

Pakhtun movements for rights

Monday 5 March 2018, by [KHILJI Usama](#) (Date first published: 26 February 2018).

IN the past year, two important movements relating to Pakhtuns and led by Pakhtun youth have emerged in Pakistan: the movement for merging Federally Administered Tribal Areas with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, or the Fata Youth Jirga; and what is referred to as the Pakhtun Long March that has demanded an end to violations of rights of Pakhtuns, especially enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, sparked by the killing of Naqeebullah Mehsud in Karachi by the Sindh police.

Both these movements have common characteristics: they are completely peaceful, largely led by youth, demanding justice from a state seen as complicit in rights violations, across political affiliations, and involve an organised use of social media for projection.

It's unfortunate that mainstream media has provided little coverage to these two movements. There are three possibilities why.

First, the demands of both relate to the security policies of the state, and involve a discussion on Pakhtuns, who have been linked to the narrative of terrorism by the state and media. This discussion is considered taboo. This was evident in the conspicuous lack of coverage given to the Pakhtun Long March sit-in in Islamabad.

Second, access of media personnel to Fata has been limited owing to threats from both state and non-state actors. There are few alternatives to journalists embedded with security forces that paint a rosy picture of a ravaged land, and official statements.

Third, news relating to Fata and Pakhtun issues does not generate much interest and hence ratings for corporate news channels driven by profits. This is also linked to the larger public narrative that has dehumanised Pakhtuns, especially those from Fata, as terrorists or criminals.

It is interesting to note that mobile internet has been blocked in Fata since June 2016, and broadband connectivity is restricted to only a few towns.

Then, in the absence of media coverage and internet in Fata, how are the youth able to create critical mass on the internet? Youth active in Pakhtun movements relating to Fata on social media are either displaced by security operations and reside in nearby areas in KP, or in large cities such as Karachi, Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Islamabad, often subjected to racial profiling by state actors as well as society.

There are several injustices that Pakhtuns say they have been subjected to both in their native Fata and KP, and in other urban centres.

First, several checkpoints have been set up in Fata and in Swat, often at very close intermittent distance from one another that make movement for locals cumbersome. Instances of humiliation of locals here cause resentment of being treated like a suspect in one's own land. For South and North Waziristan Agencies, locals were issued special cards without which they could not enter, referred to

as 'Waziristan visa' by locals.

Second, the imposition of curfews in Fata and Swat is routine, and rounding up of locals after an attack on the military has also drawn protests. This includes shooting at sight anyone found in the vicinity of an attack. The collective punishment clause of the draconian colonial Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), 1901, has been employed several times whereby all male members of a tribe are punished for the act of one person from the tribe, and in the absence of a court system, justice is administered by the local political agent and commanding officer of the military.

Third, there is frustration that despite the presence of strict security checks, terrorist attacks on locals have continued. This was the point of the protest in Parachinar in 2017, where several bomb attacks took place despite the security posts.

Fourth, Pakhtuns often find themselves being racially profiled in the rest of the country, under a Punjab police order in 2017, and earlier announcements of disallowing IDPs from Fata into Punjab and Sindh.

However, what sparked the launch of the Pakhtun Long March was the killing of Naqeebullah Mehsud in a fake encounter in Karachi by the Sindh police, where, like millions of Pakhtuns, he was a migrant worker. He was an aspiring model as well. The story of his killing went viral on social media, making him the poster case of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and discrimination that Pakhtuns face.

The protesters camped in Islamabad from Feb 1 to Feb 10 ended the sit-in after the government promised to agree to their demands. These included an inquiry commission to investigate extrajudicial killings of Pakhtuns; arrest and trial of Rao Anwar, the police officer held responsible for Naqeebullah's extrajudicial killing and, as reported in this newspaper, hundreds of others; an end to mistreatment of locals during curfews in Fata; release of forcibly disappeared Pakhtuns; and complete removal of landmines in South Waziristan that have claimed several lives.

The Fata Youth Jirga has been able to achieve some of its goals. Their advocacy contributed to the favourable vote in parliament finally extending jurisdiction of the superior courts to Fata. The Pakhtun Long March has also seen some success. Its leaders claim that 71 missing persons whose return was demanded by the protesters were back home.

Meanwhile, the army chief scrapped the requirement of the Watan card, also known as the Waziristan visa, to enter Waziristan. These victories have encouraged thousands of other Pakhtuns to protest peacefully in Swat, Khyber Agency, and Bajaur Agency against mistreatment at checkpoints, curfews and raids on locals' houses, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings.

It is time the state realises that the politics of information and communication technologies are radically different from previous mediums of communication such as newspapers, pamphlets, radio and television, which were easy to censor. Circumventing censorship attempts on the internet is far easier, and social media has empowered citizens to mobilise and organise against injustices peacefully.

Hence, intimidation tactics such as registration of FIRs against protesters in Swat, or labelling organic local movements as unpatriotic and supported by foreign agencies is not going to work. The Pakhtun millennials have grown up in a post 9/11 security state and witnessed displacement, violence and discrimination. There is an urgent need for the state security policy to prioritise human security and fundamental rights, even when fighting terrorism. The organised and determined youth will not settle for less.

Usama Khilji

P.S.

Dawn

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1391731/pakhtun-movements-for-rights>