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## The Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement: A thorn in the Pakistani Military's side

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2019 was nothing if not a year of protests. From Chile to Hong Kong, passing through France, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Sudan and India, the world was engulfed in a wave of demonstrations, some more peaceful than others, where citizens rallied and shouted their grievances against their respective governments to the world. Pakistan was not exempt from this global tsunami of marches and manifestations of dissatisfaction, as the country was swept by the peaceful protests of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM). Tahaffuz means protection in Urdu, and it is precisely what the leaders of the PTM, including renowned human rights activist Manzoor Pashteen, are advocating for: the protection of Pakistan's largest minority, the Pashtuns, against the gross human rights violations they have suffered as a consequence of the Pakistani army's military operations in North and South Waziristan (part of the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas) during Pakistan's war on terror beginning in the early 2000s.

The plight of the Pashtuns of Pakistan runs deep and is rooted in a series of unfortunate historical events that has led to systematic discrimination of their ethnic group. The PTM has been able to make waves amongst Pakistani society, but the Pakistani government is reluctant to sway in favour of their demands, which can be explained by the fact that the PTM is not only calling out the Pakistani police's brutality, but they have also charged at the de facto leaders of the country: the military establishment. Indeed, the PTM challenges the military's integrity and has publicly accused it of not only collaborating with terrorist organisations, but also fermenting them in order to serve its interests. The mass support gathered by the PTM is increasingly threatening the military establishment's hegemony. As such, the PTM is seen by the military as a true thorn in its side, and in an attempt to remove it, the movement's symbolic and charismatic leader, Manzoor Pashteen, was arrested on 27 January on grounds of criminal intimidation, promoting enmity between different groups, criminal conspiracy, sedition and condemning the creation of the country and advocating the

abolishment of its sovereignty. Despite widespread manifestations protesting his arrests and demands of his immediate release, on top of condemnations by notable human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, as well as Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, Pashteen was detained for a month and only released on bail. The charges against him were not dropped, and if sentenced, he could face life imprisonment.

This article aims to explore the threat caused to the Pakistani military by a peaceful movement which demands the most basic human rights for a minority that has long been marginalised from Pakistani society. While the PTM has always used constitutional means to express its demands, it has been branded as a treacherous and terrorist faction by supporters of the military. In this modern tale of David versus Goliath, the future of the PTM remains to be seen. Will the military remove the thorn and trample the seeds, or will the movement, despite continuous setbacks, only continue to bloom?

### FCR and FATA

Understanding the plight of the Pashtun Tahaffuz movement requires taking a step back in history, examining the reasons why the Pashtun were systematically and legally marginalised from Pakistani society and how this engendered human rights violations in our day and age.

In the 19th century, at a time of geopolitical tensions in the South Asian region dubbed as 'The Great Game' by the writer Rudyard Kipling, the British Empire faced the threat of Russian expansion through Central Asia. Although unlikely, the British feared a Russian invasion of Afghanistan, which would in turn threaten its hegemony in British India and its economic advantages in the region. As such, the British sought to consolidate their borders in a pre-emptive approach to counter Russian influence. After annexing the Punjab and Sindh regions by the end of the 1850s, the British reached the foothills of Pashtun dominated territories. The British continued to annex and fortify the mountains inhabited by Pashtun tribes, stepping closer and closer towards Afghanistan. However, the empire had failed on two previous occasions to bring Afghanistan under its direct control and as such, it opted to turn the country into a buffer State to serve its interests. It was hence vital to define the country's external frontiers, and this is how the border between modern day Afghanistan and Pakistan,

known as the Durand line, was decided. In 1893, Sir Mortimer Durand arrived in Kabul to start negotiations with the Afghan Amir, Abdur Rahman. While historians to this day debate the conditions under which Rahman agreed to Durand's border treaty, the result is that the agreement divided the Pashtun, a nation inherently tied by blood, culture and tradition, in half. Following the creation of Pakistan in 1947, this border issue continued to strain regional relations. Afghanistan, which had gained full independence and sovereignty in 1919, challenged Pakistani membership to the United Nations as it did not recognise the international border between the two countries.

Post-independence Pakistan was quickly sown with instability and had already managed to engage in a territorial war over the Princely State of Jammu & Kashmir with India within a year of its formation by sponsoring and managing an invasion of the Princely State. It was clear that the country could not afford a war on its western border with Afghanistan as well, and the potent threat of Pashtun nationalism influenced by Afghanistan, and supported by India, convinced the Pakistani leadership to maintain the British-established status quo in the Pashtun majority regions of Pakistan, known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), as to root out any budding notions of reunification with the Pashtuns' ethnic kin across the border.

Under the domination of the British Empire, the Pashtun tribes along the Durand line were administered by the 1901 Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), a legal framework that seemingly respected the area's internal autonomy and customs of Pashtuns. The FCR recognised the authority of the tribal elders, known as *maliks*, and certain aspects of the *Pashtunwali* code of honour. However, this paved the way for corruption and abuse of power by the maliks, who were essentially bribed by the British to preserve their national interests. Furthermore, the legal system set in place by the FCR did not allow citizens, living in tribal regions, basic justice and civil rights such as appeal, *wakeel* (lawyer) and *daleel* (argument); in short, the right to defend themselves in a free trial. The FCR allowed collective punishment against a culprit's tribe and permitted authorities to hold individuals for up to three years without charge. Hence, when this system was maintained by the Pakistani government for the sake of preserving its infant territorial integrity, it rendered those living in FATA second-class citizens in comparison to their compatriots. The FCR, which became colloquially known as the '*black*

*law*’, made for a ‘*lawless*’ territory whose special regime turned out to serve in the Pakistani military’s favour during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and during its counter-terrorism operations following the fall of the Taliban in 2001 at the hands of the United States.

### **FATA: an incubator and safe haven for militancy**

It is well-known that the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) provided financial, material and logistical support to the Afghan Mujahideen following the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union. Thus, FATA’s porous border with Afghanistan proved to be a strategic advantage for training and infiltrating Mujahideen fighters and served both American and Pakistani interests. However, once the Soviets left Afghanistan and another insurgency started, the Taliban arose victorious and ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. The Taliban served as the ISI’s strategic asset in Afghanistan but following the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent US invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan engaged in a dangerous double game where it supported both the US and NATO engagements and the Taliban insurgency against them. While the US demanded full support from Pakistan, the military could not afford to abandon the Taliban after half a decade of support, as such a reversal of policy could risk reprisals from the group and losing man-power for its proxy-war in Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir. This culminated in the use of FATA territories as safe havens for militants and terrorist organisations, until President Musharraf succumbed to US pressure and half-heartedly launched operations in FATA against Al-Qaeda operatives who had taken refuge in the region in 2002. This clash began an era of unprecedented violence towards Pashtun tribes, who could freely be accused, persecuted and killed for allegedly aiding and abetting Al-Qaeda operatives under the FCR. Furthermore, it sowed deep mistrust towards the Pakistani military, which had previously refrained from entering FATA territory without the accord of tribal elders.

Moreover, using FATA as an incubator for militant organisations inevitably turned around to bite the hand of the Pakistani military. This occurred upon the formation of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an umbrella of Islamist radical terror groups who were nurtured in the conflict, violence and instability of FATA in 2007. The TTP developed close links with Al-Qaeda

and the Afghan Taliban and conducted a subversive agenda against the Pakistani State. It aims to overthrow the government in Islamabad and install a strict Islamic regime in the country. While at first the government was open to negotiations with the TTP, their consecutive failure to negotiate led to an upscale of attacks and counter attacks from both sides, mostly conducted in FATA. The conflict between the TTP and the Pakistani military caused mass displacement of the Pashtun people, civilian deaths, extrajudicial killings and arbitrary detentions. The FCR facilitated the military conduct in FATA and ensured impunity, while the notorious reputation of FATA enforced stigma and discrimination against Pashtun refugees, who are perceived as terrorists by their fellow Pakistanis. The population of FATA was also subject to drone strikes by the United States, which conducted operations against Taliban and Al-Qaeda members who had fled to North Waziristan following the US invasion of Afghanistan. It is estimated that the US launched between 330 and 374 drone strikes in Pakistan from 2004 to 2013, killing between 400 and 900 civilians and seriously injuring at least 600.

### **Birth of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement**

It was in this context of war and devastation that the forefather of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement was born. In May 2014, in a Gomal University Hostel room, eight students belonging to the Mehsud tribe started the Mehsud Tahaffuz Movement (MTM). Amongst these students was Manzoor Pashteen, whose charisma, eloquence and determination would propel him into becoming the face of the movement. The students had formed the movement to campaign and raise awareness on the atrocities committed in their homeland, by both militants and the Pakistani military. One of their major demands included the removal of landmines and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) left behind during Pakistan's war on terror in Waziristan. The movement rallied support for its anti-war campaign, and its supporters called on the Pakistani government to cease systematic discrimination, extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances all done in the name of counterterrorism.

The movement rose to the forefront of the political scene in early 2018, following the death of a young Pashtun man named Nageebullah Mehsud. Mehsud was a shop owner and an

aspiring model, and his untimely demise came at the hand of the Pakistani police during a staged encounter which claimed the lives of three other people. Rao Anwar, a Senior Superintendent of Police in the Malir District of Karachi who was involved in the shootout, justified the operation by stating that Mehsud and the other victims had links to the TTP. However, Mehsud's family challenged these claims and in January 2019, following a police enquiry, an antiterrorism court in Karachi found that the encounter had been staged and the killings of Mehsud and the three other individuals were extrajudicial.

Ali Wazir, a PTM leader, described Mehsud's murder in an interview with the magazine *Himal Southasian* as, "*the event that launched the movement*". Indeed, the march organised by MTM leaders to protest Mehsud's death and call for an enquiry into police brutality and Pashtun discrimination is considered to be the starting point of the PTM. The MTM and its small group of followers marched from Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, to the capital Islamabad, approximately 300 kilometres. Along the way, despite the lack of media coverage but thanks to the power of social media, more and more people joined the event. Families of the '*disappeared*' joined the march in the thousands. Upon arrival in Islamabad, the MTM organised a ten-day sit-in that would transform it into a broader movement that has now gained international recognition: the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement. By englobing all the Pakistani Pashtun tribes, rather than solely naming the Mehsud tribe, the PTM leaders sought to include the multiple grievances their people had endured under the appalling FCR legal framework and the abuse of their territory by the Pakistani military and Islamist extremist groups. The sit-in gathered support from other political movements and human rights organisations in Pakistan, such as the Women's Democratic Front, the Awami Workers Party and even leaders from mainstream political parties such as the Tehreek-e-Insaf (Prime Minister Imran Khan's party), some of whom attended the march and the sit-in. The PTM welcomed members of religious groups as well and installed a policy of non-violent manifestations to let their grievances be heard by those in power.

Throughout the year, the PTM continued to organise protests and sit-ins to voice their demands, which had expanded to include not only the removal of landmines and the return of the '*disappeared*', but also the creation of a truth and reconciliation committee for those affected by the conflict in FATA, recognition of the Pashtun people's constitutional rights and

an end to systematic discrimination and harassment, accountability for extrajudicial killings and that Rao Anwar be brought to justice for his involvement in the murder of Naqeebullah Mehsud. During these nation-wide protests, held in cities such as Lahore, Peshawar and Miran Shah, tens of thousands of people rallied to the cause of the PTM and the protests successfully remained peaceful. Manzoor Pashteen's charisma placed him in the spotlight, and he became the face of the increasingly prominent movement. As he advocated for the rights of his people and accountability on behalf of the military, he continuously stressed the constitutionality of the PTM's demands.

### The military's response

During PTM rallies, Manzoor Pashteen's speeches challenged the military in a way no other civil movement in Pakistan previously had. Indeed, it is customary for political opponents and civil movements who are critical of the military to be silenced and pressured into abandoning their fight against the military establishment, however, the PTM has so far shown incredible resilience and efforts to silence and pressure its leaders have not succeeded, despite significant setbacks. For example, in May 2019 two senior leaders of the PTM and elected members of the National Assembly of Pakistan, Ali Wazir and Mohsin Dawar, were detained following a clash at a security checkpoint between protesters and the military. The army opened fire on the protesters, claiming they were armed, and at least 13 people died as a result. Wazir and Dawar were finally released on bail in September 2019, but so far, no independent investigation has been conducted. Earlier that year, another prominent PTM leader, Arman Loni, was killed in a police encounter following a protest against a terror attack in Balochistan province. His fellow activists were barred from attending his funeral.

Aside from using force and intimidation techniques, the Pakistani government has also sought to repress the movement by discrediting it and preventing media coverage on its marches and events. However, being ignored by traditional media outlets turned the PTM to social media networks, such as Twitter and Facebook, to advertise its cause. While the military has less control over censorship on social media, it has still managed to unleash a disinformation campaign and the accounts of PTM leaders are regularly *'trolled'* by supporters of the military.

PTM activists are branded as traitors and terrorists, their opponents playing on the mistrust and stereotypes of Pashtun people. Moreover, the PTM has been accused by the Pakistani military of receiving outside support from India and Afghanistan, in an attempt to further discredit and demonise the movement. Military spokesman Major General Asif Ghafoor questioned the PTM's funding at a press conference, asking: *"On the PTM website, they have got a number that states the amount of funds they have collected from Pashtuns around the world. But tell us how much money did you get from the NDS (Afghan National Directorate of Security) to run your campaign? How much money did RAW (India's Research and Analysis Wing) give you for the first dharna (peaceful demonstration) in Islamabad?"* Such statements emanating directly and publicly from military officials only fuel the anti-Pashtun sentiment, and plays into the military's accusations that the PTM has a subversive anti-Pakistan agenda.

## Conclusion

The Pakistani authorities' arrest of Manzoor Pashteen only drove the PTM thorn deeper into the military's side. The move asserted everything the PTM is accusing them of, and only fuelled the movement's determination, upheld its resilience and gained it further international recognition. Surely, it is this international recognition, combined with the pressure placed upon Pakistan by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), that eventually led to Pashteen's release, on bail, after a month of detention. Pakistan is already receiving heat for its failure to cooperate and comply with FATF guidelines and as such remains on the organisation's grey list. Furthermore, the orchestrated escape of Ehsanullah Ehsan of the TTP and Masood Azhar, UN designated Global Terrorist and chief of Jaish-e-Mohammad, further cast doubt on the genuineness of the efforts made to arrest Hafiz Saeed, another UN designated Global Terrorist and the chief of Lashkar-e-Taiba. Hence, the Pakistani government certainly needed to ease some of the pressure and releasing Pashteen could have served as a show of goodwill and appeasement, and potentially as a distraction from the military's dubious dealings with Ehsanullah Ehsan, Masood Azhar and Hafiz Saeed.

Obtaining the release of Pashteen is certainly a big win for the PTM. Upon his release, Pashteen gave a statement to AFP declaring that his arrest was not going to stop him from raising his voice for Pashtun rights.

It is of utmost importance that Pakistan takes adequate measures to address the grievances of the Pashtun people, investigates human rights violations committed in the erstwhile FATA and honours the basic and fundamental human rights of the Pashtuns. With the signing of the US-Taliban peace deal, the Af-Pak region has entered a critical time and each step taken towards peace in Afghanistan must be treaded carefully, as to avoid the outbreak of yet another conflict. Hence, Pakistan's border region with Afghanistan must be stabilised and not used as a launchpad for terrorism and anti-State activities, as it was done during the Soviet and American invasions of Afghanistan.

The PTM, in its two-year existence, has carefully avoided questioning Pakistan's territorial integrity. Hence, the military's demonising of the PTM and Manzoor Pashteen on grounds of sedition and treachery are held in murky waters. The PTM does not call for secession, and it has not resorted to armed conflict to engage against the military. On the contrary, it is seeking to fully integrate the Pashtuns of Pakistan into Pakistani society and is demanding rights that were finally made available to them following the merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018. Yet, the media blackout and repression it has suffered at the hands of the Pakistani military, as well as Prime Minister Imran Khan's prolonged silence on the issue (Khan had once proudly claimed his Pashtun ancestry but is now considered to be the military's man) provide evidence that the PTM has truly managed to impose itself as a threat to the military. That is because the PTM is not afraid to call the military out for what it is: a sponsor of terror and a terrorist against its own people. Indeed, a popular slogan at PTM rallies goes: *"Yeh jo dehshatgardi hai, is ke peechay wardi hai" (Behind this terrorism, is the military uniform).*

The PTM has opened Pandora's box by exposing the tactics of the military against its own people, but the military's modus operandi is not exclusive to the Pashtuns. These techniques are all too familiar to any individual or member of any Pakistani civil movement that has dared to challenge the hegemony of the military. Hence, the PTM has the power to rally the

countless victims of the Pakistani military's abuse, regardless of ethnicity, and further decrease support for the institution.

Since the military continues to hold such a grasp on the political scene in Pakistan, it is unlikely that the civilian government will ever concede to all of the PTM's demands for one simple reason. In the aftermath of conflict and gross human rights violations, victims call for recognition and accountability. Yet acknowledging the plight of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement would be acknowledging the decades of state-sponsorship of terrorism by the Pakistani military, and the violations committed in the name of counterterrorism in a region the military itself nurtured as an incubator for terrorism. It would recognise everything that India, the United States, numerous other countries and the FATF have been calling Pakistan out for.

As such, from the Army's perspective, crushing the PTM is not only about crushing Pashtun demands. It is about safeguarding the institutional interests of the Pakistani military establishment.