

Pakistan: When farmers protest

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ON Sept 24, 2020, the Indian parliament enacted three laws: Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act 2020, Farmers (Empowerment & Protection) Assurance and Farm Service Act 2020, and Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act 2020. Although the government's rationale for enacting these laws was the reorganisation and revitalisation of the agricultural sector, the affected farmers branded its move as a 'blatant attack on food democracy' and 'nature's health' and took to the streets in protests. As the two sides remain at a deadlock more than four months after the enactment of the farm laws, it is important to explore the roots of this dispute and to consider its implications, if any, for Pakistan.

At its core, the dispute between the Indian government and the farmers is about different economic approaches towards enhancing food security. The Indian government, under the guidance of the WTO, seeks to increase food security by increasing food production through a range of measures including inviting investments from foreign corporate interests into the agricultural sector, and allowing them to engage in contract farming and to trade in food products on market prices. The farmers, however, complain that these measures would not only reduce their incomes and, therefore, their access to food by locking them into one-sided contracts and forcing them to trade without the safety net of market-support prices but in requiring them to grow only the most marketable products, would in the long run, lead to environmental damage and reduced biodiversity.

Pakistanis should be concerned with understanding why farmers' protests have not arisen on their side of the border.

The arguments presented on both sides have merit and need to be balanced through negotiations in light of India's national priorities. Unfortunately, however, any hope for such dialogue has been shattered by the deep mistrust that divides the two sides. The farmers mistrust the government for being pro-business, and, by extension, anti-farmer, and, therefore, are unwilling to negotiate with the government. These misgivings are further cemented by the fact that the government had initially introduced these reforms through presidential ordinances without consultation either with the farmers or legislators. Later, even when it tabled the laws before parliament, it did not allow for the views of the stakeholders to be heard let alone taken into consideration and simply enacted these very ordinances into acts.

On the other hand, the government is suspicious of the protests because these are led by Punjabi Sikh farmers. Although Sikh farmers are protesting because they are the primary affectees of the laws by virtue of being amongst the smallest landholders in the country, the government sees the protests in the perspective of the separatist Khalistan movement that is routinely associated with Indian Sikhs. This mistrust led the government to first dismiss the genuine concerns of the Sikh farmers and then to crack down upon them on the allegation that they were deliberately scuttling the reform process and challenging the writ of the state. Rather than bearing fruit, this harsh response only confirmed the worst fears of the farmers, that the farm laws are merely designed to impoverish and further marginalise their community.

Pakistani observers have mostly treated these protests as a specifically Indian phenomenon and yet more evidence of the ineptitude of Prime Minister Modi's government. Such a view is short-sighted because it overlooks the many similarities between India and Pakistan including its large agricultural base; its considerable number of small farmers that struggle for their livelihood; its WTO and, therefore, its commitment to the agenda of economic liberalisation and, most importantly, its long history of legislating through ordinance rather than through meaningful debate, consultation and consensus. These significant commonalities suggest that rather than celebrating or dismissing these protests, Pakistani commentators should be more concerned with understanding why such protests have not arisen on their side of the border.

The uncomfortable reality is that the absence of protests in Pakistan is not due to any positive action taken by the Pakistani government to prevent them, but due to the acute backwardness of its agriculture sector. Unlike their Indian counterparts, the Pakistani small farmers have remained too poor, too under-educated and too powerless to organise themselves into a group and to agitate for their interests. This is largely due to the fact that whilst India had abolished the system of feudal landholding in the 1950s, Pakistan not only allowed it to retain control on the agricultural sector but also to extend its influence on the affairs of the state. Consequently, agricultural reforms have either been completely ignored or when undertaken, have been more aligned with the interests of the powerful.

It is unlikely, however, that this status quo will remain unchallenged in this age of social media and the protests of the Indian farmers will not ultimately kindle a demand for change on the Pakistani side. Watching the resolve of the Indian farmers, Pakistani farmers may learn to appreciate that they too have a right to seek a decent livelihood, to challenge unfair and antiquated governmental policies, and to play a fuller role in agricultural commerce and in protecting biodiversity and the environment. Further, looking at the international attention Indian protests have recently garnered, Pakistani farmers may also realise that they too may find a larger, more sympathetic audience beyond the country's borders.

In the absence of meaningful reform, Pakistan is simply sitting on a gunpowder keg, waiting to explode. It is, therefore, in the interest of the government to turn its attention towards the modernisation and uplift of the Pakistani agricultural sector and to do so, not in blind adherence to the economic guidance provided by the WTO and other multilateral agencies but in consultation with the domestic players that have a stake in these reforms. Perhaps the greatest lesson from the ongoing protests in India is that inaction, labelling of grievances as being politically motivated, or simply foisting reforms upon the people, is no longer an option because when the people protest with understanding and with organisation, not even the machinery of the mightiest of states can stop them.

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