed to be connected to elements threatening Pakistan’s internal peace and security.
When there is a street crime, or a shooting, and you see the shooter on CCTV, where will you look for him if he is unidentified? He is a namaaloom afrada. So, the “mafia” has capitalized on this – street criminals, organized crime, political parties. They are recruiting Bengalis and exploiting them. We have even identified Bengali youngsters in suicide bombings cases in Karachi. (NADRA official)

In the interview, the official further acknowledged that NARA did in fact conduct raids with the police because “the Bengalis needed to be deterred and scared.” The interviewee’s perspectives echoed another government official’s perceptions about Afghan refugees: “Afghans are extremely dangerous. Mentally, they are very rigid as a community. For them, slaughtering a person is nothing. They go towards terrorism, international organized crime, mafia groups. Therefore, Afghans are a big threat for us here” (NADRA employee). Ironically, these racialized perspectives are not simply held by state officials responsible for the registration or repatriation of migrants. In an interview with a civilian employee responsible for providing legal aid to refugees, I gained further insights into how both state and society have over time come to frame perceptions about Afghans as “the dangerous Talibs” (Alimia, 2013, p. 104): “See, [Afghans] are unpredictable, always ready to fight. Pakistanis fear Afghans because Afghans are physically strong. Even we cannot go into their areas without the police. They are like this by their genetic make-up, their nature, their culture” (Non-Afghan Lawyer for Afghan refugees).

The refusal to provide citizenship to non-citizens is thus rooted in an insecure state’s perceptions about migrant communities as security risks. NARA’s militarized methods of alienating Bengalis and stripping away their citizenship, and the government’s overarching approach to not recognize
even second- and third-generation Afghans born and raised in Pakistan as citizens, resonates with “colonial governmentalities” (Kapoor & Narkowicz, 2019) in the way these communities are framed not simply as outsiders but as threats to the wellbeing of the nation. Consider, for example, the following argument posed by a state official overseeing Afghan repatriation in Karachi:

Why should we give them nationality so easily? If we give some Bengali or Afghan our nationality, and they go and blow themselves up in some western city, everyone will say it was a Pakistani. It’s a risk for us as well. (Employee, Afghan Registration and Repatriation Cell)

Hence, ideas about transnational terrorism, international security, and migration as security risk have shaped conversations around citizenship, the policing of which in former colonies demands further investigation.

**Securitizing the policing of migrants**

The following discussion considers how racialized discourses and security constructions have seeped into policing policies under which operations against these communities are carried out. Over time, they have influenced police abuse and harassment of Afghan refugees (Gossman & Ijaz, 2015), such as the torture of an Afghan national in police custody in Peshawar (Ali, 2020). Such harassment has also taken the form of threatening non-citizens with draconian laws that can be used against them as trumped-up charges.

They’ll stop one of us and say, “Do you see this *chars* (cocaïne)?” “Do you see this TT (pistol)?” “Should I put this on your body and charge you under the [Anti-Terrorism Act]?” Nobody wants that so we just give the cops some money. (Bengali resident 05)

Threats of arrest and imprisonment are not always empty. Resistance to informal demands by the officers expose non-citizens to violence that can be publicly humiliating and degrading. Consider an encounter witnessed by one refugee near Afghan Basti, the official refugee camp that was established in 1986 (Figure 4). Over the years, many families have moved to other neighborhoods, but some continue to live here and travel to neighboring areas, such as Al Asif Square (Figure 5), for work. According to Afghan residents in both these areas, the police are routinely situated at critical junctures to carry out stop-and-search activities. Police deployment has been justified on grounds of terrorism, ethnic violence, and organized crime.

Once I was returning home from my shop to Afghan Basti. They had detained a young Afghan boy. The cops were asking the boy why he hadn’t paid them the day before. He said, “I didn’t go to work yesterday.” The cops said, “Haven’t we told you that you need to pay up daily?!” Then they started slapping him, ruffled him up, and took whatever money he had on him. (Afghan refugee 16, Afghan Basti)

Such interactions with local police officers, in which the border is routinely performed, have long-term implications for refugees and migrants, monetarily but also on their physical and mental wellbeing, showing how securitization practices create possibilities for the repression of vulnerable communities through the institution of a militarized colonial-era justice system, demonstrating the postcolonial condition of policing at work. The risk of such repression extends to members of these communities even when no laws are violated.

There’s an ongoing case of an Afghan couple in jail. They had come to Pakistan with all proper documentation, including an Afghan passport and a Pakistani visa. They also had 150,000 rupees with them for medical treatment for the wife. The police detained them and asked them to give their money. When they resisted, multiple charges were placed on them – including terrorism and the Foreigners Act, neither of which applied. It’s been eighteen months and they are still in jail and their money is gone. (Afghan refugee 17, Afghan Basti)

As suggested in the quote above, policing and criminalization of Afghan refugees exacerbated in the aftermath of 9/11 and the subsequent securitization of travelers from Afghanistan (Farani, 2020). In some cases, this has forced refugees to return to Afghanistan.
Over the past two decades, we have been policed heavily. People have been detained for one month, two months. Then, we would get news that a corpse is lying on the side of the road. So, a lot of people in previous years have gone back to Afghanistan because of this fear of the police. They would sell their belongings for cheap and return. (Afghan refugee 18, Afghan Basti)

The reference to the corpse speaks to ongoing concerns and insecurity about Afghan lives falling victim to an insecure state’s repressive tactics. In Karachi, for example, reports have indicated that the police have killed Afghan nationals in suspected extrajudicial killings (The News, 2016), and Afghan nationals have expressed fears of being killed by the police should they not be able to pay a bribe (Gossman & Ijaz, 2015, p. 22).

Increasingly, security discourses around immigration have also become embedded in routine policing and surveillance practices. In this regard, the colonial policing tactic of using police informants (khabri) offers interesting insights. Although enlisting the public in policing and law enforcement is not new and raises several ethical and legal issues (Aliverti, 2019), in many ways it has contributed to informal policing practices. Police informants or khabris work as the eyes and ears of the police. Khabris may live and work alongside Bengali migrants and Afghan refugees. Their purpose, at least partially, is to enable “targeted” police surveillance, extortion, and exploitation. While their presence is justified on grounds of “security,” their assistance to the police is also for facilitating police informality.

Khabris provide information to the police about illegal immigrants, based on which the police pick us up and detain us. When the police arrest the immigrant, they would take from him maybe Rs.10,000. Of this, some Rs.2,000 gets paid to the khabri. So, this is a daily earning. (Bengali community representative, Machar Colony)
Migrants learn to live with such surveillance because they internalize that they are viewed as security threats, and because their survival necessitates informal practices, such as relying on dalaals for buying property or procuring identity cards and driving licenses. For this reason, police collusion with informants adds to their everyday experiences with urban insecurity.

If we buy a property, or if we make an earning by going on a fishing launch for several months, a khabri will know that we are in possession of money. So, he will inform the police. Then everyone will come to take their “cut”: the port trust authority that owns this land, the local police station guys. People will pay what they can to get their home built here. Sometimes, we will negotiate because we are poor. If someone cannot pay, the police will pick up the property owner. Who wants to go to jail and drag out the problem? So, we pay. (Bengali resident 07, Machar Colony)

The use of the khabri was echoed by a Bengali resident in Ibrahim Hyderi.

If a resident here is in possession of Rs.100,000 and a khabri comes to know, the khabri will tell the local police and the policewala [constable] will pick up the resident. The policewala will say, “Oh, look, we have found this stolen mobile phone on you!” And they’ll also have a “witness” saying, “Yes, yes, he stole my phone.” The resident will just want to get out of the situation. He’ll say, “I have Rs.20,000. Please take this and let me go, I’m a poor man.” So out of the original 100,000 he had, he’ll give some to the police and be let go. From that, the police will pay a little to the khabri and a little to the witness. (Bengali resident 04, Ibrahim Hyderi)

As these conversations show, a particular manifestation of the postcolonial condition of policing plays out in the context of police-migrant encounters in urban Pakistan. Grounded in a colonial inheritance of viewing certain races and classes as “suspicious,” insecure regimes have framed the presence of
migrants and refugees through securitized discourses. Hence, law enforcement agents increasingly find their mandates expanded, with immigration policies justifying extensive raids, patrols, stop-and-searches, and surveillance of these communities, without adequate capacity, resources, or prospects for street-level, lower-ranked officers who must resort to informality.

**Relying on informality**

Knowing that the presence of non-citizens is a source of state insecurity, that formal laws and legal procedures work to discriminate against migrants and refugees, and that institutional weaknesses create possibilities for “off-the-book,” creative, and entrepreneurial practices, officers and migrants both rely upon informality in police work. As a Bengali resident in Ibrahim Hyderi explained, “The law here only knows Quaid-e-Azam. Only Quaid-e-Azam works here” (a reference to Pakistan’s founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah and his picture on local currency).

On the part of the police, informal practices, such as extortion, accompany the pressure placed on them to meet the security demands of the state, including the detention and arrest of non-citizens, in the face of institutional constraints and the socioeconomic marginalization of rank-and-file officers recruited from underprivileged backgrounds, a continuation of colonial institutional design (Heath, 2021). Consider the following quote by a rank-and-file officer on the necessity of engaging in informality, including what is often reduced to acts of “corruption.”

There are three kinds of people who come to the police: those with a *sifaarish* (reference); those with money; and the poor who have neither *sifaarish* nor money. The ones with *sifaarish* and money, use their status and power, and get their work done; the poor does not get his work done. My house rent is covered by the police, but my bills are not. I get only Rs.1,000 per month for healthcare. I have two sons and a daughter. I can’t give them English-medium education. And I have been in the service for 20 years. I must engage in corruption. For some policewalay it’s “grease” money. For others, it’s *guzaara* (subsistence). (Rank-and-file officer, Karachi Police).

In the context of police-migrant interactions, then, we see the intimate way in which informal police practices, driven by institutional weaknesses and financial constraints, meet a migrant’s own precarity, insecurity, and informal ways of surviving.

Constantly, they stop and ask us to give kharcha (expense money). Once a constable told me to get off the bus. He said, “You look ‘Afghani,’ and you don’t have a national identity card, give me some kharcha.” He said the police has been given orders to detain at least 20 Afghans per police station. (Afghan refugee 07, Al Asif Square)

Such informal exchanges are well-known by local organizations working with migrants. Interestingly, these organizations unofficially advise refugees to tolerate informal exchanges to avoid more formal procedures that may entail the use of conservative legislation and security laws.

Sometimes, Afghans work here as truck drivers. They are doing these jobs with licenses they have procured through informal means. Because of this, when they are stopped by the police and bribed, they come to us for advice. So, we tell them to just get over the matter because if the aggrieved migrants take a formal route and complain about police malpractice, they’ll get into bigger trouble. A legal action will work against them, they will lose their licenses, and they could be added to the deportation list. (Lawyer for Afghan refugees)

Interestingly, decades of experience with the police have thus taught migrants that the harassment they face stems from a persisting reliance upon informal (corrupt, extra-legal, and entrepreneurial) practices on the part of the police. They recognize that a hierarchical, rigid, rank-and-file structure works not just against them, but also against lower-ranked street officers whom they encounter. Consider the two quotes by members of both Bengali and Afghan communities.

What else will a policewala [constable] do? SSP sahab [a senior-ranked police officer] has many expenses to take care of at home. His bills also need to be paid. (Bengali activist, Machar Colony)

In addition to stop-and-search, the police also come to our shops to extort money. The policewala says to us, “We need to send this money up [the chain of command]. We are also helpless; we are only foot soldiers; if we don’t collect, we will lose our jobs.” (Afghan refugee 03, Al Asif Square)
Furthermore, Bengalis and Afghans also recognize that formal rules and procedures will disadvantage them by virtue of their lack of citizenship, and thus they need to rely on informal practices to survive. Afghan refugees, for example, are not allowed buy property, own businesses, or enroll their children in public schools; they therefore resort to informal networks and interactions that include bribing state officials to “look the other way.”

Sometimes, if we need to buy a house, or a car, we’ll have a Pakistani contact here to help us out. That contact could be a broker or a friend. We’ll use his identity to buy property or rent a shop. We must use someone else’s identity. So, when a policewala stops me, and asks for my motorcycle document, for example, I show him my Afghan citizen card. He knows I cannot be driving that motorcycle because I don’t have a local license. I must bear the expense. I’d rather pay him than lose my license or my shop. (Afghan Refugee 19, Afghan Basti)

Such informal practices, for moving, living, and working in the city, show that citizenship laws and formal security policies are designed to disenfranchise and socioeconomically exclude migrants. Therefore, these residents need to rely on informal practices. Furthermore, when such exchanges work against them, they have no legal recourse available and therefore cannot complain against harassment or abuse. In this way, the migrant-security nexus and the postcolonial condition of policing work together to empower and encourage police officers to act informally, but forces and subjugates non-citizens to rely on informality as well. Hence, the latter believe that if their identities were not in flux, they would not need to operationalize informality as much and their encounters with public institutions would differ.

Given their circumstances and their conditions, they are not willing to take up challenges that they encounter with the police. Bengali residents say that if you can just help solve our identity-related problems, it will fix all other problems. So, they don’t take on the police. They don’t even contest their employers too much. If you don’t have a valid ID card, you get paid less, and you don’t get perks and raises. If Bengalis take on their employers, they will lose their jobs. If they take on the police, they can be arrested. (Lawyer, Machar Colony)

For these reasons, migrants have internalized that their experience with urban informality includes dependency on the informal procedures and practices prevailing within the formal public institutions, including the police, in addition to the informal arrangements they make with private brokers and middlemen. The postcolonial condition of policing, explains how the securitization of migrants and refugees, based on colonial perceptions about certain races, both empowers the police to abuse members of these vulnerable communities but also facilitates police dependency on informal entrepreneurial practices outside the formal sanction of law. And it is this mutual dependency on informality, in the shadow of repressive and exclusionary laws and rigid institutional structures, that allows police officers and compels non-citizens to negotiate with each other in ways that can benefit both parties in the police-migrant relationship. Consider this interaction between Afghan refugees and police officers.

Once someone was detained by the police because did not have his POR card with him and he called me late at night from the police station. I pleaded with the station house officer, and said, “Let the poor man go and I’ll personally bring him to the station tomorrow with his POR card.” After some insistence, the policeman agreed and said to me, “I’m only doing this because of you and because I know you and respect you.” Even then, he took Rs.500 from the man! (Afghan refugee 17, Afghan Basti)

As the above examples of police-migrant encounters demonstrate, formal rules and procedures designed on the logic of securitization disadvantage migrants, and informality on the part of the police is a form of discretion that can result in abusive policing responses or a mutually beneficial arrangement between the two sides, or both. But the lack of alternative, formal options that can either improve migrant mobility in urban areas of host countries or provide legal recourse from police malpractice, or address structural cleavages and institutional weaknesses within the police, leaves little room for neither migrant communities nor the police to not operationalize informal practices in their everyday encounters. This is not to justify or cushion the extent of harassment meted out to certain social groups because of their contested citizenship; rather, it is to show how colonial continuities (such as the structure of the police) and postcolonial governmentality (such as state perception of the
“other”) shape routine police-migrant encounters. The postcolonial condition of policing, therefore, captures the relationship between policing institutions and marginalized communities in postcolonial contexts.

Conclusion

This paper explored the policing of migrants in a postcolonial city and offered a unique framework for understanding police-migrant encounters in urban areas of the Global South. In postcolonial cities, immigrants and their growing numbers, and the impact this can have on ethno-political dynamics of urban areas, have influenced securitization policies that frame their arrival and existence as threats to national security, often criminalized as being equated with terrorism and organized crime. As discussed above, this has expanded the burden placed on the police by such insecure postcolonial regimes, leading urban law enforcement agencies into domains of immigration and border management. While the police mandate has expanded, few efforts are made to decolonize policing, or address its unequal structure and organizational challenges. Thus, institutional racism has remained unaddressed and manifests itself in encounters between the police and marginalized social groups.

In this environment, the securitization of migration and the criminalization of migrants and refugees has allowed, and indeed encouraged, the police to resort to informal policing practices, bypassing formal procedures, standards, and restrictions. While this can produce police harassment, migrants and refugees are left with little option for contesting such abuse as doing so may subject them to colonial security laws and racialized procedures that can further restrict their right to belong, move, work, and survive. Hence, the desire for more security on the part of postcolonial states generates greater insecurity for those on the margins, who thrive on urban informality, including informal exchanges, networks, and interactions with rank-and-file officers, who themselves engage in militarized, racialized, and informal policing behaviors to meet state demand. Hence, migrants’ precariousness and street-level officers’ own institutional and professional standings position both into these informal negotiations on the streets.

The relationship between securitized narratives, the structure of policing, and these informal interactions demonstrate how informality is not a “way of life” for just marginalized urban residents (AlSayyad, 2004; Roy, 2012), but also for street-level bureaucrats and entrepreneurial officers who also occupy these spaces and operationalize informality for personal and professional purposes. I call this intermingling of securitized narratives developed by insecure regimes and policing structures ridden with institutional weaknesses and discrimination because of their colonial legacies, that effect interactions between the police and social groups, the postcolonial condition of policing.

Observing postcolonial condition of policing at work in the context of police-migrant encounters in urban areas has broader implications for our understanding of state-society relations, which should be explored further in future research. First, it demonstrates how policing, surveillance, and border-management impact people’s ability to exercise their right to the city, and their sense of belonging to these cities. Second, it shows that decolonization remains an ongoing and incomplete process, as colonial structures of policing and governance are retained, replete with their racist, classist and militarized philosophies to manage social groups. And third, everyday policing in localized urban spaces is inextricably linked to national, even global, political and security narratives. Everyday police harassment against Bengalis and Afghans in Karachi occurs because these social groups have been framed in national and global security narratives as “aliens” or “terrorists,” a labeling intended to present them to citizens as burdens on the polis. The securitization of migration, therefore, has shaped and continues to shape law enforcement around the world in ways that risks the transportation of colonial governmentalities beyond borders (Kapoor & Narkowicz, 2019).

In future research, we must contextualize encounters between police and non-citizens in wider urban society and consider how the policing of non-citizens shapes citizens’ perceptions of the police and notions of procedural justice and police legitimacy in postcolonial societies. Further, we must boost calls for decolonizing policing and criminology, especially if we need criminal justice institutions
to “deal fairly with competing citizenship demands and maintain legitimacy for different social groups” (Cunneen, 2011, p. 256). Such decolonization of criminal justice demands that state institutions, including the police, move away from being colonial artifacts toward adopting more inclusive policies and practices. This is a tall order for radically restructuring and redesigning justice systems that question criminalization and penal policies and practices rooted in racial categories and hierarchies (Aliverti et al., 2021). Decolonizing policing may entail, at the very least, (i) creating and maintaining room for alternative modes of dispute resolution that take indigenous approaches into account instead of solely relying upon the criminal justice apparatuses that are not too representative; (ii) ensuring that the police adequately protect the rights and dignity of all minority groups and marginalized communities; (iii) decriminalizing processes such as migration so that suspicion and surveillance of migrant communities is reduced and police abuse against them decreases; and (iv) moving beyond positivist narratives of police reform that are largely geared toward materially strengthening existing colonial structures instead of initiating ideological changes. Decolonizing policing is also an epistemological agenda that requires postcolonial perspectives on the experiences of the police and those interacting with the police in the former colonies, an agenda to which this paper responds. This agenda is borne out of larger debates on decolonizing criminology and must be explored further in critical policing and criminology scholarship.

Notes

1. I draw upon the International Organization for Migration’s definition of a migrant as anyone who crosses an international border, temporarily or permanently, for any reason, including asylum seekers, refugees, migrant workers, international displaced people, and stateless persons.

2. This conceptual contribution coupled with the geographic focus of this paper, is also relevant for the southern criminology agenda (Carrington et al., 2018) and calls for decolonizing urban studies (among other disciplines) (Wood, 2020). Common to these agendas is the application of southern, postcolonial, and critical perspectives that amplify not just conceptual contributions from the Global South but also question the historical and contemporary influences that the North has on criminal justice, urban planning, education, and development (Connell, 2014).

3. The “postcolonial condition of policing” draws from Owen’s (2016) discussion on the characteristics of postcolonial policing that include prioritization of regime security over civilian security, prolonged periods of military rule, institutional fragility, exploitation of street-level police officers, and informal police practices. On informal police practices and their utility, also see, Jauregui’s (2016) work on jugaad in the Indian police.

4. The exact population of Machar Colony is unknown and reported figures have ranged between 85,000 and 700,000. According to police reports, Machar Colony’s population is 300,000, with 75% of it considered to be Bengali migrants (Mughal & Baloch, 2017). Ibrahim Hyderi’s population is similarly difficult to establish and estimates range between 150,000 and 300,000. Al Asif Square is believed to host at least 20,000 people, more than half of which are Afghan refugees. Afghan Basti’s exact population is estimated at a few thousand.

5. As per figures provided by NADRA, an independent agency under Pakistan’s Ministry of Interior that manages the registration of all Pakistani nationals, there are approximately 2–3 million Bengali and Afghan migrants in Karachi (both registered and unregistered). With an unofficial population of an estimated 20 million, this means that between 10% and 15% of Karachi is home to these two communities. Although Burmese and Bengalis are often grouped together and typically reside in the same neighborhoods, I focus specifically on Bengali migrants.

6. For a detailed discussion on the use of brokers, middlemen and dataals for accessing state resources, and how this practice has been permitted by postcolonial states, rendering corruption a necessity that can “sustain the agency of the poor migrant,” see, Anwar’s (2013, 2014) work on the experiences of Bengali migrants.


8. Based on data provided by the Afghan Refugee Repatriation Cell.

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