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Pakistan

Demanding land rights is not terrorism

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A massive repression of the most militant but peaceful peasant movement in Pakistan – the Anjman Mozareen Punjab (AMP) – is underway. Most of its leadership has been arrested under false anti-terrorist laws. Dozens are missing while over 50 remain behind bars. All have been declared “terrorists” by the Okara district police, working hand in hand with the Military Farms administration, which mainly serves military officers.

The source of the problem is that while 14000 acres of land in the Okara district is owned by the Punjab government, it is occupied by the Military Farms administration. Since 2001 the tenants of the Military farms have refused to turn over half of their crops (bitai), which they and their families had been paying for over 90 years. How could ordinary people dare to say no to the military officers? But that is their real “crime.” They demand their land rights.

The high point of the repression took place on April 16 2016 when police raided the home of Mehr Abdul Sattar, general secretary of Anjman Mozareen Punjab. He was considered the main “terrorist,” having modern weapons at home and surrounded by “proclaimed offenders.” He was taken into preventive custody under the Maintenance of Public Order ordinance. As a precaution against massive resistance, the military trucked in tanks from other cantonments.

Yet Mehr Abdull Sattar was arrested without resistance. No weapons were discovered nor were there “proclaimed offenders” who fired back at his arrest. This myth was consciously promoted to demonize the peasant movement.

Despite a severe crackdown by the military and the police, the Anjuman Mazareen Punjab went ahead with its planned convention on April 17, marking the International Day of Peasants’ Struggle. Thousands of peasant activists gathered in Okara district to demand an end to use of violent tactics by the state authorities and to seek the release of AMP general secretary Mehr Abdul Sattar and other AMP leaders.

After being unable to stop the huge peasant convention, the police are now resorting to arrests, intimidation and mass charges in order to force peasants off the land.

Currently the police are organising daily flag marches with dozens of heavily weaponized police vehicles patrolling the area.

The Pattern of Arrests and Protests

Following the successful 13th commemoration meeting of Bahsir Shaheed, who was killed by state agencies in 2002, in Ranalkhurd [\[1\]](#), its main organizer, Nadeem Ashraf, was arrested at home. He was charged with murder, attempted murder, anti-terrorism and various other serious criminal charges.

Malik Salim Jakhar, one of the main leaders of the movement from Kulyana Military Estate, has also been arrested and framed up on various criminal charges. Hafiz Jabir and Shabir Ahmad Sajid were arrested as well. Each time tenants protested on the main road. What else they could do? All these arrests took place during 2015/16.

As part of their plan to isolate and destroy the peasant organization, the police charged Okara journalist Hafiz

Husnain Raza, who is working for Nawai Waqt group, in April 2016 with breaking several anti-terrorist laws. His real crime is following his father's path to speak the truth. The police prefer journalists who allow them to review articles.

On April 16 2016, police broke down the doors of Hafiz Husnain's home in order to arrest him. Fortunately he was in Lahore to see his mother off as she was going to perform Umrah [2]. Three days later two of his uncles, attempting to locate the journalist at home, were arrested.

In an official communiqué, the district administrator Okara claimed that day around 200/300 Muzareen tried to block the road on April 16 after the arrest of Mehr Abdul Sattar but they were "successfully" dispersed.

On the April 18 the Daily Dawn reported that 4000 Muzareen had been booked under anti-terrorist laws for "injuring police." However no police had been injured on the day as tanks and other military vehicles were used to disperse the crowd.

After arresting Mehr Abdul Sattar on April 16 , District Police Officer Okara claimed that he was wanted in 150 cases. But at the Lahore High Court only 26 cases were entered. Among those 26 cases, the lower courts have acquitted Mehr Sattar in five cases earlier while the police themselves declared him innocent in another nine.

Among the other seven cases, one particularly stands out: In 2014 two peasants of Anjman Mozareen were killed by Rangers firing on them. Yet even the deceased's family and the main AMP leadership were charged with committing the crime.

What Drives the Repression?

Under the civilian government of Main Nawaz Sharif [3], the military were given the constitutional power to establish military courts. This was to be the tool through which terrorism could be eliminated. In fact the military operation in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) had some initial success in pushing back the growing tide of religious fundamentalism.

However in Okara, the Anjman Mozareen Punjab became a long-awaited target. A retired military captain turned police officer was posted to Okara to launch the attack against the peasant organization.

The district administration created the myth that "tenants are armed and hosting terrorists" as an excuse to launch massive repression. Yet with thousands attending rallies, there was never any looting, burning, or damage to property or to state security forces. The protests were a peaceful expression of a most mature and militant peasant movement, representing the collective voice of the voiceless.

It is the unjust control of land by military-run companies and some individual officers that drives the protests. The peasants have built a strong organization and pursued their just cause through their constitutionally guaranteed rights of protest and assembly. The PMLN government is doing what Musharaf [4] as a dictator could not do.

According to traditional accounts the peasantry is expected to resort to armed struggle. Yet in this political struggle against the most brutal intuition of the state, the peasants' main tool was the building of a mass movement.

Defending Peasant Protest

Speaking in defense of the Okara peasant movement at a press conference in Lahore on April 18, the radical human right activist, Asma Jehanghir, said that we will never accept that peasants are forbidden to demonstrate on Grand Trunk roads. "Protest at the place with sound and light" is accepted worldwide.

The human rights lawyer pointed out that when protesters led by Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) [5] and Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT) [6] staged a sit-in in front of the parliament for more than two months, no army tanks were called to disband the protesters.

"The military, the federal and the provincial governments must clarify their position regarding the suppression of the protesting peasants in Okara. What is the criteria being used to determine legitimate threats to national security and law and order?"

"The right to assembly is guaranteed in our Constitution," she said. "The government must answer why a group formed to lobby for rights of peasants has been branded a terrorist group. AMP represents more than 100,000 peasants who work and live on Pakistani government and military-owned land. How did a peasant convention called for International Peasants Day threaten to cause a law and order situation?"

"Use of tear gas and tanks to disperse unarmed citizens is a serious waste of our taxes and calls into question enforcement of the National Action Plan, under which terror laws can apparently be used arbitrarily to crush any form of dissent."

Chaudhary Sajjad Ahmed, brother of AMP leader Mehr Abdul Sattar, told the press conference that his brother had been detained.

"When policemen came to take him away, we did not resist," he said. "If we were terrorists, we would have brandished guns and fought back. We have put up with many search operations and raids. No one has ever found weapons or any literature that indicates that we are enemies of the state."

The misuse of the National Action Plan against Terrorism as a pretext for suppressing the peasants' struggle is very evident in case of Okara. The peasants are not terrorists. They are victims of state terrorism. They have lost at least 11 comrades in their 14-year struggle. The real issue is that the army wants to take back the land from the peasants. We will not let that happen. The actions of the authorities must be condemned.

The country's Constitution allows the AMP to hold conventions and to press for its demand for land rights, fair distribution of agricultural resources, and an end to state violence. The right of peaceful democratic protest is non-negotiable.

There should be an immediate stop to all attempts at dispossession and violence perpetrated by any state actor. The state must develop a comprehensive land reform plan with a just and equal distribution of agricultural, land and water resources in the country.

[1] a town within the Okara district

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[2] pilgrimage to Mecca

[3] the current prime minister of Pakistan who has been in place since June 2013

[4] President from 2001-08, resigned to avoid impeachment

[5] Imran Khan's organisation

[6] their erstwhile allies led by cleric Tahir-ul-Qadri