

PAK'S PASHTUN HEADACHE

BY

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The Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) rose from the extra judicial killing of a young Pashtun man by a police team led by Rao Anwar in Karachi early this year. From its humble start, it has marched on and threatened the power of the most powerful institution of the country, its army. Its largest rally was in Peshawar where it drew tens of thousands of supporters, despite a complete media ban, employing social media. Its young leader, Manzoor Pashteen, has become a household name in the country. It has subsequently held a rally in Lahore and has proposed the next in Karachi this week.

The movement takes its roots from the FATA regions of Pak, which is one of the world's most significant regions. It borders Afghanistan and has only seen turmoil since 2011. Operations against selected militants by the Pak army have turned the region into a war zone and displaced millions, alongside extra judicial killings and forced disappearances. The movement has also gained support from the Afghan President and the lawmakers of the Mesharano Jirga, the Afghan upper house of Parliament, also wore the traditional cap of Pashtuns in solidarity.

The major demands of the PTM as enunciated by Manzoor post the arrest of Rao Anwar, include his hanging, establishment of a judicial commission to investigate extrajudicial killings of Pakhtun's, presenting missing persons in court, release of innocents, lifting of curfew in FATA, stopping torture of locals and clearance of mines. Most of those who form part of the rally carry with them placards with photos of those missing.

The sudden rise of this movement has rattled the army to the extent that their army chief commented that the protests by the PTM are 'engineered' and it would not be allowed to undo the so-called gains of military operations. Arrests, threatening its leaders and media blackouts have all failed to deter the protestors. Police actions against its leaders, prior to its rallies went viral on social media impacting the army's image. The army, as per Pak media, based on a request from the PTM agreed to hold talks to help diffuse the situation, well before the movement gained steam.

Talks brokered by the DG ISPR were held between delegations of the PTM and the General Officer Commanding's of North and South Waziristan respectively in mid Feb. Initially, it did appear that the talks were making progress, subsequently, they bogged down. As per Pak newspaper reports, the Pak army opines that the 'PTM is increasing its demands and that there are elements of uncertainty and unpredictability in its approach'. The PTM on the other hand remains distrustful of the army.

Even a Jirga constituted by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Governor has not moved forward. The main sticking points remain two, removal of left over mines and missing persons. In both cases the army is unwilling to relent, either claiming it has not laid mines or seeks lists of missing, to delay action.

With elections now around the corner, political parties have begun jumping into the bandwagon, realizing that a word from PTM leaders can swing votes in their favour. The two major political parties, the ruling PML-N and the main opposition party, PPP have both voiced their support for the movement. Their leaders, Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto have stated that protesting against oppression and excesses should be permitted. Imran initially supported them but witnessing the army approach has backed out.

A newly formed counter-PTM movement termed as Pakistan Zindabad Movement (PZM) took out counter rallies against the PTM. It has claimed that the PTM is a force working against the security forces and the state. PZM organizers, towing the line of the Pak army and possibly created by it, claim that leaders of PTM are agents of RAW and the Afghan intelligence agency, NDS.

Where the Pak army faces the pinch is that claims by the PTM, spread across the globe by social media only highlights what the international community has been accusing Pak of all along. The PTM claims that the Pak army forced them to flee when it launched a 'selective clampdown' on militants along the Pak-Afghan border. They further claim that it continues to provide safe havens to those groups that target Afghanistan through their region. This further proves that Pak has all along been supporting terror groups involved in India and Afghanistan.

The PTM movement demanding a return of its missing thousands and similar numbers of extra judicial deaths further derides Pak's claims of excesses in Kashmir, as such momentous claims have neither existed nor have Indian security agencies been so questioned. It displays the open brutality of an armed force on its own population.

Added to it is the planting of landmines within a country, without concern of internal casualties. Across the globe, such internal brutal

intensity has not been witnessed for decades and that in a country, which raises the Kashmir bogey in multiple international forums.

Pak is losing on all accounts, its reputation, duplicity and brutality are being highlighted. Every action known to suppress a movement has been attempted including media blackouts, arrests, and even flooding of rally grounds with sewage water, but to no avail. This indicates the desperation of the deep state to quell this movement at any cost.

The world is watching carefully, as social media is the biggest tool of the PTM. One mistake by the Pak army, especially when it displays brutality or breaks a peaceful protest, would open Pak to further international criticism and enhance isolation. PTM leaders have galvanised 15% of Pak's population, enough to give the deep state sleepless nights and with elections drawing close, those whom the army pushes away from centres of power, would begin supporting this movement. While it is heading to be a lost cause for the Pak army, it is win-win for the PTM.

For India, any comments of support or highlighting the issue in international forums is what would give the Pak deep state the authority to crack down brutally on the movement, using Indian comments as an excuse. Hence, India should remain aloof, refrain from supporting the movement, letting it grow as the biggest threat to the Pak deep state.