

Bookstores Closed in Kabul Makeover

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New chapter for the city is an unhappy one for book lovers.

Booksellers whose market stalls were recently closed by the authorities, as part of an urban renewal project, are refusing to relocate to a new site because they says it's too far away for their customers.

They've set up temporary pitches next to their former premises, which were well-known and popular features of central Kabul over the past decade.

The two book markets, made up of 85 stalls, were built illegally on private property, but during the chaos of the past ten years the landowners let them be, and the booksellers paid small amounts of rent to the city.

But two months ago, the municipal authorities began clearing out the markets, saying they were a blight on major routes to embassies and ministries.

The booksellers are not the only ones angered by this latest chapter in the capital's rush towards urban renewal. Many of their customers, in particular students, are opposed to the relocation to the Bagh-e-Ali Mardan area of the city.

"We students, in fact everyone living here, don't need modern parks, more cosmetics shops, etc," said Masood Sakhi, a third-year political science student at Kabul University. " We need bookstores to compensate for the damage that we and our education have suffered for the last ten years."

Bookseller Mohammad Daud said the previous regime did more to protect his trade. "In Taleban times, a businessman named Hotak wanted to build a park to replace the bookstores. But when the case was referred to the municipality, the officials said that our people need books more than the parks and the suggestion was turned down."

The book markets were a hodge-podge of metal and wood stands. Book lovers could find the latest foreign texts; would scavenge for magazines long out of print; or find rare old volumes of history, literature and academic disciplines. Many of these came from private collections sold by their owners during hard times or even stolen from embassies closed during the wars.

The booksellers had been in the markets for so long that they - and their customers - had come to think of it as their own.

Sayed Alem, the director of construction for Kabul municipality, said the city never gave the property to the booksellers and that the closure of their market was a necessary part of the urban renewal drive.

"Now that the rehabilitation of Afghanistan has begun, the municipality wants to build Kabul city the right way," he said.

Bagh-e-Ali Mardan, a little known part of Kabul, is located in the midst of shops selling bicycles and electrical appliances, along a major road that doesn't have any pedestrians.

Shifting the market to Bagh-e-Ali Mardan "would be hard for the customers because not many people know places in Kabul city by name", said one bookseller, Mohammad Shafi, adding that this was never a problem with the former premises.

The cost of getting to the new market is also a problem. "It would be hard to pay 20 afghanis in transport costs to buy a book costing 40 or 45 afghanis," said Hamidullah Hamid, a student at the Polytechnic Institute.

Some of the booksellers decided to take over a strip of grass near their old location. They told IWPR that they had to pay a bribe of 3,000 afghanis each (about 60 US dollars) to officials to stay there, but even at that price the arrangement is only temporary.

Others have simply laid out some books and magazines each morning on cloths in the vacant lot where the shops used to stand. They have to pay nearby shops to store their inventory overnight.

Booksellers are not the only merchants being targeted. The city has cleared out 535 small stands selling clothes and shoes and 35 outlets offering plastic household goods from several other central locations.

The land for one of the two former book markets, owned by the nearby Spin Zar hotel, will be turned into a park, said Alem. The fate of the other plot, the property of the family of King Amanullah Khan, who ruled at the beginning of the 20th century, is uncertain.

Alem said he doesn't know what the former monarch's descendents plan to do with the land, but the city would like to clean it up because it is on the way to a number of embassies and the foreign ministry.

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