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COVID-19 and Emerging Challenges to the State of Pakistan's Writ

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Key Points:

- Groups and entities that are otherwise unable to exert any meaningful influence find the general uncertainty around COVID-19 as a means to legitimise their existence and garner widespread ground-level support.
- The past three years or so have witnessed the rapid rise to prominence of diverse and polarised interest groups which have the potential to challenge the writ of the state and create implications for the existing law and order systems.
- The singular point of convergence for all groups including religious extremists is opposition to the established state order.
- Since the official acknowledgement of COVID-19 pandemic, all three groups – ethno-nationalists, left-wing elements and politico-religious groups - have unanimously voiced their rhetorical discontent for official state measures employed to counter the virus.
- Rather than incentivising on-ground activism by good-hearted men and women, the government should instead encourage sharing of information pertaining to those who need the relief.

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 has posed a dilemma for state apparatuses around the world, perhaps more so in third-world countries. In the case of Pakistan, the situation is further compounded because the bureaucratic machinery is a continuation of the British imperial administration, with many prevalent laws still drafted before the country achieved independence in 1947. Consequently, such laws and administrative methods are too “medieval” to cater for pending problems in the 21st century.

One glaring example of the state's inefficient governing apparatus is the establishment of a military-dominated National Command and Operations Centre to serve as a “one-window” platform for round-the-clock situation monitoring, analysis and coordination of issues related to COVID-19 within Pakistan.¹ The fact that the military had to intervene in such testing circumstances speaks volumes.

Nationwide emergencies like these compel state authorities to shift their priorities elsewhere, thus encouraging opportunistic groups with a vested agenda to challenge the writ of the state. We have seen similar examples in the past when the state's writ

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¹ “Information ministry, ISPR to deal with media over coronavirus: Awan,” *Dawn*, last modified April 3, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1546165/information-ministry-ispr-to-deal-with-media-over-coronavirus-awan>.

was blatantly challenged by a variety of political and religious groups. However, those circumstances were different and certainly did not take place during a pandemic that is global in scope and not confined to a particular territory.

Groups and entities that are otherwise unable to exert any meaningful influence find the general uncertainty around COVID-19 as a means to legitimise their existence and garner widespread ground-level support. Earlier, prohibited groups like Jamaat-ud-Dawah's offshoot Falah-e-Insaniyat Foundation tried to play the same legitimacy card after natural disasters in Pakistan.²

Participation in philanthropy and relief efforts is the most effective means of gathering public support. The state administration's failure to account for all those citizens who need basic items for sustenance and shelter creates holes which are rapidly filled by such fringe elements. In the process of facilitating the needy on time, they find avenues to sow the seeds of discord. For the aid-receiver, whoever helps their family is a messiah, be it the state or some unofficial entity.

The past three years or so have witnessed the rapid rise to prominence of diverse and polarised interest groups which have the potential to challenge the writ of the state and create implications for the existing law and order systems. These groups can broadly be collated into three distinct categories:

- **Ethno-Nationalists:** Entities such as the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) being the most prominent which has a highly-influential international support base and thrives on digital projection by the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM). The US Secretary of State (presently Michael Pompeo) is an ex-officio board member of USAGM.³

- **Left-Wing Elements:** Different Marxist-Socialist entities and organisations which appear to have different agendas but retain a common ideological core. Prominent among these include the Haqooq-e-Khalq Movement (HQM), Progressive Students Collective (PSC) and Awami Workers Party, to name a few.

- **Politico-Religious Groups:** Outfits such as the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) being the most prominent on account of their robust digital media use and networking capabilities. Despite a general ban on their activities, the group retains influence in manipulating Twitter trends to present a parallel/

² Adam B. Ellick and Pir Zubair Shah, "Hard-Line Islam Fills Void in Flooded Pakistan," *New York Times*, last modified April 6, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/07/world/asia/07pstan.html>.

³ "The Board," *US Agency for Global Media*, accessed April 9, 2020, <https://www.usagm.gov/who-we-are/board/>.

alternate narrative to that of the state.

While each category of entities has their own unique modus operandi, one can often witness mutual overlaps, especially among ethno-nationalists and left-wing elements. The singular point of convergence for all groups including religious extremists is opposition to the established state order. Since the official acknowledgement of COVID-19 pandemic, all three groups have unanimously voiced their rhetorical discontent for official state measures emplaced to counter the virus.

Ethno-Nationalists

Groups such as PTM continue to exploit the situation to shore up populist rhetoric against the state. Examples include MNA Mohsin Dawar who claimed discrimination against tribal area residents in COVID-19 relief efforts, MNA Ali Wazir who reportedly acted against hoarding/profitteering of food and ration supplies and MPA Mir Kalam Wazir urging the Chairman of Higher Education Commission to ensure Internet access for online education of Waziristan residents.⁴ The incompetency or wilful cessation of space by administrative authorities in erstwhile FATA provides opportunities for ethno-nationalist elements such as the PTM to gain greater legitimacy.

Left Wing Elements

An interesting documented example of the mind-set inherent among such fringe elements can be gleaned from an article authored by Dr Ammar Ali Jan and Zahid Ali titled 'A Left Strategy Against Coronavirus in Pakistan'.⁵

In this detailed piece, Jan and Ali present arguments in favour of their core assertion that the existing capitalist socio-economic system has become redundant and must, in their view, be replaced with autonomous, self-help communities in a framework for 'dual power.'

According to Jan and Ali: "Dual power is part of a strategy of rupture that transforms existing social relations and gears production and distribution towards meeting human needs. This means building networks where the creative potential of the working classes can be established, and a new will can both be formulated and imposed by working class actors within

⁴ Mohsin Dawar, Twitter Post, March 31, 2020, 4:57 AM, <http://archive.vn/VGRrH> and Rehmat Mehsud, Twitter Post, March 28, 2020, 7:15 AM, <http://archive.vn/aROG1> and Mir Kalam Wazir, Twitter Post, April 2, 2020, 2:31 AM, <http://archive.vn/s31NT>.

⁵ Ammar Ali Jan and Zahid Ali, "A Left Strategy Against Coronavirus in Pakistan," *Pakistan Left Review*, accessed April 8, 2020, <http://archive.vn/ZvftV>

their communities. Such alternative forms of worker committees are necessary to impose limits on capital accumulation, particularly once people return to the work.

Organs of popular decision-making are all the more necessary, as politics at the top will remain frozen among intra-elite actors. This is because one cannot imagine elections or any mass mobilizations in the coming months (other than riots). In the absence of high-politics, we must develop alternative visions and practices for a future society. If we think with big ideas but act specifically and locally, we can begin developing a nucleus for alternative forms of power, existing outside and independently of institutional frameworks.”

Building upon this rationale, the authors suggest that: “The slogan ‘All power to the people’ cannot be more urgent than it is today. With courage, clarity and commitment, let’s dive into this pandemic and organize for alternative power. We must train each other as medical workers, provide solidarity to the workers and neighborhoods in small numbers, elect local representatives to inventory food and other basic supplies, run mass people’s clinics, and devise systems for worker and community controlled provision of essential necessities.”

It is evident that from one prominent group of left-wing actors (Jan and Ali both being members of HQM), the COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity to mobilise resources and inculcate an alternative socio-political-economic paradigm which would exist in parallel, essentially creating self-governing spaces within an established state system. One can witness such examples in dystopian sci-fi movies where the ruling elite prefer to be unbothered about how people at the lower end of the economic spectrum manage to survive. For its part, HQM is practically working to fulfil its agenda on-ground.⁶

Politico-Religious Groups

Generally, prominent clerics from the Sunni (Deobandi, Barelvi) and Shia school of thought have refused to comply with state requests for encouraging followers to pray from homes, despite a fatwa (edict) from Egypt’s Jamia Al Azhar.⁷

The hardliner politico-religious group TLP was observed distributing food supplies among the needy along with

a poster of their firebrand cleric Khadim Hussain Rizvi, ensuring they can boost their PR during the process.⁸ Earlier, they ran a coordinated social media campaign to defend Barelvi cleric Mufti Muneeb-ur-Rehman against what they perceived were attempts to discredit his religious authority.⁹

To a lesser extent, transnational subversive groups like Hizbut Tahrir were also observed rejecting Al Azhar’s fatwa and labelling their scholars as ‘slaves of Pharaoh.’¹⁰ Matters involving religious groups are particularly sensitive for state authorities in Pakistan to deal with, since attempts to engage with one are automatically assumed as rejection or favouritism for another.

The Way Forward

Prime Minister Imran Khan announced the constitution of a volunteer “Corona Relief Tiger Force” requiring registration through the Citizen Portal app.¹¹ Similarly, the Punjab Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA) issued an order barring anyone within the province to engage in relief work for COVID-19 without prior coordination and registration with respective zonal authorities.¹²

Instead of trying to rein in fringe elements, on the contrary, such measures will further discredit the good intentions of the ruling political regime and provincial administrative apparatuses. They are viewed as authoritarian attempts to politicise relief efforts, as expressed by one disgruntled opposition politician.¹³

The federal government should refrain from political/state patronage of preferred volunteer teams (Corona Relief Tiger Force). Rather than incentivising on-ground activism by good-hearted men and women, the government should instead encourage sharing of information pertaining to those who need the relief. To this end, the Citizen Portal app can help citizens mention particulars such as geo-marked location and identification particulars of individuals/families/colonies that need aid and for district administration teams to act upon shared information.

⁸ Ahmad Raza Qadri Rizvi, Twitter Post, April 5, 2020, 9:19 AM, <http://archive.vn/4n3ZW>.

⁹ “Salaam_Mufti_Muneebur_Rehman,” (Salute Mufti Muneeb-ur-Rehman), Twitter trend, accessed April 8, 2020, <http://archive.vn/B2bXo>.

¹⁰ umme.musfira2016@gmail.com, Twitter Post, April 4, 2020, 10:23 AM, <http://archive.vn/t76JP>.

¹¹ Corona Relief Tiger Force, accessed April 8, 2020, <http://archive.vn/84RL8>.

¹² PDMA Punjab Official, Twitter Post, April 5, 2020, 10:00 PM, <http://archive.vn/x8vvS>.

¹³ Aftab Khan Sherpao, Twitter Post, March 30, 2020, 8:10 PM, <http://archive.vn/biFA9>.

⁶ Haqooq e Khalq Movement – HKM’s Facebook Page, accessed April 8, 2020, <http://archive.vn/6i8KB>.

⁷ “Ulema adamant to keep mosques open despite President Alvi’s appeal for ban on congregational prayers,” *Geo News*, last modified March 25, 2020, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/279182-president-alvi-wants-religious-scholars-to-curb-covid-19-spread-ban-congregational-prayers>.

Crowdsourcing information for district administrations to act upon is a smart solution but crowdsourcing official duties/responsibilities is absolutely foolish. The state should not willingly cede space for fringe elements to exploit.