# NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENT AND STATE RESPONSE: A CASE STUDY OF PASHTUN TAHAFUZ MOVEMENT IN PAKISTAN

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## Introduction

The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) is a grassroots social movement in Pakistan that emerged to address longstanding state perpetrated injustices, human rights violation and longstanding marginalization against Pashtun communities. It gained it prominence through media engagement, digital activism and peaceful protest, giving voice to grievances that were historically overlooked. PTM's core demands includes establishment of a truth commission- accountability for extra-judicial killing and justice for missing persons, the removal of landmines from the conflict affected tribal areas and an end to the systematic discrimination against Pashtuns. Through media campaigns, rallies and online mobilization the movement seeks recognition, reforms to ensure social justice and protection to civil rights. This research argues that PTM exemplifies a New Social Movement, where culture, identity and right based activism, rather than purely material or economic concerns, drive collective action. By positioning PTM within NSM theory, the study highlights how todays movements leverage digital media to mobilize support, shape narrative and challenges state authority in the pursuit of social justice.

## Literature Review:

Social movements have for a considerable amount of time been the focus of scholarly attention with early studies emphasizing their structural reasons, material issues and mobilization strategy. Over the course of time, the theory has progressed to questions of identity, culture and symbolic politics. In such contexts as Pakistan's now newly merged districts- formerly referred as Federally Administered Tribal Areas where ethnic marginalization and state securitization of dissent intersect, such social movements as the PTM presents the old and the new collective movements.

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This literature reviews explores five lines of literature on PTM that is state-movement encounter in war zones, ethic mobilization in the frontier regions, the transition from classical to new social movements and the question of symbolism, the politics of perception and counter-narrative and gender and representation in social movements.

Social movements in politically and militarily sensitive areas tend to find themselves subjected to intersecting regimes of physical suppression and discursive discrediting. Tarrow (2011) writes about repression as a state response to social movement, in his book he mentions that repression often tends to weaken the movement by fragmenting the leadership, instilling fear, and restraining organizational capacity. Suppression is mostly chosen by an authoritarian regime as a strategy to respond to a movement. Goodwin (2001) analyzes why revolutions happen and pays particular attention to levels of state violence, exclusion, and repression. His central thesis is that regimes that spring from military and autocratic lineages regularly develop the very conditions that foment resistance, especially when political opposition is seen as dangerous or illegitimate. Thus revolutions in regions that are heavily militarized are exposed to systematic repression and marked out as a threat to a nation's security. Governments in such environments tend to label opposition as a security menace and hence validate the use of coercive measures and the limitation of civic space (Della Porta, 2013). Along the borders of Pakistan, the securitization of ethnic mobilization has come to be a habitual approach, with movements depicted as destabilizing agents and not legitimate political actors (Shah, 2014; Haroon, 2011).

The PTM surfaced in 2018 in response to extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and the militarization of the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). While framing itself as a peaceful, rights-focused movement, the state's counter-framing castigates the movement as foreign-inspired and anti-national (International Crisis Group, 2019; Yusuf, 2020). This dynamic mirrors wider global trends where contentious actors are subject not only to physical repression but also state campaigns to undermine their moral and political legitimacy (Scott, 1990). Border regions are typically regions of geopolitical significance and long-term marginalization. Scholarship characterizes such regions as socially and politically constructed, on the basis of exclusionary state policies, militarization, and localized identities (Hastings & Wilson, 2020; Newman, 2006).

Pashtun identity in Pakistan has come to be significantly affected by decades of military campaigns, forced removals, and the global rhetoric of the "War on Terror" (Ahmed, 2013; Rashid, 2012). PTM's strategy of agreement and mobilization is deeply grounded in Pashtun cultural discourse, badal (revenge) and ghairat (honor), and yet also deploys the global idiom of human rights. The two-framed approach reflects the tension of the partisan universal and the material universal, by which political demands emanate from a specific cultural perspective and yet must have universal appeal in order to remain legitimate, as theorized by Mallick (2020).

Classical theories of social movements like resource mobilization (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) and political process approaches (Tilly, 1978) accounted for collective behavior mainly in terms of access to material resources, political opportunities, and organizational forms. Though still useful, such theories do not adequately account for movements with non-economic or state-focused goals. From the late 20th century, New Social Movement (NSM) theory emerged to analyze mobilizations in post-industrial societies, emphasizing identity, culture, and everyday life (Touraine, 1981; Melucci, 1996; Offe, 1985). NSMs are distinguished by their focus on recognition, lifestyle, and symbolic politics, often using non-violent and performative strategies to contest dominant narratives. They challenge not only state policies but also societal values, aiming to reshape cultural norms and public consciousness.

The PTM fulfills various NSM traits. It is based on an identity-centered movement, focuses on dignity and recognition in addition to material claims, and uses non-violent discourses. Mobilization is based on cultural signs and internet resources, framing itself as a moral opposition to state discourses. Viewing the PTM in the light of NSM clarifies the way in which identity and perception become the focal point of political agency in Pakistan. Symbolism is a core dimension of NSMs, functioning as both a unifying force within movements and a communicative bridge to external audiences (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998). Symbols condense complex grievances into tangible forms such as flags, slogans, attire, songs, and rituals allowing movements to articulate identity and purpose in ways that transcend formal political discourse. PTM mobilization is dense with symbolic politics. Pashtun tribal dress on rallies, the reading of resistance poetry, naming the martyrs and the use of popular cultural slogans all work to reinforce group identity even as they signal defiance of state repression. These symbolic gestures are performative in character,

confirming solidarity for those who participate even as the event projects legitimacy to the wider public. Here, then, the symbolism of the PTM not only articulates but performs its cause. Symbolism is also tied to perception politics. As Benford and Snow (2000) argue, framing processes involve not only content but also the symbolic vehicles through which meaning is conveyed. In PTM's case, symbols operate as both cultural markers and political tools, shaping how the movement is perceived by supporters, opponents, and international observers.

Perception is a political arena of competition no less real than any literal battlefield. Movements struggle to express themselves in such a way as can convince different audiences, but states vie to discredit and demonize movements (Snow & Benford, 1992; Jasper, 2014). In Pakistan, social media use by the PTM has allowed evasion of mainstream media censorship by reaching followers directly with Facebook Live, Twitter campaigns, and WhatsApp groups (Ahmad, 2024). Yet the same platforms have enabled counter-narratives framing PTM as divisive or externally funded. This dynamic of multiple competing narratives underscores the two-faced nature of online visibility: raising voices but leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and disinformation.

 Scholarship on the feminist movement warns us not to assume visible inclusion of women as gender-equitable participation (Alvarez, 2014; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). In the case of PTM, women's participation -in increasing numbers- is typically confined to symbolic presence in rallies and has little impact on decision-making processes (Bibi, 2023). This underrepresentation affects the legitimacy of PTM, both in the local patriarchal environment and in the gaze of global allies who consider gender inclusiveness a part of claims of universality.

**Research Questions**

1. What characteristics define the PTM as a New Social Movement in Pakistan and how has the state responded to it mobilization?
2. What is the nexus of technology (digital media), and NSM, particularly in the context of PTM?

**Theoretical framework:**

New Social Movement Theories (NSMT) is rooted in the European tradition of social theories, which is conceptually Western and over the years transformed from ideology to identity politics. NSMs theory is a compilation of the work of many theorists with a central claim that the new wave of movements started in the 1960s is due to the post-industrial economy and that they are different because the collective action is mainly to address the non-material issues like environmental, feminism and human rights. Close observation of New Social Movements (NSMs) discourse suggests several distinct waves of NSMs. As mentioned above the first wave of NSMs appeared in Europe in the 1960s, the second wave in the 1980s, and the third one has a reflection of $2^{nd}$ wave but with an induced flavor of technological advancement. The third wave of NSMs is defined by the Internet's proliferation, which not only initiates a new wave of social movements but also enhances their functionality, extending beyond the public sphere into active engagement within the cyber sphere.

What makes it "New" is the theory's diversion from Marxist ideology- the main features of which are class struggle, materialist critique, and industrial tussle against capitalism. Whereas NSMs advocate for a more cosmopolitan, universalistic, cross-class, anti-war, environmentalist, post-materialist inclination advocating for the cause of human rights and matters that facilitate individual self-actualization. In his seminal work 'New Social Movements' (1981, 1987); German Critical Theorist Jürgen Habermas articulates his distinctive analysis of the novel social movements that arose in Europe from the student protests and countercultural movements of the late 1960s. He called it new because it shifted from the old politics of the labor movement and included the ideas of identity, culture, and lifestyle. The new social movement is for the pursuit of identity and not for material deprivation- this also becomes the central theme of NSMs. The original work of Habermas on the theory of 'New Social Movements' is presented in a 1981 source from "The Theory of Communicative Action", which posits a transformation in the principal agents of societal change and the key battles in which they engage themselves. For Habermas, the agents now paramount for creating a public sphere of discourse are not those inquiring about what we should acquire but those probing who we are, how we exist, and who is responsible. Jürgen Habermas used the terminology of "System-lifeworld" distinction, the system refers to institutional structures of society like economy, government, and legal system and lifeworld indicates everyday life that includes culture, values, and communication. In his work, he

mentioned the term "colonization of lifeworld" meaning that the system intrudes and impacts negatively the lifeworld. He links it with NSMs that are concerned with the lifeworld which includes movements for minority rights, human rights, women's rights, and environmental protection.

## KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

1.      Unlike traditional social movements, they mostly have identity-centric mobilization. Alberto Melucci's work emphasizes the importance of collective identity.

2.      To frame their causes NSMs use cultural symbols and narratives. As Francesca Polletta and James Jasper argue this helps the NSMs to connect with a greater audience.

3.      NSMs often have horizontal structure and decentralized leadership, which reflects their emphasis on inclusivity and collective decision-making.

4.      NSMs mostly prioritize non-violent tactics of protest.

5.      NSMs focus on post-materialistic values rather than economic grievances.

6.      The digital age has amplified the characteristics of NSM. These movements rely on the use of technology and digital media to influence the audience. Digital activism plays a huge role in the Arab Spring too.

7.      NSMs prioritize human autonomy and self-determination over traditional political structure.

## DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND NSM:

To analyze PTM's digital activism, New Social Movements (NSM) scholars like Alain Touraine, Alberto Melucci, and Jürgen Habermas provide theoretical groundings for it. Alain Touraine considers social movement to be a key actor of society which is associated with the projects of liberation and emancipation and this actor refuse to be directed, exploited, manipulated, alienated or subjected. It was the May 1968 Students movement in France that demanded individual freedom, greater democracy and a break from traditional authority that made Touraine realized how social movement redefine and challenges the emerging social orders. He called it a post-industrial society as it transitioned from traditional industrial economies towards economies driven by knowledge, information and services. Thus, the initial expression of the new social movements was found in student movements, in women movements and some of the regional movements

happening around (Wieviorka, 2025). Moreover it's not denied that there are no more trade unions or working class struggles but that all this has lost its centrality. Much of the work has been done by Alain Touraine on how contemporary social movements uses technology and communication networks to promote their cause, defining the significance of the communication in understanding and facilitating the social movements. Though his work does not directly addresses the role of digital activism but it provides ground work on how social movements like PTM uses digital media to connect activists around the globe. His analysis of European social movements highlights that the struggle for identity and recognition has moved from physical protests to digital activism (Touraine, 1981).

The book "Protests in the Information Age: Social Movements, Digital Practices and Surveillance" edited by Lucas Melgaço and Jeffrey Monaghan, explains how the dynamics of social movements changed with the advent of information and communication technology. While explaining the Spain's anti-austerity protests they examine the role of social media where social media platforms like twitter (recently rebranded as X),and Facebook, facilitated rapid mobilization of protest, thus allowing decentralized coordination, allowing real time information sharing and spontaneous gatherings. Moreover, they emphasizes on the duality in the nature of social media as it also make easier for the authorities to monitor activities and identifies individuals thus a certain type of vulnerability is also introduced. Furthermore it explores how activists use social media to campaign for reparation for victims of police torture in Chicago. #RahmRepNow was used to amplify the movement's message and to pressurize the government official by drawing their attention to it (Melgaço & Monaghan, 2018). Many more movements like environmental movements have harnessed digital activism to cultivate collective identity. Greta Thunberg's "Fridays for Future" is another example of how digital media can amplify youth voices (Ackland & O'Neil, 2011). Jürgen Habermas's concept of public sphere as discussed in the theoretical framework provides an understanding of how digital activism functions as alternative spaces for discourse, challenging the state control over information and main stream media narrative (Habermas, 1989). This can be seen through the event of Arab Spring where the activist used digital media to create counter narrative against authoritarian regime. Thus, the internet has created a new public sphere for the marginalized communities to raise their voices. Alberto Melucci is yet another NSM theorist that

has worked on one of the key element of NSM which is collective identity (Melucci, 1985). While analyzing the environmental and feminist movements, Melucci explain the role of digital media as a tool to amplify collective identity . In Network of Outrage and Hope, Manuel Castells how digital media serves as a tool to empower movements by providing them a decentralized communication model like the Occupy Wall Street Movement used, to bypass mainstream media. He also highlights the role of digital media in Arab Spring demonstrating how digital network facilitated in disseminating rapid information (Castells, 2012). In Twitter and Tear Gas (2017), Zeynep Tufekci discusses the role of digital media in enabling the movement to scale rapidly and also make the movement vulnerable to state oppression. During the Arab spring the Egyptian protests saw similar digital suppression like internet shutdown. Tufekci further highlighted the Gezi Park protests started in 2013 as a reaction to urban development plan in Turkey and later converted into a nation-wide protest against the government (Tufekci, 2017).  Digital media specifically Twitter, Instagram, Whatsapp, Tiktok and Facebook played an important role in bypassing mainstream media and disseminating movement's activities. But this also made them vulnerable to state surveillance, internet shutdown and propaganda.

**Methodology**

The study employed a qualitative ethnographic case study design in investigating the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) as a contemporary New Social Movement (NSM) in Pakistan. It is a case study design allowed a close examination of PTM in its specific socio-political context. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. Interviews were administered with PTM activists, academicians, as well as students who had either directly contributed towards or keenly observed the movement. These were afterwards translated and transcribed into English from Pashto as well as Urdu in which it had been administered, and facilitated an insight into PTM's objectives, strategies, symbolic action, online activism, as well as conditions of state oppression. To further this end observation of PTM's virtual presence was conducted over media such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, YouTube, as well as Telegram.

Participants were gathered by means of purposive and snowball sampling to reach people. Nevertheless, limitations continued as a result of PTM's male-dominated framework as well as

risks involved in political participation. Data analysis was made based on thematic analysis which integrated inductive and deductive coding.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the study's findings by situating the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) within the framework of New Social Movement (NSM) theory. Drawing on interviews, tweets, and media sources, it highlights how PTM mobilizes around identity, symbolism, digital activism, and resistance to militarization. The analysis also reviews the state's response and places PTM in comparative perspective with movements such as the Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC) and the Arab Spring uprisings.

## STATE RESPONSE TO PTM

State response to any social movement depends on the fact that how the specific movement is perceived by the state. The Pakistani state's response to the previous movements revolves around three strategies: accommodation, co-option, and suppression, depending on the demands of the movement. Paul Staniland's foundational work on social movements provides another approach to how states respond to any social movement that is considered a threat to its integrity. He categorizes state response into four: suppression, containment, collusion, and incorporation. . Looking at the case study of this thesis is the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement it can be seen that Pakistani state adopted a mixed strategy of suppression and containment. PTM, because it emerged as a unique challenge to the state's control over security discourse, more specifically in Pashtun identity and post-conflict governance context of ex-FATA. PTM's grievances, its ideology, its methods of protest, and its demands – seeking justice for extrajudicial killing, enforced disappearances demilitarization of the Pashtun region posed challenges to the dominant civil-military framework of Pakistan (Khan, 2020; Staniland, 2015).

Initially, the state dismissed the movement for its lack of political maturity and called it an emotional movement.  PTM was accused of receiving foreign aid in the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) briefing. The military of Pakistan accused them of receiving both financial and ideological support from countries like India and Afghanistan. The former Director General of ISPR, Major Asif Ghafoor in 2019 publically claimed that PTM under foreign directives was

advancing a foreign agenda, though substantive investigative and legal evidence to support such allegations remained elusive. The Political response also included jirgas by tribal elders as an effort of indirect mediation. .[3] The tribal elders and PTM leaders sought to de-escalate the tensions through informal meetings in 2019 but those efforts remained ineffective because of the government refusing to formally engage with PTM as a legitimate political entity. Repeated arrests, travel bans, and restrictions on political activities were faced by the PTM leaders repeatedly. The prominent figures among these leaders to face these hurdles were Manzoor Pashteen, Ali Wazir, and Mohsin Dawar to name a few. The movement's sit-ins were faced with heavy police presence and legal repercussions (Amnesty International, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024; Voice of America, 2024).

Under Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) Section 124A (Sedition) and the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) of 1997, PTM's activists and leaders have frequently been charged. These laws have been utilized to restrict gatherings by labeling PTM leaders as threats to public order, arresting their leaders, and imposing travel bans and asset freezes on PTM members. A few of the legal cases against its prominent leaders started in 2019 when FIR was registered against Ali Wazir and Mohsin Dawar, following the Kharqamar incident, then in 2021 sedition charges were imposed on several PTM activists were booked for critical speech against the military. In 2024, under Section 11B of the Anti-Terrorism Act, PTM was designated as a banned outfit. Thus, its financial operations were restricted and its membership was criminalized (The News International, 2021). A significant legal response came in 2019 after the Kharqamar incident, which became a pivotal moment in the state's criminalization of the movement. It was a critical moment because this incident marked a shift in the state's repression tactics. Kharqamar, a small village in North Waziristan was a hotspot of military operations particularly during Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014). The strategic location of Kharqamar was such that it was near the Afghan border thus it was under strong military surveillance and control during the operations to eliminate militant groups from ex-FATA. This resulted in a violation of the human rights of the local Pashtuns as they faced enforced disappearance, curfews, and extrajudicial killings. The incident happened on 26th May 2019 when

PTM leaders led a protest towards the Kharqamar check-post to raise their voices against the abuses of human rights they faced due to the military control of the region. When the convoy of PTM, led by Ali Wazir and Mohsin Dawar, reached the check-post they were refused to pass through it. Things escalated and a clash broke out between the military forces and the protestors *(Dawn, 2019).*

PTM publically criticized the controversial role of the establishment during the Afghan war and their discriminatory behavior towards Pashtuns. Thus, sporadic events of arresting and using force have been reported by the state against the members of PTM. One such incident was the death of a university professor and a prominent PTM activist Arman Loni. On 2nd 2019, during a peaceful PTM sit-in, Loni's death was reported, where the witnesses confirmed and the death occurred due to head injuries he got when the police tried to disperse the peaceful sit-in. Whereas, the state dismissed the allegations and attributed his death to natural causes. This resulted in intensifying the confrontation between PTM activists and the state as the death was followed by several large-scale protests where the killing of Arman Loni was condemned and they demanded an independent judicial inquiry. The government responded to these protests with repression as the security forces cracked down on the activists by arresting many. Manzoor Pashteen the founding member of the movement was also arrested under sedition charges (Deutsche Welle, 2022; Naya Daur, 2020).

## KEY THEMES IN PTM USE OF DIGITAL MEDIA

We will further delve into the tweets of the PTM illustrating how the activists made use of twitter (now X) to gather around the demonstrators.

### Assertion and reinvention of Pashtuns identity

The first identified theme of this chapter reveals the foremost task the activists took is the responsibility of assertion and reinvention of Pashtuns identity. While skimming through the profiles of the fore founders of the PTM, the common observation was the use of Pashto language and Pashto poetry as a medium to build a collective Pashtun identity. Culturally loaded poetry has always been a part of Pashtun culture but the contemporary poetry has seen certain shifts in the tone and discourse. Through poetry they sing a proud, valorous Pashtun past to evoke the sentiments. The change observed in the tone basically refers to all the atrocities the Pashtuns have been through since Soviet-Afghan war and then War on Terror. Thus with these geo-political

development impacted the poetry. Through the use of these poetries and songs the PTM leaders forge an emotional bond within the Pashtun community. Additionally linking their struggle to the broader historical tradition, therefore poetry counters the state narrative about violence and terrorism. This asserts the idea of condemning the State violence on Pashtuns on one hand and trying to preserve the unique culture and identity of Pashtuns on the other hand. To deepen the exploration few of the tweets will be mention to illustrate how this culturally loaded language translates into digital activism.

## Symbolism

While looking at the PTM trough the New Social Movement on key factor is the symbolism that the movement uses for the impact over its people. Thus this symbolism results in a collective identity. In case of PTM the Pashteen cap signifies the transformational symbol within its identity narrative. Originally called Mazari hat from northern Afghanistan was quickly adopted by many when once Manzoor Pashteen wore it in Peshawar rally. The mazari cap became signifier of Pashtun cultural pride and solidarity. In certain tribal areas like in North Waziristan the caps were confiscated and burned by the authorities to challenge the symbolic solidarity. In another incident the University of Sciences and Technology in Bannu banned the use of these specific caps for the students and faculty citing the fear of ethnic division. The pashteen cap's rise within the PTM shows a significant portrayal of collective identity as an effort to demonstrate solidarity and challenge the state's hegemonic power structure. The institutional effort to suppress the cap demonstrates its symbolic potency. Looking at this through the lens of a State, the origin of the cap might be questionable as it became boundary object. Its origin is from Afghanistan. Therefore it became a bridge for politically and geo-graphically diverse Pashtun communities across the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Hence, became a tangible emblem of cultural pride and shared struggles. The same cap was seen in the Afghanistan upper house- the Mesharano Jirga- in solidarity with demands of the movement. The suppression of the Pashteen cap may indicate the State's anxieties such as cross border militant influence. Thus it suggests that the authorities' suppression might be a strategic attempt to contain culturally mobilized Pashtuns collective identity.

## Stop State militarization

One of the reoccurring trends in the media activism was that of #StopStateTerrorism which condemns the use of force against the Pashtuns in general and PTM's activists in specific. This hashtag became one of the most powerful rallying cry for the movement in the opposition to military excesses in the tribal areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). During the arbitrary detention of the PTM activists and protest's crackdown, human right advocates and PTM's supporters frequently used this trend. While conducting the research, this specific theme that is violence against Pashtuns remained the most prominent one. Under the section 11-B of the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) 1997, PTM was labeled as a Proscribed organization citing it as a "prejudicial to the peace and security of the state". This was accompanied by dispersing the peaceful assemblies, arbitrary detention of the movement's leaders and mass arrest particularly after the Khyber Jirga (National Quami Jirga). Moreover the complete media silence because of the direct and indirect pressure forced the PTM to rely heavily on the digital and international platforms.

## Truth Commission

Article 2 of the United Nation's International Convention for the Protection of All Persons From Enforced Disappearance define the Enforced Disappearance as any instance of abduction, arrest or detention or any another way of depriving a person of their freedom by the state personnel. Moreover this deprivation is followed by the state's refusal to disclose the individual's detention and hiding the individual's fate or whereabouts and placing them outside the protection of law (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], n.d.). Inquiry of extra-judicial killing and Enforced disappearance are one of the core objectives of PTM's advocacy as these represents a form of visible violence that was imposed on the Pashtuns after 9/11. These disappearances subvert every principle of the International Human Right norms as mentioned above of the Art 2. PTM's struggle reflects broader struggle for human dignity, accountability and truth. In fact building of the truth commission for the accountability is one of the foremost demands of the PTM. One of the respondents (a founding member and an activist) of the PTM said "The main objective of the PTM is the making of the truth commission. For the atrocities done during the War on Terror Truth Commission is mandatory. Till today no political party has talked about enforced disappearances, the installed land mines that killed hundreds of innocents. No political party demanded accountability for them. This is what PTM does for its

people. It narrates the true stories of people pain and sufferings. It represents the true sentiments of Pashtuns"(Anonymous PTM activist, personal communication, May 12, 2025).

International media played a big role in making the movement heard by the international audience. With the demise of the Gilaman Wazir, international media gave coverage to the funeral procession, while the mainstream Pakistani media remain silenced. PTM has their representations in the international forums. Recently, Manzoor Pashteen addressed the 58th session of the Human Rights Security Council (UNSC) in Geneva on 19th March, 2025. He talked about the injustices done to the Pashtun community and the PTM members in detail ranging from extra-judicial killing to enforced disappearances. Furthermore, he called upon the International community to stop the persecutions of innocent Pashtuns and other oppressed community in Pakistan. This too was a part of their broader campaign to appealed UN High Commission to intervene (Pasteen, 2025).

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Situating the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) within a comparative framework reveals both convergences and divergences with movements such as the Arab Spring and the Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC). A shared characteristic among these movements is their reliance on digital platforms for mobilization, narrative construction, and dissemination of information. The Arab Spring (2010–2012) demonstrated the catalytic role of social media in amplifying grievances, facilitating mass protests, and fostering transnational solidarity. Yet, despite the initial optimism it generated, the movement often culminated in violent state repression and the re-entrenchment of authoritarian regimes, underscoring the limitations of technology as a sole driver of democratic transformation.

BYC is more comparable to PTM because both are rights-based, identity politics movements that respond to extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances. BYC's and Mahrang Baloch's leadership, in particular, has exhibited a more inclusive form of leadership with seeming women's involvement, while PTM continues to be male-dominated. Both, however, assume non-violent methods, grassroots street politics, and symbolic resistance and utilize them for resistance against oppression by the state. PTM and BYC respondents indicated shared victimhood and solidarity regardless of their divergence in ethnicity, style of politics, and gender politics.

The contrast illustrates that while PTM and BYC advocate for community rights within Pakistan's socio-political structure, the Arab Spring advocated for regime change within authoritarian regimes. Different contexts shaped outcomes: the Arab Spring contributed to revolutionary yet volatile transitions, while PTM and BYC focus on recognition, dignity, and human rights. Social activism has made it possible for there to be decentralized mobilization and world visibility, yet as Manuel Castells and Zeynep Tufekci suggest, it requires offline institutions, leaders, and sustained organization for durable change. PTM's template of drawing inspiration from Bacha Khan's Khudai Khidmatgar movement makes it a humanist and not a nationalist movement. In building a united front with BYC and other aggrieved groups, it suggests the potential for broader, non-violent resistance fronts in Pakistan based on common experiences of oppression from the state.

## DISCUSSIONS

Based on the findings, it can be argued that PTM broadly falls under the umbrella of a New Social Movement. It reflects several core tenets of NSM theory such as identity-centric mobilization, non-violent protest, the use of cultural symbols, emphasis on post-materialist values, and digital media activism. However, unlike many NSMs that operate through highly decentralized, loosely organized structures, PTM displays a relatively centralized leadership, particularly around figures like Manzoor Pashteen. That said, the movement still retains a non-hierarchical ethos in its grassroots organization, where decision-making and participation are shared across a wide network of supporters and activists. State's initial response to PTM appeared somewhat lenient, allowing early sit-ins and engaging in dialogue, this was more of a strategic "wait-and-see" approach. The general view among interviewees was that the state was never truly accommodative of PTM; rather, it hoped the movement would quietly dissolve without gaining traction. As PTM gained popularity and began raising slogans critical of the military, it was gradually framed as a threat to national security, a common state tactic- as Sidney Tarrow mentioned.

One of the problems of New Social Movement like most movements is that it challenges the monopoly of the state and fighting for a particular cause. That is why they eventually get proscribed when state cannot stand them anymore. So this is relevant for New Social Movements and PTM as well. The ongoing 2025 counterterrorism operations in ex-FATA, though framed as

essential for national security, risk exacerbating local grievances by reinforcing cycles of displacement, mistrust, and militarization. International attention, such as former U.S. President Donald Trump's renewed interest in the region through his tweets, highlights its geopolitical significance, yet it often neglects the profound human cost borne by local communities. Within this climate, movements like the PTM and emerging groups such as BYC gain traction as they articulate counter-narratives that challenge state-centric security logics. Ultimately, the persistence of these mobilizations signals a critical lesson: without addressing the deeper structural injustices and entrenched socio-political alienation that fuel dissent, reliance on securitized responses alone will not only remain insufficient but may inadvertently strengthen the very movements the state seeks to contain.

## Conclusion

The state's response to PTM - a peaceful movement- contrasts sharply with liberal democratic norms of civil liberties and free expression. This has drawn international criticism and may affect Pakistan's GSP+ status, which depends on human rights compliance. Equating PTM with militant groups like TTP misrepresents its nature and risks alienating peaceful voices. To preserve national stability and global credibility, the state must distinguish civic activism from extremism and prioritize dialogue over repression. PTM broadly comes under the civil society which is important for vitality of democracy thus it's important that state shall reach on mutual understandings with PTM.

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