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Pakistan has a protest problem

‘When your alleged protectors are the ones to attack you for exercising your democratic rights, it’s a scary world.’



Over the past year, the Pakistani government has taken swift – often violent – action to shut down an array of protest movements, from supporters of jailed ex-prime minister Imran Khan, to a grassroots Pashtun rights collective, to Baloch activists calling attention to hundreds of alleged disappearances.

For those demonstrating – whether as part of Khan’s PTI party, as members of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), or as Baloch activists – these heavy-handed and militaristic crackdowns have been far from unexpected.

The leadership in Pakistan has long been accused of disenfranchising and discriminating against any number of minority groups — Pashtuns, Ahmadis, the Baloch people, Hazaras and non-Muslims — many of whom have tried to express their discontent through protest.

Each time, the government has responded by blocking highways leading to major cities, by stacking heavy shipping containers on top of one another, by suspending mobile services and public transport, and by deploying security forces to cut off urban centres.

Amnesty International has [described](#) these actions – enacted yet again in Islamabad and Lahore last month – as “part of a systematic and relentless clampdown by the Pakistani authorities on peaceful protests and assemblies by dissenting groups”.

Maham, an associate consultant at a private firm in Lahore who – like most of the Pakistan-based sources interviewed for this article – preferred to give only one name for security reasons, said these overzealous state responses haven’t gone unnoticed by the people. They realise the harsh response is all about maintaining control. “Throughout different regimes, protests have often been looked down upon because they challenge the status quo,” she told The New Humanitarian.

That status quo sees power – and resources – concentrated in a few densely populated areas, namely the province of Punjab and the port city of Karachi, while people in much of the rest of the country can go largely unheard and unserved.

Ayesha Siddiq, a Pakistani writer and academic based in the UK, said the protests reflect this. The grievances of the PTM and the Baloch protesters, for example, are really about “fundamental agency and rights”, she told The New Humanitarian.

Balochistan is the largest province in the country by land mass, and a major producer of natural gas and oil. But residents say profits aren’t being fairly distributed back into the remote southwestern province, where [70%](#) of the population is considered “multidimensionally poor”.

As a separate ethnic and linguistic group, the Baloch people say their cultural and language rights have been trampled on by the Pakistani state. This has led to a decades-long separatist movement that has often resorted to violence to seek retribution from Islamabad.



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The state's response has done little to distinguish between violent factions and activists, leading to accusations of [excessive force](#) against Baloch civilians. Over the last two decades, activists say at least [7,000](#) Baloch, mostly men, have been jailed, tortured, and disappeared by security forces. The government, however, claims there are only [50](#) cases of missing Baloch.

Meanwhile, in northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Pashtun rights organisations, including the PTM, have [accused](#) security forces of extrajudicial killings, torture, and enforced disappearances against civilians as part of a years-long series of counterterrorism efforts.

A generational shift

A noted Pakistani researcher, who also asked not to be named due to security fears, said the recent wave of protests, including [last year's](#) Baloch Long March from Quetta to Islamabad, are indicative of a generational shift among Pakistan's minority groups.

"The movements are evolving and the state's response has to evolve with it," the researcher said, pointing to the fact that the PTM is led mainly by young men from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, and that the rising star of the Baloch movement is Mahrang Baloch, a 31-year-old female activist.

These people, said the researcher, see little hope in trying to join the ranks of the government or the legislature, especially after Khan's 2022 ouster and eventual arrest.

Maham said Khan brought "a significant amount of political awareness to the average Pakistani, and when he was ousted, people realised that this situation might actually be unjust".

This realisation has seen many young people, particularly Pashtuns, lose faith in the traditional political structure in Pakistan.

“The default option is not political engagement,” said the researcher. “It’s to clamp down. That’s why nothing gets resolved.”

“The government wants people to play by the parliamentary rules and make their anti-government speech in the halls of parliament,” said the researcher.

But the swift actions against Khan and his party have eroded people’s belief in politics as usual, and the state’s fiery rhetoric about recent demonstrations has done little to restore faith or credibility in the government’s image.

At a 3 October press conference, Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi issued a [stern warning](#) to would-be protesters: “Rangers and army have been called. Those who try to attack Islamabad will not be shown any leniency. Think 10 times before coming out to protest.”

Adding to the gravity of Naqvi’s statement was the fact that police had been [accused](#) three months earlier of shooting dead at least four protesters attending [a rally](#) in Bannu, in southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, against a military campaign in the province.

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Everyone is affected

Ibrahim, a 22-year-old student in Islamabad, explained how the impact on day-to-day life spreads far beyond just the threat of a violent response, especially when the government shuts things down.

“Transportation is severely limited,” he said. “If we manage to travel, we face the risk of being interrogated by police. They will question whether we are participating in political rallies.”

And even for those not involved in the protests, the simplest tasks can become impossible, agreed Maham. “Every civilian faced issues,” she said, citing everything from road blockages to internet shutdowns.

But none of this – nor multiple public warnings – deterred thousands of PTI supporters from marching last month towards the parliament building in Islamabad, where they managed to breach the barriers in small groups and engaged with the police. In response, the security forces fired tear gas and [arrested](#) dozens of protesters, including Imran Khan’s two sisters.

This doesn’t mean civilians aren’t concerned by the violent response. As Minahil, a 23-year-old student in Lahore put it: “When your alleged protectors are the ones to attack you for exercising your democratic rights, it’s a scary world.”

Protests are a natural reaction around the world, but the Pakistani government tends to have an overly negative view of open, public dissent, according to Siddiq, the UK-based academic.

“The state is not sufficiently impressed by the capability of the protesters to be able to force an outcome on the state,” she said. “From the view of the state, mobs and public protests are interpreted simply as people’s ability to enact violence,” rather than a plea to be heard by the government

These heavy-handed crackdowns, however, are having the opposite effect, Siddiq continued: “They are pushing these protesters towards more extreme positions and actions. The sloganeering has become much more intense and sharp.”

And it's not just forced disappearances in Balochistan and abusive military incursions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa that are bringing people to the streets. Over the last year, protests have also been held against everything from a [40%](#) tax hike following an IMF deal, to rising [electricity](#) prices, to soaring [inflation](#).

"People feel helpless when the economy is struggling and there is no social justice," explained Maham.

The elite vs the street

Siddiqa said the Pakistani government often makes the mistake of looking at the Pashtuns and Baloch in parliament and the cabinet, rather than at the masses on the streets protesting: "What the state does is look around and say, 'Who are these guys who are standing with me? What are these Baloch separatists talking about? There are so many Baloch sardars (nobles) who are with the state.'"

What the young Baloch and Pashtuns are trying to do is send the message that those who have made it into the halls of power are now firmly part of the political establishment and have forgotten the average person, Siddiqa explained.

"While it appeared as a political protest on the surface, it was deeply intertwined with other issues. Some were there to voice their frustration over soaring inflation, while others stood in protest at the government's failure to deliver justice and fairness."

Munaizhe Jahangir, a TV journalist and filmmaker, said one need only look at the composition of the parliament itself to find out why the nation's minorities see little point in engaging with the electoral system.

"The Baloch, for example, have only 16 seats in the entire national assembly – that is as much as Lahore as a district has," said Jahangir, highlighting the lack of political representation for the nation's [8.2 million](#) Baloch.

When Sardar Akhtar Mengal, arguably the most prominent Baloch MP, resigned from parliament in September, he [said](#) it had become clear to him that there was a "lack of genuine representation in this assembly for the people of Balochistan [that] has left voices like mine unable to bring meaningful change".

But this sense of disenfranchisement is not the only reason for the recurring protests in Pakistan, where an amalgamation of social, economic, political, and legal grievances has come to the fore in recent years.

"While it appeared as a political protest on the surface, it was deeply intertwined with other issues," Moatar, a 21-year-old student from Rawalpindi, said, describing recent demonstrations. "Some were there to voice their frustration over soaring inflation, while others stood in protest at the government's failure to deliver justice and fairness."

Siddiqa put it more simply, saying the protests are simply a way for millions of Pakistanis to say, "Notice us!" to their government. "How else do you get the political elite to notice what you want, your demands?" she asked.

Edited by Andrew Gully.