



# The Betrayal of FATA

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## **PREFACE**

This piece is based on conversations with relatives who had attended the Pashtun Long March (PLM) in Islamabad, their hopes at the ten (10) day sit-in and views about the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), almost two months since the protest in Islamabad.

In part one I will compare their views about PLM & PTM. In part two I will opine on the transformation of PLM into PTM. Finally, I will discuss the State's response to both PLM and PTM and conclude with how the State and PTM treated the individuals discussed in the first part.

### **From Pashtun Long March (PLM) to Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM)**

A young Pashtun from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Naqeeb Mehsud, was murdered in a racially profiled killing claiming him to be a terrorist. The murderer, a police officer, was not only known for extra-judicial murders but also widely perceived to operate under the patronage of the PPP, Pakistan's largest secular, liberal and relatively pro-Western political party.

After growing social media outrage, a core group of Mehsud tribesman from FATA, took their peaceful and relatively small protest to the streets of Pakistan's capital city, Islamabad. The protest, termed Pashtun Long March (PLM), grew and within days had amalgamated demands to redress injustices borne by Pashtuns in Pakistan. The protest eventually ended after a ten (10) day sit-in.

A Pashtun myself, an Afridi, I have extended family and friends who reside in FATA and many had made the journey to Islamabad to have their voices heard. I was fortunate enough to hear their first-hand accounts. To them, PLM was a chance for Pashtuns from various areas and walks of life to finally channel their grievances and call attention to the usurpation of their rights. They were full of hope and had a genuine optimism that finally their issues had a platform.

### **Views on PLM**

Among those protesting was one of my aunts. Her youngest son had been a soldier in Pakistan's military and had lost his life in an operation against terrorists who had facilitated an attack on Peshawar's Army Public School (APS), slaughtering 132 children. She spoke to me with absolute pride in his son's sacrifice and then chided the state because, despite his actions, his family in FATA did not have the basic human rights all other Pakistanis took for granted. One of my uncles, a former activist for the Pashtun nationalist party ANP, was there. He had lost a son in terrorist attack in Kabul and two grand-daughters during the Pakistan military's anti-terror operations in FATA. His younger brother was killed by an improvised explosive device (IED) planted by who turned out to be Afghan terrorists sheltering in FATA. His brother was targeted because his son volunteered in one of FATA's tribal levies, the khassadaars, fighting alongside Pakistan's Army during the anti-terror operation that had taken the lives of my uncle's grand-daughters. PLM for him highlighted Pashtun suffering. His most vehement criticism was for nationalists who had, in his words, prostituted Pashtun suffering to play power politics. Many like him had shot down ANP and

PkMAP representatives who had belatedly attended the PLM to divert the protest to spew anti-military venom.

Also present was one of my cousins, a young lawyer and political activist who had assisted the Political Parties Joint Committee on FATA Reforms (PPJCFR). A fierce critic of Pakistan's present PML-N government for first diluting and then shelving plans for FATA reforms. Two of his brothers had died in the past decade. One was assassinated as a retaliation by a rival tribe who had 'lost face' after PPJCFR recommendations were shelved. My cousin had negotiated their support for the reforms, assuring them, this time, the government was sincere. The second brother was abducted by masked men in military uniforms, one among the thousands of 'enforced disappearances.' After years of effort my cousin was able to find his shallow grave. Abducted and killed by an Afghanistan based Uzbek terror-lord's men in retaliation for Pakistan military's operations against them in FATA. At PLM, as part of a group of lawyers, he had heckled Asma Jehangir, Pakistan's eminent, now deceased, human rights' activist, when she tried to colour the protest against the military. Having worked against done strikes and for FATA reforms, he and his companions were acutely aware of her role in playing down civilian deaths by US drone strikes and her newfound enthusiasm to defend Pakistan's now disgraced Prime Minister who, on an individual whim, had shelved FATA Reforms in 2013. For him PLM was about FATA and the rights of Pashtuns, not a stage for anyone's anti-military rhetoric.

Another cousin, a young human rights activist, was also at PLM. Educated in the UK she had returned to Pakistan to work for gender equality, education and the empowerment of Pashtun women. She had assisted several charitable organisations including the now widely recognised 'Girls Aware'. Married to another Pashtun activist, the couple had refused to leave Swat during the worst of the Taliban oppression, survived assassination attempts and sheltered street-orphan throughout the eventual military operation. She had encouraged many Pashtun women living in Islamabad to participate in PLM. She saw PLM as a vehicle that would finally bring the plight of Pashtun women to the fore.

They inspired my twitter thread

<https://twitter.com/safridis/status/962054307322380288>. They had all borne the brunt of suffering and injustices befallen the people in the Pashtun dominated Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province and FATA. Despite this, they were exceedingly optimistic that finally an avenue had become available to channel their grievances and ask for their rights as Pakistanis and, above all, as human beings. PLM was a movement devoid of the power-political nationalists, hate-filled anti-military activists and cheap publicity seekers. PLM was fiercely proud of the numerous sacrifices Pashtuns had made, as civilians, soldiers and volunteers, for the defence of Pakistan.

PLM was a movement about 'their' rights and grievances.

## VIEWS ON PTM

Two months later, another protest was held in the city of Peshawar. I spoke to them all again. They discussed PLM's transformation into the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) which held the Peshawar rally. I was taken aback by their views and it prompted me to write this piece.

My aunt recounted how she had heard about the APS massacre of 132 children in Peshawar, how her son left home with barely a word about his deployment and how she had been informed he had fallen but there would be no burial. He had lost his life on foreign soil in an operation that targeted one of the key facilitators of the APS massacre. When she spoke of PTM her rage was barely containable. She spoke of the slogans being pushed by senior PTM members. Openly stating on numerous occasions that Pakistan's military had itself massacred the 132 children at APS to gain sympathy. I was barely able to hold back my tears as I heard the disappointment and anger in her voice.

When I spoke to my uncle he broke down. He recalled how various fellow nationalists had visited his son in law's home in Peshawar and made passionate declarations about his grand-daughters' deaths. Lifelong nationalist friends had even said the girls' father, a police officer, was in essence working with the 'enemy' who had killed his grand-daughters. How he had thrown them out and accused them of playing anti-military politics on the deaths of his grand-daughters. He tearfully recalled that these same people were now marching for PTM, sloganeering against the sacrifices made by countless others like his nephew who still volunteers as a khassadaar. Amid his tears he cursed the nationalists for hijacking the only hope that had arrived in decades. The man who had been so upbeat during PLM was now unable to stem his tears.

My cousin spoke about how the main culprits in the shelving of FATA reforms had shared the stage with PTM's leaders, who embraced them without any shame or remorse. How PTM balks on FATA reforms. He recounted PTM's leaders meeting those who had actively supported militant outfits in FATA. He began to name lawyers, politicians and journalists who had been vocal in their support for US drone strikes that killed so many FATA civilians and had ridiculed him and other activists who opposed drone strikes by a foreign government. In his words, the PTM is now indistinguishable from those who had been buying for the blood of FATA civilians to please the US government. The PTM for him was playing on ethnic tensions and the legitimate grievances of FATA's people but seemed uninterested in working with anyone to find solutions. His depressive summary of PTM was such a contrast to his near euphoric optimism at PLM in Islamabad.

"These are not the people I stood with in Islamabad. They are now among those who I had stood against. Its politics now, plain and simple. FATA and its people are all but a prop; forgotten".

The most stoical conversation was with my cousin who told me that she had seen this happen so many times. She said the problem lies with the way basic grievances are projected, propagated and used to mould then drive narratives in Pakistan. She spoke in detail about how she saw this happen to an organisation she had once been very proud of. When it began 'Girls Aware' was all about the

empowerment and life-choices for girls and young women in the Northern areas. This was an honourable cause and many idealist young women like her had flocked to assist. As there is no effective state-umbrella that could seed, germinate and assist such honourable efforts, the organisation looked towards donors, domestic and foreign, to facilitate its good work. At the outset only, some of the donors' initiatives found a small but negligible place in the organisation's work. Overtime, as the reliance on the donors for funds, propagation and international recognition grew, so did the portion of the donors' narrative. When she stopped assisting Girls Aware, the original cause was a dwindling facade that stood ahead of a narrative almost entirely driven by the donor aspirations. In her words;

"In the beginning Girls Aware was about us, women like me, and the difficulties we face in reaching our potential. It's now about what the donors wish to talk about, it's no longer about us".

She claimed PTM was the latest in a long line of narrative usurpations in Pakistan's civil discourse. Those who coat-tail donor narratives will promote PTM and those who suspect everything, good or bad, donors push will brand PTM as traitors. The cycle will repeat itself irrespective of the original cause's purity. She ended on the depressing note that in the absence of indigenous mechanisms to channel grievances, the 'narrative-industry' will remain the primary actor in Pakistan's civil society and opposed by self-branded 'patriots'.

In little more than two months, a movement that had inspired so much optimism amongst these four people has left them feeling irrelevant, angered and even betrayed. The demand for their right or the need for their grievances to be heard has not changed for the better, but the movement they thought would amplify their voice has changed for the worse.

## PLM vs PTM

Why have those who put so much stock into the PLM find their concerns and core issues abandoned, or betrayed, by the PTM?

### PLM

PLM was focused on key concerns of the people of FATA and KP. Their demands centred around the grave injustices faced by mainly Pashtun populations as a result of the war on terror, repeated drone strikes and the military operations against militants, foreign and domestic, in KP and FATA. Drone strikes from Afghanistan conducted by the US and hailed with near euphoric hysteria by the Afghanistan, India and US governments, as well as their supporters within Pakistan, have been a major source of civilian deaths in FATA along with the actions of domestic militants operating under the shadow and support of Pakistan's geo-politically motivated Army. Most of these policies, vociferously supported by most outspoken civil society and human rights activists as well as warmongering media outlets in the rest of Pakistan, had led to innumerable deaths, termed collateral damage, and enforced disappearances of locals during and after military operations. The sheer number of alleged enforced disappearances, sometimes designated by the relatively benign term 'missing persons', is enough to rattle any conscience. Those from FATA and KP who showed reluctance to join the war mongering, opposed drone strikes from Afghanistan or conduct large scale military operations by the Army were ridiculed as terrorist sympathisers and given comical accolades by the mainstream and Pashtun Nationalists including the ANP. The PLM marchers voiced their anger at the profiling of Pashtuns in urban centres such as Lahore and Karachi. To the extent that PML-N government in Punjab and the PPPP & MQM coalition had expressly refused the sanctuary and temporary relocation of IDPs from FATA and KP in the provinces of Punjab and Sindh. This profiling of Pashtuns as terrorists provided the instigating act of the protest through the extrajudicial murder of Pashtun in Karachi by a police officer widely perceived to operate under the patronage of the PPP government in Sindh. They also expressed profound anger at the failure of the PML-N Government, with a two-third majority in parliament, ostensibly at the behest of its political allies PkMAP and JUI-F, to reverse the colonial rule in FATA by mainstreaming the region, a process begun in earnest twelve (12) years ago through the All Parties' Committee on FATA and was repeatedly, unforgivably, delayed by the PML-N government since 2013. Military check posts, the treatment of locals at these check posts and the colonial attitude of federal administrators were among the most vocal criticisms repeatedly voiced by the PLM marchers. They called for FATA to have local governments, local courts and formalised local security and police forces, in short, they wanted FATA to be provided the same rights that the rest of Pakistan enjoyed.

### PTM

Today PTM stands hand in glove with those who opposed FATA reforms and is so beholden to PkMAP's politically malleable leader that it refuses to call for FATA reforms. This silence deprives FATA of its core demand for local governments,

local courts and local security agencies such as the police to provide due process for local grievances and miseries, like the enforced disappearances. PTM repeatedly invokes the truly grave injustice of enforced disappearances. It makes much theatre by parading the relatives of the disappeared as talismans to encourage hate slogans against the military, but there is near complete silence on FATA reforms that would go a long way towards bringing these relatives structured due process, or at least hope for long term remedies. By doing so PTM saves its self the cost of criticising the chief architects of shelving FATA reforms, the PkMAP, JUI-F and PMLn governing coalition.

Racial profiling of Pashtuns and the refusal of PMLn in Punjab and the PPP & MQM coalition in Sindh, to temporarily house IDPs from FATA was a key element of anger among FATA locals. PTM remains silent at the key contention and in a weird twist, are rewarded by the support of the key apologists of such racial profiling. PTM has refused to criticise PPP, the political party widely perceived in FATA to have sheltered and assisted the murderer of Naqib Masud to escape authorities.

PLM was fiercely protective of the sacrifices of Pashtun personnel as part of the military, the Frontier Constabulary (FC) and local Pashtun levies, the khassadaars. PTM's incessant military bashing garners it a lot of opportunist supporters but comes at a price of effectively downplaying, if not betraying, the sacrifices made by FATA locals in the fight to rid their areas of militants. Nothing symbolises this betrayal more than PTM leaders repeatedly implying that military itself conducted the truly heart wrenching killing of 132 children at an Army run school in Peshawar. Many of the children killed were Pashtun, the children of military personnel. To propagate that the military conducted the APS massacre shows a truly reprehensible sickness of the mind within PTM. The military has lost more than 5,000 soldiers and officers, including Generals, many of them Pashtun, in the fight against militants, yet PTM has unashamedly owned a slogan borrowed from the once Soviet-terrorism apologists within the Nationalist movement that blatantly blames the military for all terrorism in Pakistan.

Within two months of the initial PLM protest, PTM is now in bed with almost every entity that helped to cause much of FATA's post 2007 predicament and the continued problems faced by IDPs. All entities of course but one; the military.

PTM is now unashamedly playing ethnic power politics and is a political party in all but name, subsumed in the external and internal mechanism that manufacture politically expedient and exclusively ethnic political narratives of dissent in Pakistan. The only thing missing is the political party structure required to fight elections. There is a finite vote bank for ethnic nationalism and military bashing in Pakistan, cornered by established power players currently propagating PTM. The moment PTM voices a political aspiration these players and their apologists will drop their support and vilify PTM. In essence, PTM has become hostage to the very forces those idealists had shouted down during the ten-day Islamabad sit-in by PLM. The complete refusal shown by PLM in Islamabad to be hijacked by nationalists and military bashers has now been replaced by PTM's brand of ethnic nationalism and military bashing.



PLM, the movement that emerged and was epitomised by the ten (10) day Islamabad sit-in, is now all but dead. Its metamorphoses now all but complete.

### **The State**

How did a purely indigenous rights based movement that vehemently refused to be hijacked by hate-mongers transform within two months into an ethnicity driven movement relying on hate to propagate its message and in bed with almost every actor it had initially targeted for criticism?

The fault here lies firmly with the State and Pakistan's ever meddling Military. There is no mechanism in Pakistan to channel legitimate grievances besides becoming a tool in the self-perpetuating civil-military binary. In the absence of such a mechanism any aggrieved entity, whatever their concerns, becomes an easy prey for those who do have a functional mechanism to highlight, promote and propagate narratives. In Pakistan they have proved themselves quite successful at marketing and branding their pet projects or ideas. No such mechanism is provided by the state.

PLM leaders were idealists, with genuine grievances and issues that could and should have been resolved within a relatively short period of time through a transparent process. With some progress made at the Islamabad sit-in, by enlarge the state's response had been cloistered as well as the epitome of colonial functional incompetence to deal with bottom-up issues. The state needed to be proactive, include key members of the PLM into a consultative committee to chart a course to resolve all core grievances. The consultative process needed to be open and transparent.

It's about perceptions. The State must be perceived as sympathetic, responsive and inclusive.

Showing sympathy does not mean the state starts showering purple prose through state and semi-state media outlets but place a structure to listen, as well as, record the concerns raised and empathise with the losses experienced by the aggrieved as a result of the state's actions or omissions. Being responsive does not mean issuing press releases promulgating in-house committees to provide 'suggestions'. It means setting out an open and transparent process with clear benchmarks. Being inclusive means key leaders of the aggrieved are included in any committees set up to ensure that the government responds to issues raised 'by the aggrieved, through the aggrieved' so they and the state can mutually agree on a better course of action to remedy grievances.

What was required from the State was a clear structure that provided a resolution process.

The first step was to ensure a consultative process of mediation and arbitration. The aggrieved and the State needed to sit together and deal with each issue raised, mutually agree on political solutions for the issues and recommend both legislative and judicial measures to ensure the effective implementation of solutions. The second step would have involved the resolution of issues through judicial due process after the required, mutually agreed, legislation was put into place.

Such a structure would have ensured that those aggrieved were provided remedies for their issues, had been part of the solution process and remained isolated from those who had agendas and narratives that were contrary to the exercise of solution finding, such as the 'narrative industry' now dominating PTM.

The State of Pakistan failed on being sympathetic, responsive and inclusive, as well as providing anything remotely similar to a structured process for dispute resolution. The absence of a structure to channel legitimate grievances allowed those who have a functional mechanism to first mould and then hijack PLM.

Simply put, the government of Pakistan's state failed to govern.

## MILITARY AND THE 'NARRATIVE INDUSTRY'

Pakistan's military has a chequered history of intervening in politics at the behest of foreign governments like the US and for reasons of pure self-preservation. It has indulged in wholesale purchase of politicians, judges and media personnel to preserve its overbearing shadow. It patronised non-state actors for geo-political goals in Soviet backed Afghanistan and against India in Kashmir. It is widely perceived as the key patron of outfits now fighting foreign troops in Afghanistan. This naked Machiavellian realism gave rise to a peculiar polarity in Pakistan where one side, intellectually close to the West, is defined by its opposition to the military in everything, irrespective of motive. Though a fringe in real terms, they have a disproportionately loud voice in Western capitals, are excessively skewed beneficiaries of donor funds and have become key components of the very effective grievance channelling mechanism provided by Western diplomats and donor agencies. They are the chief architects of Pakistan's version of the 'boomerang effect'.

Spanning a varied collection of individual, political, media and business interests as well as civil society organisations they are a truly formidable brand management collective. When they partake in promoting a narrative, for largely Western audiences, articulate, yet confirmation-bias riddled, articles emerge in media outlets, foreign and domestic, symbols are created, 'Che Guevaras' are born and marketing gimmicks become the must have ornaments to show vicarious solidarity. In a democracy as systemically dysfunctional as Pakistan, a vocal, organised and well supported fringe is more important than the grievances of its population. It is a hallmark of Pakistan that even its heroes and villains are subject to someone else's narrative production. The same mechanism had promoted the military as forward thinkers, religious messiahs or enlightened moderates when the military was important to Western interests but in a world reoriented towards Pakistan's eastern neighbour, the military is now a hindrance, even a key obstacle, to those same interests. Demonising it for its wrongs, real and imaginary, has traction and is lucrative.

This mechanism ensures that military-bashing sells in Pakistan, and sells well. Many a political, non-political and apolitical career, as well as fortune, is beholden to this mechanism. This mechanism was instrumental in validating drone strikes and large-scale military operations in FATA & ridiculed locals who opposed these measures. Those within PLM who opposed them have been all but silenced in PTM. Voicing such opposition jeopardises the availability of mechanisms through pro-US organisations to promote PTM's narrative. Their guilt in the death of thousands in FATA is now forgotten as PTM rides their narrative building mechanism through near exclusive military-bashing.

Here again the fault lies with the State, or more precisely, the military. A colonial inheritor, it has always had a discerningly choking grip on open debate in Pakistan. It is not that alternative views to the manufactured narratives do not exist, or cannot be articulated, its rather than the Military and the state have simply not structured a system of goal congruence and mutually beneficial progression that would encourage people to challenge the external narrative building mechanism. Those who do without support are shot down as 'boot lickers' or 'boot polishers', the boot here referring to the military. While those who engage in, sometimes

laughable and unbelievably farcical, criticism of the military, 'the boots' or 'the boys', find their cerebral retching promoted mercilessly. Rather than engage in challenging a contrary narrative the military's response has almost always been to shun debate, even stifle it. The military's penchant for political meddling and its failure to allow the state to develop its own narrative building mechanism is so complete that today no political party in Pakistan worth its salt is willing to openly declare itself supportive of military initiatives, even when necessary. An interesting, if not largely unique, occurrence for a deeply conservative 'Republic'.

Most legitimate calls for rights and addressing grievances in Pakistan begin as PLM. In a dysfunctional democracy run on patronage, the absence of a state patronised mechanism for narrative building means legitimate voices of concern are left orphaned. Inevitably, and even unwillingly, they have no alternative but to seek patronage elsewhere. Eventually they accept assistance from private donors, domestic and foreign, who can get them heard. Unless they are adamant to the point of suicidal, they usually accept that assistance along with the narrative it accompanies. This is how legitimate concerns for ethnic extra-judicial killings in Karachi, enforced disappearances in Baluchistan, resisters of military-patronised terror camps in FATA and advocates of girls' empowerment and education in Swat fall prey to the 'narrative industry' and become mere tools in their aspirational structures. They become PTM.

The military's unwillingness, even inability, to allow open debate on matters where it must acknowledge its past mistakes and its default position to ban or strangle voices contrary to its perceptions is perhaps the most potent enemy of the military. Yes, someone else is thrusting into the wound, but it's the State and military of Pakistan who have provided them the knife. Stuck between the post-colonial military and neo-colonial lackeys, the ones who truly suffer are those burying sons in Karachi, searching for loved ones in Baluchistan, securing their children in FATA and burying their daughters in Swat.

Even their legitimate grievances and rights get hijacked this game of narratives.

## CONCLUSION

The most appropriate way to conclude this piece would be to summarise what became of the aspirations of the four individuals who had inspired the original twitter thread on the 9<sup>th</sup> of February 2018.

All four had made the journey to Islamabad and sat through the ten-day PLM protest full of hope and optimism about the possibility of their grievances finally being channelled. All four of them did not go to PTM's Peshawar protest because they see no relevance of PTM's newfound direction with their grievances.

All four of them were failed, by the State, the Military and the PTM.

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