

Pakistani Farmers Are Gearing Up for India-Like Protests

Monday 1 March 2021, by [KHULDUNE SHAHID Kunwar](#) (Date first published: 25 February 2021).

Farmers in Pakistani Punjab plan to take to the streets next month, hoping to generate some of the noise that their Indian counterparts have created.

As [India's protesting farmers](#) remain camped outside New Delhi, four months into their demonstration against the [three agriculture laws](#) passed in September, the movement appears to be generating a domino effect across the border. Multiple Pakistani farmer leaders, under the leadership of the organization Pakistan Kissan Ittehad (literally meaning Pakistan Farmers' Unity) met on February 21 to work out a roadmap to launch an "India-like" protest in March, The Diplomat has learned. A formal announcement for the protest is expected next week.

The Pakistani farmers are set to rally for a list of demands, including the fixing of the minimum support price (MSP) per maund (40 kilograms) of wheat at 2,000 Pakistani rupees (\$12.60), and sugarcane at 300 rupees, in addition to setting a flat electric power rate of 5 rupees per unit for farm tube-wells. Other demands include subsidies on seeds, fertilizers, and other expenses borne by the Pakistani farmers, which they maintain is making agricultural activities insufficient for their sustenance.

Pakistani farmers have had a tough 12 months. They began [battling COVID-19](#) this time last year, which damaged the food supply chain, hitting fruit and vegetable growers especially hard. While the coronavirus pandemic posed a unique challenge to the entire world, Pakistani farmers also had to simultaneously cope with their annual nemeses, [climate change and water scarcity](#), as the drought further exposed Pakistan's agricultural fault-lines.

With unprecedented [wheat and sugar crises](#) also taking their toll, the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government has also been put under pressure by the opposition alliance [Pakistan Democratic Movement \(PDM\)](#), prompting the rulers to take note of the farmers' plight in recent weeks. Last week, the Punjab chief minister's information advisor, Dr. Firdous Ashiq Awan, [maintained](#) that the government would "guard the farmers' rights" with Irrigation Minister Muhammad Mohsin Khan Leghari vowing irrigation reforms.

On February 6, Prime Minister Imran Khan also [announced](#) that a "huge package for farmers" will soon be unveiled. However, there is a growing feeling among Pakistani farmers that the government's reassurances are aimed more at blunting the opposition's criticism than at attempting to address the farmers' quandary.

"We are launching an India-like movement in March against this anti-farmer government," PKI President Zulfikar Awan told The Diplomat.

"The seed control rate has gone from 7,500 rupees to 14,000 rupees. The minimum support price for wheat was 1,400 rupees - we never even got that. Fertilizer was at 2,500 rupees, now it's 4,500 rupees; urea was 1,300 rupees, now it's 1,800 rupees. There is so much input-output disparity for

Pakistani farmers that our produce just cannot compete with other countries,” he added.

On November 2, weeks before the Indian farmers protest became a [nationwide rallying call](#), Pakistani farmers had camped in Lahore to register their protests against the government’s agricultural policies. On November 5, a protesting farmer was [killed](#) in a police action, with the law enforcement personnel reportedly mixing tear gas with chemical additives.

“When we go out to protest, we are killed. Our fellow farmer was martyred in November and many others were injured [during the protest],” said Awan, recalling that the demonstration in Lahore had to be hastily called off owing to the state action against the protesters.

Many farmer leaders are of the opinion that while the protests in India have given a new lease of life to the farmers’ movement in Pakistan, the ground realities in the agricultural sectors of the two countries, and the state’s action against dissent, betray significant contrast.

“The Indian farmers’ movement is against the neoliberal agenda that [Indian Prime Minister Narendra] Modi has been trying to impose there — privatize everything, give everything to big companies, end the *mandi* [market] system, end the minimum support price, and let the market dictate everything. Those realities already exist in Pakistan,” said Farooq Tariq, the general secretary of the Pakistan Kissan Rabita (Farmers’ Contact) Committee (PKRC), in an interview with The Diplomat.

“[In Pakistan] it’s the big companies that get the subsidies for medicines or fertilizers. [The Pakistan Army-owned] Fauji Foundation is the most profitable fertilizer company [for example],” he added.

Further reaffirming the gap between Indian and Pakistani agricultural sectors multiple farmers told The Diplomat that the policies that Indian farmers are protesting against would actually be a step forward for their Pakistani counterparts given the autocratic manner in which the state has treated farmers’ rights.

“Agriculture is a profitable venture in India, not in Pakistan. Their agriculture is subsidized; our agriculture is taxed. Their realities are different, but we are wholeheartedly supporting them across the border, because they are not only fellow farmers, but also from our Jatt *biradri* [community],” maintained Mehmood Hassan, a farmer from a village near district Mandi Bahauddin, around 200 kilometers north of Lahore.

“Under [India’s] new agriculture laws there is a chance that the Indian farmer could get a better price than the MSP. I as a Pakistani farmer would consider this amazing. We barely get 15 percent of our wheat stock sold at the MSP, which is already extremely less,” noted Ajmal Khan, an agricultural land- owner from Multan in southern Punjab. “So if someone tells me that someone can give me a better price, I’ll be the happiest man. But of course the Indian farmer is right to consider it an attempt to remove the minimum support price altogether.”

Despite the contrasting agricultural challenges, the feeling of professional and ethnic brotherhood is pushing the farmers in Pakistani Punjab to take to the streets next month in the hope of generating some of the noise that their Indian counterparts have created globally. In addition to motivational and symbolic support, actual linkages between Indian and Pakistani farmers are also helping shape up the latter’s movement.

The PKRC is currently conducting online sessions and workshops to spread awareness among Pakistani farmers in the run up to the upcoming protests. The PKRC is also affiliated with [La Vie Campesina](#), the international peasants’ movement with a presence in over 80 countries, including India, which is also providing the opportunity for farmers in the two countries to connect. Indian

farmer leader [Rakesh Tikait](#) participated in a PKRC online session earlier this month via his press secretary.

PKRC General Secretary Tariq believes that just as Pakistani farmers are learning a lot from their Indian counterparts, the same is also true the other way around. Tariq uses Pakistan's example to criticize the proponents of India's new farm laws, especially the argument that the new laws will help improve food security in the country.

"We Pakistanis can best respond to that argument: The worst crises over the past two years in Pakistan are related to food. The wheat and sugar crises were caused by the private sector and its illegal profiteering. The private sector can never bring prices down. [India's] food sovereignty would be at its worst under the private sector," he said.

However, Pakistani farmer leaders maintain that the most glaring difference between the situation in India and Pakistan is the [role of the army](#), which they say makes the latter more authoritarian. Tariq believes that if Pakistani farmers had been camped outside the capital for almost four months, the state would have used much more repressive measures.

The [Okara military farms](#) are an oft-cited example of the Pakistan Army's authoritarian foray into agriculture. The institution's profiteering has come at the severe cost of the local farmers being denied the right to their lands. Farmer leaders from Okara have been arbitrarily arrested and even slapped with terrorism charges for challenging the army's hegemony over the local farms.

"It is only in Pakistan that the army has taken over agriculture. What has the army got to do with harvesting? If you want to do farming, then maybe give your fighter jets to us farmers!" remarked Tariq.

Even so, given that the army's control over the state [remains unwavering](#), there remains skepticism about the effectiveness of the upcoming farmers' protest in Pakistan.

"In Pakistan, even the political parties cannot protest without the support of the army. How will the poor farmers?" commented a bureaucrat who has worked in Punjab's agriculture department for the past two decades.

Cynics also point to a lack of unity among the farmers' organizations in Pakistan as a possible reason that the protests might not go according to plan. They also cite the political affiliations of various farmers' groups as a stumbling block.

"Pakistan's farmer has been victimized more than any of his contemporaries. No one is as financially exploited as a Pakistani farmer. [However] there is no chance that a movement like India would take place in Pakistan," said former Punjab Agriculture Minister Malik Ahmad Ali Aulakh.

"All farmers' organizations are linked to different political parties and hence follow the parties' agendas. There is no unity among farmers' organizations. There is no protest over actual issues concerning the farmers, and those who do demonstrate are abandoned by the farmer leaders and suffer financially," he added.

Groups like the Kisan Board Pakistan (KBP) have traditionally been affiliated with the Jamaat-e-Islami. Kissan Ittehad is divided into at least three factions led by Khalid Khokhar, Chaudhry Anwar, and Rao Tariq Ashfaq. This fragmentation not only makes it hard for the farmers to assemble for a common cause, but critics also believe that all leaders of factions have a tendency to compromise the broader interests of farmers for personal gain.

Even so, the organizers of next month's rally maintain that they've learned from their mistakes, and with the push provided by the protests in India, they're set to right the wrongs of the past to build a future more conducive to farmers' rights in Pakistan.

"Our job is to register the protest. We are poor farmers, we make up 65 percent of this country, but we are ignored. Until the farmer of this country prospers, the country cannot progress," underlined PKI President Zulfikar Awan.

"We'll take out the rally on tractors, just like [in India](#). And we are ready to take on whatever the state throws at us."

Kunwar Khuldune Shahid

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