

Pashtun long march

Pakistan: marches and democracy

Friday 27 April 2018, by [JAN Ammar Ali](#) (Date first published: 6 March 2018).

Dont be fooled by the media blackout and prejudice. The Islamists are not the only social movements on the march in Pakistan. Over the last few months, Pakistan has witnessed a plethora of long marches and square occupations in the country.

The long march led by the Islamists of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah (TLY) remains the starkest example of the power of this new form of political claim-making. Thankfully, there are more progressive examples.

For example, an under-reported but hugely popular mobilisation recently took place in Gilgit-Baltistan, where thousands joined a long march to demand the withdrawal of taxes on wheat, a demand eventually accepted by the GB government. More recently, the Pashtun Long March and subsequent sit-in in Islamabad foregrounded the most repressed issues in Pakistan's political landscape – the pervasive problem of 'missing' persons and the systematic discrimination faced by ordinary Pashtuns.

Despite its own historical specificity, the theatrical and confrontational nature of this form of political expression is situated within a global trend observed over the last few years. The Arab Spring was the most intense expression of popular mobilisations that converged onto a particular site and turned into a force that shook regimes and stunned political analysts. The Occupy Wall Street movement was another major event that placed protesters against the powerful financial and political elites of the United States. Similar protests have occurred around the world, including the Indignados movement in Spain and the creation of an Azaadi Chowk at Jawaharlal Nehru University in India, to cite a few examples.

What is remarkable about many of these protests is that they have resorted to direct action to demand better representation and citizenship under democracies. This raises two important questions. First, why is there such persistent public discontent with representative democracies in today's world? And second, what form of politics (even if in an embryonic stage) is represented by recurrent long marches and sit-ins of space witnessed in Pakistan and around the globe?

The first question is answered by examining the ways in which the content of democracies has been hollowed out over the past few decades. Key economic decisions that impact millions of people are made by global financial elites whose names and faces are not known to the public, let alone being elected or accountable. For example, after the financial crisis of 2008, governments in Washington, London and Brussels were forced to pay massive bailouts to financial institutions, leaving millions of ordinary households in enormous financial instability. With automatisisation further decreasing the prospects of long-term employment for the youth, the 'millennials' have seen their dreams of social mobility abruptly disrupted by the nightmare of being trapped in a present without a future.

In poorer countries, this context has become an explosive political problem, with many analysts arguing that the root cause of the Arab Spring was the inability of the system to provide

opportunities to the youth. By making them 'surplus populations' who are no longer needed by the system, a large number of youth today are assigned the role of potential threats that need to be perpetually tamed. This perception of 'unwanted people' has led to an international regime of surveillance and securitisation, putting large sections of the population under militarized control.

In Pakistan, the authoritarian tendency to control the lives of ordinary citizens is intertwined with the ethnic, religious and gender fault lines in society. Fata has been affected as part of a geo-strategic calculus by state and non-state actors in which not only certain populations, but entire regions, are becoming disposable. The emergence of 'zones' and 'enclaves' within countries and cities expresses the discrimination that is carved onto space itself. Today, one sign of demonstrating citizenship rights in Pakistan is one's ability to cross over from one zone to another without being harassed or humiliated at check posts. Pashtuns are almost always denied this privilege.

We, therefore, have a twin movement of financial plundering coupled with an increasingly securitised society. And herein lies the crisis of contemporary democracies; the financial elites and security agencies around the world are monopolising power by consolidating their forces, while 'the people', who are supposedly the real subject of democracy, remain dispersed due to an active process of segregation and marginalisation perpetrated by those in power. If procedural democracy is merely becoming a tool for representing power rather than the people, then the question arises whether there is any point holding onto abstract phrases such as the 'will of the people'.

It is at this point that one can see the broad appeal of the long marches and occupations erupting around the globe. If the system is geared towards the dispersal of people, occupations concentrate them at a site and give them a sense of common purpose. If the status quo humiliates its own citizens, then these demonstrations allow their participants to redeem their dignity and sense of being away from the grip of power on their bodies and their minds.

There is then a qualitative shift in people from being passive and isolated individuals to an active, purposeful and confident mass. This birth of the collective subject of democracy is what endows these movements with a capacity to overcome the limitations of the contemporary political system. Occupations have played a major role in opening up frank discussions about taboo subjects as a way of resisting the shrinking space for political discussions. Occupy Wall Street and the Indignados movement were able to bring the critiques of financial elites into the centre of political discourse.

Similarly, the Pashtun Long March not only opened up the debate on the issue of missing persons and the discrimination faced by citizens in Fata, but forced the government to acknowledge the problem and negotiate with the protesters. Despite not having any formal representation in parliament, leaders of the long march such as Manzoor Pashteen are being recognised as legitimate political actors by the powers that be, signalling the emergence of an alternative form of sovereignty grounded in popular mobilisation rather than the rituals of electoral democracy.

Yet, this situation creates challenges for both the endurance of such movements, and the very future of democracy. Will the promise and ideals of these movements endure beyond the intense but rare periods of mobilisation? The tragedy of the Arab Spring lies precisely in the inability of anti-government organisers to develop an adequate relationship between popular assertion and institutional change, opening up space for retrogressive forces and military authoritarianism.

More importantly, such movements cannot limit themselves to mere 'resistance' against the status quo. The dystopic forms of militarisation and control we see are linked to the impossibility of providing a decent life to millions of people within the confines of the system. If one is to truly transform social relations, there cannot just be a critique of the status quo. There must also be an affirmative, positive vision of what a good life in the contemporary world should look like. The seeds

of such an alternative are already present in practices, declarations and demands of the disparate protests which need to be carefully studied.

A radical vision of democracy views politics as 'the art of the impossible', insofar as it brings forth what is deemed impossible by the coordinates of a mediocre present. By bringing into discussion some of the most repressed themes, these movements have already opened up the possibility of a new form of politics. If they further succeed in developing an enduring relationship between popular mobilisation and institutional change, then we could be on the cusp of a truly historic political moment.

P.S.

The writer is an assistant professor at Punjab University, Lahore and member of the People's Solidarity Forum

First published: The News (Pakistan)

<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/288812-democracy-on-the-march>