

Pakistan: Ali Wazir's arrest

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THE circumstances surrounding the arrest of Ali Wazir, PTM leader and South Waziristan MNA, are curious to say the least. He was taken into custody in Peshawar last week on charges of hate speech, criminal conspiracy, etc while addressing a rally in Karachi on Dec 6. Several other PTM leaders, including Mohsin Dawar, were also charged with the same offences but not detained. Mr Wazir was arrested on the request of the Sindh police, a team of which travelled to Peshawar to take him into custody and bring him back to Karachi on Friday. The detained lawmaker was produced in the Anti-Terrorism Court the next day, where the judge remanded him in police custody until Dec 30. The most intriguing aspect of the whole episode is that despite the Sindh police's role in Mr Wazir's detention, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, chairman of the PPP which runs the government, roundly condemned the arrest as being "against democratic traditions". He said it was fascist governments that muzzled the voices of the people's representatives. No one quite appears to know what has actually transpired.

Have the Sindh police overnight acquired a hitherto undetected sense of independence that years of political meddling had neutralised? Or perhaps someone with more clout than even the PPP in Sindh had ordered Mr Wazir's arrest. Whatever the facts of the matter, it is an inexplicable turn of events. And where there is lack of clarity, speculation and rumour-mongering have a field day. Thus there have been unsubstantiated reports doing the rounds that Mr Wazir was being subjected to torture in custody. What is beyond doubt, however, is the truth of Mr Bhutto-Zardari's words. Arrests of the people's elected representatives engender a sense of persecution, especially among those who count themselves as that individual's constituents. Certainly there is no room for hate speech or incitement to violence, and sometimes a very thin line separates it from genuine grievances voiced intemperately, but disaffection with the state can lead to grave and long-term consequences.

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