

Pakistan: Missing Persons Issue Swept Under Rug as Pashtun Anti-war Movement Spreads

By [Ali Mohsin](#)

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*The head of the commission on missing persons, **Justice (r) Javed Iqbal**, significantly downplayed the role of the country's military and intelligence agencies in "enforced disappearances" of Pashtun and Baloch people while briefing the National Assembly's Standing Committee on Human Rights on Monday. Iqbal's attempt to absolve Pakistan's military-intelligence apparatus of its responsibility for missing persons was made against the backdrop of a growing anti-war movement in the country led by Pashtun youth.*

During the briefing, Iqbal also accused foreign intelligence agencies of kidnapping people to defame Pakistan's armed forces, but no evidence was provided to back up his assertion. In addition, he claimed that most of the cases of missing persons received by the commission have been resolved and that the majority of the people recovered or accounted for were found to be "pro-military." Again, no evidence was given in defense of these claims. Iqbal also failed to acknowledge the security apparatus' role in the kidnapping and detaining of journalists, activists and political dissidents.

Since Justice Iqbal took over as President in 2011, the Commission of Enquiry on Enforced Disappearances has failed to publish a single report. The commission received 868 new cases last year, more than either of the previous 2 years. According to **Amina Masood Janjua**, an artist and human rights activist whose husband was disappeared in 2005, Iqbal has consistently discouraged the families of missing persons from seeking justice and has even implied that enforced disappearances are an effective means to deal with terrorism.

Justice Iqbal's mendacious defense of the army and intelligence agencies should come as no surprise in a country where the judiciary has a long history of supporting the military establishment and its anti-democratic maneuvers. In contrast, Pakistan's judges tend to be much more confrontational when it comes to elected officials. True to form, in his comments on Monday, Iqbal blasted parliamentarians for failing to adequately address the missing persons issue while completely denying the role of the military-intelligence apparatus in human rights violations against oppressed ethnic groups.

The unresolved issue of missing persons has been the main catalyst for an anti-war movement that has been gathering steam in the country since January. The movement began after the kidnapping and extrajudicial murder of **Naqeebullah Mehsud**, a Pashtun shopkeeper and aspiring model in Karachi who was not in any way associated with militant groups. Naqeebullah was murdered by the Sindh Police in an operation led by **Rao Anwar**, who was the Senior Superintendent of the Police at the time. After the authorities failed to apprehend Anwar, members of the Mehsud tribe began a long march from Dera Ismail Khan

in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to the capital city of Islamabad. Recognizing that they share the same grievances, other tribes soon joined the march. The protesters were enthusiastically received upon their arrival in Islamabad, where a sit-in commenced which lasted for 10 days and was attended by thousands of supporters.

Rao Anwar has since been apprehended, but young Pashtuns across the country are continuing their struggle. Their movement, which eventually adopted the name Pashtun Tahafuz (Protection) Movement (PTM), is led by **Manzoor Pashteen**, a 26-year-old member of the Mehsud tribe. The demands of the PTM are entirely legitimate. These include the recovery of 32,000 missing persons believed to have been kidnapped by the army; an end to state repression of Pashtuns, particularly in the tribal areas; the removal of army checkpoints where ordinary people are routinely humiliated; an end to discriminatory identification cards; and the clearing of landmines in tribal areas that have killed and injured scores of innocent people, including children.

These demands have struck a chord with Pashtuns throughout Pakistan. Massive rallies have been held all over Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, including a public meeting in Peshawar on April 8 that drew tens of thousands of supporters. A public meeting in Quetta, located in the restive province of Balochistan, drew a crowd of 50,000, including many Baloch and Hazara supporters. Large numbers of women have also participated in PTM rallies.

In his speeches, Manzoor Pashteen describes the misery unleashed on working class and poor Pashtuns ever since, in the aftermath of 9/11, Pakistan assumed the role of junior partner in US imperialism's subjugation of Afghanistan. At the behest of Washington, Pakistan has conducted numerous counter-insurgency operations in the tribal areas. The army has committed atrocities during these operations, including kidnappings, torture and extrajudicial killings.

Over the years, many Pashtuns have charged the military with conducting its operations indiscriminately, resulting in civilian casualties. In one of his speeches, Manzoor Pashteen recalled witnessing Pakistani fighter jets kill women and children in a bombing raid. He described how newspapers later reported that the attack killed terrorists, with no mention of civilian casualties. The military rarely identifies the people it kills in its operations, nor is there any independent verification regarding the identities of those killed. Millions of people have also been displaced at various points over the past 15 years. A Pakistani left-wing magazine, Tanqeed, used to publish interviews with Pashtun civilians in which they would discuss how the army operations were wreaking havoc on their lives. However, the magazine stopped publishing in January 2017 after one of its editors was kidnapped and held for 20 days by intelligence agents.

The PTM has also charged the military with selectively targeting militant groups in the tribal areas, sparing those militants it considers "strategic assets." Thus, ordinary people in these areas are left vulnerable to attack by certain militant groups, which in addition to state repression, have made their lives increasingly unbearable.

The PTM leadership has repeatedly stated that the movement is loyal to the Pakistani state and committed to non-violent activism. Nevertheless, the movement's rapid growth has terrified the country's ruling elite. On April 12, Pakistan's army chief ominously warned that "engineered protests" would not be tolerated.

The major political parties and the media first ignored the movement. When this proved

unsuccessful, they began smearing the movement as controlled by foreign elements, denying its organic character. The Awami National Party, which decades ago served as a pole of attraction for Pashtun nationalists and leftists, has prohibited its members from participating in the PTM. Journalists attempting to cover the movement objectively are being undermined. Online articles sympathetic to the PTM have mysteriously disappeared, including 3 recent articles from The News on Sunday (TNS) website.

With the movement gaining momentum, some politicians have feigned support for the movement, including Bilawal Bhutto, Chairman of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). However, the PPP, which controlled the central government from 2008 to 2013 and studiously followed Washington's dictates in conducting the "war on terror," is entirely complicit in the suffering of Pashtuns.

Throughout Pakistan's history, the ruling elite has displayed a tendency to overreact to movements of oppressed ethnic groups, favoring repression over accommodation. This tendency has become more pronounced since Bengalis achieved independence from Pakistan, with assistance from New Delhi, following a months-long war in 1971. The state of Bangladesh was established after Bengalis endured decades of oppression and exploitation. The Pakistani military, in alliance with Islamic extremists, massacred hundreds of thousands of Bengali civilians before it was forced to surrender.

As was the case with Bengalis, Pakistan's military and civilian elites are attempting to portray the nascent movement of Pashtuns as a foreign plot. Under these circumstances, the recent support for the PTM expressed by Afghanistan's puppet government could lend credence to this dubious narrative. The movement has also received enthusiastic coverage in the western media, much to the chagrin of Pakistan's ruling establishment. The PTM would do well to distance itself from forces seeking to influence the movement in order to serve their own geo-political agendas. The PTM would also benefit from highlighting Washington's role in destabilizing the region, to the detriment of Pashtuns on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Such an approach would dispel any notion that this powerful grassroots movement is "engineered."

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Ali Mohsin is an independent writer. He can be reached at alimohsin1917@gmail.com.

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