

Lahore (Pakistan): Crackdown on protesters demanding release of imprisoned peasant leaders

Thursday 8 June 2017, by [PKRC](#) (Date first published: 7 June 2017).

Lahore

Press Release

Dozens of policemen from the Qilla Gujjar Singh police station, including DSP Ghulam Dastgir, forcibly shut down a protest organized by the Pakistan Kisan Rabta Committee (PKRC) to demand the release of arrested leaders of the Anjuman-i-Mazareen Punjab (AMP) on Wednesday.

Earlier, AMP members and peasants from Chak4/4L, 12/4L, 15/4L and 10/4L found their villages barricaded early in the morning on Wednesday, and unable to leave their villages to join the demonstration organized in front of the Lahore Press Club.

When members of the PKRC and sympathisers arrived in front of the Lahore Press Club to demand the release of Mehr Abdul Sattar, the AMP leader jailed for over a year on trumped up charges, and Ghulam Noor Nabi, AMP general secretary arrested last month, they found a heavy police contingent deployed in front of the Press Club. Among them were several cops in plainclothes who deplored that they had been deployed there since 6am to arrest protesters and any peasants from Okara who managed to join the protest. The police claimed they had received special directions to clamp down on the peasants' protest without specifying where those directions had come from and why.

At around 5pm, when members of the PKRC, the Communist Party of Pakistan, the All Pakistan Trade Union Federation, the Progressive Labour Federation, the Joint Action Committee for People's Rights and the Pakistan Trade Union Defence Campaign began shouting slogans against the state's coercive tactics to silence protesters and demanded the release of AMP leaders, the police officers including an SHO threatened to arrest everyone present at the demonstration.

They claimed that the city administration had imposed Section 144 on protests throughout the city (not just on The Mall and in front of the Press Club) and that anyone found protesting for the rights of disenfranchised workers or peasants would be arrested. The SHO present called the demo a "charade" and announced that the democratic right to protest in the city had been "officially revoked". They then told the protesters to move along or face mass arrests.

The state's tactics of using anti-terrorism laws and Section 144 to silence activists, peasants, workers and students, and to criminalise dissent is a worrying trend which can be seen in the authorities' attempts to frame oppressed communities and brand them as traitors working against the interest of Pakistan. The sitting rulers who had once seen in ally in Mehr Abdul Sattar abandoned him and left him at the mercy of state landgrab interests.

Farooq Tariq, general secretary of the PKRC, condemned the police's shameful attempt to silence

the peasants and their supporters. "We will continue to support the right of landownership of all tenants of Okara. The state's attempt to silence the weak and the oppressed must be condemned by all conscious individuals." He urged progressive groups to raise their voice against the draconian laws and policies used to unjustly imprison activists for no reason, other than demanding their rights.

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