

A little better

# Pakistan: Building and Maintaining a Peasant Movement

Wednesday 15 December 2010, by [TARIO Farooq](#) (Date first published: 14 December 2010).

On the eve of the International Day of Human Rights, 10<sup>th</sup> December 2010, I went to Okara as part of a delegation to attend public meetings organized by Anjuman Mozareen Punjab (Punjab Tenants Association—AMP). The other delegates were Nazli Javed, a member of the Labour Party Pakistan's federal committee, Jahan Ara, a leader of the Pakistan Telecommunication workers union, and Shahbaz Bajwa of the Labour Education Foundation. Of the four meetings that were held, we were able to attend two.

Over 5000 peasants working on military farms in the Okara and Pakpattan district of Punjab participated in the forums. Their demand is for ownership rights to the land their families have been cultivating for over 100 years.

It seemed to me that conditions at the Okara Military Farms and at the Kulyana Military Estate are a little better than before. The two large farms are spread over 20,000 acres and contain 26 villages. Okara City separates them. Many tenants had motor bikes and some also owned tractors. Mud homes are now being transformed into cement ones. And there had more animals. In fact there was smile on the face of almost all the tenants.

In 2000, the tenants at Okara military farms were asked to become lessees. After initial hesitation, they refused. In 2001 I attended a large gathering where tenants decided not to pay the share that they and their families traditionally paid to the administration of the military farms. For 10 years, they have successfully blocked any attempt by the military generals to reverse that process.

In 2001, I wrote my first article on the peasant movement, entitling it “paid enough and no more.” That is still the case. Clearly this has become the most successful nonpayment movement of peasants in Pakistan history.

After the public rally, Rehmat Masih told me at Chack 4/41 in Okara Military Farms that “We are a little richer now; this year the potato crop has paid well. We sold a 100-kilogram bag for up to 2000 Rupees. We earned nearly 100,000 Rupees from one acre. The corn crop was also good. The prices of vegetables were a little better than before and above all we do not have to pay anything to the Military Farms administration.” He eagerly contrasted that with the previous situation, when “with one excuse or another almost two-thirds of all crops were taken by the Military Farms people. We were treated like slaves. We had no life. We were here to do what the military officers were asking us to do. We did not have any reasonable income; we were living in absolute poverty.”

I thought about the price I had paid for one kilogram of potatoes in Lahore. While those who grow potatoes were happy with 20 Rupees a kilo, I remembered paying 60 or 70 Rupees a kilogram earlier in the year. Who pockets the difference?

I asked Nadeem Ashraf, vice president of AMP in Renalkhurd, how he could build a big house for his

family. He said with a pride in his eyes, “by the amount that we have not paid to the army during the last 10 years.” This is the case of many in the villages.

However, the price the tenants have paid in building and maintaining the nonpayment movement is high. Twelve tenants have been killed by the army, the police or hired goons. Several hundred peasants have been jailed. Many still bear wounds on their bodies from their fight against a repressive army.

The last three movement martyrs lost their lives in 2009 at the Kulyana Military Estate Okara. Three tenants, Abdul Rahim, Mohammed Abbas and Amir Ali, including a father and son, were shot and killed while another 27 peasants, including several women, were injured by army officers at Chak 28/2-R (part of Kulyana military estate).

Military Farms were built across Punjab by the British in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century for the use of the colonial army—mainly to cultivate fodder and rear domestic animals. The leases on these farms began to run out in 1985, with most reverting to the provincial government by 2000. Throughout all this time, the land was cultivated by farmers. In recent decades, military officers have been illegally profiting by subleasing the land to contractors; they have been reluctant to give up the extra income even when their leases expired.

Military authorities have been pressing the Punjab Board of Revenue to transfer the ownership of these lands to the military, often in the name of national security (whether the land is in border areas or not). Where this fails, the military simply grabs the land from farmers by force. Then the farmers are placed under contract with the army. Currently about 68,000 acres in Punjab are managed illegally in the name of the Okara Remote Military Farms, Army Welfare Trust and on other names.

In the villages of the Kulyana, the pattern is different. There farmers have been working under the contract system and are therefore cleared from the land when an officer wishes to profit from its sublet.

During the General Musharraf dictatorship, a peasant movement, “Malki Yaa Mout” (“death or ownership”), arose. It opposed any payment to military authorities and was the first challenge to the dictatorship. The military government tried its best to force the peasants to pay something but failed despite repression.

The main reason, the movement succeeded, was because it was not isolated. Through the successful use of the internet, knowledge about the movement spread worldwide. In 2001, when I wrote the first email explaining the extent of the peasant revolt under the leadership of both Muslims and Christians, the story immediately grabbed the attention of social organizations nationally and internationally. Publicity and backing from them played an important role in sustaining the peasant movement.

In January 2002, Asma Jehaghir, presently president of Supreme Court Bar Association of Pakistan, accompanied us to the area following the killing of Mohammed Bashir by military gangsters in Renalakhurd. The peasant women appealed to her to help them. Once Asma Jehaghir committed herself to this struggle, it was difficult for the military generals to crush the movement.

When Asma Jehaghir went abroad on 10 December 2010 to collect her prestigious award on the protection of human rights, everyone rejoiced. On the home side, the peasants under the leadership of AMP decided for the first time, to celebrate the International Day of Human Rights in their own traditions. Everyone seems happy and unafraid that future actions by the army generals might force

them to pay again. It feels like we are an extended family.

“We will do what we have done in the past, we will struggle and build the mass movement” responded Mehr Abdul Sattar, general secretary AMP and a member of the federal executive committee, Labour Party Pakistan. He added, “We no longer live in fear. We have killed no one while they have killed our 12 brave peasant leaders. We have been framed in several fake murder cases and are also fighting the legal battles.” He was elected twice as Nazim (mayor) of the local union council and contested for a Punjab Assembly seat in 2008, losing by only 1500 votes. He came in second after Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz. Mehr Abdul Sattar confidently and proudly spoke of the coming possibilities: “We are putting up candidates for local bodies, and whenever elections will be held, we will win.” We spoke in his newly built home in Chack 4/4L in Okara Military Farms, another sign of ‘little better’ phenomena.

The AMP has become a part of the Pakistan Kisan Rabita Committee, a broader network of peasant’s organization established in 2003. The PKRC fights to end to feudalism and in defense of land rights and food sovereignty. It also struggles around the variety of problems that peasants face.

The struggle continues with “a little better” factor playing an important part in building the peasant movement in Pakistan.

**Farooq Tariq**

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