

## AHIMSA 2.0

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We don't know if India invented non-violent civil disobedience — sometimes, mistakenly referred to as passive resistance. But India is certainly the first country where this form of protest was practised on a large scale under the leadership of [Mahatma Gandhi](#), who ascribed it to the Hindu/Jain notion of ahimsa. Exactly a hundred years ago, the Non-Cooperation Movement to protest the Jallianwala Bagh massacre set the tone for the satyagrahas that marked the freedom movement. This method of protest became the hallmark of several movements against oppression in post-independent India. The JP Movement, which precipitated the declaration of Emergency in 1975, is a case in point.

Today, the Subcontinent is returning to this peaceful mode of popular protest. In Pakistan, the Pashtuns have reactivated the legacy of Abdul Ghaffar Khan, also called Bacha Khan and Frontier Gandhi because his stronghold was located in the North West Frontier Province. The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (Pashtun Protection Movement or PTM), formed after Naeqebullah Mehsud — originally from Waziristan — was killed in a police encounter in Karachi on January 13, 2018, draws inspiration from Frontier Gandhi's movement. The extra-judicial killing has led to rallies in support of the human rights of Pashtuns. But these spontaneous protests have also been precipitated by other problems that the Pashtuns in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) are facing. The merger of FATA with the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province hasn't mitigated the area's problems, including that of the landmines left behind by the Taliban. The peaceful protests by PTM followers have been met by repression. The army and paramilitary forces have allegedly forced dissenting voices to "disappear" (hence the "missing persons syndrome"); they have also killed dozens of peaceful demonstrators. Even then, the PTM has been steadfast about protesting in a non-violent manner.

This is also the attitude of most of the Indian demonstrators who have marched against the Citizenship Amendment Act and the [National Register of Citizens](#) which they consider as unconstitutional. This non-violent movement has been subjected to intense repression. More than 24 people have been killed so far, most of them in [BJP](#)-ruled Uttar Pradesh. The violence by police in the BJP-ruled states against students on university campuses or against peaceful demonstrators has been recorded on videos made on mobile phones — so has the alleged destruction of private properties, including cars, by the custodians of law. This is the era of Ahimsa 2.0, where social media makes it impossible for the state to escape testimonies of committed eyewitnesses, even when there is an internet shutdown. Something similar is happening in the case of the protests by the Pashtuns — those who want to know what is happening do remain informed, irrespective of how the mainstream media engages with the protests.

In Pakistan, PTM leaders have been presented as traitors working for foreign powers. And, in India, several TV channels have characterised non-violent demonstrators as hooligans by repeatedly screening a select number of incidents.

The first challenge that a non-violent protest faces, always, is to remain non-violent in the face of repression and activities of agents provocateurs. Mahatma Gandhi suspended the Non Cooperation Movement in 1922 after Chauri Chaura for that reason. The second challenge pertains to the sustainability of such a movement. As Gandhi used to say, non-violence is not for the coward. It demands a lot of physical courage — a resolve that may weaken gradually in the face of incessant repression. If ahimsa took India to freedom and helped [Nelson Mandela](#) defeat apartheid, it failed in China where the Dalai Lama could not stop Beijing from repressing

Tibetans and annihilating their culture. Non-violence can work only when states and societies are amenable to moral pressure and likely to develop feelings of guilt. It is bound to fail when the rulers and/or the majorities that support them dehumanise the protestors — whether they are ethnic groups, religious communities or political movements.

If moral pressures are a key factor, external pressures can also play a role. Sustained international sanctions also played a role in South Africa turning its back on Apartheid. Peaceful demonstrators cannot expect much from the West today. State sovereignty has staged a comeback after the fiasco of foreign interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. More importantly, Western governments do not dare to interfere with domestic politics in the name of human rights, especially when they are doing business with a big country or when they look at it as a potential partner to balance China — India being a case in point.

For a peaceful protest to bear fruit, the judiciary can probably offer some hope provided it is independent enough. For divided societies in the Subcontinent, relying on the supreme courts of their countries is often the last resort. On February 11, 2019, the leader of the PTM, Manzoor Ahmad Pashteen wrote in a New York Times oped, 'The Military Says Pashtuns Are Traitors. We Just Want Our Rights': "We are not seeking a violent revolution, but we are determined to push Pakistan back towards a constitutional order."

The Indian peaceful demonstrators are also asking the government to respect the Constitution, whose preamble they recite at the gatherings. The ball is in the court of the judiciary: In the case of the CAA, [NRC](#) and [Article 370](#) and the transformation of the state of Jammu and Kashmir into a Union Territory. In Pakistan, the judiciary is back to the judicial activism of 2007-08, as evident from the recent verdict that sentenced General Pervez Musharraf to death and the supreme court's judgment asking parliament to pass a law codifying the procedure through which the Chief of Army Staff can benefit from an extension. India's Supreme Court has, in the past, practised a strong form of judicial activism and endeavoured to protect the checks and balances essential to a democratic order.

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