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Pakistan

# Fear and dissent in Okara

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**The widespread use of exceptional legal and administrative measures to intervene in social conflicts, particularly in the aftermath of the National Action Plan, is radically altering legal and political conceptions of citizenship in Pakistan. While many have considered the legal aspects of this seemingly permanent state of emergency, there is a need to debate how this environment is (re)defining acceptable political dissent and notions of a legitimate political community.**

In one of the most extreme examples of state high-handedness, the local administration in the Okara district has imposed a severe crackdown on the Anjuman Muzareen Punjab (AMP), a peasant group that has been resisting state-led evictions from the Okara Military Farms since 2000. The AMP, much like other organisations resisting state violence in rural Punjab, had developed legal, media and political networks over the last 15 years which it could mobilise each time the intensity of violence increased.

Yet, the movement is no longer able to rely on such support. Since late 2014, the entire top leadership of the AMP has been arrested (five office-bearers) and charged with 'anti-state' activities. Over 4000 unarmed villagers across the district have also been charged with terrorism, with periodic arrests and harassment continuing at checkpoints and through police incursions into the villages. Ten days back, over one hundred women and children from the farms were arrested. Some were charged with terrorism, a treatment never before meted out to women, even at the peak of repression under the Musharraf regime. However, despite large mobilisations by the AMP and a persistent campaign of civil disobedience against state repression, their defiance has been met by a haunting silence from civil society, political parties, and most notably, the media.

Such indifference to the peasants' plight is linked to the rather lesser known fact that the current operation against the peasantry was launched by the local administration under the cover of the 'National Action Plan', which demands media censorship and limits the possibility of public dissent. How a policy formed in response to an unimaginably gruesome murder of school children is being cynically deployed by the local administration to arrest peasants, prevent them from harvesting their crops, and steal their buffaloes in itself speaks volumes about the disconnect between policy formulations and their actual implementation. The significance of bringing a peasant movement into the ambit of an anti-terror policy, however, has more severe consequences for redefining what is considered to be acceptable political behaviour.

The most common and public accusation levelled by district authorities against the AMP revolves around the group's alleged links to the Indian intelligence apparatus. Okara is currently littered with banners placed by the city administration warning citizens against the widespread presence of "RAW agents" and demanding vigilance as a national duty, giving the impression that the city is about to witness an imminent fall at the hands of our eastern neighbour. Yet, the accusations of Indian support for thousands of tenants, including women and children, fits into a larger history of absurd allegations against political opponents in Pakistan. Popular political parties such as the Awami League (East Pakistan), PPP, MQM, ANP and Baloch nationalists have all been accused of being RAW agents, a narrative that makes little analytical contribution other than unintentionally projecting RAW as the most popular political organisation in the country.

The idea that rural Punjab is a bastion of Indian support is an outrageous proposition that no one truly believes. Yet the narrative's function has been rather strategic in eliminating socio-political dissent in an era where an intense agrarian crisis and a schizophrenic movement of capital (for example in the land market) threaten to economically and socially displace millions of precarious communities into oblivion. When such an economic rationale intersects with a state rationale that views dissenters as nothing more than foreign intruders into the national body, we witness

the recurrent and paranoid forms of violence unleashed against vulnerable segments of society.

Here lies the political significance of the Okara tenants' movement. For over a decade, the AMP has consistently refused to be obliterated by the ruthless logic of the current system, disrupting the homogenising fantasies of 'development' and 'nationalism' parroted by state officials. They have thus far successfully resisted government repression through peaceful acts of civil disobedience, inspiring a number of young political activists in Punjab.

It is this spirit of defiance that remains the primary target of state violence, cloaked in the language of national security. By denying legitimacy to their dissent through the invocation of a foreign conspiracy, the administration aims to remind the economically marginalised classes of their place in society - which today means nothing more than being perpetually disposable.

It is no wonder then that the state has no language to understand popular movements - from Baba Jan's campaign in Gilgit-Baltistan to the Katchi Abadi resistance in Islamabad to the peasants' movement in Okara - other than through the metaphor of foreignness. 'RAW agent' has become an imprecise term for local administrators to describe any social phenomena that appears inassimilable into state ideology, or whose popularity exceeds that of the local state. Moreover, it remains a potent weapon to de-humanise thousands of citizens, who are no longer seen as mothers, daughters, children, etc undergoing persistent humiliation at the hands of the local administration, but are awkwardly lumped together under the category of 'traitors'.

The fact that the state has been able to induce a perpetual fear of popular agitation in the minds of the country's upper-middle classes means that there is a large constituency ready to consume the insecurity sold to them by the state, reducing the possibility for empathy with the peasantry from urban centres.

Being a defiant peasant in Okara today is a very lonely experience, since there is a virtual boycott of the movement by the media and political parties, who previously used it as cannon fodder in their opposition against Musharraf. Yet, the AMP has maintained organisational unity and refused to accept the humiliation of evictions desired by the local administration. The broader political significance of this episode, however, is the questions it raises on the place of dissent within a legitimate political community.

One of Pakistan's primary tragedies has been the state's exaggerated fears of conflicts in society, and its impossible (and violent) desire to overcome them through force. In such a worldview, fear becomes the only basis for constructing a political community, and violence becomes the sole method for ensuring its reproduction.

Yet, to become a republic (and Pakistan is one on paper), we must acknowledge that any social formation is ridden with conflicts, and that the task of politics is not to circumvent the question of social antagonisms through a recourse to 'technocracy' or emergency measures, but to construct institutional frameworks for their contestation and partial resolution. This is more pertinent in a society as monstrously unequal as Pakistan, where only acceptance of a permanent struggle over rights and resources can provide us with a semblance of stability and aid in developing more durable relations between the citizenry and the Pakistani state.

Thus, the challenge posed by the tenants' movement in Okara is about more than merely making visible the suffering currently faced by Punjab's peasants. It demands us to examine the possibilities of reimagining a politics that embraces social plurality as a pre-condition for socio-economic transformation, rather than believing fantasies of total consent. The task of imagining such a future is as difficult as it is urgent today.

[1] introduced supposedly to 'counter terrorism' but actually being used against social movements: *Ed.*