

What's Next for Pakistan's Pashtun Movement After a Brutal Army Crackdown

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The Pakistani army is trying to crush the rising tide of Pashtun nationalism and demand for civil rights in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

The Pakistan [army shot and killed at least 13 civilians](#) and injured dozens more at a sit-in staged by the [Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement](#) (Pashtun Defence Movement or PTM), this past weekend, in the tribal North Waziristan district of the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province.

The Director-General of the Inter-Services Public Relations (DG ISPR) Major [General Asif Ghafoor](#), [swiftly alleged](#) that the PTM – a nonviolent civil rights group – had attacked an army check-post and the soldiers acted in self-defence. What was even more malicious in the unfounded allegation was the army spokesman's claim the PTM's two parliamentarians [Mohsin Dawar](#) and [Ali Wazir](#) had led an armed assault on the army.

Wazir – a maverick Pashtun nationalist leader, who has lost sixteen family members, including his father and two brothers, to army-backed jihadist terrorism – was arrested on terrorism charges. Mohsin Dawar, an attorney by profession and a rights activist, was also [taken into custody](#) a few days later. Its ironic is that these two lawmakers had spearheaded a landmark [amendment to the Pakistani constitution](#) earlier this month.

The army subsequently imposed a [curfew](#) and shut down the internet, cellular and landline phone services in the region. Convoys of the other Pashtun nationalist groups headed to Waziristan, to express solidarity, were stopped in their tracks by the army. The area remains a no-go zone – as it has been for nearly two decades – for independent media. The [army even arrested a journalist](#) who had interviewed the parliamentarian Mohsin Dawar.

Within 24 hours, however, [video clips](#) had emerged indicating that other than raising their voice and slogans, the protesters had not launched any assault – armed or otherwise – on the army positions. In one clip, a few lads are seen trampling on the tin roof of a deserted sentry's cabin, but not a single frame shows the crowd pelting as much as a stone at army personnel.

The protesters greeted Dawar and Wazir with flower garlands, which they still had around their necks at the time of the assault. On the other hand, the rapid, indiscriminate firing is heard, with protesters on the run. The Pakistan army seems to have killed over a dozen Pashtun protesters, including some who had jumped into a ravine, apparently trying to save their lives. It was a turkey shoot.

Former Pakistani Prime Minister [Shahid Khaqan Abbasi was compelled to say](#), “army had the guns and no else seemed to have even a stick”. The massacre was [roundly condemned by the political leadership](#) in Pakistan, except the incumbent Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) of Prime Minister Imran Khan, who is widely seen as an army stooge.

The army was simply carrying out the [threat, which the DGISPR had arrogantly issued](#) a few weeks ago, when he had proclaimed: “they [the PTM] have taken as much liberty as they could; their time is up”. When all one has is a hammer, everything looks like a nail, and that has been true of the Pakistan army on dozens of occasions from dealing with East Pakistan’s Bengalis, to the Baloch nationalists, to the pro-democracy Sindhis, to the Muhajirs of Karachi, and even the [Punjabi tenants of its farms](#).

Rise of Pashtun nationalism in FATA

But why is the world’s [sixth largest army](#), with the [fastest growing nuclear arsenal](#), worried sick about a ragtag civil rights movement from the Pashtun backwaters? It is not that the PTM is challenging the army’s monopoly on violence; it is the challenge to the junta’s chokehold on the narrative that has got it worried. Ever since the US War on Terror started in 2001 and the coalition forces arrived in Afghanistan, the Pakistan army has peddled its word about FATA, as the gospel truth.

For decades, the army has kept Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) – a region inhabited exclusively by Pashtuns – under tight control. The army essentially carried on with the British policy of a double frontier where the Durand Line formed a working boundary between the FATA and Afghanistan but a second, internal boundary separated the FATA from mainland Pakistan.

FATA was used effectively as a sandbag against Afghanistan even before the Soviet or American armies rolled into that country. The army had helped the transnational [jihadist patriarch Jalaluddin Haqqani](#), his madrasa and training camp in North Waziristan in 1973. The FATA served, in the words of [Sir Olaf Caroe](#), as a point d’appui from where jihadist insurgencies were launched in Afghanistan to neutralise the Afghan support for the secular Pashtun and Baloch nationalist, and at times separatists, in Pakistan.

In order to maintain this launching pad, the FATA was kept in a constitutional, legal and informational black hole for generations. It was ruled via a British-era draconian [Frontier Crimes Regulation \(FCR\)](#), which even inflicted collective punishments on tribes, clans and families for the alleged crimes of an individual. In fact, even after FATA was given constitutional rights a year ago and [merged with the contiguous KP](#) province, it has remained under an undeclared martial law and unannounced FCR.

The hapless region has essentially remained [behind an iron curtain](#). The army groomed, trained and unleashed jihadist terrorists in all directions from the region. These jihadists also targeted the local population and killed hundreds of tribal elders. The army either stood by at the time, or worse, signed peace deals with the terrorists. The army eventually did go after the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which was attacking it regularly by then.

The Afghanistan-oriented jihadists were preserved during these operations and relocated to other tribal areas or the Pashtun region of Balochistan. The army also has allowed many of the TTP cadres to return to the region after cutting undisclosed deals with them. These TTP thugs have been given the name of “peace committees”.

On the other hand, the common people of Waziristan were [internally displaced](#), while the army conducted operations in their region, in which their [homes and businesses were bombed](#) to extinction. Many of the displaced tribal people are [still languishing](#) in refugee camps. Those who have returned, face constant humiliation at the hands of the army at scores of check-points dotting the region. They found whatever was left of their belongings plundered.

They have also been victims of the landmines laid by the terrorists and the army. But the biggest complaint that the people of Waziristan have is about thousands of their men, young and old, who have been forcibly disappeared, they say by the army. The army claims that many of these missing persons either fled with the TTP to Afghanistan or may have died fighting alongside it.

A judicial commission had been investigating the disappearances without much to show for results. The tribal people displaced to various parts of Pakistan faced incredible hardship, ethnic profiling and police brutality. The [murder of a young tribal Pashtun man](#) in Karachi, by the police in a staged encounter last year became the tipping point.

The PTM became the voice of these voiceless people and championed all these issues, and more. It has remained unequivocally nonviolent and consistently demanded full implementation of the Pakistani constitution and laws in the former FATA regions. It has been calling for opening the area for travel and to the independent media, so the world can see their plight.

Many of the PTM leaders came of age while their homeland was caught between the military and militants and yearning for peace and security has added an urgency to their protests. Many of the young supporters of the PTM also saw, perhaps for the first time, that while the army shoved them under the jihadists' heel as well trampled them under its boots, the rest of Pakistan, including the so-called settled Pashtun areas, were moving on with their lives fairly normally.

Pakistan's army cracks down on the Pashtun movement

The tribal Pashtuns were nothing more than cannon-fodder and collateral damage for Pakistan's army. A sense of deprivation and even bitterness was inevitable, but the movement and its leaders chose the democratic path of peaceful protests starting with a large sit-in protest in Islamabad, which was even addressed by Imran Khan, who was vying for the high office back then. And this strict adherence to non-violence is what is unnerving for the army as it has deprived the army of a pretext to initiate a crackdown on the movement.

On its part, the army has resorted to its old playbook. The DG ISPR has overtly and through [innuendo in tweets](#) from his personal accounts, [smeared the PTM](#) as peddling an Indo-Afghan agenda and receiving foreign funding. The Afghan backing of PTM is a red herring deployed by the ISPR and its controlled media, to give the movement a bad name and eventually hang it.

Those of us familiar with the movement's finances know very well not a single Afghani has been given by the Kabul government. The movement is run by donations from Pashtun and non-Pashtun supporters within and outside Pakistan. However, painting it as a foreign-funded, violent outfit paves the way for a legal ban and a violent crackdown against the PTM.

This is the exact same tactic that the Pakistanis state had used against the leftist-nationalist National Awami Party (NAP) in the mid-1970s. The NAP was first implicated in a fabricated case that it had was about to receive weapons from the Iraqi embassy – off all the places – to use in Balochistan. The party was subsequently banned by the Supreme Court, adjudicating an executive reference, and its top and second-tier leadership were jailed.

Just like in case of NAP, the Pakistani state is both suspicious of the PTM raising subliminal slogans about solidarity with Afghanistan, and also plays it up. The suspicion becomes paranoia due to the completely organic nature of the movement and the geographic contiguity with Afghanistan. However, in reality, no organised Pashtun separatist movement has existed in Pakistan overtly, and none even covertly since the 1980s.

By using such labels, the army legitimises both its high-handed approach in the former FATA and its

self-anointed role as the sole arbiter of what Pakistani identity, national security and foreign policy direction should be. The PTM leaders have never mentioned any irredentist agenda or separatist leanings, even in meetings behind closed doors. On the contrary, their emphasis remains on upholding the Pakistani constitution.

From what has transpired in Waziristan, the army's attempt to completely blackout the PTM's perspective from the media, and the [army-installed](#) Imran Khan [government's rhetoric against the PTM](#), it appears that the army plans to steamroll the Pashtun civil rights movement both brutally as well as legally – on trumped-up charges. The PTM is up against major odds. It will have to be extra nimble to extricate itself from the trap being laid around it.

While the movement certainly did not have a go-it-alone approach, it has yet to build formal bridges with the major political parties. The political parties, on their part, have been either apprehensive or coy about the PTM. Some of them, especially the traditional Pashtun nationalist parties, see the PTM as a competitor, while the mainstream parties like Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) have been reluctant to be seen supporting the PTM agenda.

An honourable exception had been the PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, who has frequently struck sympathetic tones. The PMLN leadership has also spoken sagaciously about the massacre in Waziristan and warned against military adventurism. Both the PPP and the PMLN have been persistently tormented by the army and its henchmen. They have much more common with the PTM than just a minimum program.

A window of opportunity exists for the PTM and the political parties to reach out to each other to form a broader front against the army's attempts to turn Pakistan into a totalitarian state once again. It would be prudent for the PTM's charismatic leader Manzoor Pashteen to take the initiative, before it's too late.

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