

29 January 2020

## **Pakistan: Mass detention of and false charges against human rights defenders supporting the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement**

On 28 January 2020, Pakistani authorities arbitrarily detained 29 human rights defenders who were peacefully protesting in Islamabad against the arrest and continued detention of Manzoor Pashteen, a leader of the **Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement**.

The [Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement \(PTM\)](#) is a peaceful human rights movement campaigning for demining the region and against extra judicial killings, enforced disappearances, discrimination and surveillance of the Pashtun community by the Pakistani authorities. Pashtuns in north-west Pakistan have been made especially vulnerable by the so-called war on terror, unwillingly caught up and targeted in the battle between state security forces, the Taliban, and US – Afghanistan regional tensions. Their demand for the protection of the constitutional rights of Pashtuns, and their peaceful human rights work for the protection of their community have been met with hostility, criminalisation and often violent reprisals by the Pakistani authorities.

On 28 January 2020, PTM supporters in Islamabad held a peaceful protest against the [arrest](#) and continued incarceration of human rights defender Manzoor Pashteen. The protest was disrupted by riot police who arbitrarily arrested 29 human rights defenders including academics, writers, social media activists and women's rights activists. Among those detained are Mohsin Dawar, a key PTM leader and parliamentarian; Ismat Shahjahan, woman human rights defender and political activist; Ammar Rashid, writer, researcher on social justice and human rights, and political rights campaigner; M. Nofal Saleemi, academic and human rights activist; Shah Rukan Alam, political and social activist, and peace campaigner; Saifullah Nasar, academic; Khurram Qureshi, social media activist; Zahid Khan, political and human rights activist and women human rights defenders Maria Habib Malik and Muneeba Hafeez.

All those arrested were taken to Kohsar police station in Islamabad and detained without a formal warrant. The human rights defenders were not shown a First Information Report (FIR) or informed of the basis for their arrest. Subsequently, the detainees were split, a group of six remained at the Kohsa station and the rest were transferred to four police stations in Islamabad. Lawyers, family members and fellow human rights defenders were denied access to those detained. The arbitrary nature of the detention, lack of information and failure to observe due process created chaos and fear among the defenders and their lawyers and supporters, who were forced to rush from one police station to another in search of their whereabouts.

On the night of 28 January 2020, the six defenders at the Kohsar station, Mohsin Dawar, Ismat Shahjahan, Maria Habib, Muneeba, Gul Alam Wazir and Badshah Khan were released. The remaining 23 human rights defenders were held overnight and an FIR for their arrest was shown to them the following morning on 29 January 2020. The FIR contains provisions of the Pakistan Penal Code including sedition (124A), statements aimed at inducing public mischief (505A and 505B), assault or criminal force against a public servant (353), wrongful restraint (341), rioting and unlawful assembly (147 and 149 respectively), obstructing an official in his public function (186) and disobeying an order by a public servant (188). On the afternoon of 29 January, the 23 human rights defenders were produced before the Magistrates Court and remanded in judicial custody for a period of 14 days, despite a clear lack of evidence against them.

In a further incident, on 28 January 2020, in the city of Bannu, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, an FIR was

lodged against nine other human rights defenders who also protested against the arrest of Manzoor Pashteen. The FIR was lodged under Section 121 (waging or attempting to wage war or abetting waging of war against Pakistan), 122 (collecting arms, etc., with intention of waging war against Pakistan) and 123 (concealing with intent to facilitate design to wage war), among others.

The protests in Islamabad and Bannu were peaceful assemblies and the charges listed in the FIRs are clearly fabricated and aimed at punishing the human rights defenders for their support for PTM. The attacks against PTM members and their supporters have been systematically used by the Pakistani authorities to undermine, silence and criminalise their peaceful human rights work and legitimate demands for peace, non-discrimination and an end to human rights violations.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned about the ongoing judicial harassment of members of the PTM and it condemns the baseless detention of and charges against the human rights defenders as it believes that they are being targeted solely as a result of their human rights activities and their exercise of the rights to freedom of assembly and freedom of expression.

### **Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Pakistan to:**

1. Immediately and unconditionally release the 23 human rights defenders who remain in detention, as Front Line Defenders believes that they are being held solely as a result of their legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of human rights;
2. Drop all charges against the human rights defenders, as Front Line Defenders believes that they are being targeted solely as a result of their human rights activities and their exercise of the rights to freedom of assembly and freedom of expression;
2. Ensure that the treatment of the human rights defenders, while in detention, adheres to all those conditions set out in the 'Basic Principles for Treatment of Prisoners, adopted by General Assembly resolution 45/111 of 14 December 1990';
3. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological security and integrity of the human rights defenders;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that human rights defenders in Pakistan are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals, and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.