

PASHTUN TAHAFUZ MOVEMENT COMPOUNDS PAKISTAN'S WORRIES

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On May 23, on the eve of *Eid-ul-Fitr*, a video was uploaded on Twitter by a Pashtun rights activist associated with Pashtun Tahafuz [Protection] Movement (PTM), showing a group of Pashtuns staging a sit-in protest in front of an army camp in Gariyum area of Shaktoi in South Waziristan, against the abduction of more than 15 local youth days ago, who had not been produced in the court and had gone missing.¹ It is the same area where the American drones had struck in January 2010, suspecting former chief of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) Hakeemullah Mehsud's presence there.

While there was no report of it in the Pakistani media, it is now well-known that innocent inhabitants of South Waziristan, predominantly Mehsud Pashtuns, have long been a victim of the ongoing complex power game between the Pakistani state and non-state actors of various hues. The state regards them as sympathisers of anti-state groups like TTP and treats them with brute force at one level and harasses them through its armed proxies at another. Those opposed to the Pakistan Army and state look at them as informers of the state. Apart from staged encounters and targeted killings, abductions of Pashtun youth and intellectuals have become a norm in the tribal areas in recent years.

In May 2014, a small group of students from South Waziristan set up a group called Mehsud Tahafuz Movement (MTM) in Dera Ismail Khan, with the avowed aim of bringing Pashtun sufferings to the limelight, in the wake of prolonged army action, as well as demanding clearance of landmines in the Mehsud areas in Waziristan in particular and tribal areas in general.

The PTM grew out of MTM and hogged the limelight when Naqeebullah Mehsud, an aspiring model was shot dead by the Karachi police claiming that he was a terrorist. PTM organised a march from Waziristan to Islamabad against the police inaction. Its five-point memorandum to the government contained longstanding demands of the Pashtuns apart from the trial of Rao Anwar, the police officer who had allegedly killed Naqeebullah in a fake encounter

The PTM holds state agencies responsible for the subsequent kidnapping and killing of Pashto poet and serving Superintendent of Police Tahir Dawar, chief of Peshawar police's rural circle in November 2018; the killing of Arman Loni, professor of Pashto literature in the University of Balochistan, in Loralai during a sit-in in February 2019; the killing of 13 civilians participating in a peaceful protest in North Waziristan in June 2019; and, the targeted killing of PTM leader Arif Wazir in May 2020. The main leaders of PTM, Mohsin Dawar, Ali Wazir and Manzoor Pashteen have been arrested several times for allegedly making anti-Pakistan speeches and inciting people to rise against the state.

The PTM has been regarded by the Pashtuns, especially from the tribal belt, who have suffered a lot because of continued operations by Pakistan Army in the pretext of fighting anti-state elements, as the true representative of their voice. They feel that as a social movement, PTM has been able to articulate their grievances well through peaceful sit-ins, protest marches, and enthusiastic use of all forms of media.

The PTM has consistently opposed the establishment's approach towards the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Since 2003, in the name of the war on terror, Pakistan Army has launched multiple large and small-scale operations in the tribal areas, now integrated into the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Province, with the express aim of clearing the area of the TTP. But the PTM activists have argued that the operations have been selective as the army makes a distinction between its jihadi assets which they consider as 'good' and those who oppose it.²

The recent killing of Arif Wazir points inevitably to the abiding nexus between Pakistani security forces and state-sponsored armed non-state actors, who act as extended arms of the Pakistan state.

The army operations have resulted in internal displacement and loss of lives of civilians, while forces loyal to the Afghan Taliban continue to hold their ground and gain in strength. According to the government figures, about five million people were displaced internally at the height of military operations in FATA.³ Such a selective approach vis-à-vis armed non-state groups in the region has made people increasingly insecure. The people of tribal areas have been targeted both by the militant groups and the security agencies, each accusing them of spying for the other.

The stance taken by PTM urging the government to restore civil rights of the Pashtuns and reverse its policy of encouraging state-sponsored armed groups to operate with impunity has found resonance not only among Pashtuns of the tribal areas but also Pashtun nationalist groups in the rest of Pakistan.

The fact that PTM, a professedly social forum propagating its cause through peaceful protests, has started appealing to the Pashtuns beyond the tribal belt has been a point of worry for the establishment. The Pakistan state has traditionally regarded such popular manifestation of Pashtun ethnic sentiments as potentially divisive, and a threat to its integrity

Ruffled by the PTM-led protests, and its anti-military narrative as well as intense campaigns, the then spokesman of the Inter-Service Public Relations (ISPR), Major-General Asif Ghafoor, sought to delegitimise it by projecting it as "a foreign-funded movement probably backed by India or Afghanistan". However, the establishment has not provided any evidence to back its allegations.⁴ To delegitimise PTM in the eyes of the Pakistani people, the state agencies have launched active propaganda in both mainstream as well as social media claiming that the PTM activists are supporters of TTP. The PTM leaders have openly challenged this allegation clearly stating that it has no link whatsoever to any armed group or agency, internal or external.⁵ It has demanded that the state should end its support to all kinds of armed groups without being selective about them.

Arif Wazir, a prominent voice of PTM killed last month, had probably riled the state agencies through his vocal advocacy of Pashtun rights and condemnation of state-sponsored violence in the Pashtun areas. He spent almost 15 months in jail on various trumped-up charges. More recently, he was accused of allegedly making anti-Pakistan remarks during his visit to Afghanistan along with other PTM leaders to attend President Ashraf Ghani's swearing-in ceremony held on April 17.

In the absence of any other plausible reason for his killing, it is speculated that the killers of Arif were acting at the instruction of the state agencies, who wanted to get rid of him for having crossed the line. Perhaps, Arif was too popular and famous to be neutralised by well-known methods of abduction or encounter often employed by the agencies. In the aftermath of his killing, hardly hiding his glee, the Inspector General of KP made an unguarded statement to the media implying that it was normal to expect such attacks because Arif had indulged in anti-

Pakistan propaganda in his interview to a TV channel in Afghanistan.[6](#)

Interestingly, the attack did not attract any comment from any government official or prominent political leaders in Pakistan. Its coverage in the media was rather sketchy. Instead, a malicious campaign was launched against the Wazir family for its alleged opposition to Pakistan. Expectedly, such negative propaganda has brought the Pashtuns in the area firmly together as can be seen from the spontaneous outpouring of emotions on Pashtun-related issues in the social media.

The media of Pakistan is under tight control these days. There is censorship on reporting the activities of PTM. Its leaders are being denied any screen or airtime on TV debates and discussions.[7](#) Few columnists who wrote about PTM were reportedly removed from their jobs.

Faced with several constraints, PTM has used the social media platform liberally and effectively to highlight the condition of the Pashtun people in general and especially those in the tribal areas. Some PTM leaders have also written articles for international media outlets to put across their message.

The Pashtuns, in general, have taken to social media aggressively. In twitter, for example, hashtags like #statekilledarifwazir, ##pashtungenocidebypakstate and #MissingPersonsOnThisEid have sought to disseminate information about abduction and killing of innocent Pashtuns to attract international attention to their sufferings.

The Pakistan state has clearly failed to suppress the voice of the Pashtuns in the face of their indomitable courage to fight for their rights, and as they say, within the confines of the Pakistan Constitution.

The killing of PTM leaders like Arif Wazir and the growing number of enforced disappearances and repressive measures taken by the state in the tribal belt has only widened the gulf between PTM and the Pakistan Government. Arif's killing was condemned by many Pashtun nationalists in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, fueling anti-Pakistan sentiments in the Pashtun belt straddling both countries. In the coming days, tribal Pashtun voices are only likely to get shriller, adding to the worries of the Pakistan state.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or of the Government of India.

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