

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Borderland, Resistance, and Neo-Pashtun Consciousness: The Case of Pashtun Tahafuz (Protection) Movement in Pakistan

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Abstract

This article examines the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) as a transformative political movement that has emerged from Pakistan's historically marginalized borderland region. Immediately following the aftermath of Naqibullah Mehsud's extrajudicial killing on January 13, 2018, the PTM exceeded its initial demand for justice to articulate a broader critique of state violence, militarization, and structural inequalities faced by Pashtuns in Pakistan. Drawing on postcolonial theory, this article attempts to situate PTM within the genealogy of colonial indirect rule and Pakistan's continuation of exceptional governance in its frontier region through mechanisms such as the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), and to examine how such practices produced a space of exclusion in which Pashtuns were simultaneously securitized and silenced. The article's main argument is that PTM represents a rupture in this historical pattern by generating a "neo-Pashtun consciousness" forged in urban centers through student politics; digital networks; and the lived realities of profiling, displacement, and everyday state surveillance. Through ethnographic accounts, the analysis highlights how PTM disrupted hegemonic binaries of citizen/terrorist and periphery/center by examining the internal contestations and ideological resistance the movement faced within the Pashtun community, which were shaped by state propaganda, class interests, and suspicion of authenticity. Mainly focused on both support and opposition to PTM within the Pashtun population, this article also argues that PTM sheds light on the dialectics of political agency in Pakistan, where hegemony and resistance continually redefine the boundaries of citizenship, justice, and collective memory.

Keywords: Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM); Borderland Studies; Neo-Pashtun Consciousness; Postcolonial Theory; Social Movement(s)

Introduction

In April 2018, a group of young Pashtuns from Waziristan in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)¹ in Pakistan embarked on a journey toward the capital of Pakistan, Islamabad, to demand justice for Naqibullah Mehsud²—an aspiring young model who had been extrajudicially killed in a police raid in Karachi city, where he was working in a shop. This group, primarily comprising young people, was led by three activists—Manzoor Pashteen,³ Mohsin Dawar, and Ali Wazir—all of whom had been involved in progressive Pashtun nationalist politics during and after their university years. In 2013, while studying at Gomal University in Dera Ismail Khan district, they formed the Mehsud⁴ Tahafuz Movement (MTM). Their initial protest, organized under the MTM banner, evolved into the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) by the time they reached Islamabad to demand justice for Naqibullah Mehsud.

In Islamabad, the PTM's sit-in (*dharna*) initially garnered support from mainstream political parties, civil society, and progressive activists, all united in demanding justice for Naqibullah. The mainstream media amplified their cause, framing it as a call for accountability—a seemingly uncontroversial demand that did not yet appear *anti-state* or *foreign-funded*. However, when university students and young activists took the stage and expanded their discourse to broadly criticize the Global War on Terror (GWOT), militarization, and the historical injustices inflicted on people of the frontier (the borderland adjacent to the Durand Line of Afghanistan) during military operations, the dynamics shifted abruptly. Mainstream politicians withdrew their support, media coverage declined, and even many Pashtuns began to distance themselves from the protest.

This moment marks the crux of this article's question: What were the ideological and political limits of mainland Pakistan that rendered it unwilling—or unable—to acknowledge the grievances of its borderland Pashtun population? Put differently, why did the dominant national discourse find it unsettling, even threatening, to incorporate the narratives of the borderland periphery? By analyzing the PTM's trajectory, this article interrogates the tensions between center and periphery, state sovereignty and subaltern resistance, and the contested politics of nationalist

¹ The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) were a semi-autonomous region along Pakistan's northwest frontier bordering Afghanistan, administered directly by the federal government through the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) of 1901. The British colonial state had designated the area as a buffer zone, ruling indirectly through tribal elders and political agents, while excluding the population from the rights enjoyed in "settled" districts. After 1947, Pakistan retained this colonial framework, maintaining FATA's exceptional status until its formal merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in May 2018.

² Naqibullah Mehsud was a young aspiring model from North Waziristan, working in Karachi city who got killed in a police encounter in Karachi. He was killed by a police officer known as Rao Anwar, who was involved in extrajudicial killings of perhaps hundreds of people in different parts of Karachi.

³ Manzoor Pashteen (b. 1994) is the founder of PTM and emerged as the single most famous leader among other founding members. He hails from South Waziristan and received his early education in Dera Ismail Khan, later studying veterinary science at Gomal University. Pashteen began his political journey through student activism before emerging as the central figure of PTM, advocating nonviolent resistance and the rights of marginalized Pashtun communities.

⁴ The Mehsud is a major Pashtun tribe of South Waziristan situated on the border with Afghanistan. During the War on Terror, their lands became heavily militarized, due to Talibanization and military operations.

memory in Pakistan's marginalized Pashtun borderlands, exploring the limits of mainland politics and the potential of borderland or frontier political struggles to shape and challenge the dominant narratives about justice, equality, resource distribution, and resistance.

Methodology and Empirical Design

This article is based on qualitative fieldwork conducted between 2020 and 2022, primarily in Islamabad and Lahore, combining semistructured interviews and informal focus-group discussions with Pashtun university students and urban dwellers. In total, the study draws on 50 to 55 in-depth interviews and four focus-group conversations, conducted across multiple university campuses, student hostels, and informal community settings.⁵

Conducting interviews over several months allowed the research to capture both continuity and change in political attitudes as the PTM evolved and state responses intensified.

The interlocutors were not socially homogeneous. The majority of Pashtun students interviewed came from lower-middle and precarious middle-class backgrounds, often originating from the former FATA and southern districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Many were first-generation university students whose families had experienced displacement, surveillance, or economic disruption due to military operations. Alongside this group, the research also engaged a smaller segment of aspirational middle-class students, particularly from settled districts, whose educational trajectories were oriented toward incorporation into state institutions such as the military or civil bureaucracy.

These class positions shaped distinct political orientations toward the PTM, which has been discussed in detail in the last part of this article. For more precariously positioned students, the PTM represented a means of articulating collective grievance, dignity, and constitutional citizenship in the face of everyday securitization. For others more securely placed within pathways of state inclusion, the movement was often viewed as politically risky, disruptive, or incompatible with upward mobility. Recognizing these internal class differences is essential to understanding both the PTM's appeal and the ambivalence it generates within Pashtun society.

Studying Borderland(s)

The study of borderlands and frontiers has attracted significant academic scholarship since the mid-twentieth century, particularly during the Cold War period when Area Studies became an expansionist project in US universities. However, the foundational study of the frontier actually began earlier, in 1893, when the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner published his seminal article, "The Significance of the

⁵ Interviews typically lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and focused on participants' experiences of securitization, political mobilization, and engagement with the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM). Participants were informed that the interviews formed part of an academic research project examining Pashtun political consciousness in the post-War on Terror period. To protect participants, all interviews were anonymized, and data were recorded through detailed field notes and, where consent was given, audio recordings.

Frontier in American History,” which placed great emphasis on examining frontier populations and their interactions. The contemporary critical use of the term “borderland” is widely attributed to the Chicana author and activist Gloria Anzaldúa. It was her work that popularized the term and initiated its widespread use in academic discourse.⁶ In the Pakistani context, the region known as the “borderland” or, more commonly, the “Frontier,” attracted significant scholarly attention from both regional and international scholars and agencies following the launch of the Afghan Jihad (holy war). This US-backed holy war was executed with the assistance of Pakistan’s military to fight Soviet troops in Afghanistan. Consequently, the borderland along the Durand Line became a prominent focus of both academic and journalistic inquiry. The area on both sides of the border further became a central concern for security analysts after the 9/11 attacks, when the Global War on Terror was launched to combat Al-Qaeda and its leader, Osama bin Laden—the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks—who had fled to this borderland and was using the region as a base for his future activities.⁷

However, these borderland studies mainly focus on the security dimensions of the borderland, or on how to manage and control this region for peace-building and security-related initiatives.⁸ Beyond these security-related studies, this article analyzes the borderland(s)—in both singular and plural senses—as fluid and complex spaces. These spaces are predominantly shaped by asymmetrical power and violence. Yet they are also highly productive and creative, serving as sites for generating narratives of resistance and for developing new political theories. Located within postcolonial theory and method, this study of borderlands and frontiers seeks to reclaim this space for social science and humanities scholarship. It does so by emphasizing its difference from the mainland in two key ways:

First, how the British colonial state approached borderlands as a distinct entity to control them, a mechanism that pushed these areas into being categorized as non-man’s lands (*alaqa-ghair*) and as barbarian geography.

Second, it investigates the borderland as an emerging geographical space, often culturally and politically distinct, where compelling political and social processes take place, thus providing a vital new field of study within postcolonial studies.

By emphasizing the above inquiries, this article aims to shift the focus of borderland/frontier studies beyond military and security studies and to critique Eurocentric approaches to borderland studies, which are often applied only minimally to non-European societies. For example, Immanuel Wallerstein’s World-Systems Theory approaches borderland/frontier regions through dependency theory, framing frontiers as politically, culturally, and economically docile zones dependent on the

⁶ A. M. Fellner, “Borderlands,” in *UniGR-CBS Online Glossary Border Studies*, eds. A. M. Fellner and E. Nossem, eds. (2024), <https://doi.org/10.22028/D291-37371>.

⁷ Tariq Mahmood, *The Durand Line: South Asia’s Next Trouble Spot* (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, 2005), https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/si/si_4_8/si_4_8_007.pdf.

⁸ Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Centre of Excellence on Countering Violent Extremism and Muhammad Kashif Irshad, “Border Management and National Security in Pakistan: A Strategic Case Study of the Durand Line,” *Advance Social Science Archive Journal* 4, no. 1 (2025): 1465–74, <https://doi.org/10.55966/assaj.2025.4.1.084>. Also read Peter Chalk et al., “Case Study: The Pakistani-Afghan Border Region,” in *Un governed Territories: Understanding and Reducing Terrorism Risks*, 1st ed. (RAND Corporation, 2007), 49–76, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg561af.14>.

core. This reductionist framework casts the frontier-periphery as merely passive recipients of innovations and ideas emanating from the core.⁹

Regarding the colonial and postcolonial differential treatment of Pakistan's borderland between Pakistan and Afghanistan and emerging narratives, this region is often perceived as distinct from the mainland. Rather than being valued for their potential, the region and its inhabitants were treated as inferior and were therefore subjected to a separate set of laws and regulations. This continuity of colonial difference, as Pakistan—continuing colonial legacies such as the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) and militarized governance—has treated the borderland as an exception to standard civic belonging. This treatment of difference was not the continuation of previous rules or something inherent in the race or genes of the Frontier's people; instead, these mechanisms were developed by the British Empire to regulate and manage the population of this region. By this, the frontier was solemnly regularized and managed by the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), thus excluding the people of the Frontier from the colonial state's legal system.¹⁰ Because of this exclusion from the state's law, people in the Frontier relied on traditional justice methods like *jirga* (a local group made up of regional elites, religious scholars, and representatives from the state) to resolve disputes. Interestingly, for the state, the purpose of this *Jirga* system in the Frontier was to control its subjects through indirect rule, where sovereignty was exercised—because a member of the *Jirga* often acted as a political agent representing the state—and therefore, the *Jirga* was no longer an independent institution. People came to see the state through the *Jirga*. This indirect rule meant there was no direct interaction between the state and its subjects, which put the state's legitimacy and sovereignty at risk and loyalties shifted and changed over time. Because the state lacked formal institutions in the Frontier, ethnic and religious leaders often used their power to enforce justice, punish wrongdoers, and regulate behavior for moral reasons. This demonstrates that excluding the Frontier residents from the state's law led to the development of alternative systems of justice and governance and encouraged different groups in the area to resist external control, such as the state and its institutions.

This indirect rule also allowed the state to exclude the Frontier from its legal system, to use it as a buffer zone, and to violate every right extended to the subjects of the state through its constitution but at the same time functioned as an active space where different resistance movements emerged, spanning the religious, nationalist, and Marxist, and sometimes even the pro-democratic.¹¹

⁹ Kent Lightfoot and Antoinette Martinez, "Frontiers and Boundaries in Archaeological Perspective," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 471–92.

¹⁰ Benjamin D. Hopkins, "The Frontier Crimes Regulation and Frontier Governmentality," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 74, no. 2 (2015): 369–89, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911815000030>.

¹¹ Tremendous work has been done in this field especially in nationalist struggles in frontiers such as, Mukulika Banerjee, *The Pathan Unarmed* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000); Mark Condos, "'Fanaticism' and the Politics of Resistance along the North-West Frontier of British India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 58, no. 3 (2016): 717–45, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43908474>; Sana Haroon, "The Rise of Deobandi Islam in the North-West Frontier Province and Its Implications in Colonial India and Pakistan 1914–1996," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 18, no. 1 (2008): 47–70, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2775911>; Feroz Ahmed, "Pushtoonistan and the Pushtoon National Question," *Pakistan Forum* 3, no. 12 (1973): 8–22, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2569059>.

Borderland, Urban Space, and Theorizing “Support” for Ptm

Connecting the history of the Frontier with the current wave of neo-Pashtun consciousness is an attempt to argue that PTM’s expanded critique is an argument for the epistemological crisis with the postcolonial state of Pakistan. The movement’s narrative directly challenged the hegemonic national story or “narration” of the nation, which is built upon the pillars of a secure, unified state under the guardianship of a powerful military.¹² To incorporate the PTM’s counternarrative of state-sponsored violence and ethnic marginalization would be to destabilize the very foundations of that national self-conception. The borderland’s experience had to remain an externalized, silenced history to preserve the coherence of the center’s story. Yet, it is precisely from this marginalized space of exception that resistance emerges. The PTM stands as the latest manifestation of a long subaltern tradition of generating powerful counternarratives. The very mechanisms designed to control and isolate the Frontier—the absence of the state’s law, the indirect rule—paradoxically created the conditions for the emergence of a potent political voice that seeks to reclaim its history and demand a reimagining of the state itself, not from the center, but from its most productive and creative periphery.

The emergence of PTM represents a critical rupture in Pakistan’s political landscape, one that can only be fully understood through its urban manifestations and its challenge to the postcolonial state’s management of its periphery. As Sana Haroon’s¹³ work on the Frontier elucidates, the tribal regions have long been governed as a space of exception, where the state’s legitimacy is fluid and mediated through indirect rule (as mentioned above), creating a vacuum often filled by alternative structures of authority. The PTM, however, marks a significant departure. It is not a resistance movement emanating solely from the mountainous borderlands but a modern, political project born from the convergence of war-induced displacement and the specific conditions of urban centers, especially comprising university-going students and urban dwellers.¹⁴ These cities, often imagined as sites of opportunity and modernity within the national narrative, became the crucial incubators for what I term a “new Pashtun consciousness.”

This consciousness emerged directly from the experience of the Pashtun diaspora from the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), who migrated to urban centers like Karachi, Islamabad, and Lahore seeking refuge from militarization and economic devastation. Yet, as this article demonstrates using data collected from university students and urban dwellers in Islamabad and Lahore, urban spaces did not provide a sanctuary of belonging; instead, they emerged as new sites of subjugation. Here, the state’s disciplinary power, once exercised from a distance through proxies and legal exceptionalism like the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), became direct and intimate. The routine harassment, the extrajudicial killings epitomized by the murder of Naqibullah Mehsud, and the pervasive crisis of enforced disappearances transformed the abstract violence of the Frontier into a tangible reality on the streets of the

¹² Homi K. Bhabha, “Dissemination: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation.” In *Nation and Narration*, ed., Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 291–322.

¹³ Sana Haroon, *Frontier of Faith: Islam in the Indo-Afghan Borderland* (New York: Columbia University Press; London: Hurst & Co., 2007).

¹⁴ Most parts of this article are based on my MPhil thesis: Abid Ali, “The Formation of Political Agency and Its Support/Opposition to Social Movement(s): The Case of Pashtun Tahhafuz Movement (PTM) in Pakistan,” MPhil. diss., Quaid-I-Azam University, 2021.

metropolis. This was a phenomenon of the postcolonial state, which often replicates colonial practices by governing differentiated populations through exception; the Pashtun body in the urban core became a site where this exceptionalism was violently enforced, rendering their lives disposable within the very heart of the state.

This paradox of urban marginalization is best understood through the experiences of students from the Frontier region who migrated to urban spaces in Pakistan, as well as the people who settled for work/labor in Pakistan's urban centers. In Islamabad, university students and young activists—many of whom had migrated from FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—transformed the PTM sit-in (*dharna*) into a hybrid site of enunciation, where students, workers, and urban dwellers articulated political claims, identities, and solidarities. Here, Pashtun identity was neither confined to earlier nationalist idioms nor subsumed within statist counterterrorism frameworks. Instead, it was rearticulated as a discourse of rights, justice, and citizenship, thereby unsettling dominant binaries—citizen/terrorist, periphery/center, victim/agent—and, in the process, crystallizing the “neo-Pashtun consciousness” embodied by the PTM. Consequently, the urban experience forged a new political subjectivity among Pashtun youth. They faced a dual crisis: of belonging, stigmatized by a militant stereotype that marked them as the perpetual “other,” and of existence, denied the full rights of citizenship and subjected to constant state surveillance and violence. This created a profound political vacuum. The traditional Pashtun nationalist parties, constrained by an old politics tethered to territorial electoral constituencies and historically repressed by state and nonstate actors since the Afghan Jihad, failed to address the daily, embodied oppression faced by this Pashtun urban diaspora.

It was into this vacuum that the PTM emerged, articulating a subaltern voice that is typically silenced when it transgresses the scripts permitted by the powerful.¹⁵ Initially, its demand for justice for Naqibullah was a permissible grievance. However, as its discourse expanded to critique the broader architecture of the military-state complex and the historical injustices of the war economy, it was swiftly met with the hegemonic force of the center. The movement's power lay in its ability to rearticulate the Pashtun-state relationship and define citizenship on new terms and lines. Its demands—for constitutional equality, the restoration of missing persons, and an end to resource exploitation—transcended ethnic particularity to speak to a universalist language of rights and democratic accountability.

The substantial support for the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) among urban Pashtun youth, especially students and city dwellers, who were at the forefront of PTM, was not a spontaneous or abstract political choice but was forged in the material and discursive crucible of urban life itself.¹⁶ This support was rooted in a confluence of factors: the direct experience of ethnic profiling and state surveillance in cities, the development of a critical political consciousness within university spaces, the pervasive sense of existential threat that connected the violence of the periphery to

¹⁵ This formulation draws on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's argument that subaltern speech is rendered unintelligible within dominant epistemic regimes rather than simply absent. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. Can the Subaltern Speak? In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271–313. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

¹⁶ Ayyaz Mallick, “From Partisan Universal to Concrete Universal? The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement in Pakistan,” *Antipode* 52, no. 1 (2020): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12661>.

the alienation of the core, and the utilization of digital media by PTM's supporters to circumvent a hegemonic media blackout.¹⁷ Furthermore, this mobilization took shape in a political vacuum in which conventional Pashtun political actors, limited by fixed territorial bases of representation and historical repression, failed to voice the lived grievances of a generation shaped by the post-9/11 war economy.¹⁸ The emergence of the PTM, therefore, represents the political society of the Pashtun urban diaspora organizing itself to make claims on the state, claims that were previously rendered invisible or illegitimate within the official channels of civil society and representative politics.

The historical genesis of the PTM is inextricably linked to the instrumentalization of the Pashtun tribal belt as a strategic frontier. For decades, this region was subjected to a form of indirect rule and legal exception, first under colonial-era regulations like the Frontier Crimes Regulation and later by the postcolonial Pakistani state.¹⁹ This policy created a zone of anomie where the normal social contract was suspended. As Ismat Shahjehan, a political activist and member of the core committee of PTM, told me, "The state's use of this territory as a frontline boundary against Soviet invasion, then the War on Terror, drone attacks, and military operations had a catastrophic human cost, resulting in over 60,000 civilian deaths and creating millions of internally displaced persons (IDPs)".²⁰ The pain and displacement caused by this perpetual war economy created a latent demand for a political outlet. As another respondent, Abdur Rahman from Quaid-i-Azam University astutely observed:

The emergence of the PTM was not a sudden phenomenon but the culmination of long-standing discussions in private gatherings among urban Pashtun youth. These discussions, held in the relative safety of university hostels and cafes, were the incubators of a nascent political consciousness.²¹

The transformation of the Mehsud Tahafuz Movement (MTM) into the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) in Islamabad was the pivotal moment where this private, contained grief erupted into public, political claim-making. It was, as Ismat Shahjehan confirmed, the urban youth—politically savvy from their engagements in student politics—who rejected the elders' decision to disband after meeting with the premier. This act of defiance marked a generational shift, signifying the transition from a tribal demand for justice to a modern, political movement articulating a broader vision of rights and citizenship.²²

For the tribal Pashtun students migrating to urban centers like Islamabad, the city presented a paradox. It was simultaneously a site of opportunity and a site of

¹⁷ Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, "The War of Terror in Praetorian Pakistan: The Emergence and Struggle of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 51, no. 3 (2020): 516–29, doi: [10.1080/00472336.2020.1809008](https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2020.1809008).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ B. D. Hopkins, "The Frontier Crimes Regulation and Frontier Governmentality," *Journal of Asian Studies* 74, no. 2 (2015): 369–89, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911815000030>.

²⁰ Ismat Shahjehan in interview with Abid Ali, December 15, 2020 (Islamabad).

²¹ Abdur Rehman in interview with Abid Ali, November 10, 2021 (Islamabad).

²² Abid Ali, "The Formation of Political Agency and Its Support/Opposition to Social Movement(s): The Case of Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) in Pakistan."

profound alienation. The experience of being consistently named as “Khan Sahib”—a term reductively associated with gatekeepers—was a moment of rude awakening. This was not a simple case of cultural misunderstanding; it was a manifestation of what Frantz Fanon described as the “epidermalization” of inferiority, where the colonial gaze imposes an identity upon the subjugated body.²³ One of my respondents from the Islamic International University in Islamabad experienced this directly, realizing that his Pashtun identity automatically categorized him within a specific, subservient class in the urban social hierarchy. While sharing his experience, he reiterated that being subjugated due to one’s Pashtun identity can be tolerated but being *tribal* is always labeled as something inherently bad, as in with one’s body, mind, and even soul, so that whenever he erred—for instance, if his friends or he made mistakes, his mistakes were attributed to his Pashtun identity first and then to his tribal/frontier identity. This double marginalization is a routine phenomenon when one is living one’s life among mainland Pakistanis.²⁴

As argued earlier, this oppression was not met with docility, but rather led to the development of a resistance, just like in colonial times in the Frontier, but this time in a new shape, which I called “neo-Pashtun consciousness.” In the development of this neo-Pashtun consciousness, the university space in cities became the critical site for processing this alienation. It provided the tools—critical theory, history, and a community of dissent—to transform a personal feeling of shame into a collective political analysis. As the respondent Sohail Ahmed, who was doing a PhD at Quaid-I-Azam University at that time, argued, “The university was where they could discuss the urban miseries and reflect on the dehumanization of our region.”²⁵

This process echoes the critical pedagogy, which allows the oppressed to name their world and, in doing so, begin to transform it.²⁶ The PTM provided the ultimate platform for this transformation. One of my respondents, who then became an active member of PTM and was working at a local shop in Islamabad, shared his experience of how PTM provided a platform for him to express his alienation:

I climbed onto the stage and declared, Look at us [Pashtuns], we are not your *Khan Sahibs* [gatekeepers], rather come to talk about the injustices of the country’s Khan Sahib [military].²⁷

This was not just an emotional speech but rather a deeply contextual narrative about the “security state role in the Frontier and was an act of counterhegemony in the core of the country.”²⁸ He was seizing the very term used to marginalize his community

²³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986). (Original work published 1952).

²⁴ Identity of some respondents was kept anonymous on their request due to the threat of being exposed to state institutions.

²⁵ Sohail Ahmed in interview with Abid Ali, January 2021 (Islamabad).

²⁶ For a more detailed discussion into the development of critical pedagogy, read Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2000).

²⁷ Manan Afridi in interview with Abid Ali, December 2020 (Islamabad).

²⁸ The “security state” in Pakistan refers to a political order where the military and intelligence institutions dominate governance, national priorities, and state-society relations under the pretext of national security. For a detailed discussion on the security state presence in the Frontier see, Aasim

and reappropriating it to critique the actual structures of power—the military establishment—that perpetuated their suffering. This aligns with Antonio Gramsci's concept of the “war of position,” where subaltern groups challenge the cultural and ideological dominance of the ruling bloc.²⁹

This othering extended beyond class to encompass a deeply ingrained caricature of Pashtuns as inherently masculine, intolerant, extremist, and conservative. This stereotype, as my respondents Sami Ullah Mohmand and Haider Zaman attested, is a direct inheritance of the colonial construction of Pashtuns as a “martial race,” a label used to both recruit and control certain ethnic groups by defining their identity in purely militaristic terms.³⁰ The postcolonial state, rather than dismantling this racist taxonomy, perpetuated it, particularly after 9/11, when the Taliban identity was seamlessly grafted onto the Pashtun body. This had a crippling effect on the individual psyche, leading to what Sami Ullah called a “skepticism of my identity.”³¹ This other-ization worked beyond gender, and Pashtun female students were equally stereotyped in urban centers of Pakistan. Commenting on Pashtun women's experiences, one female respondent, Sana Rehman, shared her experience at her university, that whenever she dressed in modern style, the non-Pashtuns' reaction was the following:

You don't look like a *Pathan* [in Punjab, Pashtuns are called by this name], do your family live in Islamabad or any other modern city? When I replied no, they replied that you wear a shuttlecock Burqa at home and pretend yourself as modern in university? Isn't this a hypocrisy?³²

The PTM's significance, therefore, lay in its creation of a powerful counterdiscourse. By centering the voices of women like Sana Ijaz, Gulalai Ismail, Ismat Shahjehan, Wranga Luni, and many more, the movement actively dismantled the monolithic image of Pashtun women.³³ It demonstrated that Pashtun women were not silent victims as presented in most of the mainstream media or academia, but rather active agents of resistance, not necessarily in liberal-secular terms, but resisting within sociocultural and religious boundaries, and sometimes within the homes, villages, and in everyday practices.³⁴ This woman's activism is not new; rather it has deep historical

Sajjad Akhtar, “The Checkpost State in Pakistan's War of Terror: Centres, Peripheries, and the Politics of the Universal,” *Antipode* 54, no. 5 (2022); Sana Alimia, “Performing the Afghanistan-Pakistan Border through Refugee ID Cards,” *Geopolitics* 24, no. 2 (2019): 391–425; Maximilian Lohnert, “Security Is a ‘Mental Game’: The Psychology of Bordering Checkposts in Pakistan,” *Geopolitics* 24, no. 2 (2017).

²⁹ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. and trans., Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

³⁰ Sami Ullah Mohmand and Haider Zaman in interview with Abid Ali, December 2020 (Islamabad).

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Sana Rehman in interview with Abid Ali, February 2021 (Islamabad).

³³ Zuha Siddiqui, “Firebranding the Frontier: The Women of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement,” *Jamhoor*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.jamhoor.org/read/2019/5/06/firebranding-the-frontier-the-women-of-the-pashtun-tahaffuz-movement>.

³⁴ Jamaima Afridi, “Pashtun National Jirga: Women Fighting Two Wars,” *The Friday Times*, October 23, 2024, <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/23-Oct-2024/pashtun-national-jirga-women-fighting-two-wars>.

roots in the region in the form of the Khudai Khidmatgar movement (1929–47).³⁵ The PTM thus provided what Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls the “epistemic space” for marginalized women to define their own realities and histories against the grain of dominant, often patriarchal and orientalist, narratives.³⁶

Apart from the students, PTM’s main support also comprised the urban dwellers and workers in the cities of the country. The experience of urban Pashtun dwellers, particularly those living in informal settlements (*katchi abadis*), further illustrates the material basis of support for PTM. Their migration from the conflict zones of the periphery to the urban core did not bring safety but merely a different modality of violence. The state’s security apparatus, instead of offering protection, became a source of perpetual harassment. The practice of registering their Computerized National Identity Cards (CNICs) with local police stations and being summoned for every local crime transformed their identity from one of citizenship to one of victim of perpetual suspicion. This is a classic technique of “biopower,” where state power is exercised through the management and surveillance of populations deemed to be “risky.”³⁷

The feeling of being constantly watched and profiled creates what Manan Afridi, one of my respondents, described as a “continuous fear,” a lawlessness that has followed them from FATA to the capital city, Islamabad.³⁸ Manan Afridi reiterated her response to seeing a police officer coming near her: “I strongly desired to hide or even omit our place from my CNIC.”³⁹ This desperate act, or in James C. Scott’s words, “*infrapolitics*”—the small, everyday acts of resistance employed by subordinated groups to navigate and mitigate oppressive power structures, is happening on a routine basis with Pashtuns in Islamabad.⁴⁰ In this context of daily dehumanization, the PTM emerged not as a vehicle for delivering material benefits like “shelter, food, and water,” but as, Janat Gul, one of my respondents, beautifully articulated, as a “resistance to violence in its natural way.”⁴¹ The movement provided a language and a platform to articulate this collective pain, transforming individual alienation into a powerful collective consciousness. Janat Gul’s statement, though simple in words, has powerful meanings: “Even if you do violence to animals, they would show some anger . . . we are human,” and is a profound claim to humanity and a rejection of the state’s implicit categorization of Pashtun lives as disposable.⁴²

³⁵ For a detailed discussion on Pashtun women’s role in politics, read, Sayed Wiqar Ali Shah, “Women and Politics in the North-West Frontier Province (1930–1947),” *Pakistan Journal of History & Culture* 19, no. 1 (January–June 1998), accessed August 26, 2025, https://www.nihcr.edu.pk/Latest_English_Journal/Pjhc%2019-1,%201998/5-Syed-Wiqar-Ali-Shah0001.pdf. Also Naushad Khan Momand, 2022, “Feminism and the Khudai Khidmatgar Movement,” *Pashto* 51 (664), accessed August 26, 2025, <https://pashto.org.pk/index.php/path/article/view/337>. For a detailed ethnographic study on Khudai Khidmatgar, read, Mukulika Banerjee, *The Unarmed Pathan: Opposition and Memory in the North West Frontier* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000).

³⁶ Talpade Mohanty, Chandra, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Feminist Review*, no. 30 (Autumn 1988): 61–88.

³⁷ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, eds., Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).

³⁸ Manan Afridi in interview with Abid Ali, November 2020 (Islamabad).

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ James C. Scott, “*Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*” (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

⁴¹ Janat Gul in interview with Abid Ali, December 2022 (Islamabad).

⁴² *Ibid.*

Along with informal physical spaces, this collective consciousness was also facilitated and amplified by digital spaces, that is, social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter (now X), which played a crucial role in connecting the fragmented Pashtun diaspora. As this article identifies, corporate national media functioned as an arm of the hegemonic ruling bloc, manufacturing a consensus of “returning peace” and “development” in FATA that bore little resemblance to the reality on the ground. Digital platforms, particularly Facebook, provided an alternative public sphere where this official narrative could be challenged. They allowed individuals to bypass the media blackout and discover shared experiences of violence and surveillance. One political party activist, upon listening to Manzoor Pashteen’s speeches online, decided to support the movement despite state propaganda labeling it as foreign-funded and Pashteen as a traitor. He concluded, “Whoever is supporting or funding PTM, I can’t deny the movement, because he [Pashteen] is speaking the right things (*speni speni khabri kawi*) [translated from Pashto].” This highlights a key function of digital media in resistance movements: they enable what Benedict Anderson called an “imagined community,” but one based not on print capitalism but on shared digital counternarratives. It connects the “individual miseries with the collective,” allowing a taxi driver in Lahore who had lost a brother to enforced disappearance to see his story reflected in the experience of an internally displaced person (IDP) in Peshawar, with the miseries of a student in Islamabad, and so many other similar connecting stories.

Along with the state oppression and profiling of Pashtuns and the resistance to it, the support and the rise of PTM must also be understood within the context of a profound political vacuum. The established Pashtun nationalist parties, though historically significant, were structurally incapable of addressing the specific crises of the post-9/11 era.⁴³ The established political parties’ were restricted to the land and were bound by the logics of electoral competition. If any political party or person dared to question, they would be subjected to violence. There are cases of political victimization in which political parties have lost many leaders to terrorist attacks, thus leading to a political vacuum. However, their failure was also discursive; they could not articulate the raw, embodied grievances of a generation that had lived through drone strikes, military operations, and urban profiling. The PTM did not emerge in opposition to classical Pashtun nationalism—indeed, it consciously drew on the legacy of Bacha Khan’s nonviolent resistance—but it was a significant departure. It was a movement for the IDP, the extrajudicially killed, the disappeared, and the profiled, and for constituencies that existed outside the traditional frameworks of territorial electoral politics. It gave representation to those who were completely censored, whose stories were absent from both national television and the agendas of established parties. In doing so, the PTM did not just demand justice for Naqibullah Mehsud, it demanded a fundamental renegotiation of the relationship between the Pashtun citizen and the state, challenging the very structures of militarism and ethnic hierarchy that have long defined Pakistan’s political order. The urban space, with its contradictions of opportunity and

⁴³ Hurmat Ali Shah, 2020, “Redefining Citizenship in Pakistan,” *Himal Southasian*, April 28, 2020, accessed August 26, 2025, <https://www.himalmag.com/comment/redefining-citizenship-in-pakistan-2020>.

oppression, its universities and its *katchi abadis*, was the forge where this new political consciousness was smelted, making the city not just a backdrop but a central actor in the movement's genesis and growth.

The Anatomy of Opposition: Deconstructing Resistance to the PTM

In the previous part, a detailed analysis was provided on how material and ideological conditions fostered support for the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM). This section turns the analytical lens to an equally significant phenomenon: the substantial opposition it faced from within the Pashtun community itself. The PTM's political expression, which came to serve as the lingua franca of political discourse at the time, was never universally accepted; instead, it remained contested. This internal opposition is not a mere footnote but a critical element for understanding the complex political landscape of the post-9/11 relationship between the Pakistani state and the people of the borderland. I seek to argue that the profound power of state ideological apparatuses, the strategic calculations of class interest, and the pervasive culture of suspicion that thrives in a national security state are the actual basis of opposition to PTM. By categorizing this opposition into three intertwined strands—the ideological, the class-based, and the conspiratorial—in this section, I argue that resistance to the PTM was not a simple lack of awareness but an active, structured political stance, cultivated by decades of militarized Pakistani nationalism and the co-optation of ethnic elites into the state's power structure.⁴⁴ This opposition demonstrates the success of “hegemony”—the process by which the ruling bloc secures the consent of the governed to its own domination, even when that domination is against their objective interests.⁴⁵

The most potent and publicly articulated form of opposition was ideological, framing PTM as an anti-state, foreign-funded entity. This narrative is a well-worn tool in the Pakistani state's arsenal, deployed to discredit any challenge to its foundational myths and power structures.⁴⁶ The effectiveness of this label lies in its ability to tap into a deep-seated nationalist sentiment, one that has been carefully cultivated through what are known as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), namely education, media, and official historiography.⁴⁷ These apparatuses work to normalize the

⁴⁴ Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, “The Checkpost State in Pakistan's War of Terror.”

⁴⁵ For Gramsci, hegemony is the process by which ruling groups secure and reproduce power through the consent of subordinate classes, achieved via cultural and ideological leadership rather than force alone. See detailed discussion on this theorization in Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 12, 57–58, 161–62. Also read these in Pakistan's context, Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, *The Struggle for Hegemony in Pakistan: Fear, Desire and Revolutionary Horizons* (London: Pluto Press, 2022); Shahid Siddiqui, *Language, Gender, and Power: The Politics of Representation and Hegemony* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010); Muhammad Shoaib, Qamar Abbas, and Ayesha Amjad, “Right-Wing Cultural Hegemony and the Decline of Socialism in Pakistan,” *Global Social Theory* (April 2024): 1–17.

⁴⁶ Nadeem F. Paracha, “Pakistan's Ideological Project: A History,” *Dawn*, March 22, 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1171263>.

⁴⁷ This idea is drawn from Louis Althusser's concept of *Ideological State Apparatuses*, which explains how institutions such as education and media reproduce state power through ideology rather than coercion. For details read, Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 143–48.

extraordinary violence inflicted upon the Pashtun community during the War on Terror, recasting it as a necessary “sacrifice for the nation.” This framing was powerfully articulated by one of my respondents, who stated the following:

Bad times have come on the nation, and as Pashtuns, we are passing through that time . . . all we suffer is to protect our land against the terrorists and foreign forces. After so much suffering, if a movement emerged in which language is against the State and its institutions, then how would we tolerate it?⁴⁸

This statement is a textbook example of hegemonic consent. The respondent acknowledges the suffering but internalizes the state’s justification for it, viewing any critique of the institutions that orchestrated that suffering as a profound betrayal. The state’s language of “collateral damage” performs a crucial ideological function: it erases the state’s role as an active perpetrator (or oppressor) and blurs the lines between victim and martyr, between a crime and a sacrifice.⁴⁹

This hegemonic narrative constructs a specific state-citizen relationship where the state is the benevolent protector and the citizen’s duty is unwavering loyalty. One respondent expressed this view starkly:

We [Pashtun] right from the first day have opposed the creation of Pakistan and have been involved in conspiracies against the State. Despite this, the State of Pakistan has tolerated us Now we have created PTM to use it against the State and army.⁵⁰

This perspective rewrites history to paint Pashtuns as perpetual dissidents, framing state inclusion in the army and bureaucracy as an act of grace rather than a right of citizenship. It completely inverts the PTM’s narrative, transforming a movement born from victimhood into an act of aggression. This inversion was further enabled by state censorship and propaganda. The experience of a female student is telling: “My mind was skeptical about the military operation . . . it was later when I watched a Pakistani television drama that cleared the picture for me, and I realized that the military operations are genuine.”⁵¹ Here, popular culture becomes an ideological state apparatus, manufacturing consent by presenting a sanitized, heroic version of military operations that obscures their brutal reality on the ground.⁵²

⁴⁸ Ihtisham Alam in interview with Abid Ali, December 2020 (Islamabad).

⁴⁹ Maria Rashid, *Dying to Serve: Militarism, Affect, and the Politics of Sacrifice in the Pakistan Army* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), 4–6.

⁵⁰ Interview with Abid Ali of a respondent who requested anonymity, January 2021 (Islamabad).

⁵¹ Sana Yousaf in interview with Abid Ali, December 2020 (Islamabad).

⁵² For a detailed discussion on how popular culture, especially Pakistani dramas, are backing state-centered narratives, read, Qaisar Abbas and Farooq Sulehria, eds., *From Terrorism to Television: Dynamics of Media, State, and Society in Pakistan* (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2021); Kiran Rabbani Kiran, Syed Kazim Shah, and Farhana Yasmin, “Impact of Slanted State Ideology on Pakistani Dramas: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of *Ehd-e-Wafa* and *Alpha Bravo Charlie*,” *Pakistan Journal of Languages and Translation Studies* 10, no. 1 (2022): 71–93; Uzair Ahmad and Muhammad Rashid Khan, “Television Dramas and National Integration in Pakistan: An Analysis of Public Perception,” *Journal of Peace Development & Communication* 4, no. 2 (2020): 2663–79; Arooba Iftikhar, Bakht Zaman, and Samina Kalsoom, “The

A second, deeply rooted ideological opposition stemmed from the perception of PTM's ethnic nationalism as an existential threat to Pakistani nationalism. Since its inception, the Pakistani state has struggled to manage its ethnic pluralism, often promoting a homogenizing "one nation, one ideology" narrative where Islam is meant to supersede all other identities. This project intensified under Zia-ul-Haq's regime, and its legacy is a deep suspicion of ethnic claims-making. PTM, despite its focus on civil rights, was immediately placed within this genealogy of "threats" to national unity, seen as a continuation of historical movements like the Bengali struggle for independence⁵³ and the ongoing Baloch struggle for independence. This view was summarized by a government civil servant in Islamabad, where he stated that "Ethnic nationalism is a threat to the ideology of Pakistan because ethnicity leads to division and differences The slogan of *lar ao bar, yao Afghani*⁵⁴ . . . symbolizes that PTM wants unification with Afghanistan."⁵⁵ This interpretation weaponizes the cultural reality of the Durand Line—that it divides a shared Pashtun homeland—and transforms it into a secessionist threat. It demonstrates how the state's ideological machinery successfully equates any assertion of ethnic identity with a desire to break the country apart, effectively shutting down space for a multicultural, federalist conception of Pakistan.

The ideological opposition to PTM also had a distinct religious dimension, often articulated by students of madrasas (Islamic religious educational institutes). A respondent from a madrasa in Islamabad told me the following:

PTM is a movement of Pashtuns, but for us, first we are Muslims, and then we are Pashtuns. The day they call their movement "Islam Tahafuz movement," I will be the first one to support it. Fighting on ethnic lines and not speaking of the pain of the people of Kashmir and Palestine is the reason I am against this movement.⁵⁶

This critique privileges a transnational Islamic *Ummah*⁵⁷ over a localized ethnic identity and judges political movements by their adherence to a specific religious-political agenda. It reflects a successful hegemonic project that has positioned the state's foreign policy concerns (Kashmir, Palestine conflicts) as the only legitimate foci of political solidarity for pious Muslims, thereby discrediting movements focused on internal injustices.

Representation of Pakhtuns in Pakistani Urdu Dramas: A Case Study of *Sang-e-Mar Mar*," *Journal of Media Horizons* 5, no. 4 (2024): 234–42.

⁵³ Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation in December 1971, following a nine-month liberation war against Pakistan.

⁵⁴ The Pashto slogan "*Lar ao Bar, Yao Afghani*" translates as "On both sides, one Afghan." *Lar* = this side, *Bar* = that side, *Yao* = one, *Afghani* = Afghan. It asserts Pashtun unity across the Durand Line.

⁵⁵ Interview with Abid Ali of a respondent who requested anonymity, December 2021 (Islamabad).

⁵⁶ Yaseen ul Hassan in interview with Abid Ali, January 2021 (Islamabad).

⁵⁷ The Arabic term "*Ummah*" denotes the global community of Muslims, transcending nation-states and ethnic boundaries. In Pakistan, the idea has been central since 1947, invoked to justify its creation and later reinforced during Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization, especially in relation to Afghanistan and Kashmir. For scholarly work on this topic, read Ian Talbot, *Pakistan: A Modern History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 251; Vali Reza Nasr, *Islamic Leviathan: Islam and the Making of State Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 130–57.

Beyond ideology, opposition to PTM was also driven by concrete class interests and a pragmatic calculus of survival. Like other nationalities' integrations into state structure through services and participation, Pashtun nationalism has also historically been, in part, a struggle for a share of state power.⁵⁸ A significant segment of the Pashtun population, particularly from the Peshawar valley of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, has been successfully integrated into the state's power structure, comprising an estimated 35 percent of the military and bureaucracy.⁵⁹ For this class and those aspiring to join it, resistance politics to the state and its institutions represent a direct threat to their social and economic upward mobility. Their opposition is not necessarily about believing state propaganda but about protecting their investment in the system. A student from the National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST) in Islamabad expressed this fear clearly:

We have come to Islamabad for good education and to get good grades to secure jobs in a competitive market and to climb from the middle class to the upper/elite class. If we engage in politics, especially the politics that are against the State institutions, how can we achieve that?⁶⁰

For this student, politics is not about rights but about risk. The "future" is a narrowly defined path of upward mobility within the existing structure, and any deviation is seen as a dangerous gamble. This fear was poignantly illustrated by a former worker of a nationalist political party from Mohmand Agency, who now owns a shop in Lahore:

I have spent eight years with a political party, and when I was attacked by the Taliban due to my political affiliation, no one came to my help Now I tell my children . . . don't indulge in any political activity, including PTM, which is a genuine movement, but people like us who are struggling for a one time meal in a day should refrain from it because if difficult times come, no one from even PTM would come for our help.⁶¹

This testimony reveals the devastating cost of political engagement in a context of state abandonment and militant violence. It is a rational calculation of precarity; the state offers no protection to its critics. Therefore, the only logical choice is depoliticization and a focus on individual survival. A businessman from Mardan who has a settled business in Islamabad spoke even more bluntly:

To support PTM politics is like struggling for nothing, you will gain nothing at the end I aligned myself with the powerful political elites of this area PTM has no power, nor can it gain, so why should I spend my money and energy on it?⁶²

⁵⁸ Adeel Khan, *Politics of Identity: Ethnic Nationalism and the State in Pakistan* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2005), 99–131.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Muhammad Shahab in interview with Abid Ali, December 2020 (Islamabad).

⁶¹ Interview with Abid Ali of respondent who requested anonymity, December 2020 (Lahore).

⁶² Ikram Uddin in interview with Abid Ali, January 2021 (Islamabad).

This is the voice of a class that has learned to navigate patronage networks for material gain. It views politics through a purely transactional lens, and PTM, lacking the power to distribute resources or provide protection, is seen as a poor investment.

The third form of opposition to PTM was perhaps the most paradoxical: a deeply rooted suspicion that has persisted among the Pashtuns—that “PTM itself is a creation of the state’s intelligence agencies.” I was unaware of this particular form of opposition, but it also caught my attention during interviews with respondents. By thoroughly analyzing this type of opposition, I conclude that a conspiratorial mindset is not necessarily a sign of ignorance but can be a rational response to living within a deep state where the military establishment has historically manipulated political projects. A respondent from the Islamic International University, Islamabad, expressed this doubt:

When Mehsud Tahafuz Movement (MTM) changed into PTM in Islamabad, many believed that there was a hidden program behind the emergence of PTM I am not sure for what purpose . . . but a State institution has vested interest in its formation.⁶³

Another respondent pointed to the movement’s rapid growth as evidence that “People have spent many years gathering people on a single point . . . but PTM has gathered many people in a very short time . . . which indeed has support from the intelligence agencies of the country for some vested interests.”⁶⁴

This opposition is fascinating because it does not dispute PTM’s facts or grievances. Instead, it doubts its authenticity. It reflects a profound cynicism and powerlessness, a belief that no genuine opposition could ever emerge or be allowed to thrive. As one student in a focus group discussion argued, “PTM was created by the military to look for and find the anti-state actors in the country.”⁶⁵ In this view, the movement is a honeypot, a trap set by the very power it claims to challenge. This conspiratorial opposition is the ultimate testament to the state’s success in destabilizing truth and fracturing political solidarity. It leaves citizens trapped between a state they cannot trust and opposition movements they cannot believe in.

Though opposition to PTM within the Pashtun community is complex and cannot be dismissed as false consciousness, it is a multifaceted political stance shaped by the powerful interaction of state ideology, class interest, and a pervasive culture of suspicion. The state’s hegemonic project, carried out through education and media, successfully redefined a struggle for rights as an act of treachery. The pragmatic calculation of a middle class integrated into the state’s power structure prioritized individual mobility over collective risk. Additionally, the deep state’s history of political manipulation fostered a cynical skepticism that undermined the possibility of genuine resistance. Together, these elements of opposition highlight the significant challenges faced by any social movement aiming to challenge the militarized and centralized power in Pakistan. They demonstrate that the battle is not only fought in

⁶³ Jalal Ahmed in interview with Abid Ali, January 2021 (Islamabad).

⁶⁴ Mohsin Ali in interview with Abid Ali, December 2020 (Islamabad).

⁶⁵ Focus group discussion at Quaid-I-Azam University, December 2020, Islamabad.

the streets or on social media but also deep within the consciousness of the very people the movement seeks to represent.

The Dialectics of Political Agency: Between Hegemony and PTM

This article has endeavored to move beyond a simplistic binary of success or failure in analyzing the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement. Instead, it has delved into the complex and often contradictory processes that shape political agency, seeking to understand not just that Pashtuns supported or opposed the movement, but how and why such divergent positions emerged from within the same ethnic community. The formation of political will or agency, as this article demonstrates, is a dialectical process, caught between the powerful gravitational pull of state hegemony and the emergent forces of resistance.

The analysis reveals that support for PTM was not a spontaneous eruption of anger but the product of a long, subterranean development of political consciousness. This consciousness was forged in the informal, interstitial spaces that exist on the margins of the state's disciplinary apparatus: university study circles, private discussion groups, and digital platforms.⁶⁶ These arenas functioned as a "political society" of the urban Pashtun diaspora—spaces outside the formal channels of civil society where subaltern groups organize to make claims on the state. Within these spaces, a counterhegemony was painstakingly built. Through critical engagement with history and theory, Pashtun youth were able to decode the state's narrative of the War on Terror, transforming their personal experiences of profiling, loss, and displacement into a structured political critique. The PTM did not create this consciousness; it provided it with a public stage and a political vocabulary. The movement's power lay in its ability to articulate what was already being whispered in private, turning individual "rumors" and shared stories of military-Taliban collusion into a collective claim for rights and recognition.

Conversely, opposition to the PTM was equally structured and not at all due to a mere lack of awareness. It was the product of a highly effective hegemonic project of state ideological apparatuses. The national education system, mainstream media, and official historiography worked in concert to produce a "common sense" that equated critique of the military with treason, recast horrific violence as noble "sacrifice," and framed ethnic nationalism as an existential threat to the nation. For many Pashtuns, particularly those from settled districts integrated into the state's military and bureaucratic structures, subscribing to this "common sense" was a rational choice. It was a strategy of survival and upward mobility within the existing power framework, a pragmatic calculation where supporting the PTM posed an unacceptable risk to their class interests and familial security. Their opposition reflects that "hegemony" operates not just through coercion but by securing the active consent of the governed, even to their own collective subordination.

⁶⁶ Abid Ali, "The Formation of Political Agency and Its Support/Opposition to Social Movement(s): The Case of Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) in Pakistan." Also read, Usman Khan, Yu Cheng, Zahid Ali Shah, Shakir Ullah, and Ma Jianfu, "Reclaiming Pashtun Identity: The Role of Informal Spaces in Developing an Alternative Narrative," *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 23, no. 8 (2021): 1166–86.

Thus, the puzzle of why the same ethnic group found itself on opposing poles is solved by tracing the divergent paths of political socialization. The supporters, often from the most marginalized tribal areas, developed a “good sense” through counterhegemonic spaces. This “good sense” allowed them to critically dissect the state’s common sense and articulate an alternative political vision based on justice and constitutional rights. The opponents, often from more privileged class positions within the Pashtun community, had their political agency shaped by the state’s hegemonic institutions. Their “spontaneous philosophy” while feeling like independent thought, was in fact a reflection of the state’s successfully manufactured consensus.

Ultimately, the story of the PTM is a stark illustration of the unequal terms of political engagement in a national security state. The state engaged with these two broad trends that I have described in this article in fundamentally different ways. It met the resistance of the supporters with direct coercion, censorship, violence, and enforced disappearances. It engaged with the opposition to PTM through the softer power of ideology, rewarding their consent with inclusion and the perks of patronage. This analysis underscores that the fate of social movements is not determined solely by their moral clarity or the justice of their cause, but by the arduous work of building counterhegemonic consciousness against the immense, often violent, power of the state to shape the very will of the people it governs. The PTM’s legacy, therefore, lies not in success or failure binaries, but in its profound demonstration of how political agency is made, unmade, and contested in a postcolonial state by employing borderland experiences in locality as well as in urban centers.

Conclusion

The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement emerged as a profound rupture in Pakistan’s political landscape, articulating a long-silenced narrative of state violence, ethnic marginalization, and the brutal realities of life in the country’s securitized borderland. In this article, I argued that the PTM is not merely a temporary or faddish protest movement but a transformative political project that produced a “neo-Pashtun consciousness” across Pashtun geographies and even beyond that. This consciousness was forged in the crucible of urban centers, born from the dual experience of GWOT-induced displacement from the tribal areas and the subsequent systemic ethnic-based profiling and violence faced by Pashtuns in Pakistan’s urban centers. By connecting borderland studies with postcolonial theory, this article situates the PTM within a historical continuum of colonial and postcolonial “governmentality through exception” where the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) created a zone of anomie that paradoxically became a fertile ground for resistance. The powerful aspect of this movement was that it grew its ability to disrupt hegemonic binaries. It transformed from a tribal demand for justice into a modern, rights-based movement that challenged the very foundations of the national security state. It utilized the space in the urban core where Pashtun identity was rearticulated in the universalist language of citizenship and constitutional rights, powerfully dismantling the state’s caricature of the Pashtun as either a loyal “martial race” or a potential “terrorist.” Crucially, it also provided a platform for women and youth to assert their agency, countering both patriarchal and orientalist narratives.

However, as the analysis of internal opposition revealed, this challenge to the state’s hegemony was never total. The movement was met with a multifaceted

counterresistance from within the Pashtun community itself, cultivated through decades of state ideological apparatuses, class interests, and a pervasive culture of suspicion. The state's ideological apparatuses successfully framed the PTM's critique as *ghadari* (treason), while pragmatic calculations led many integrated Pashtuns to prioritize individual survival and mobility over collective risk.

The current status of the PTM—officially banned, with its leaders persecuted, imprisoned, or forced into exile—should not be seen as a sign of the movement's failure (as many, particularly in mainland Pakistan, might think); rather, the state's criminalization and suppression of the PTM exemplify the very militarized governance and denial of dissent that the movement has long sought to challenge, ultimately confirming its central argument. The ban represents the state's final recourse to coercion, having found the movement's discourse impossible to assimilate into its hegemonic national narrative. It is the logical endpoint of a historical pattern where the state, unable to address the substantive grievances and constitutional rights of its periphery, chooses to silence dissenting voices. But this suppression does not erase the PTM's profound legacy; rather, the movement successfully shattered a long-standing silence, forcing a national—and international—conversation about enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and the human cost of perpetual militarization. It demonstrated the potent ability of subaltern groups to cultivate counterhegemonic consciousness even in the face of immense persecution and violence. The “neo-Pashtun consciousness” it forged persists in digital spaces, private discussions, and the collective memory of a generation, representing a latent political force that continues to challenge the state's official story.

Thus, the story of the PTM is a stark illustration of the dialectics of political agency in a postcolonial security state. It reveals that even for other political movements that the struggle for rights and recognition is not a linear path but a constant battle between the forces of hegemony and resistance. The movement's journey from a massive public *dharna* to a banned entity underscores a painful truth: that in Pakistan, the space for pluralistic, rights-based discourse remains severely constrained. The PTM's greatest achievement may ultimately be its exposure of this very contradiction, leaving an indelible mark on the political consciousness of Pakistan and serving as a potent testament to the unyielding demand for justice from the margins.

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