

ISAS Working Paper

No. 298 – 12 June 2018

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The Pashtun Protection Movement in Pakistan: The Taliban, the Military and the Fragmentation of Authority

Since January 2018, the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (Pashtun Protection Movement) [PTM] has organised mass rallies across Pakistan in which they have denounced the Taliban, Pakistani military and the state apparatus for “humiliating” and persecuting the Pashtuns. Such an open critique of the military is rare in Pakistan. By way of presenting a historical backdrop to the emergence of this movement, this paper reviews key facets of the socio-political dynamics of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. It also reviews the major demands made by the movement. More broadly, the paper highlights how the adoption of new media is enabling movements like the PTM evade state censorship and challenge established religious and social political authority.

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On 3 June 2018, gunmen opened fire on a rally organised by the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (Pashtun Protection Movement) [PTM] in Wana, the capital of South Waziristan. While there are differing accounts on the number of casualties, it is widely held that at least three PTM activists were killed and more than 20 injured. Manzoor Pashteen, a leading figure of the

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PTM, has unequivocally blamed both the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (often referred to as the Pakistani Taliban) and the Pakistani military for the attack and for attempting to stifle the movement.²

Since January 2018, the PTM has organised rallies across Pakistan in which they have denounced the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, the Pakistani military and even the Pakistani state for “humiliating” and persecuting the Pashtuns. On its part, the military has painted the PTM as agents of foreign governments seeking to destabilise Pakistan. A day after the attack at Wana, the chief spokesperson for the Pakistani military, Major General Asif Ghafoor, stated that the PTM had been manipulated by the “enemies of Pakistan”.³ He was specifically referring to Afghanistan, which has openly supported the PTM. Afghanistan is suspected of attempting to stoke an uprising to further its irredentist claims over Pashtun areas in Pakistan.

The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement

The PTM is a loosely organised movement that came into being in response to the public outcry following the murder of Naqeebullah Mehsud in January 2018. Mehsud, a Pashtun shopkeeper and aspiring model with an active social media presence, was accused by security agencies of having links with the terrorist groups Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). After 10 days of detention, he died in what many describe as a ‘fake encounter’. For many Pashtuns, Mehsud’s detention and death came to symbolise the plight of thousands of their brethren who have been detained without trial and remain unaccounted for as a result of the military’s campaign against militancy in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Following Mehsud’s funeral, Manzoor Pashteen, a leading figure of the PTM, launched a protest march from Dera Ismail Khan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan. Pashteen left Dera Ismail Khan with 29 others on 26 January 2018. As the march made its way through key Pashtun areas like Bannu, Kohat and Peshawar, thousands joined in. Upon reaching

² Manzoor Pashteen issued this statement via his Twitter feed and a video message posted on YouTube. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CN_5W16Iunc. Assessed 5 June 2018.

³ Major General Asif Ghafoor press conference, 4 June 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtLiJC IrYP M>. Assessed 5 June 2018.

Islamabad, a 10-day sit-in was held. A subsequent sit-in in Peshawar on 10 April 2018 drew a 60,000-strong crowd.

Through mass rallies, sit-ins and its active social media presence, the PTM has demanded a judicial inquiry into the murder of Mehsud and the “disappearance” of thousands of Pashtuns. They have also called for an end to what they describe as atrocities carried out by the military in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA, the release of all political prisoners, the clearing of land mines in FATA, and an end to racial profiling and official discrimination against the Pashtuns. At a constitutional level, the movement has demanded that the state of Pakistan abolish the Frontier Crime Regulations, a series of laws specific to the region of FATA enacted by the British colonial regime in 1901. These laws allowed the state to impose extraordinarily harsh punishments and severely limited the right of the accused to trial and appeal.

The PTM’s open critique of the military and championing of the rights of the Pashtuns has won the movement mass support, especially amongst the youth. At the heart of the PTM’s appeal is its claim to represent and protect the ‘pride of the Pashtuns’. In the words of Saira Bano Orakzai, a Pashtun intellectual and vocal supporter of the movement, the PTM is striving to “restore [the] dignity of Pashtuns”⁴ and is a “manifestation of the trauma and sorrow the Pashtuns living in Pakistan’s war torn tribal regions have had to face”.⁵

Like many others, Orakzai sees the movement as part of a much longer tradition of resistance on the part of the Pashtuns against oppression from external forces. It is thus no surprise that leaders and supporters of the movement have often drawn reference to figures like the Faqir of Ipi (1897-1960), a Pashtun celebrated for his violent resistance both against territorial encroachments by the British and attempts by the Pakistani state to incorporate parts of FATA; and Abdul Ghaffar Khan (1890-1988), an open supporter of an independent state for the Pashtuns. The song associated with the PTM, *Da Sanga Azadi Da* (What Kind of Freedom is This?) further reflects how the issue of rights is intrinsically linked with the issue of autonomy. Such statements have made the military and the Pakistani government nervous about the aims of the movement and its links with Afghanistan.

⁴ Saira Bano Orakzai, ‘Restoring Pashtun Dignity in Pakistan’, *Daily Times*, 23 March 2018. <https://dailytimes.com.pk/218319/restoring-pashtun-dignity-in-pakistan/>. Accessed on 4 June 2018.

⁵ Orakzai, ‘Pakistan’s Defiant Pakhtuns’, *Daily Times*, 17 May 2018. <https://dailytimes.com.pk/240941/pakistans-defiant-pakhtuns/>. Accessed on 4 June 2018.

The Context: Pashtuns, Pashtunistan and the Frontier Crime Regulations

With an estimated population of 33 million, the Pashtuns are the second largest ethnic group in Pakistan. They make up about 16 per cent of Pakistan's population.⁶ Geographically speaking, they are an ethnic group divided by the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. This border is often referred to as the Durand Line as it was a line negotiated in 1893 between the colonial diplomat, Henry Mortimer Durand (1850-1924) and the Afghan Amir. The primary aim of the line was to demarcate the spheres of influence of the British in India and the Afghan Amir. Pakistan inherited the boundary when it emerged as an independent country in 1947. The fact that Afghanistan does not recognise the legitimacy of this border has complicated the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁷ Ongoing attempts by Pakistan to build a fence along the border have been met by opposition from Afghanistan. The Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, has condemned Pakistan's attempts to seal the border as an "undeclared war of aggression".⁸

The Pashtuns of Pakistan primarily reside in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly known as the North-West Frontier Province) and FATA. Unable to fully subdue the Pashtun tribes, the British colonial state carved out a number of 'tribal areas' or 'agencies' in the area that constitutes FATA. These included Khyber, Orakzai, North Waziristan and South Waziristan. With a view towards employing these units as a buffer against Afghan expansion, these agencies were granted autonomy and their leaders were vested with special favours and allowed to exercise extraordinary authority.

Upon the emergence of Pakistan in 1947, the regions in which the Pashtuns resided generally showed little enthusiasm for the new state. In fact, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, one of the most prominent Pashtun leaders, had openly denounced the demand for Pakistan. He argued against the call for the creation of a separate state for the Muslims of India. Moreover, Abdul

⁶ This estimate is based on the provisional results of the 2017 census exercise conducted in Pakistan. The official results have not been released. The last survey for which we have confirmed numbers was conducted in 1998.

⁷ The former president of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, stated in 2017 that 'Afghanistan hasn't and will not recognize the Durand line.' Naveed Siddiqui, "Afghanistan will never recognize the Durand Line: Hamid Karzai", *Dawn*, 5 March 2017. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1318594>. Accessed on 4 June 2018.

⁸ Ismail Dilawar and Kamran Haider, 'The Fence Driving a Wedge Between Pakistan and Afghanistan', *Bloomberg*, November 1, 2017.

Ghaffar Khan countered the demand for Pakistan by calling for the creation of Pashtunistan – a separate political entity for the Pashtuns divided by the Durand Line.⁹

With a view towards retaining the Pashtun areas within Pakistan, the founder and first Governor-General of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1876-1948), assured “internal freedom” to the regions in exchange for pledges of loyalty to the new state of Pakistan.¹⁰ While setting out to crush the opposition in the North-West Frontier Province, posed by figures like Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Jinnah essentially pledged to continue the status quo in the tribal regions.

The tribal areas were grouped together as FATA and administered directly by the federal government of Pakistan. Political Agents, who held extensive powers, were appointed by and reported to Pakistan’s President. The system also vested immense authority in the hands of the *maliks* or tribal elders. The *maliks* were recognised by the state as the natural custodians of customs and social order, and the *jirga* (council of elders) as the supreme authority within the tribe. This colonial model of administration has continued to the present. Until 1997, the *maliks* were the only ones who could vote. While universal adult franchise was finally granted in 1997, political parties remained prohibited till 2003.

The state of Pakistan also continues to implement the Frontier Crime Regulations in FATA. The Frontier Crime Regulations, which were enacted by the colonial authorities in 1901, were part of a series of draconian laws implemented in the Pashtun areas on the assumption that the Pashtuns were lawless tribesmen who were prone to crime and fanaticism.¹¹ The Frontier Crime Regulations allowed for collective punishment to be meted out to the tribes under the “collective responsibility clause”. It also denied the accused the rights to appeal, *wakeel* (lawyer) and *daleel* (argument). Under the Frontier Crime Regulations, the authorities are permitted to detain individuals for up to three years without charges.¹²

⁹ See Safoora Arbab, ‘Nonviolence, Pukhtunwali and Decolonization: Abdul Ghaffar Khan and the Khuda’i Khidmatgar Politics of Friendship’ in Ali Usman Qasmi (ed.), *Muslims Against the Muslim League: Critiques of the Idea of Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 220-254.

¹⁰ Mohammad Ali Jinnah, *Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah Speeches and Statements as Governor General of Pakistan 1947-1948* (Islamabad: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Directorate of Films and Publications, 1989), p. 239.

¹¹ See Mark Condos, ‘License to Kill: The Murderous Outrages Act and the rule of law in Colonial India, 1867-1925’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 50, 2, 2016, pp. 479-517.

¹² Willard M. Berry, *Aspects of the Frontier Crimes Regulation in Pakistan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1966).

Concerned by Afghanistan's rejection of the Durand Line and support for the idea of Pashtunistan, successive Pakistani governments, and military regimes have maintained the colonial structure of governance in FATA. 'Provincial autonomy' has been strategically employed to counter a transnational Pashtun consciousness. While this system has allowed the Pakistani state to both suppress unrest and nurture the loyalty of the *maliks* through patronage, it has stifled the development of norms of governance and legal structures in FATA.

Over the years, a number of Pashtun figures have called for the abolishment of the Frontier Crime Regulations and the reform of the socio-political structure. They have argued that the Frontier Crime Regulations and structure of governance implemented in the tribal areas have resulted in extremely low rates of literacy, high rates of corruption and a lack of economic development. For instance, Shaukat Aziz, a student leader and prominent figure in the "Go FCR [Frontier Crime Regulations] Go" movement has stated that "[u]nder the FCR, we have neither freedom nor protection" nor is there "progress, development, employment opportunities, peace and the rule of law".¹³ In FATA, the Frontier Crime Regulations are popularly referred to as the "Black Law".

The PTM's employment of evocative symbolism of Pashtun dignity, humiliation and discrimination in relation to the Frontier Crime Regulations has struck a chord with the masses. The movement has presented the existence of this legal regime as a glaring example of official discrimination against the Pashtuns and the federal state's role in depriving the Pashtuns of their constitutional rights. The fact that the PTM also accuses the *maliks* of being complicit with the Pakistani state in the underdevelopment of FATA differentiates it from earlier protest movements.

Pashteen has repeatedly stressed that the PTM is demanding for constitutional rights: "We want our issues resolved through the Constitution and according to the country's laws".¹⁴ While, on the one hand, locating their demands firmly within the ambit of the constitutional

¹³ Said Alam Khan, "Go FCR Go", *The Nation*, 30 January 2017. <https://nation.com.pk/30-Jan-2017/go-fcr-go>. Accessed on 3 June 2018.

¹⁴ "Our demands are constitutional: PTM", *The News*, 30 April 2018. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/310779-our-demands-are-constitutional-ptm>. Accessed on 3 June 2018.

rights of citizens and refraining from playing the Pashtunistan card,¹⁵ the PTM has, on the other hand, repeatedly stated that if their demands were not met they would take their case to the United Nations.¹⁶ This reflects an ambiguity inherent in the movement's appeal to constitutional rights of the citizens and Pashtun autonomy. It should also be noted here that the movement has dismissed the recent decision by the Pakistan National Assembly to merge FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with the stated aim of mainstreaming FATA as a meaningless gesture.

Critiquing the Taliban and the Military

Addressing a rally on 16 March 2018, Pashteen called on the Pashtuns “to publicly identify the place that has destroyed us”. As the crowd cheered on, he asserted that “[i]t is GHQ [General Headquarters], which ruined us!”¹⁷ Such a direct reference to the GHQ of the Pakistan military marks a rare open critique of the military in Pakistan. Indeed, the PTM members regularly accuse the military and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency of not only carrying out human rights abuses in Pashtun areas during its campaign against militants, but also of fanning the militancy in the first place. Various leaders of the PTM have stated that the Pashtuns have been caught in the middle of the military's “good Taliban-bad Taliban” policy.

Afghanistan's vocal support for Pashtunistan in the early 1970s resulted in the then-Prime Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1928-1979), establishing an ‘Afghan Cell’ in the Foreign Office to counter Afghan propaganda and establishing ties with groups within Afghanistan which could help to develop Pakistan's influence in Kabul. In the 1980s, the military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq (1924-1988) consciously provided support and arms to Islamists groups like the Hizb-i-Islam that were involved in the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union. This was done partially with the aim of promoting an Islamic consciousness that could override the bonds of a transnational Pashtun ethnic identity, thus eroding Afghan support for the demand for Pashtunistan. Within Pakistan, funding and patronage were extended to

¹⁵ See video released by Manzoor Pashteen on the constitutional basis of the PTM's demands. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hWCiPCt992k>. Assessed on 3 June 2018.

¹⁶ SherShah Atif, “Manzoor Pashteen: Our Protest is non-violent and constitutional”, *alJazeera*, 9 April 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com>. Assessed on 13 April 2018.

¹⁷ Manzoor Pashteen, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eg3rfrTk7X0>. Assessed on 3 June, 2018.

sections of the *ulema* (Islamic scholars) that could aid and legitimise both Zia's military regime and the campaign against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. This enabled religious figures such as Fazlur Rehman and Samiullah Haq to attain political prominence and develop an extensive network of *madrasas* (Muslim educational institutions) in the North-West Frontier Province and FATA. It is important to note that this marked a unique development. Previously, authority and prestige were embedded largely within tribal networks. This was especially the case in FATA where the Frontier Crime Regulations and system of governance clearly placed the *ulema* in a subordinate position to the *maliks*. The *ulema* had no official role in the legal structure nor did they have a voice on the *jirga*. Their position had been dependent upon the patronage of the *maliks*. Funding from the federal government gave them an independent source of revenue, which in turn provided them with a new source of authority.

Subsequent regimes in Pakistan continued this policy of funding religious networks and groups to exert geo-strategic influence in Afghanistan. The Taliban was one such group. Though the Taliban was initially made up of Pashtun refugees from Afghanistan, it soon drew support from the regions of FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. With support from Pakistan, the Taliban gained control over much of Afghanistan between 1994 and 1998.¹⁸

The Taliban was, however, a movement that lacked ideological and organisational unity. In time, sections of the Taliban began to split off. A number of splinter groups now turned their attention to Islamising parts of Pakistan. At the same time, Pakistan witnessed the rise of Taliban inspired movements such as the Tehrik-i-Nazaf-i-Shariat-i-Muhammadi (TNSM), which took control over much of Swat, a district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, in 2007. Initially led by Sufi Muhammad (b. 1933), who had mobilised thousands of volunteers to cross over into Afghanistan to fight against the United States, the movement came to prominence when his son-in-law, Fazullah (b. 1974), assumed leadership over the movement following Sufi Muhammad's arrest. Popularly known as 'Maulana Radio' because of his extensive adoption of the radio to provide religious instruction, Fazullah intensified the TNSM's attacks on state and military institutions in his quest to control Swat.

¹⁸ For a detailed study of the rise of the Taliban and its relations with Pakistan see Rashid Ahmed, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

In FATA, militant groups that had splintered off from the Taliban coalesced under the title of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). While nominally supporting the activities of the Taliban in Afghanistan, members of the TTP were primarily concerned with destabilising the authority of the Pakistani state and establishing what they defined as the socio-legal structure of Islam.

Pakistani authorities initially tried to negotiate with such groups. For instance, in 2009, the state signed an agreement with the TSNM to allow for the implementation of *Sharia* law (Islamic law) in parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in return for it agreeing to abide by a ceasefire. However, as attacks on civilians and state authorities expanded, the military launched an intensive military campaign in parts of FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This, in turn, led to intensified attacks by militants on military, police and government institutions. Militants in South Waziristan even laid landmines in regions where they held a presence.

In June 2014, the Pakistani military launched Operation Zarb-i-Azb, an extensive military operation to weed out militancy in FATA that involved nearly 30,000 soldiers. A number of observers in Pakistan have highlighted that this campaign has resulted in thousands of Pashtuns being arrested without trial and almost a million people being internally displaced.¹⁹

A New Phenomenon

The emergence of the PTM has ushered in a new dynamic into the Pashtun socio-political life. The movement is not only openly challenging the militants and the Pakistani military but also disrupting the authority of the *maliks*. The mass mobilisation of the Pashtun youth has caught the *maliks*, the military and the Pakistani state by surprise. As noted above, the Frontier Crime Regulations and the system of Political Agents have for decades served to entrench the social and political position of the *maliks* in FATA. The fact that universal adult franchise was only granted in 1997 and political parties remained prohibited till 2003 has meant that mass political mobilisation of the sort being witnessed currently is a novel development.

¹⁹ A report by the Human Rights of Commission of Pakistan listed that there were 868 new reported cases of people being abducted in 2017 itself.

The *maliks* have responded to the rise of the PTM by presenting themselves as mediators between the movement and the military authorities. They have constituted an Aman (Peace) Committee and invited leaders of the movement to attend a *jirga*. On its part, the PTM has rejected these tribal elders as pro-government and pro-status quo figures who have been associated with the TTP. Moreover, the PTM stresses that the issues they have raised need to be dealt with at the constitutional and state level rather than within the ‘social’ or ‘internal’ realm. The *jirga*, in the words of Pashteen, is an institution where two aggrieved parties bring their dispute. Issues between citizens and the state are handled at the constitutional level and not by the *jirgas*.²⁰ The PTM is thus rejecting the mechanisms and forms of traditional authority that have governed FATA since 1901.

More broadly, the popularity of the PTM reflects how the rapid expansion of smartphones and internet subscriptions in Pakistan is hastening the fragmentation of religious and socio-political authority. The PTM’s use of social media has allowed it to challenge the established authorities and evade state censorship. In fact, Mehsud’s murder attracted the attention it did due in no small measure to the fact that he had an active social media presence. It is worth noting here that the mainstream Pakistani media, especially the television news channels, has by and large not covered the PTM’s protests and rallies. The Pakistani journalist, Omar Quraishi, noted, for instance, that leading television channels “gave five hours of uninterrupted ad-free coverage” to the rally organised by the politician Imran Khan, widely believed to be supported by the military, “but not even 30 seconds to the huge PTM *jalsa* (rally)” that took place in Swat on the same day.²¹

In the face of such censorship, the PTM and its supporters have made extensive use of new media such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Members of the PTM have proven to be adept at uploading and circulating images, videos and speeches. At PTM rallies, protestors often come armed with flags, banners and smartphones.

²⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQLB5qodExY>. Assessed on 8 June 2018.

²¹ <https://twitter.com/fazalwarraich?lang=en>. Assessed 7 June 2018.

Conclusion

The PTM has emerged as a major force in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA. Its rallies are attended by thousands and leaders like Pashteen are increasingly being equated with figures like Abdul Ghaffar Khan. The fact that the movement does not have a fixed formal structure or unified socio-political vision, coupled with its employment of broad slogans like “constitutional rights”, “official discrimination” and “human rights”, has resulted in the PTM receiving support from numerous activists and socio-political movements. Members from organizations as divergent as Lal Salaam, the Pakistani branch of the International Marxist Tendency, and the religiously conservative Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (F), have joined PTM rallies and sit-ins. In this sense, the PTM draws from and resembles the wave of protests movements that characterized the Arab Spring. These movements were marked by spectacular mobilization – often through social media – against oppression but often lacked a clear unified vision about socio-political change.²²

Political parties like the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (F) and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, both of which are prominent in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA, have attempted to appropriate the protests launched by the PTM. On their part, the leaders of the PTM have thus far stated that the movement will not develop into a political party and have not endorsed any political parties. It remains to be seen how the PTM (or potential factions within it) will negotiate their position as Pakistan heads to elections in July.

On its part, the military and state authorities are monitoring the rallies organized by the PTM, speeches made by its leaders and various social media sites employed by the movement. As of 9 June 2018, a one-month ban has been imposed on public gatherings in South Waziristan to prevent “anti-state” gatherings.

PTM leaders are being watched, in particular, on how they respond to the issue of Pashtunistan. This is especially salient given that various activists and political leaders in Afghanistan have openly expressed their support for the PTM. Thus far, PTM leaders have refrained from raising this issue, preferring to speak in terms of “constitutional rights”. The

²² Asef Bayat, *Revolution Without Revolutionaries: Understanding the Arab Spring* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

movement's appeal to Pashtun pride and attention to discrimination against the Pashtuns has, however, caused concerns within the Pakistani establishment.

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