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Pakistan

# Use of anti-terror laws against peasants' movement

- IV Online magazine - 2016 - IV498 - July 2016 -

Publication date: Thursday 21 July 2016

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**The Pakistani state's black brush being used to paint any dissenting voices as terrorists under the National Action Plan has now been directed towards the ongoing peasants' movement in the heart of the Punjab province. The enabling conditions in the security framework has allowed the state to create an atmosphere of repression and impunity in the Okara Military Farms and form a narrative that demonises the peasants and allows for unbridled violence under the guise of national security.**

In the dead of the night on July 17, 2016, the police vans snaked their way into Chak 4-L. At around 2am, several dozens of policemen forced entry into the house of Mehr Abdul Jabbar, younger brother of incarcerated peasant leader Mehr Abdul Sattar. They broke down the front door and opened indiscriminate fire shattering cupboards and other household paraphernalia. They departed 15 minutes later but left behind a cloud of uncertainty and fear that spread among the villagers jolted awake by the gunfire.

Within half an hour, several private television channels broke the 'news' that the Okara police had rescued six hostages from Jabbar's house and had found wads of Indian currency and ammunition including hand grenades.

The charade was necessary to feed the narrative that Sattar was an anti-state agent working for India, that he had a cache of illegal weapons at home and that he was harbouring criminals at his house who had shot at the police. The police were, of course, lauded for being the heroes who had successfully freed 'hostages' from the peasant leader's house.

Sattar was arrested on April 15, 2016, and accused of being a foreign agent working for the Indian Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). The allegation was tied to Sattar's visit to Nepal in 2007 where he attended a meeting of the South Asian Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE) as secretary of Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee. To provide this measly accusation teeth, the police staged a raid at his house on July 17, and claimed that they had found INR 85,000 there. This is, apparently, all the proof required to brand someone a spy and an anti-state agent. Due process be damned.

Hundreds of villagers, on tenterhooks after hearing the gunfire, gathered around the house in the aftermath of the raid. Jabbar's wife, who was at home with her children when the policemen broke in, explained to them that while they had not harmed her or her children, the cops had taken away clothes and cell phones and had ransacked the house. One of the policemen, she said, had been taking pictures and making videos of the house.

The raid comes barely a week after the same cops claimed to have killed six AlQaeda 'terrorists' at the house of the younger brother of another peasant movement leader in Kulyana Estate on July 12. The narrative in this case was further skewed by the fact that the police had, in fact, murdered the terrorism suspects at another location – the dera (private place for meeting guests) of Major (ret'd) Faqeer Hussain. Villagers in the area vouch for the time the 'encounter' took place (2am) and explain that it was not carried out at Malik Naeem Jhakkhar's house. Naeem Jhakkhar's elder brother Malik Saleem Jhakkhar, a peasant movement leader, has been in jail for the last two years. The police did, however, move into Naeem Jhakkhar's house in his absence to seize his tractor and animals.

A week after this incident, on July 19, the Shuhda Foundation of the Lal Mosque mullahs claimed that two of those killed supposedly at Jhakkhar's house had been in police custody for over a year. The statement, coming from unlikely quarters, only strengthened what the peasants of Kulyana Estate have been trying to explain all this time – they had nothing to do with terrorists.

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The Anjman Mozareen Punjab (AMP) have long opposed brutal Islamist militancy and have called for civilian state intervention to protect the lives of citizens. Events unfolding this month, however, speak of a blatant attempt by the state to box in leaders of the AMP with the same extremist elements the peasants have opposed so far. The attempts have been made in service of the powers that are trying to build a case for the persecution of peasants and to undermine the AMP's struggle for land ownership rights.

This encounter, if indeed staged, is telling of dangerous tactics the police and intelligence officials are employing to implicate and criminalise peaceful political activists.

Furthermore, they speak volumes of the extent and manifestation of the misuse of the National Action Plan and anti terrorism laws. The police appear to have adopted a no-holds-barred approach to somehow prove that the five main leaders of Anjman Mozareen Punjab they have arrested – Mehar Abdul Sattar, Nadeem Asharf, Malik Salim Jakhar, Hafiz Jabir and Shabir Sajid – have been funded by foreign elements including foreign intelligence agencies.

The peasants' struggle is not a recent occurrence nor has the brutality emerged out of a vacuum. The people arrested for leading the movement have been demanding their right to own the land they till for more than 16 years. The peasants of the Okara Military Farms have lived in and tilled the lands there since 1910. State narrative has been contrived around the movement in a way so as to criminalise their demand of the right to own the 68,000 acres of land they have been tied to for generations.

Since 2001, the police have registered 348 cases against the tenants of Okara. Section 7 of the Anti-Terrorism Act is added to create extra pressure and to tighten a noose around the movement. Most of these cases were registered in the aftermath of protests by tenants against state injustice. Where women are mostly spared in times of war, the women peasants in Okara have been dealt the same hardened blows as the men have.

This is because the women peasants had managed to organise and mobilise in a manner unprecedented in any peasant movement in the Punjab.

More importantly, never before had any segment of the have-nots, the oppressed and the financially and politically weak dared to challenge the most powerful institution in the country. The peasant farmers of Okara had stood up to the administration of the Military Farms and the serving military officers there.

Hundreds of criminal charges later, the accusations directed against the peasants have been unable to hold water. As many as 11 tenants have lost their lives to state brutality in their struggle for land ownership rights. Not a single casualty has been reported by those wielding the guns. There has never been attack on the oppressors by those oppressed – yet the brutality continues unabated.

The security agencies' blundering attempts to connect peasants to terrorists in their custody speaks volumes of their desperation to see the movement meet an early end. The staged encounter on July 12, is one of the tactics the state has employed to turn public sympathy away from the peasants and to snatch away their moral or ethical claims to lands the state elite have their eyes on.

Decimating the peasants' movement would be the first step towards that.

The aftermath of the police encounters and the staged raids has created an environment of trepidation among the tenants. With their leaders in prison, the tenants now fear that the wrath of the security apparatus will be turned on them.

The very basis of the movement pits the tenants in opposition with the administration of Okara Military Farms which demands share-cropping rights. The tenants, however, argue that the land does not belong to the military but the provincial government. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, chairman of the political party in power in the Punjab, had

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earlier promised to extend land ownership rights to the tenants.

It was after the tragic mass murder of children by religious extremists at an army-run school in Peshawar that the security apparatus was given a free hand to rein in terrorists and extremists. Two years after the incident, the National Action Plan has been directed towards the most vulnerable segments of the society to silence those who dared raise their voice for their rights.

Despite warnings and remonstrations from human rights quarters, including the National Commission for Human Rights and the Senate Committee on Human Rights, the violence does not appear to have abated. If anything, it has worsened and the peasants of Okara lie in the heart of this brutal onslaught.