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Pakistan

In solidarity with Pashtuns

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A public meeting that became voice of the voiceless in spite of repression.

On 22nd April, over 10,000 packed the historic Mochi Darwaza (Cobbler's Gate) ground in Lahore to listen to leaders of Pashtun Tahafuz (Protection) Movement and Lahore Left Front. The meeting took place despite all efforts of the district management to stop it. They rejected two application of PTM and LLF for permission to hold the rally on "security" grounds.

A night before the public meeting, 10 leaders of PTM and Awami Workers Party were arrested from a hotel where they were staying. After massive spontaneous demonstrations and mass social media campaign in various part of the country, the leaders were released in few hours.

Those arrested included Ali Wazir, a main leader of PTM and a member of Pakistani Marxist's, The Struggle group, Nisar Shah chairmen Jammu Kashmir Awami Workers Party, Fanoos Gujjar, president of Awami Workers Party and Ismat Shah Jahan, the president of Women Democratic Front.

The 27 year old main leader of PTM, Manzoor Pashteen, went on Facebook live watched by over 200,000 within minutes, declared a nationwide protest the next day in protest and holding of the public rally as planned.

Maryam Nawaz Sharif, of PMLN, daughter of the deposed Prime Minister used twitter to condemn the arrests and demanded an immediate release. Bilawal Bhutto, son of Benazir Bhutto, also was among those demanding the release of the arrested leaders.

Ironically, it was the PMLN government in Punjab whose district government was taking all these actions. We knew very well that the Punjab bureaucracy was forced by intelligence agencies not to let this public meeting take place in Lahore.

I had to spend the night in underground as they were hunting me everywhere. The main leader of the Struggle was picked up and threatened he would be treated as a state criminal if he kept supporting and hosting the PTM leaders.

The intelligence agencies made sure that no campaign posters or leaflets were distributed among the public. They raided a press where the leaflets were printed and took away 20,000 printed leaflets advertising the event, after beating and threatening the press workers. No flexes were allowed to be put on any roads and those fixed already were removed immediately.

The commercial media had a total blackout of news of holding the public meeting. Only English *Daily Dawn* printed the news of the arrests of the leaders on the day of the public meeting.

We had made it clear: come what may, we will hold the rally. "If the religious fanatics are allowed to block the roads for weeks in the main capital city Islamabad and no legal action taken against them, why the Left and PTM is not allowed a public meeting at a ground where no traffic is blocked? It is our democratic right of free assembly and we shall not let anybody to take away this right!" I declared in a press release as convener of Lahore Left Front, a united front body recently formed by the Left groups of Lahore. No mainstream corporate newspapers or electronic media printed this press release.

In the background of such intimidation, threats and arrests, in the morning of 22nd April, the day when public was held saw a dirtiest trick used to spoil the whole event. An underground gutter pipe was diverted to the Mochi Darwaza ground by intelligence agencies and the stinking sewerage water filled the avenue of the public meeting.

We had planned that we will spread some mats and carpets on the ground and people can sit on it, but that was not possible in these circumstances. The PTM activists who arrived early morning at the ground found an alarming situation but we were determined to hold the rally. PTM activists diverted the running water successfully to another gutter pipe after they made a water path in emergency. Dozens of comrades started using all sort of methods to dry up the ground and by 12pm they were successful to a large extent.

We had to arrange the chairs in emergency at an exorbitant cost.

Why all this?

The PTM is the fastest growing mass civic right movement started by Pashtun youth in the last few decades. It has taken over the hearts and minds of Pashtun youth who are victims of state and religious terrorism for over 17 years after 9/11. The PTM started as a small organization in 2014 by Manzoor Pashteen, a local student leader for clearing the mines from tribal areas. Many had been killed by these land mines.

After killing of Naqeeb Ullah Mahsud, a young social media activist, in Karachi early this year by police in an 'encounter' after they declared him a religious terrorist, a massive campaign against police action was started in all parts of Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

Manzoor Pashteen and Ali Wazir were the leaders of this movement. Ali Wazir, is a Marxist who had lost 17 members of his family killed by Taliban in Wana in the FATA region and all his property destroyed by the fanatics. Still he refused to bow down and kept his struggle against religious fundamentalists and other forces of oppression going on with courage and mass support.

The PTM leaders have addressed thousands in various parts of Pakistan during the last two months

Their demands are very simple and genuine. Bring back the missing persons. Compensate those who have suffered heavy losses due to the destructions of their homes and shops. Compensate the traders whose shops were emptied after they were forced to leave their trade during military operations. If there is charge against any one, present them to the court within 24 hours for trial instead of extra judicial killings and abductions. They also demand the state to break all links with fanatics. They said that there are no "good or bad" Taliban they are all the same" religious terrorists. A thesis that we have been promoting for years in all our articles and booklets.

These demands were challenging the way military operations were conducted against religious terrorists and on several occasions, hundreds of thousands had to leave their homes. Mass internal migration had made the lives of many thousands Pashtuns a hell for years.

In this background, the Lahore Left Front decided in their first meeting in end of March that they will hold a Pashtun Solidarity March in Lahore on 22nd April. On 8th April, PTM leader Manzoor Pashteen, speaking to thousands in Peshawar, announced that we will hold a public meeting in Lahore. After consultation, LLF decided that PTM would hold the rally and LLF will be hosting it and put in every effort to make it a success.

A day before the public meeting, the intelligence agencies promoted a local group to hold rally against our rally. There were around 300 on motorbikes moving around the whole city without any permission of the district management, in fact they were facilitated to go on by state actors, declaring us as traitors and threatening us for dire consequences.

The entry of the voiceless

The PTM Mochi Gate, Lahore meeting was a massive success. Thousands of Pashtun workers in Lahore who are subject to racial discriminations and subject to all sort of negative comments poured into the ground. This rally became voice of the voiceless. They did not need chairs to sit-in, as is the case in most public meetings of the elite's parties political meetings. They did not need the food normally provided by the organizers, a normal practice by the parties of the rich. They did not need any transport from different parts of the city to come to the venue. They came on their own.

It was a tremendous act of unity and solidarity among the Punjabi and Pashtun workers.

The emotions were running high. There were a great response by the audience to the speeches. Freedom was the main slogans, a freedom from hunger and state and non-state actors violence.

The main civil rights organizations in Lahore had declared the complete support for this event and they were all there. The Women Action Forum, the Joint Action Committee for Peoples Rights, the Anjuman Mazarin Punjab, all came in solidarity with Pashtuns.

The daughters of revolutionary poets Habib Jalib, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Tahira Habib and Salima Hashmi, sister of late Asma Jehanghir, Hina Jilani and daughter of Asma Jehanghir, Munizae Jahangir, all were there with their friends and colleagues.

When I spoke, as convenor of the Lahore Left Front, about the plight of Pashtun workers in Lahore, I got the tremendous applause. However, it was Ali Wazir and Manzoor Pashtun who got the maximum applause and standing ovations from the audience.

Manzoor Pashteen, probably the most popular youth leader Pakistan in the last few decades, declared to hold a rally in Swat on 29th April and on 12th May at Karachi. "Now there is some one here to take care of you, your will not be treated as orphans anymore" he declared. Withdraw the police reports registered against students who supported this public meeting, withdraw the rustication of Pashtun students. Reinstate Dr. Ammar Ali Jan who had lost his job as professor at University of Punjab because of his vociferous support for the PTM's struggle and their demands.

This was the first public event organised by the Lahore Left Front and it was a tremendous success. After this rally the LLF has now become known to some extent to the working class of Lahore, that cannot be ignored in politics and the progressive workers and youth have finally found a platform for their struggles that is genuine, revolutionary and trustworthy. It was able to lend the necessary timely logistic and political support to the most growing mass civil rights campaign of Pakistan.

24th April 2008

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