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The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement as a Template for Non-Violent Collective behaviour

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ABSTRACT

This review paper is based on a social movement in a protracted conflict zone of the Pashtun lands in Pakistan, bordering Afghanistan. The paper contextualises the available literature on "protests" and "social movements" as a manifestation of disenfranchisement of an ethnic minority geographically located in a global conflict hotspot, particularly post 9/11. Unlike violent protests in other parts of the world, this movement is a unique example of 'Collective Behaviour' in contemporary politics that is rational, composed, and has all the hallmarks of a classic non-violent movement. The usual collective behaviour is considered 'mad' and 'blind' but Pashtun Tahfuz Movement (PTM) provides a template for how young people may channelise a non-violent narrative to serve their cause. The result of this on-going movement testifies to the fact that there still is room for 'non-violence' in a world engulfed in violence across the continents of Asia, Europe, Middle East and Latin America.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social movements are generally defined as informal networks, based on shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilise people around conflictual issues, through the frequent use of various forms of protest (Della Porta & Diani, 1999). Literature on Collective Behaviours suggest that every movement need a stimulus that assimilates the sufferings of the disenfranchised and give voice to the years of sufferings. Such a catalyst gives the isolated voices a platform to come together in a collective force to transform the group's existing status (Hillstrom, 2018). What started as a protest around the killing of an innocent Pashtun in 2017 in Karachi, Pakistan soon turned into a country wide protest relying on extended sit-ins, aggressive sloganeering in large gatherings, activism on social media and educational campuses, poetry, and openly calling out the Country's powerful military for discrimination against a certain ethnicity. The agitation has since turned into a full-scale movement based in the principles of non-violence. The paper investigates this movement form the theoretical perspective of what drives crowd to join a movement. Two theoretical perspectives of Blumer's functionalism (1995), and Smelser's symbolic interactionism (1999) are utilised to make sense of this extraordinary social movement led by young men and women in an under-privileged part of Pakistan.

Context of the Movement

Pashtuns are an ethnic group based in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, with exonyms such as Afghan, Pukhtoon, Pakhtun, Pashtun, Pushtoon, and Pathan (Yousaf, 2019). They make up about 15% of the total Pakistan's population spread over two provinces and the tribal districts bordering Afghanistan. Particularly interesting is the case of Pashtuns in the tribal districts who have been invariably posed as savages and violent in colonial literature having militant tendencies (ibid). Most of the Taliban leadership before and after 9/11 emerged from this ethnic group.

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At the same time, these Pashtun tribesmen have resisted any foreign incursion on their proud lands and abided to State laws of Pakistan under a loose arrangement since 1947. The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), comprising 13 regions, have been a restive yet integral part of Pakistan since independence. It governance, however, has been run through a set of archaic laws called Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) set out by British rule in 19th century (Ullah, 2013). This law has enabled the State of Pakistan to maintain the status quo in the tribal areas short of integrating with the rest of Pakistani federation or making FATA independent.

Under the FCR, most powers have been accumulated in the hands of political agents appointed by the State of Pakistan and there have been cases of State's highhandedness to run the affairs of tribal lands. The political agent has been the equivalent of an administrative patriarch directly appointed by the Governor to maintain law and order (Latif & Musarrat, 2012). At the disposal of the political agent is a force of khassadars and militia to maintain law and order. The office of Political Agent also used to be the collector of revenue, implementor of development plans, and dispensation of justice under FCR. Above all, his office has unaccounted funds which can be used to buy loyalties and administer other affairs as he deems fit.

To do away with the special status of FATA and in a bid to integrate the area into mainstream Pakistan, different efforts have been made historically. For example, only Maliks (tribal elders) could cast their votes in national elections till 1996. The Adult Franchise Act of 1996, for the first time, enabled FATA adults to have votes directly for their representatives. Since the turn of the century, various efforts were made to merge FATA constitutionally with the rest of Pakistan. These include the FCR reform committee of 2005, the FATA strengthening and rationalization of Administration Report (2006), Cabinet Reforms committee recommendations of 2008, the Frontier crimes (amendment) Regulation of 2011 (encompassing legal protection, FTA tribunal, Quami Jirga, Jail inspection, Audit by central government, FATA reforms commission 2015, and finally the amendments in the constitution, 2018 (Ullah & Hayat, 2018). This last piece proved to be a historic act known as the 31st amendment bill which paved the way for merging FATA with the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Consequent to the merger, it was believed that this 'lawless', 'no-man land' will finally be a peaceful place. Huge reform packages like the 'tribal decade strategy' and huge amounts of money were promised to be spent. Land reforms were to be initiated but in the last 5 years, residents of FATA haven't seen any real progress, and their disenfranchisement continues to exacerbate. Surveys and research on FATA shows that it has consistently been the poorest regions of Pakistan on a variety of indictors. Its literacy rate according to the FATA Development Indicators Households (FDIH) Survey (2014) is just 33.3 percent. This is lower than that of KP (52 percent), Punjab (62 percent), Sindh (60 percent), Balochistan (44 percent) and Pakistan on the whole (60 percent). As a measure of poverty, 74.8 percent of FATA's population lives in katcha structures, compared with 29.8 percent elsewhere in Pakistan. Until recently, governance and administrative control were minimal, and the region's fiercely independent tribes were left to be on their own. In the absence of legislative or judicial oversight, the tribal Areas gained notoriety as a safe haven for criminal activities, illegal businesses and militancy. Particularly during and after the Afghan War (1980s), the region became a training ground for militants operating complex trans-boundary terrorist missions that gained global focus and attention in the aftermath of 9/11 (2001). The region's volatility spiked thereafter and created a violent conflict crisis that resulted in displaced communities and disrupted livelihoods - peace became elusive (Iqbal, 2016).

The Makings of PTM

Owing to this disenfranchisement, various resistance movements have been waged first against British rulers and subsequently against the State of Pakistan. Most of these movements have been armed and its leaders have usually voiced marginalisation of Pashtuns, non-development of FATA, orchestrated sectarian violence, and using FATA as buffer between Pakistan and Afghanistan particularly since 9/11. That is the reason people perceive Pashtuns to be fearsome fighters and savages.

However things appeared to be changing around the time of merge of FATA with KP. The beginning of 2018 saw widespread protests led by Pashtuns outside FATA on the killing of a 27-year-old Naqueebullah Mehsud in Karachi. He was accused of working for the banned organization, the Islamic State. This extra-judicial killing set in motion a series of events where larger crowds of Pashtuns began marching towards the capital city of Pakistan. Every week there would be protests at various press clubs around the country. These events led to the formation of the so called "the Pashtun Long March" (Shah, 2018b). These agitations were not confined to the boundaries of Pakistan. Major European countries, Northern America and Middle East saw large gatherings. The messages were amplified through the social media and a serious discussion started visibly shaking the Pakistani 'establishment'.

Thereafter, the Long March evolved into a settled pattern and got its current name of the Pashtun Tahafuz (protection) Movement (or PTM). This movement is markedly different from others in the region in many ways. This new form of resistance is exemplified by the young fearsome yet soft-spoken leader in Manzoor Pashteen who openly challenges the State's security apparatus in killing, abduction, and maiming thousands of Pashtuns since 9/11. He has directly hit at the Country's powerful military establishment in creating chaos in Pashtun lands (Mir, 2018a). The movement is different because it mostly started with young people. Young people in FATA are usually taught from their formative years to be good listeners and not to disrespect elders by asking questions. In a first, women have been vocal leaders delivering fearsome speeches in what used to be men's places on podiums and stages. The movement thus challenged the entrenched patriarchal structure of the tribal society, much to the ire of tribal elders and other conservative Pashtuns. PTM is unique also as movements in FATA have historically been led by religious leaders. It is the first instance where mobilisation of masses occurred because of a genuine grievance based on Pashtun identity above the narrow tribal divisions which has divided Pashtuns historically (Shah, 2018a). PTM's way of protest is above all that of non-violence and its ardent supports, leaders and followers include professionals such as doctors, teachers, engineers, labourers, students, and women alike. What makes Pashteen's message resonate well with a varied audience and why people join this social movement is the central theme for this essay.

The rest of the essay first describes the context of why this movement began discussing the main actors and the region. It then bases collective behaviour of PTM in Smelser's structural functionalist paradigm. What follows next is the key questions of what drives crowd behaviour. The major discussion then is about how PTM invokes various symbols to unite apparently well-educated people to its cause and concludes that the movement is well and alive and will scale further heights in days to come.

2. METHODOLOGY

Collective behaviour (CB) theory has been a classical explanation of protests. It has been an influential sub-field of sociology particularly in the United Sates in 1930s. CB has been mostly taken forward through the symbolic interactionist paradigm (such as Robert E Park & t Herbert Blumer 1940s) and the functionalist paradigm (Neil Smelser in the 1960s). We make sense of PTM through these two critical paradigms of structural functionalists, particularly Blumer (1995), and symbolic interactionists, foremost that of Smelser (1999). Literature on social movements usually portray CB as irrational behaviour in times of strains in major institutions of the society (Edwards, 2014). In its puritan form, the 'functionalists' sees protest as a manifestation of a strain or grievance that disturbs the social order. The analogy given is that of a smooth life where everyone is happy until a strain appears and causes grievance which sets in motion moment of crisis and breakdown of social order. This description mirrors Durkheim's classical formulation of 'anomie'.

The symbolic interactionists version, on the other hand considers protest as just one form of a range of behaviours to deal with the societal strains. It looks at the emotions displayed by crowds who feel wronged and let their emotions out through various symbolic avenues. In a sense the emotions spread out as a contagious mechanism where others start to feel about the issue in a circular reaction. People are no more thinking rationally but instead base their actions on energy and emotions of other people. The symbolic interactionist formulation thus states that the crowd initially have little idea about the goal of protest, and it is usually harnessed by political agitators through symbols and slogans (Rucht, 2007). The art of carving a social movement from this initial protest needs a collective identity to provide a sense of belongingness (solidarity) to a group to share a common cause. This essay relies on symbolic interactionism to explain the making of PTM and in the discussion section brings to light themes that appeals to group solidarity amongst Pashtuns.

3. RESULTS & FINDINGS

Making a Shared Identity through Social Movement

Pashtuns are depicted 'savages, lawless, treacherous, and violent' in colonial literature (Oliver, 1890). Not much has changed about the characterisation of Pashtuns in post-independence Pakistan and popular media shows them as 'backward' and 'old-fashioned'. By design or default much writing on Pashtuns post post 9/11, continues to distort Pashtun identity (Khan & Afsar, 2018). The often quoted "Pashtunwali" (the 'way of the Pashtuns') is considered archaic in modern day Pakistan. Khan, W and Afsar, A (2018) particularly mentions additional two components of Pashtunwali including Tura (Bravery) and Nang (honour) that came to define the 'war on terror' where Afghan Pashtuns provided refuge to Osama Bin Ladan and refused to hand him over on the pretext of 'refuge. The Pashtuns, true to their code, resisted US calls for extradition of OBL on the pretext of 'refuge' to a guest, and that a fellow Muslim can never be handed over to its enemy under Pashtunwali. Later events further cemented the perception that Pashtuns are fatalistic in nature, and they will prefer irrational war over negotiated peace in return for a fugitive.

What PTM has done tremendously well is to turn this code into something of a modern-day identity marker that is both humane and desirable. They have shown to its followers and detractors that alongside the cultural particulars of hospitality, jirga, and badal, people often overlook the notion of non-violence that is abundantly clear in Pashtun history. They take a leaf out a the past social movements in Pashtun lands, particularly the one championed by the Bacha Khan. Following in the footsteps of Mahatma Gandhi, the Bacha Khan's Khudai Khidmatgar movement (servants of God) against the British colonialism has been successfully touted by PTM as a gold standard to follow by PTM (Mir, 2018b). PTM has successfully rallied around the notion of non-violence by employing symbolic identity markers positioning Pashtuns as people who love their lands and freedom. The rallying cry for PTM has thus been that of a point of reference to the recent past on non-violence as a viable alternative to the rigid long-held view of Pashtuns being jingoistic in nature. This single focus has largely driven the collective behaviour of followers of the movement.

Educated Crowd Fares Better at Non Violence

The key question here is what makes people join a protest movement and if possible, who are these people in terms of their education, gender, and socioeconomic statuses etc. the dominant view in literature on Collective behaviours is that people who are suffering in a particular situation are oftentimes brainwashed to the extent that they become ready recruits for a movement. This strand suggest that some people are suspectable or predisposed towards violence and are considered as an asset to assert pressure on the dominant powers to come to a negotiated agreement by virtue of force. Their alienation is turned into a force for dominant powers to come to a solution (Goodwin et al., 2001). In case of PTM, this does not hold true. Most of its following consists of literate people who have a good standing in society. A review social media handles (mainly Twitter and Facebook) reveals that much of PTM support come from educated and working class people (Primary review by the author in a systemic way). The support base is not only men but scores of women are part of its leadership and follower circles.

This is clear from the fact that the protestors are not only confined to national educated segment but also Pashtun diaspora living in Washington, Ontario, Sydney, Brussels and London. The message by protestors is clear; Pashtuns are not backward, sympathisers of Taliban, illiterate, or wary of change. The PTM has successfully restructured Pashtun identity by progressive activities such as organising poetry and book reading sessions, literary circles in campuses, discussion on social media, and selective use of other Pashtun causes to galvanize g Pashtun intelligentsia to further the image of Pashtuns as peace-loving people.

Infusing New Meanings into Old Institutional Structures

When it comes to deconstruction and creating new meaning system, the PTM has been successful in redefining at least three key institutions of Pashtun life. They include the institution of Jirga (dispute resolution body), Purdah (women seclusion), and authentic Pashto poetry bordering on rebellion. I will explain these three in turn to make a case that people join protests when pushed to the wall not as an irrational act but rather as an act to create solidarity by infusing new meaning system in collectivism.

First, the Jirga has extreme respect from Pashtuns from all walks of life, apart from the Taliban, who rely only on orders of religious leaders. Over the period following 9/11, authentic Pashtun jirga leaders have been killed and rounded up to create space for fundamentalists Mullahs (religious leaders). There are no authentic numbers available but hundreds of key Pashtun been killed to create a leadership void. To fill this void, PTM has skilfully distinguished the majority 'normal' Pashtuns from several hundred hardliner Taliban fundamentalists and their apologists by creating a new leadership core in different parts of their lands. Since ordinary Pashtuns predominately are uneducated, they would also find refuge in Mullah's injunctions in both worldly and religious affairs. With the arrival and strong following of the leaders from mainstream Pashtuns, they have heard alternative voices in explaining what Pashtun identity means. Perhaps for the first time, this generation of Pashtuns have started seeing themselves from an internal lens than to rely on international and national media portraying them in negative light.

The deliberations in Jirgas as open to all and sundry to attend and are thus reached in a participatory manner. PTM leaders are now part of ethnic Jirgas resolving disputes amongst Pashtun tribes as well as creating awareness regarding non-violence. For the first time, the leadership core including Manzoor Pashteen have turned the table on aggressive posturing. It is very common to hear the current leadership group consistently using rights-based language and phrases such as peace-building, coexistence, political engagement, constitutionalism, and empowerment.

Second, for a patriarchal Pashtun society, a unique aspect of PTM has been giving the centre stage to women. Initially women participation was only limited to sit-ins where they could be seen displaying pictures of their sons, fathers and husbands who went missing for years. However with the passage of time, these women started leading some of the bigger protests alongside men. The forebearers have been outspoken women like Sana Ejaz, Bushra Gohar, and Wranga Loni. In an indirect way, the institution of Purdah suddenly appeared to have foregone into the the backseat and people saw the strength of women as a force for success of social movement. This deconstruction may go a long way in redefining Pashtun identity as for the first time, Pashtun women have realised their strength and may leave a deep imprint on Pashtun society for time to come. Young girls in colleges and universities have followed in their footstep and spread the word around through digital platforms.

Lastly, the Pashtun poetry and performance art scene has been diverse but usually invisible to outsiders. PTM through its protests have allowed space for writers, poets, singers, and social media influencers to express themselves. The symbolic use of Pashto language in defining the contours of the movement has been organic and well-orchestrated. People can readily connect to the anthems produced for the movement, understand the veiled cynicism against injustice, and relate to the historical injustice perpetrated by powerful quarters. However, this portrayal is not that cloaked in several instances and that too to greater effect. In some of the key slogans, PTM has taken the bold step of calling names of the powerful institutions in an act of open defiance. However, this cannot be termed as violent but an act to provide rigour to the otherwise non-violent nature of the movement. Some of these couplets are reproduced below:

Zwanan mu qatal kegee (Our youngsters are killed)

Korona mu wraneegee (Our homes are destroyed)

Pakhtun pa k gharkegee (Pashtun are sinking)

Da sangaazadi da (Then what is this freedom for?)

Particularly painful has been the fate of those who have been unlawfully held, detained, or made to disappear for decades. This has caused immense pain to their relatives who are in dark about their whereabouts or whether they are alive. This has prompted some very direct hits on Pakistan's powerful military who PTM supporters believe is behind all the wrongs being done to Pashtuns. The following few slogans are the key narrative around which PTM steers its power politics within the federation of Pakistan.

Ye jo dashat-gardi hey, esky peechy wardi hey (The uniform [military] is behind this terrorism)

Ye jo namaloom hey, ye hamen maloom hey (We know all the unknown persons)

Ye jo talib-gardi hey, esky peechy wardi he (The uniform [military] is behind this Talibanization)

Apart from the use of these direct slogans, PTM has been consistently cautious in maintaining its status as a non-violent group in all times. Even the killing of its leaders and followers or detention of its key leaders for years (such as Mr. Ali Wazir) has not infused violence amongst its support bases.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This review is based on an established on-going social movement to explain collective behaviour as an act of non-violent defiance and not as a mad crowd behaviour. The movement's success can be explained through a recourse to symbolic actions that has kept the crowd following it for years. A non-violent movement is a powerful mechanism which can challenge the negative identity connotations associated with an ethnic minority and earn a greater political mileage for the group.

For PTM, the story goes on with the changed political situation of the country. There are several dimensions that can be further explored to contribute to 'protest' literature. Particularly interesting is the case to look at the PTM from the stand point of longevity. Does a social movement lose its lustre with the passage of time and what will it take for the movement to keep going until all its objectives are met. There may also be the risk of elite capture of such movements by established political parties, especially in the context of Pakistan. Lastly there is need for rigorous empirical work on non-violence as a means of achieving goals of movement in a largely 'rightist' power politics in many countries around the world.

Competing Interests

The author did not declare any competing interest.

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