



Prominent Rights Activist Pashteen is Arrested in Pakistan

Prominent Pakistani activist Manzoor Pashteen was arrested earlier this week in Peshawar, in Pakistan's northwest. Pashteen has been a vocal critic of Pakistan's powerful military, and its enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings. Pashteen is the leader of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM), which is an organization that defends human rights in Pakistan. The authorities announced he was arrested on five charges of conspiracy and sedition, which his colleagues say are nonsense and politically motivated. Pashteen's arrest comes after he gave a speech that authorities deemed as being against the constitution and state. Manzoor Pashteen's arrest is just the latest example of Pakistan cracking down on dissidents and those who challenge the country's leadership.

Pashteen has been accused of being treasonous on numerous occasions by Pakistan's authorities, mostly as a result of his speeches, which are often highly critical of Pakistan's military. Pashteen and the PTM have long advocated for minorities in Pakistan's northwest, where the military has been waging a campaign against insurgent groups. Pakistan's military has been accused of indiscriminately targeting civilians, and serving communal justice against noncombatants. In addition to this, Pakistan has severe laws against criticizing the government, which has seen numerous journalists and activists detained. Pashteen has been critical of these policies since coming into the national spotlight in Pakistan two years ago.

Since January of 2018, Pashteen and the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement have become the greatest threat to Pakistan's military due to their willingness to illuminate the abuses committed by the military along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Thousands of people have attended rallies put on by the PTM, and Pashteen has gained notoriety throughout Pakistan. People were drawn to the non-violent methods of PTM rallies, and the criticism of the military resonated with ordinary Pakistanis. Rallies organized by Pashteen and the PTM are under a strict media blackout as Pakistan's government does not want additional information about the organization filtering out. This has been combatted by the growing presence of social media in Pakistan, and information about rallies and the PTM movement has proliferated throughout society against the wishes of the government.

Manzoor Pashteen's fellow activists have demanded his immediate release, and called the charges fraudulent. Mohsin Dawar, who is both an MP and organizer of the PTM, said in a tweet that Pashteen was arrested for demanding rights in a peaceful and democratic manner, and his arrest would only strengthen the resolve of the PTM and its members. Amnesty International's South Asia division also condemned the arrest on Twitter, saying Pashteen must be released immediately and unconditionally. Pakistani law dictates that Pashteen must be held in detention for a two-week pre-trial period, but he is expected to appear before a court at the conclusion of that. The charge of sedition that Pashteen faces carries a potential life sentence, and Pakistan has not traditionally shied away from pursuing strong punishment for dissidents. However, the Pashteen case has generated a lot of attention, and Pakistan will be under pressure from the international community to ensure he is given a fair trial, and punishment, if any, that fits the alleged crime.