

Pakistan uses “anti-terrorism” law to ban Pashtun group protesting military’s manifold crimes

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Pakistan’s government has proscribed the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (Pashtun Defence Movement)—a Pashtun nationalist organization that has led mass protests against military repression—under the country’s draconian anti-terrorism laws.

Pakistani authorities are now mounting a sweeping and increasingly violent crackdown to prevent the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement or PTM from convening a three-day Pashtun National Jirga (assembly) at various sites in the predominantly Pashtun province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, starting this Friday, Oct. 11.

According to the PTM, three of its activists were killed and dozens more injured Wednesday when police attacked and opened fire on people at a Jirga campsite.

Hundreds more have been arrested and roads blockaded as security forces attempt to prevent PTM supporters and others wishing to participate in the Jirga from reaching Bannu and other Jirga sites. The full extent of the repression cannot be known because the authorities are disrupting cell phone and internet services.

However, it is highly likely that there will be further violent clashes.

On Sunday, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)-led federal government declared the PTM an “unlawful” organization under the Anti-Terrorism Act of 1997. The Interior Ministry order announcing the outlawing of the PTM claimed that it was engaged in “activities which are prejudicial to the peace and security of the country.”

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and Amnesty International have condemned the ban on the PTM. In its statement, the HRCP said that the PTM “is a rights-based movement that has never resorted to violence ... This extreme decision was neither transparent nor warranted.”

Even before the imposition of the ban, the authorities were engaged in sweeping repression against the PTM. Last week security forces carried out multiple raids on Jirga campsites to make arrests, and set one campsite on fire.

PTM leaders have been repeatedly detained. Now, under the provisions of the Anti-Terrorism Act, several PTM office-bearers and activists have had their bank accounts frozen and been stripped of the legal right to travel outside the country.

PTM leader Manzoor Pashteen announced the convening of the Jirga at the conclusion of a days-long funeral procession, in which tens of thousands participated, for Gilaman Pashteen Wazir, a Pashtun nationalist poet and acerbic critique of the Pakistani military and state. On July 11, Wazir succumbed to the head injuries he suffered during a savage beating believed to have been carried out by, or at the instigation of, the security forces.

Founded in 2018, the PTM has won a mass following by criticizing the brutal and patently illegal methods the Pakistan security forces have used in waging their dirty war against Islamist insurgents. That is, to suppress

forces that were nurtured—organized, financed and armed—by Pakistani military-intelligence in alliance with US imperialism to overthrow the Soviet-backed government of Afghanistan, and that the Pakistani ruling class has long used as instruments of its predatory foreign and domestic agendas.

For more than two decades, particularly in what was known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas till it was incorporated into Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa in 2018, the security forces of the Pakistani state and their US allies have run amok in the name of suppressing the Pakistan Taliban.

Numerous villages in North and South Waziristan have been destroyed in scorched-earth military operations, the population terrorized by US drone strikes, and tribes and villages subjected to various colonial-style forms of collective punishment. As is their practice across Pakistan, the security forces have also made frequent use of forced disappearances and summary executions against those deemed government opponents.

These atrocities caused millions to migrate to urban areas, with many forced to take refuge in poorly equipped, makeshift internal displacement camps. Although no longer in danger of being caught in the cross-fire, the internally displaced Pashtun have continued to be viewed suspiciously by the authorities and subject to state surveillance and harassment.

Popular anger against the government and military in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa has increased still further over the past year. Key reasons for this are: the Pakistani authorities’ reactionary campaign to expel Afghan refugees; their disruption of cross-border travel and trade with Afghanistan (many Pakistani Pashtuns have family in Afghanistan’s predominantly Pashto-speaking south); and, last but not least, their launching of yet another military campaign to eradicate the Pakistan Taliban insurgency.

As a result, prior to the PTM’s designation as a “terrorist” organization, a wide range of political forces had said they would participate in this week’s Jirga. Some continue to vow they will do so.

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI, Pakistan Movement for Justice) of jailed opposition leader and former Prime Minister Imran Khan, forms the government in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP).

Initially it tried to disassociate itself from the repression directed against the PTM. But this has changed dramatically in recent days and is no doubt connected to last weekend’s 24-hour “disappearance” (detention by the military) of the PTI Chief Minister of KP, Amin Gandapur. He and several other PTI leaders were seized while leading a protest in the national capital, Islamabad, demanding Imran Khan’s release.

On Tuesday, the KP government prohibited all government officials and employees from participating in the Jirga and warned that they and any members of the public who do so will be subject to criminal prosecution. Although the PTM leadership is opposed to the Pakistan Taliban (TTP)—indeed, it accuses sections of the military-intelligence apparatus of

colluding with it—the KP government order claimed that the TTP is supporting the Jirga and “therefore any participation, overt or covert, will make the individual so participating [a] facilitator/supporter of a terrorist organisation.”

The false claim that the PTM is in cahoots with the TTP is also being made by the federal government.

Separately, KP government spokesman Barrister Saif gave full support to the ban on the PTM, and the brutal and criminal methods the military employs in defending the capitalist state. “The federal government,” he proclaimed, “has declared an organisation as proscribed. We are the defenders of Pakistan and its flag and Constitution. We are proud of the actions and sacrifices of the defence agencies against terrorism.”

The multi-dimensional crisis roiling Pakistani capitalism

The violent suppression of the PTM and its Pashtun National Jirga is the product of a multi-faceted crisis of the Pakistani bourgeoisie and its state.

To avert state bankruptcy, the PML (N) federal government is having to implement yet another round of savage International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity and accelerate a sweeping privatization drive.

Having been brought to power through an election last February manifestly manipulated by the military and state bureaucracy to prevent Imran Khan and his right-wing Islamic populist PTI from returning to power, the government is widely viewed as illegitimate. It and the ruling class as a whole fear the sudden eruption of mass popular opposition, above all from the working class, as chased Gotobaya Rajapakse from the Sri Lankan presidency in 2022 and toppled Bangladesh’s Awami League government at the beginning of August.

Meanwhile, the military, long the bulwark of the state and the US-Pakistani strategic partnership, is popularly reviled for its corruption, ill-gotten wealth and power, hostility to democracy, systematic human rights abuses and reactionary intrigues with US imperialism.

In addition to the simmering Pakistan Taliban insurgency, the Pakistani state is being roiled by a longstanding and increasingly audacious nationalist insurgency in its resource-rich, yet poorest province, Balochistan. This insurgency is fueled by genuine and deep-rooted popular grievances, but is based on a reactionary, pro-imperialist and ethno-exclusivist program. With the aim of securing US imperialist patronage, the Balochi insurgents are targeting Chinese workers and infrastructure. In the latest attack carried out by the Baloch Nationalist Army, two Chinese workers were killed Sunday in a Karachi airport bus bombing.

Even more destabilising is the global geopolitical situation, as US imperialism pursues global war. Pakistan’s neighbours China and Iran are two of Washington’s principal military-strategic targets, and India, Islamabad’s historic arch-rival, is being lavished by the US with advanced weaponry and other strategic favours in return for it harnessing itself ever more fully to the US war drive against China.

The PTM’s nationalist program and the aim of its “Pashtun National Jirga” initiative

While the emergence of the PTM is indicative of growing popular disaffection with the political establishment and especially its bloated, US-trained military-security apparatus, its Pashtun nationalist politics offer no way forward for Pakistani workers and toilers.

The PTM promotes the reactionary conception that Pashtuns are victims of “Punjabi oppression” and counterposes to it the unity of all Pashtuns, that is the subordination of the workers and toilers to the Pashtun bourgeoisie.

Thus, it is actively encouraging participation in its Jirga of right-wing Pashtun politicians and parties that supported the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and have participated in governments that have imposed IMF austerity.

Although the PTM denounces the human rights abuses of the Pakistani military in blunt terms, it says little about the role of US imperialism in

transforming Afghanistan and Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas into killing fields.

It does not call for an end to the Washington-Islamabad military-strategic alliance, let alone the development of a global anti-war movement against imperialism and the predatory designs of all the great powers.

Hitherto, the PTM has focused on demands relating to “forced disappearances” and other abuses of the military, and, along with a wide swathe of opposition parties, from the Islamicist JIU-F to the Baluchi nationalists, opposed the military’s new anti-insurgency offensive.

With the Jirga, however, it aimed to begin discussion on a broader political agenda, including—if not yet fully articulated—for a Greater Pashtun nation, whether within or without Pakistan.

According to the publicly announced agenda, its first day is to be devoted to a “Presentation of data on war damages, military operations, and live testimonies from affected communities.” The second day, which would be closed to the public, calls for “delegates from 80 camps” to “engage in discussions on governance, human rights, and socio-economic conditions,” and during the third day a “Pashtun National Jirga Organizing Committee” is to be elected and “resolutions for collective action” presented.

The agenda further explains that the Jirga will deliberate on how to advance “the self-governance of Pashtun lands,” “protect the right of Pashtuns to make decisions about their own future,” and safeguard “the territorial integrity of Pashtun lands.”

In a statement that is clearly indicative of the latent anti-imperialist sentiment among the Pashtun and Pakistani masses as a whole, the explanation notes add, “A core objective of the Jirga is to prevent the recurrence of foreign-imposed conflicts, especially the specter of a renewed “Dollar-sponsored war” on Pashtun soil. After decades of suffering from wars that have caused devastation and displacement, the Jirga will offer a unified Pashtun response to external forces seeking to destabilize the region once again.”

The crisis that faces the masses of Pakistan and Afghanistan irrespective of ethnicity or religion is the outcome of: 1) a systemic crisis of global capitalism; 2) continuing imperialist oppression, and 3) the reactionary communalist Pakistan project. Its realization was the outcome, through the joint actions of the rival factions of the colonial bourgeoisie represented by the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, of the suppression of the mass anti-imperialist movement that convulsed the subcontinent for three decades beginning in 1917.

The very real threat that South Asia and the world will be dragged into a “dollar-sponsored” war, that is a war triggered by the drive of a crisis-ridden US imperialism to reassert global hegemony, cannot be opposed on a nationalist-capitalist basis.

Rather the workers and toilers of South Asia must take up the program of permanent revolution, first developed by Leon Trotsky, that animated the 1917 October Revolution and the subsequent struggle against its Stalinist degeneration.

Imperialist war can be stopped, and the social and democratic rights of the masses, including genuine and full equality among all national groups, can only be secured by the working class rallying the rural toilers behind it against all factions of the bourgeoisie in the fight for a workers’ government and the establishment—in opposition to the reactionary state borders created by colonialism, imperialism, and the craven national bourgeoisie—of the Socialist United States of South Asia.



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