

# **Pakistan's ban on the PTM cannot stop the consolidation of the Pashtun struggle**

Monday 4 November 2024, by [SHAH Hurmat Ali](#) (Date first published: 31 October 2024).

**The Pashtun Qaumi Jirga marks a new phase of Pashtun nationalism, with a swathe of demands challenging the Pakistan state's treatment of Pashtuns and growing support from mainstream political parties**

Hazrat Naeem Wazir, better known as Gilaman Wazir, would post his evocative poetry about Pashtun rights on Facebook, where it would be widely shared. He was often seen at gatherings of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), where his sing-song voice was heard advocating for Pashtun rights. Wazir was very close to [Manzoor Pashteen](#), the leader of the PTM, and the two would often be seen together in public. Unsurprisingly, this made him a target.

In 2020, Wazir was arrested in Bahrain, where he was working, and deported to Pakistan. This July, he was attacked by a group of armed men in Islamabad, and later succumbed to his injuries in hospital. The fact that his killers were able to evade justice raised many questions; the police said they would investigate the killing but never made any arrests, as PTM members have repeatedly pointed out. Soon after Wazir's death, Pashteen announced a Pashtun Qaumi Jirga, or Pashtun National Court, to be held in three months. On the agenda was a demand to end violence against Pashtuns by the Pakistan state and Islamist militant groups, and a push to define a future course of action for the Pashtun community.

Pashteen's announcement of the upcoming jirga appeared to cause alarm among government circles. On 6 October, Pakistan's government banned the PTM, with a government circular claiming that the movement had "engaged in certain activities which are prejudicial to the peace and security of the country." The move appeared to be a bid to prevent the PTM from holding the jirga, scheduled to begin on 11 October in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a region which has seen multiple military operations and militancy. The area, and in particular Khyber Pass, is also historically significant as it opens into Afghanistan and was used by the Macedonian king Alexander the Great, the Afghans and the Mughals to conquer India. The PTM's choice of Jamrud, a town close to the Khyber Pass, as a location for the jirga was seen as particularly significant.

The circular and ensuing crackdown on PTM activists and supporters – including a ban on government employees attending the jirga – failed to achieve its objective. Instead, a crowd of supporters including the organisers gathered, signalling their intent to go ahead with the event. On 9 October, police opened fire on the organisers, with three killed and at least 10 injured. The next day, the chief minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Ali Amin Gandapur, hosted a meeting with representatives of several political parties. Under pressure, the federal government agreed to temporarily rescind the ban as the PTM activists made it clear that they would not budge from their positions despite the violence. Gandapur was tasked with acting as an intermediary between the political parties and the PTM and to facilitate the jirga to be held peacefully with a couple of caveats;

there were to be no “inflammatory” slogans chanted against the government during the jirga, and there could be no waving of the Afghan flag. Despite the uncertainty due to the ban, the jirga went ahead. As the event progressed it became clear that the PTM was moving in interesting new directions.

**A PASHTUN JIRGA** can be, among other things, a forum for consultation among various tribes, communities or the wider *qaum* – the nation – with decisions taken according to the *Pashtunwali*, or Pashtun code of conduct. (Jirgas can also be mechanisms for conflict resolution or restorative justice, but they have drawn criticism for an absence of written rules, a lack of inclusivity reflected in their all-male composition, and their potential for corruption and abuse of power. Some smaller jirgas, particularly at the village or clan level, have turned a blind eye to the continued practise of *wani*, or forced marriage as a way to settle disputes, even though the Federal Shariat Court of Pakistan has ruled that the practise is un-Islamic.)

During the jirga in October, the PTM put forward a 22-point resolution that included calls to demilitarise Pashtun lands, with militant groups operating in the area given two months to leave. The PTM also called for a judicial commission to investigate killings of PTM activists in the lead up to the event; the reopening of border gates along the Durand Line, the frontier between Pakistan and Afghanistan; an end to the extortion of Pashtuns; and resettlement of Pashtuns displaced by violence.

The jirga also saw the Pashtuns call for guaranteed first rights to enjoy the resources of their home region, as well as subsidised electricity. These demands reflect how Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has been deprived of funding from Pakistan’s federal government even as the state remains resource-rich, and also the economic difficulties caused by the persistent violence as well as other factors.

But the step that could have the most immediate repercussions was the PTM’s decision to share with the jirga the lists it has compiled of the Pashtun disappeared, which claim that 6700 people have been reported missing over the past two decades. This is a highly sensitive issue, a lightning rod for Pashtun grievances and protests against the Pakistan state and security forces – and scrutiny of disappearances has reliably provoked vicious reactions from the country’s ruling establishment. The PTM also said militancy had displaced 5.7 million people over the same period, with 2.3 million still homeless, and seen more than 76,000 people killed. These figures were disputed by the Islamabad-based Pakistan Institute of Conflict and Strategic Studies, but their presentation showed that Pashtuns have begun to find powerful ways of articulating their losses and continued deprivation.

The jirga also saw participants discuss ways to collectively organise – including setting up more jirgas to solve inter-tribal disputes, and even the formation of lawyers’ bodies to take legal action against land-grabs and other forms of violence targeting the Pashtun community.

This was a first, and there were other firsts too. Even though the lack of women’s participation and power remains a problem, a number of women’s rights activists attended the jirga on its final day. PTM representatives spoke about how the violence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has impacted women, and raised calls for a ban of the practise of *wani*, among other key demands.

Also significant was the active participation of political parties, including some that would otherwise

be at odds with the PTM. The leftist and Pashtun nationalist Awami National Party (ANP), for instance, supported the demands put forward by the jirga. The ANP, which was part of the provincial government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa from 2008 to 2013, has a complicated relationship with the PTM, seeing it as a competitor. Earlier, the present chief minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Ali Amin Gandapur, had made a key intervention that ensured the jirga went ahead as planned. Gandapur is a member of the Pakistan-Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), which is locked in its own struggle against Pakistan's establishment, and he has been leading PTI rallies in the province calling for the release of the party's jailed leader, the former prime minister Imran Khan.

All these developments point to a greater popular and political consolidation of the Pashtun struggle – something the Pakistan state and security forces will certainly see as a threat.

**IN THE PAST**, especially in the early days after its 2018 founding, the PTM built up and enjoyed wide solidarity among progressive sections of society throughout Pakistan. With its [demands](#) centred on the recognition and respect of Pashtuns' human rights, the PTM mobilised rallies in major urban centres such as Lahore and Karachi – the latter home to a sizable population of Pashtun migrants who moved to the city because of war or a lack of economic opportunities back home. A subsequent crackdown on the PTM broke these links of solidarity. Now, the PTM appears to have begun looking inwards and closer to home to mobilise support for its programme.

Through the PTM, Pashtuns have continued to highlight how arbitrary violence, extrajudicial killings, surveillance and enforced disappearances have impacted their community, and have named the Taliban and other militant groups as well as the Pakistan army as perpetrators. In late September, a large protest was held in the Swat Valley in the wake of an attack on a convoy of diplomats and their families visiting the area. Activists blamed the government for failing to prevent the attack, and for [opening peace negotiations](#) with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, with the Afghan Taliban as intermediaries. Rather than stemming violence, the negotiations have seen Taliban activity surge in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa once more – and the protests highlighted this and pointed the finger of blame squarely at the government. Similarly, in the Duki district of Balochistan as well as in cities like Bannu in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pashtuns have been protesting for many months against the Pakistan army and frontier corps, who have been cracking down on demonstrators with violence.

The government's effort to ban the PTM needs to be understood in the broader context of [Pakistan's strategic plans for Afghanistan](#), given that Pashtuns are spread on both sides of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The wars and violence in areas like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have been presented by Pakistan as the result of terrorism, which the country's establishment claims to want to stamp out. But Pashtun activists, political workers and thinkers say that Pashtuns have for decades borne the brunt of the violence resulting from the Pakistan state's changeable and volatile relationship with militant groups. Indeed, the PTM was [formed](#) to address the pain and frustration of Pashtuns who were looking for a way to effectively advocate for their rights, including their right to life.

The Pakistan state sees the PTM as a threat to its sovereignty, as is clear from its violent reaction to the PTM's fresh rearticulation of Pashtun nationalism. The PTM, meanwhile, has demonstrated its continued relevance through the sheer numbers it was able to mobilise and the support and active participation of major political parties in the jirga. It is now up to the PTM and other Pashtun-led political parties to build on this momentum – even as the government and the establishment prepare their reaction.

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**Hurmat Ali Shah**

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