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## *Takshashila Strategic Assessment*

# Impact of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement on Pakistan's Political Landscape

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## **Executive Summary**

The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), a powerful civil and human rights movement, has rattled Pakistan's political and military establishment by drawing huge crowds. The merger of the provinces of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) can be seen as a major success for the Movement. The Army had opposed the merger for decades as it was keen to retain control over FATA. The sudden shift in the government's position to implement the merger to do so can be attributed in part to pressure of the PTM. With the country due to vote in National and Provincial Assembly elections soon, political parties and the Army are crafting their strategies keeping the PTM in mind. If the movement survives, it could revive dormant nationalist movements in Pakistan, perhaps even provide a shot-in-the-arm to Pashtun irredentism in the region. The possibility of the PTM spurring similar movements in Pakistan's neighbourhood, Pakistan occupied Kashmir, Sistan-Baluchistan in Iran and Afghanistan cannot be ruled out.

## Introduction

A new civil and human rights movement called the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) is drawing large crowds across Pakistan. A non-violent, mass movement that seeks the redressal of Pashtun grievances, the PTM has targeted Pakistan's all-powerful army. In turn, the Pakistan Army has sought to delegitimise the movement in several ways. Through all this, one thing is clear: Pakistan can expect more turmoil in the coming months.

With elections to the National and Provincial Assemblies due soon, political leaders are weighing the impact of the PTM on their core constituencies against their parties' relationship with the army. They are factoring in the PTM in their election strategies. Importantly, the PTM could also figure in the army's strategy in the run-up to voting. Should the anticipated result be averse to the army's preferences, there is a possibility of the army acting to postpone the elections. The army has already begun to intensify its crackdown- the attack on Ali Wazir, reportedly by the Pakistani Taliban, the three-month ban on Mohsin Dawar from Northern Waziristan and the curfew in parts of the area are all examples. By unleashing violence on the PTM, the resulting unrest could possibly be used to put off elections.

## The Rise of the PTM

The PTM is the latest manifestation of decades of Pashtun protest against state oppression.<sup>1</sup> Its origin can be traced back to 2014 when student leaders of Gomal University in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province were propelled into activism to protect the rights of Pakistan's ethnic Pashtuns.<sup>2</sup> During Operation Zarb-e-Azb, an army offensive against the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and other militant groups based in KP and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), hundreds of Pashtun civilians were arbitrarily detained and tortured, and subsequently disappeared. The activism led to the emergence of the Mehsud Tahafuz Movement (MTM), the forerunner of the PTM. In January this year, a young Pashtun, Naqibullah Mehsud, was killed in a staged encounter in Karachi. This provided the spark that transformed the simmering Pashtun rage and the rather diffused MTM into the PTM. The PTM gathered momentum quickly and spread to other cities like Karachi and Lahore, where PTM leaders have addressed huge public rallies.

Essentially a civil and human rights movement, the PTM seeks redressal of Pashtun grievances within the bounds of the Pakistani Constitution.<sup>3</sup> It demands that the army and security forces be held accountable for terrorism and unrest in

KP and FATA, as well as the arbitrary detention and unexplained disappearances of hundreds of Pashtun youth.<sup>4</sup> Its activists have raised provocative slogans, including one that holds the army responsible for the terrorism.<sup>5</sup> The army is systematically seeking to discredit the PTM by questioning the patriotism of its leaders and activists, and dubbing them as agents of foreign powers hostile to Pakistan.<sup>6</sup> It has thus sought to paint the PTM as a threat to Pakistan's national security.<sup>7</sup> PTM activists are being harassed and arrested on trumped up terrorism and sedition charges.<sup>8</sup> Pakistani media houses are reportedly under pressure to ignore PTM rallies in their coverage.<sup>9</sup> Important developments in this respect also include the June bombing of a PTM rally<sup>10</sup> which led to the death of three activists and a curfew in Waziristan. Another leader, Mohsin Dawar has been banned<sup>11</sup> from North Waziristan for a period of three months for inciting people against the State. Simultaneously, the army has engaged in talks with the PTM via an intermediary. By attending jirgas, the PTM has even considered calling off its protests for a limited period of time during Ramzan.

## Impact of the PTM

The salience of the PTM is that it is one of the only movements in recent Pakistani history that has been able to affect outcomes that were not in the Army's favour. The 31st Constitutional Amendment which allows for FATA to be merged with KP was proposed many decades ago but never found consensus in the Parliament until now. Previously, the Army had seldom extended support to bring FATA within the political mainstream because of the region's importance in its security operations. For the Army to change its position on such a significant issue is not a development that can be easily dismissed. The PTM's ability to draw attention to the army's misdeeds has generated enough pressure to expedite the process of bringing about the Constitutional reform.

Analysts in Pakistan and outside have tended to dismiss the impact of non-violent mass movements especially those targeting the army. However, such movements have brought dramatic change in the country. The lawyers' movement in Pakistan (2007-09) that began as a protest against the unconstitutional suspension of Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry as the chief justice of Pakistan's Supreme Court transformed the country's political landscape in unexpected ways.<sup>12</sup> There have been other movements that have been violently crushed by the Pakistani state and the PTM too may meet the same fate, should the army decide that its existence and activity go against the interests of the army and of Pakistan. The PTM is still a nascent movement. While its implications for Pakistan's political system will

unfold only in the coming years, it has begun to impact Pakistan's society and the country's political and military elite in small but potentially significant ways.

### **Addressing Pashtun Grievances**

By making Pakistan's political and military establishment sit up, the PTM has been successful in raising awareness of the plight of Pashtuns among the Pakistani public. Originally, its demands included the release of missing persons and an end to extra-judicial killings, stopping humiliation of Pashtuns at security checkpoints, and removal of landmines in FATA. The army has conceded some of these demands by agreeing to no longer impose curfews in the region and develop a mechanism to find the missing persons.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the latest reforms replace the draconian Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) with FATA Interim Governance Regulation, 2018. The interim rules place a check on the actions of security forces that previously benefited from the lawlessness in the region.<sup>14</sup> The more significant achievement of the Movement is the precedent that has been set - a non-violent resistance can meet its objectives.

### **Impact on Elections**

Some PTM leaders including Mohsin Dawar, Ali Wazir and Abdullah Nangyal are reportedly planning to contest the elections however it is possibly too late for them to have any significant impact. Although the PTM is not contesting the upcoming elections and has not indicated any preferences among the parties in the fray, the parties are closely watching PTM's influence on voters and the army's responses to the Movement to craft their strategy for the elections accordingly.

The impact of the PTM on Pashtun nationalist parties is complex. Prima facie, it seems that the PTM's stirring of Pashtun national consciousness would benefit Pashtun nationalist parties with which it has a "natural affinity" because of their shared ideology and opposition to the army operations in KP-FATA. It would mean that parties like the Awami National Party, which has been the torchbearer of Pashtun nationalism for decades, would see the PTM as an ally. Indeed, initially the ANP supported the PTM. However, it subsequently changed its stance. Its leaders are warning party workers against participating in PTM activities and have taken strong action against those who have defied their orders.<sup>15</sup>

It appears that the PTM's robust championing of Pashtun constitutional rights and calls for protection of Pashtuns in Pakistan have exposed the rather shallow espousal of the Pashtun cause by the ANP. This has unsettled the party. It is likely

that the ANP, recognising the PTM's potential to edge it out from its leadership of Pashtun nationalism, decided to prevent its activists from joining the PTM and strengthening it.

However, the ANP is unlikely to oppose the PTM too strongly as it will be hoping to benefit from the movement's stirring of Pashtun nationalist consciousness in the coming elections in KP and FATA. But this may not be enough to bring ANP seats as the voters have not forgotten the corrupt governance it provided in the province in the 2008-13 period.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast to the ANP, the Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PMAP) is standing resolutely by the PTM and has even organised rallies in the hope that this will bring electoral success in KP. However, the PMAP's support base is in Balochistan's Pashtun areas and its chances of doing well in KP and FATA are slim as parties like the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) have their own support bases in these two administrative units.

Thus, Pashtun nationalist parties in KP-FATA may not benefit much electorally from the PTM's mobilisation as their own shortcomings (the ANP's corrupt image) or disadvantages (the PMAP's lack of a strong base in KP) are too serious to offset voter goodwill for the PTM.<sup>17</sup>

Parties, like the PTI, that are close to the army have taken a strong anti-PTM stand. The PTI has, for instance accused the PTM of maligning the army and state institutions.<sup>18</sup> It is said to be behind a new movement called the Pakistan Zindabad Movement that aims at countering the PTM.<sup>19</sup> PTI's opposition to the PTM could cost it votes among Pashtun nationalists but many in urban KP, who see merit in the army's crackdowns in the region, are likely to vote for the PTI and the recently resurrected MMA, an umbrella grouping of Islamist parties.

### **Strengthening the Sub-national Voice**

The PTM rallies have captured the attention of international media and have brought the Pashtun identity into the consciousness of the Pakistani people and exposed the atrocities faced by the Pashtuns to a global audience. Mobilisation against the army could have a demonstration effect on other ethno-nationalist groups like the Balochis and Sindhis. These are groups that have traditionally felt excluded from the mainstream to come out in the open to raise their own grievances which could possibly contain anti-state and anti-military sentiments and demands.<sup>20</sup> Each of these sub-nationalist groups possesses a different view of

their place in Pakistan and different social orders- which could make Pakistan nationalism all the more complex.

It is too early to predict whether the PTM will evolve into a viable nationalist movement, the kind seen in the past when the Pashtunistan movement was at its height.<sup>21</sup> The Pashtuns remain fragmented along tribal, sub-tribal and ideological lines. Such divisions have traditionally been utilised by the army (and earlier by the British) to stop the Pashtuns from coalescing in the past. These multi-fold divisions have overtaken any attempts to do so and have often led to digression from the main objectives which include the right to life and dignity of Pashtuns . While it is irrefutable that the PTM has managed to consolidate a majority of Pashtuns, these divisions could form a deadlock hindering the Movement's progress.

### **Implications for Neighbours**

The Pashtun Movement could have a demonstration effect not only within Pakistan but outside of it as well. There is the possibility of dissent taking place in Gilgit Baltistan (part of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir) where demands for development have long been sidelined.<sup>22</sup> The PTM had been criticised by the Pakistani government for the involvement of Afghan refugees.<sup>23</sup> However, it is also possible that such claims were used to frame the movement for having support from foreign powers. The PTM has been quick to decry any support from outside its Pakistani borders for this very reason. There is also the possibility that this demonstration effect could extend to Balochis beyond Pakistan. There is a sizeable number of Balochis in Sistan-Balochistan in Iran, who have long been protesting against state repression, discrimination and underdevelopment.<sup>24</sup> It is also important not to overstate ties of the PTM to players in the neighbourhood- the paramount significance of the movement is long term democratisation of Pakistan.

## **The Way Forward**

### **Movement could Recede**

There are two eventualities which could result in the PTM fading away from public consciousness. One, the army displays considerable progress in addressing the grievances of the Pashtuns. Second, the Movement dies a natural death if it is unable to sustain the current level of momentum.

## **The Movement Stays the Course**

The PML-N's fulfilment of its promise to merge FATA into KP weeks before the National Assembly elections can be seen as a historic achievement for the party. It could positively impact the party's performance in the elections even though, the military has acted to systematically weaken the party. However, the merger, although a major demand of the PTM, is unlikely to prompt the PTM leadership to call off its protests. Mohsin Dawar, a leader of the PTM, welcomed the extension of judicial protections to the tribal regions but stopped short of supporting the merger. "Our entire struggle is based on the right to live," Dawar said, adding that the movement would continue to protest the abuses by officials.<sup>25</sup> Integration into the mainstream and the withdrawal of FCR provides constitutional protection to the rights of the Pashtuns and encourages the PTM to pursue its key demands. However, the leaders seem determined to stay on course whilst being careful to avoid mistakes. "The issues raised by PTM are still relevant whether FATA is a separate entity or part of KP", said Yosufzai on the merger.

It is now calling for international guarantors for any agreement it reaches with the government. It has also demanded the trial and arrest of former Pakistani President, Gen Pervez Musharraf. However, support for the Movement may wane as it could cause divisions among the ranks of people who prioritise its objectives differently.

## **The Movement Becomes a Political Party**

The PTM has not revealed any political ambitions so far and has shown no inclination to organise itself as a party.<sup>26</sup> However, the large crowds it is drawing could tempt it to support certain like-minded candidates especially in KP, FATA, Balochistan's Pashtun areas and even Karachi, which has a substantial Pashtun population. But participating in elections or forming a party carries the danger of divisions among its ranks opening up.<sup>27</sup> Besides, it could lose its popular appeal in the eyes of its supporters, many of whom view the political system as corrupt and inefficient.

## **The Movement is Suppressed**

The Pakistani army has already sought to discredit the PTM and could employ violent means to suppress the Movement if it poses a fierce challenge to the interests of the military establishment. The leaders of the PTM, including its



leader Manzoor Ahmad Pashteen are aware of this. “We know our first mistake will be our last,” he said in an interview in April this year.<sup>28</sup>

Should the Pakistan army prove unsuccessful in weakening the PTM, the possibility of using coercion to crush it cannot be ruled out. Already it has sought to discredit the PTM, arrest its leaders, bar it from university campuses and enforce a blackout on mainstream media.

## Conclusion

The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement has emerged as one of the more relatively successful grassroots movements in recent Pakistani history. It has been able to exert pressure to force the Pakistan government into implementing major reforms, despite the Army's disapproval of the move as it would weaken its hold over a region that is so essential to Pakistan's security. However, its future in the political landscape is fraught with challenges, particularly considering that some of its demands –judicial recourse and removal of the Frontier Crimes Regulation– have been met. Important factors to consider will now include division among its ranks depending on the direction that the Movement chooses to embark upon.

It is possible that its objectives will be adopted by a political party, looking to expand their supporter base. It may also mobilise into a political party of its own. However, in both these cases, the momentum of the movement may be lost. If the crackdown on the PTM intensifies, then it will mean more violence in the already fraught areas of FATA. This in turn could delay the reforms on merging FATA and KP. With respect to the power balance, it is probable that, *in its current state it will emerge only as one of the smaller players in Pakistan's political landscape.* However, its demonstration effect is not a factor that can be easily dismissed, particularly in areas where government failure is rampant. While there is little immediate impact on India, the democratisation of Pakistan bodes well not only for itself, but for the entire region.

## References

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