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Renegotiating Societal-Military Relations in Pakistan: The Case of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement

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Abstract

This article examines the Pakistani military's changing response to the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), to better understand pathways to military accountability and democratic change. An apolitical, non-violent civil-society movement, the PTM challenged the military's domestic-security practices for over a year, eliciting uncharacteristic concessions despite the apparent motive, opportunity and precedent for repression. Curiously, though, the role of civil society in renegotiating military behaviour has been overlooked in mainstream civil-military relations, which focuses on coup propensity at one extreme and harmonious democratic configurations at the other. Using first-hand interviews with PTM activists, security officials, commentators and politicians, this study argues that the PTM's unique appeal to societal and constitutional legitimacy constrained military responses, creating an opportunity to publicly contest military behaviour in a fashion impossible for conventional political elites. Although the military eventually resorted to force, this was itself facilitated by attacks on the underlying parameters of the PTM's societal legitimacy, underscoring the importance of *societal*-military relations in the space between civilian control and coup d'état.

On 26 May 2019, the Pakistan Army opened fire on a crowd attempting to force passage through an army checkpoint in Khar Qamar, near the town of Datta Khel in North Waziristan. The protests had started as a spontaneous response to recent military operations, themselves reacting to militant attacks on the local garrison. Unusually, though, the protest on 26 May was led by two Pakistani lawmakers, Mohsin Dawar and Ali Wazir. Both men were elected members of Pakistan's National Assembly, and leading figures in the non-violent Pashtun Tahafuz, or Protection, Movement (PTM). The two PTM legislators had arrived with the stated aim of investigating alleged Pakistan Army human rights abuses, subsequently leading protestors to the checkpoint.¹ At least 8 civilians (perhaps as many as 13) were killed when soldiers opened fire on the march, in the military's first outwardly violent response to the PTM. Wazir and Dawar were later charged with an assortment of terrorism offences, signalling the start of a wider crackdown on the movement.²

That the Pakistan Army reacted to the protest at Khar Qamar with force is not itself particularly surprising. The Pakistani military has a long track record of forceful interventions in domestic politics, having deposed a series of elected governments and violently repressed various previous dissident groups. What *is* surprising is just how long this response was in coming, and how successful the PTM proved in the interim. The PTM began in 2018 as a grass-roots campaign in the ethnically-Pashtun Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), but rapidly gained traction beyond the periphery to hold mass rallies in a series of major cities across the country. Despite core demands targeted squarely at the army's leadership (including the removal of landmines and checkpoints from the FATA and an end to extra-judicial killings) the military appeared to eschew its traditional tactics. Instead of violent crackdowns and political assassinations, the PTM elicited grudging concessions. Even as the military's official spokesman decried the movement's anti-military narrative, Pakistan's army chief acknowledged that the followers of PTM 'are Pakistanis too', while PTM leader Manzoor Pashteen was described as 'wonderful'.³ That Pakistan's security forces ultimately clashed with the PTM is far less surprising than their initial restraint; especially given the military's historic proclivities and enduring political interests.

This article seeks to understand the Pakistani security establishment's response to the PTM, making a series of empirical and theoretical contributions. Firstly, it argues that the PTM's unique appeal to sources of social and constitutional legitimacy politically constrained military responses – despite apparent motive, opportunity, and precedent for repression – setting it apart from previous opposition movements. Here, constitutionalist rhetoric, in particular, provided the central rallying narrative around which the PTM built its public support, generating a distinct form of societal legitimacy – and political pressure – derived from its popular base. Secondly, it contends that this peculiar societal character, intimately tied to popular grassroots support, created an opportunity to publicly contest military behaviour in a fashion impossible for conventional political elites. In so doing, it challenges the prevailing emphasis on elite-level political-military interactions which has traditionally dominated the study of civil-military relations. Instead, this article advocates for a new focus on *societal-military* relations, as a vehicle for renegotiating military behaviour in the space between civilian control and coup d'état. Evidence is drawn from first-hand interviews with activists, military officers and civil society commentators, together with published statements and media reporting.

The article initially provides a brief synopsis of existing literature concerning civil society-military relations, identifying the gap this paper addresses. The second section examines the place of the Pakistani military in domestic society and politics, together with the PTM's aims and origins. It highlights unique features of the PTM as a societal movement, and the specific challenges these presented to established military interests. The third section explores the narrative of societal

legitimacy developed by the PTM, and effect this had in constraining military reactions. The penultimate section then examines why the military switched from a blend of toleration and coercion to somewhat more direct repression. Ultimately, while a robust military response protected the military's vested institutional and political interests, the article concludes that this was initially restrained by, and then subsequently facilitated through, shifting narratives of societal legitimacy; that is, by a novel process of tacit *societal-military* negotiation that temporarily supplanted established mechanisms of elite civil-military relations.

Civil-Military Relations and Civil Society: The Gap

Any consideration of the role of armed forces in domestic society inevitably involves the question of political control because, as Finer argued, 'the political advantages of the military *vis-à-vis* other civilian groupings are overwhelming. The military possess vastly superior organization. And they possess *arms*.'⁴ This dilemma fundamentally stems from normative understandings of political legitimacy, elementally described as 'the ability to evoke compliance short of coercion', or more broadly, as 'the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society'.⁵ Hence, political legitimacy is often seen as distinct from political authority, or the mere capacity to exercise power, as it requires being 'morally justified in wielding political power'.⁶ Consequently, the 'civil-military problematique' has been dominated by discussion of the optimum means to ensure civilian governmental control over military forces, in the belief that political legitimacy ultimately originates from popular will as expressed through democratic institutions. Thus, while civil society lies at the conceptual heart of civil-military relations, the field has been overshadowed by a pre-occupation with both coup d'état, as the most extreme rupture of democratic civilian control, and with normative mechanisms of subordinating the institutions of war to that of government.⁷

However, the recent Arab Spring has refocused civil-military attention on the overlooked power of civil society. Across the Middle East and North Africa, long-standing authoritarian rulers came under sustained pressure from waves of popular protest. When dictators' armies refused to crush the crowds, regimes fell; where armies repeatedly opened fire, autocrats clung to power. In each case, regime survival appeared to hinge on the military's response to mass demonstrations. Here, ordinary soldiers' perceptions of (and interactions with) grassroots protestors were themselves significant. Broad-based protests drawn from diverse social groups were typically seen as more representative of the nation, and more legitimate. The scale and duration of demonstrations equally influenced military behaviour, with larger numbers raising the stakes for repression even as their longevity ratcheted up the political pressure on generals. Importantly, peaceful demonstrations also proved harder to construe as a national security problem – or as a threat to deployed troops – complicating military responses.⁸ Time and again, the survival of long-established civil-military relations (and the political leaders that had cultivated them) depended on the perceptions of social acceptability held by ordinary soldiers and junior officers. As Bellin has argued, firing on peaceful demonstrations 'carries the whiff of massacre', especially when the protestors seemed to 'stand for something that appears legitimate in the eyes of many recruits'.⁹

Nonetheless, understandings of military responses to popular protest remain heavily influenced by the traditional institutional fare of civil-military relations. Bellin, for instance, has argued that variation in the 'will to repress' during the Arab Spring was essentially conditioned by the pre-existing structure of military relationships to the regime.¹⁰ Where armed forces had been gerrymandered along patrimonial lines, soldiers viewed threats to the regime as a threat to the military. Where the military had been functionally-orientated, soldiers declined to fire on their fellow citizens. Similarly, while conscripts were often less than eager to fire on their protesting kin, ethnically

stacked armies typically require little encouragement to repress societal out-groups.¹¹ Thus, military responses to protest have been characterised as a series of stacked principal-agent relationships between dictators and generals, generals and subordinate officers, and subordinate officers and the soldiers on the firing line.¹² Military behaviour towards civil society is thus viewed as a product of institutional interests and political constraints decided ultimately at the elite level, including the regime's past treatment of the armed forces and the military's own internal cohesion mechanisms.¹³ While the Arab Spring demonstrated that grassroots social movements can overturn established civil-military relationships, the focus has remained on military institutions as autonomous 'kingmakers'.

Schiff's 'concordance theory' is a notable exception to this pattern. Schiff has characterised domestic military behaviour as a product of interactions between military institutions, political elites, *and* public opinion. Here, the coup-control dichotomy is replaced with a spectrum of more-to-less harmonious relations, with political stability defined by broad tripartite agreement, or 'concordance', over the military's rightful place domestically.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the societal determinants of concordance remain elusive, and in many cases (such as recruitment policies) are little more than institutional manifestations of the over-arching compact between political and military elites.¹⁵ Moreover, the applicability of this model to Pakistan has been challenged, on the (contentious) assertion that political interventions by the Pakistani army may reflect popular support for the military's political role, rather than disquiet in the country's civil-military affairs.¹⁶ Yet, in general terms, civil society actors are widely seen as important for promoting democratic 'socialization, education and fostering participation', simultaneously helping to provide checks and balances on the institutions of a state.¹⁷ Lundåsen, for example, has argued that 'local voluntary associations contribute to the local political culture,'¹⁸ while Fox has described the important role civil society can play in state accountability by empowering the state's 'own checks and balances.' According to this view, 'by exposing abuses of power, raising standards and public expectations of state performance, and bringing political pressure to bear, they can encourage oversight institutions to act, as well as to target and weaken entrenched opponents of accountability.'¹⁹

Moreover, it is clear that grassroots societal actors can shape the military's domestic behaviours independent of governmental elites. In Soviet Russia, for instance, Committees of Soldiers' Mothers used peaceful protest to challenge longstanding military practices of institutional hazing. Soldiers' mothers occupied a distinctly legitimate place in Soviet society, frequently exulted in state propaganda, posing a unique challenge for the military. Indeed, many protesters' sons had been killed on active service in Afghanistan, while protests were peaceful and orderly and aimed at the military instead of the regime. Protestors could not be framed as a threat, obliging the military to compete for public opinion in the popular press. Committees of Soldiers' Mothers were able to challenge military policy only because they retained societal and political legitimacy, while simultaneously casting aspersions on the societal and professional legitimacy of military behaviour.²⁰ As Stephan and Chenoweth have argued, by constraining the manner in which authorities can legitimately respond to political disobedience, such movements can create a novel space for negotiation and bargaining.²¹ Occasionally, protestors have actively sought to exploit this dynamic, deliberately placing young women and children close to picqueting troops to accentuate the illegitimacy of force.²² Indeed, in states that lack strong civilian control over praetorian armed forces, societal actors may be the *only* civilian groups able to pressure armed forces into change.

We argue that, at least initially, the Pakistani military was similarly constrained by the PTM, precisely because the movement carefully manipulated sources of societal legitimacy to challenge military practices. The PTM deliberately bypassed the traditional landscape of Pakistani political-military relations to construct a new, societal-military narrative. In support of this argument, we draw

evidence from 14 first-hand interviews with PTM activists, military officers, politicians, civil society activists and commentators (see annex). Interviewees were selected to represent the broadest range of actors and perspectives under examination, including PTM activists, state employees, military officers, and third-party observers. Some interviewees are described according to a generalised form of their role or affiliation, in order to preserve participant anonymity. The interviews were predominantly conducted in Pakistan during January 2019, and are supported by published material, including official statements and media reporting. These sources provide compelling insights into the views and perceptions of the PTM, the military institution, and wider societal audiences in Pakistan, shedding important light into the changing circumstances of military behaviour. In so doing, this article seeks to demonstrate the viability of a societal approach to analysis of armed forces' domestic political behaviours, as the starting point for wider conversations and future inductive research on societal-military relations. Here, our aim is not to discount the importance of robust executive, legislative or judicial mechanisms in ensuring enduring military oversight and accountability, but instead to highlight the overlooked importance of *societal* processes in conditioning military behaviour short of this traditional civil-military fare.

Military Praetorianism and the Rise of the PTM

Historically, the Pakistan Army is seen as the archetypical 'praetorian' military, ousting civilian governments in the name of its self-appointed role as protector of the nation.²³ The first coup attempt came in 1951, with successful interventions in 1958, 1977 and 1999 leading to prolonged military rule. The last dictator, General Musharraf, was forced to step down in 2008. However, the military continues to operate as a virtual state within a state, using coercion (often exercised indirectly, via pressure applied to other government institutions) to significantly influence domestic politics and foreign policy, while protecting its core economic and business interests. Indeed, these independent financial and political interests provide a key motive for the military's enduring domestic interventions, alongside a strategic culture of military exceptionalism grounded in Pakistan's regional security dilemma.²⁴ Given this enduring freedom of political action, its response to the PTM can reasonably be attributed to decisions made within military hierarchy rather than by civilian leaders. Less than a month before the incident a Khar Qamar, a military spokesman publicly warned the PTM that 'their time is up'. The shift to violence was also preceded by arrests and prosecutions of PTM leaders, including the alleged death of one PTM activist in custody.²⁵ The repression begun at Khar Qamar cannot be simply dismissed as the poor decision of junior soldiers under pressure on a far-flung checkpoint – a proverbial 'strategic Jawan' forcing the military bureaucracy's hand – but instead as the logical escalation of deliberate military policy.

The origins of the PTM lie in Pakistan's post-9/11 security operations in the FATA. Here, the US intervention in Afghanistan forced a reassessment of Pakistan's longstanding use of the FATA to sponsor cross-border militancy in search of "strategic depth" in Afghanistan. In the early 2000s, the military conducted a series of aggressive counter-insurgency and counterterrorism campaigns to clear militant groups from the FATA, relying heavily on firepower, artillery and air strikes. Although operations became more targeted after 2008 under civilian executives, the military has nonetheless remained the dominant actor in shaping Pakistan's security policy and military strategy. Checkpoints, landmines, curfews, and house-to-house searches remained key features of martial occupation in the FATA.²⁶ Moreover, the military (and paramilitary organisations like the Frontier Corps) also used extra-judicial arrests and secret detentions to 'disappear' suspected militants and political opponents. There was also an increase in both indiscriminate killings and targeted political coercion by the security establishment, not just in the FATA but across Pakistan.²⁷ The PTM emerged in direct response.

In January 2018, a young Pashtun shopkeeper and aspiring male model was killed by police in Karachi, sparking outrage. The police alleged that Naqeebullah Mehsud, originally from South Waziristan, belonged to the Pakistani Taliban and died in a shoot-out. Family members maintained Mehsud's innocence, arguing that Mehsud was an ordinary citizen murdered in police custody, with the 'encounter killing' subsequently staged by police.²⁸ Mehsud himself was typical of many who began to protest his killing, developing into the PTM. Between 2014-17, around 400,000 people were internally displaced as a result of conflict in the FATA. Many displaced children grew up in Pakistan's cities, where they developed a sense of social and political awareness, only to find disempowerment and repression on their return to the FATA as young adults. According to a Pashtun politician, the PTM was a product of a 'youth bulge', displacement and 'reverse urbanisation.'²⁹ Its core demands were rooted in the lived experience of the tribal belt, directly targeting the behaviour of the security forces. Central to these were the removal of landmines and unexploded ordinance from the FATA, and an end to roadside checkpoints curtailing freedom of movement, which are widely viewed as deliberately inhumane by local residents. Importantly, the PTM also demanded an end to extra-judicial killings by the security forces, insisting that the 'disappeared' either be brought to trial in open court, or returned to their families.³⁰

Admittedly, the PTM was not the first opposition group to challenge the military establishment, nor the first to mobilise along ethnic lines. However, unlike previous Baloch nationalist groups, for example, the PTM lacks any irredentist agenda, instead seeking the recognition of Pashtuns' full constitutional rights *within* Pakistan. Moreover, the movement is explicitly non-violent, and has actively sought to cast off the orientalist stereotype of Pashtuns as a backward and violent people. Pashteen has even called for the prosecution of leading figures in the Pakistani Taliban alongside security officials.³¹ In place of armed struggle, the PTM has relied on sit-ins and rallies, staging 'long marches' from the tribal belt to political centres.³² In this regard, the PTM mirrors features of the earlier Lawyers' Movement, which applied sufficient pressure to the previous military regime through sustained public demonstrations that senior officers tacitly withdrew support from General Musharraf, precipitating his resignation. The Lawyers' movement also adopted a similarly constitutional line, garnering widespread popular opposition to government attacks on the independence of the judiciary. Yet, unlike the PTM, it had its base among the educated, middle-class urban intelligentsia, and was led by senior lawyers and judges with political connections.³³

In contrast, the PTM is a bottom-up movement, originating not in social elites at the centre but among ordinary people at the periphery. The movement has relied on grassroots local activism in the FATA, including door-to-door canvassing, rallies and jirgas. It also made extensive use of social and digital media to raise support and awareness outside the tribal areas, within and beyond Pakistan, developing particular traction among disaffected youth.³⁴ Although the PTM has since gained the public support of a number of mainstream political parties, its initial rise came at the expense of some traditional parties; Mohsin Dawar himself abandoned the Awami National Party's youth wing in favour of the PTM.³⁵ While security operations in the FATA have not fully abated, checkpoints have been reduced and demining continues. Some of the disappeared have also returned, notwithstanding the eventual crackdown on PTM protests.³⁶ Given the movement's humble origins, it is the ability to take the 'Pashtun struggle to the mainstream, ethnically Urdu-speaking populations...which makes PTM a unique civil rights movement'.³⁷ Yet, despite this, the movement remains remarkably understudied, while the shifting military reaction to the PTM demands explanation.³⁸

The PTM and the Narrative of Protest: Constraining Force with Legitimacy

Despite its direct challenge to military authority, the PTM proved peculiarly difficult for the military to confront. Crucially, the PTM's demands were deliberately framed in a narrative of societal legitimacy,

using constitutional rights and the sovereignty of Pakistan as a legal and conceptual entity to frame its appeal for natural justice.³⁹ For example, the PTM's core aims explicitly referenced the provisions of the Pakistani constitution, 'demanding [that] security, accountability, and the fundamental human rights guaranteed in the Pakistani Constitution' should not 'arbitrarily provoke the military to use force'.⁴⁰ This appeal was reinforced by the specific manner in which the PTM called for their demands to be met, which emphasised the supremacy of the rule of law and the equality of Pashtun citizens. A PTM pamphlet called not for the unfettered return of all disappeared persons, but instead that 'the victims of enforced disappearances should be presented before a court of law. Those found guilty of a crime should be punished while the rest should be freed'.⁴¹ By scrupulously asserting the supremacy of Pakistani constitutional and criminal law, the PTM implicitly placed the military on an equal footing with that of their fellow Pashtuns – simultaneously rejecting both Pashtun militancy *and* military repression.

By juxtaposing this constitutional narrative with the military's arbitrary behaviour, the PTM made a direct play for the moral high ground in the eyes of wider society. In so doing, the PTM relied on first-hand personal accounts from victims and their families to challenge establishment claims. At a rally in Peshawar in April 2018, demonstrators carried photographs of their disappeared relatives.⁴² Moreover, while media analysts euphemistically referred to military coercion in indirect terms, PTM leaders like Pashteen deliberately employed plain, direct language:

I remember a time that when those who dared to speak out would receive a letter enclosed with five thousand rupees with the words 'this is the money for your coffin.' This kind of fear debilitates you. PTM is a result of this.⁴³

In so doing, the PTM began to break the 'barrier of fear' surrounding public discussion of such subjects. The PTM also used social media to challenge the opacity of the official narratives, uploading first-hand videos, photographs and stories from the FATA, transforming grassroots supporters into 'activists, journalists and mobilisers [all] at the same time'.⁴⁴

Here, the authenticity of the PTM's message was intimately linked to its popular grassroots appeal. Pashteen deliberately sought to distance the PTM from traditional Pakistani political parties, which have a reputation for cynical double-dealing. Despite Wazir and Dawar's election as pro-PTM independents, the PTM retained an image of being aloof from the grime of traditional party-political intrigue. Pashteen later commented that:

When we went to the people, we said that we would not ask them for votes. We asked for their support as charity...We envisioned the movement and its commitments as more durable than the tenure of an elected government, which ends every five years.⁴⁵

In principle, this 'apolitical' stance minimised the threat the PTM presented to traditional parties, while reinforcing the universality of its constitutional message. A prominent Pakistani lawyer noted the PTM leaders were thus able to position themselves as 'remarkable young men, still uncorrupted by age and experience, raising basic questions of state's responsibility to citizens'.⁴⁶ This image was supported by a commitment to transparently debating decision-making at public rallies.⁴⁷

However, to maintain this appeal, the PTM was forced to walk a delicate line between radicalism and tradition. While the PTM adopted the language and methods of traditional dispute resolution, calling jirgas and dharnas, it also deployed modern social media to galvanise groups traditionally marginalised in Pashtun political society. Indeed, the relative youth of many prominent PTM activists was itself atypical of Pashtun leadership, where age and marital status have traditionally conferred social authority.⁴⁸ Yet, while the movement's avowedly non-violent agenda harked back to

traditional Pashtun leaders of the past, such as Abdul Ghaffār Khān, the PTM simultaneously sought to challenge the lazy stereotypes of Pashtunwali deployed in support of military exceptionalism in the FATA. Rejecting the concept of ‘geography is destiny’, in which the Pashtuns are cast as ‘ignorant, warlike savages’ and the FATA condemned to insecurity and military occupation, the PTM sought to present themselves as ‘a dignified people who have paid in blood and money from years of terrorist violence and military sweeps’ through ‘peaceful and disciplined political agitation’.⁴⁹ As a former Pakistani Parliamentarian explained,

Instead of taking up guns and going up to the mountains they have taken the Constitution under their armpit and they have been flocking to the cities, urban centres, talking about constitutional rights, fundamental rights...[the] PTM has been able to, sort of, put military on the defensive in political terms.⁵⁰

Here, again, appeals to societal legitimacy were central to the PTM’s narrative, providing the medium in which to coherently blend societal orthodoxy with political radicalism.

This approach increased the PTM’s appeal among a diverse range of audiences, which in turn reinforced their perceived legitimacy, and facilitated greater openness and transparency. Significantly, that allowed the movement to develop a broader base, to include women, urban professionals, civil society groups, ‘socialists, feminists, nationalists...affected people’ intellectuals and journalists.⁵¹ It negotiated the ideological divide to attract liberal and religious Pashtuns alike, even mollifying some extremists.⁵² The PTM also attracted the support of a number of local and international NGOs, especially at times when military repression appeared imminent.⁵³ The movement’s focus on basic but universal human values cut across political parties and state institutions, attracting those with little interest in law or constitutionalism.⁵⁴ It was likewise able to attract large numbers to demonstrations outside the FATA. In April 2018, an estimated 60,000 rallied in Peshawar and 8,000 in Lahore, with several thousand more also turning out in Karachi the following month.⁵⁵ Although the PTM struggled to gain as much traction in the Punjab as in the FATA, contemporary commentators nonetheless remarked on the movement’s unusual appeal among other ethnic groups.⁵⁶ This appeal was directly tied to the universal nature of its constitutional message, and thus the wider societal legitimacy of its demands:

Pashteen’s social consciousness may be rooted in his Pashtun identity...But the questions he is asking are relevant for all of us. The debate triggered by Pashtun Tahafuz Movement is about the coercive relationship between a citizen and [the] Pakistani state and...their rights to life/liberty, dignity and equality.⁵⁷

Even Pashteen’s trademark Mazari hat was adopted by followers of the PTM as a means to ‘register complaint with the state that Pakhtuns [sic] wanted their rights in a peaceful manner’.⁵⁸

This combination of constitutional rhetoric, societal legitimacy and non-violence directly constrained the military’s response to the PTM.⁵⁹ As it became clear that the PTM would not be easily placated, the security establishment instead focused on obstructing PTM rallies. The administration in Lahore refused the PTM permission to hold a rally in the city at the eleventh hour, citing security concerns. When the PTM proceeded anyway, the city flooded the ground with sewage. PTM leaders were arrested afterwards, and security officials told local universities to break off contact.⁶⁰ However, the military stopped short of firing on the crowds or disappearing activists, claiming instead to have only sought ‘affidavits from them that they would not take part in any anti-state activity.’⁶¹ In May, the PTM sought to rally in Karachi’s central Bagh-e-Jinnah park, but was instead required to demonstrate in the peripheral Sohrab Goth, with a list of conditions attached. The authorities then

attempted to prevent Pashteen from attending, cancelling his airline ticket from Islamabad to Karachi on 'technical grounds'. His supporters then drove him to Lahore, in the hope of boarding a flight from there, only to be held outside the airport until the last flight had left. The group then decided to drive the 800-odd miles to Karachi, trailed all the way by a car full of plain-clothes intelligence officers, and repeatedly stopped and searched at checkpoints on route.⁶² Yet, the rally itself refused to disperse until Pashteen had arrived and spoken, close to midnight.⁶³

Here, the persistent popularity of PTM rallies appeared to actively preclude more aggressive measures, as to do so would concomitantly undermine the military's presentation of itself as a protector of the nation. As a result, the army was obliged to change its narrative towards the PTM. In February 2018, the army spokesman's remarks mixed conciliation with denigration, playing on Pashteen's age to describe him as 'a wonderful *young boy*'.⁶⁴ While the military initially described the movement's grievances as genuine in the hope of placating it, the tone hardened as the protests persisted. Yet, as one interviewee noted, when military frontmen repeatedly warned the PTM not to cross 'red lines', the movement simply replied that the constitution 'is the red line. Let's see who abides by the Constitution and who violates it.'⁶⁵ While the army chief denounced 'any anti-state agenda in the garb of engineered protests' in April, he also quickly highlighted that '[m]easures to facilitate [the] general public at check-posts without compromising security and [the] clearance of unexploded ordnance were already in process on [the] completion of kinetic operations', tacitly recognising PTM demands.⁶⁶ By early 2019, the Army Chief was forced to concede that the PTM's grievances 'were genuine and natural'; a theme echoed by Prime Minister Imran Khan, who instead blamed past governments for having launched military operations in the FATA, with 'inevitable' consequences.⁶⁷ While this rhetoric may simply have been an attempt to deflate the movement by appropriating its message, such statements nonetheless demonstrate that the impact of the PTM's legitimacy on the military's response.⁶⁸ Such statements cannot simply be attributed to a divergence of personal of opinion among the top military leadership, given that they were made by the same cohort of high ranking generals speaking in an official capacity from public-facing posts. Instead, they can reasonably be seen as representative of institutional policy. Given this, why then did the military shift from recognition to repression in the space of a month?

The Politics of Legitimacy: Patriotism and Repression in Pakistan

Although the military initially showed an uncharacteristic restraint toward the PTM, military leaders have not historically held constitutionalism in high regard. In 1977, for instance, General Zia-ul-Haq purportedly quipped: 'What is the Constitution? It is a booklet with ten or twelve pages. I can tear them up and say that from tomorrow, we shall live under a different system. Is there anybody to stop me?'⁶⁹ Although the military has since stepped away from direct rule, its self-image as the ultimate arbiter of the national good endures, raising questions about the initial sincerity of military officers' public acceptance of the PTM's narrative and goals. Instead, various commentators have suggested that the military's initial 'softly, softly' approach stemmed from a series of alternate strategic and geopolitical agendas, which, once resolved, enabled the swing towards repression.⁷⁰

Certainly, the PTM's rise coincided with a delicate time in Pakistan's regional relations. In February 2018, the Afghan Taliban entered into peace talks with the US, amid increased US pressure on Pakistan to deny them safe haven.⁷¹ Simultaneously, a series of popular protests demanding peace also emerged in Afghanistan's overwhelmingly Pashtun province of Helmand, inspired in part by the PTM, culminating in a brief ceasefire between the Taliban and the Afghan government during Eid.⁷² This provided a clear incentives to maintain a semblance of order and control over the FATA during fragile Afghan peace talks.⁷³ Moreover, a constitutional amendment merging the FATA with neighbouring Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province was signed in May 2018, effectively normalising the legal

and administrative status of the areas. Commentators at the time observed in the military a new-found willingness to normatively regulate the FATA, perhaps in recognition that normalisation might help secure hard-won counter-insurgency gains. Consequently, army leaders may have concluded that a more repressive stance towards the PTM might backfire locally, presenting an unacceptable risk to wider regional and strategic objectives.⁷⁴

However, if Pakistan's security establishment had good reason to temporarily tolerate the PTM, this does not itself explain the shift to force at Khar Qamar. Indeed, peace talks in Afghanistan continued throughout 2019, with the Pakistani military pressuring recalcitrant Taliban leaders in support of US efforts even as they cracked-down on the PTM.⁷⁵ Equally, long-standing tensions between India and Pakistan over Kashmir flared up again in spring 2019, further complicating Pakistan's domestic political environment. If the military's behaviour was primarily driven by instrumentalist strategic calculations, heightened military activity with India seems an unlikely time to choose to repress the PTM, given that any increased domestic unrest might absorb troops potentially needed elsewhere. Incentives to take a harder line against PTM had existed for some time without impelling action. The Pakistani military is generally regarded as extremely sensitive about its domestic reputation, for instance, especially at the prospect of looking weak in public.⁷⁶ While skirmishes with India may have bolstered the military in this regard, the PTM's campaign had targeted the military's domestic reputation from the beginning.

Instead, both restraint and repression likely reflected internal schisms and shifting institutional imperatives within the military, which the PTM exacerbated.⁷⁷ In multi-ethnic armies elsewhere, minority servicemen have repeatedly proved reluctant to repress civilian co-ethnics, leading both to ethnic stacking but also military division and disintegration.⁷⁸ In Pakistan, Pashtuns are well represented in the military, creating a 'persistent belief that the army is an exclusive club of Punjabis and Pashtuns.'⁷⁹ Recently, the army has actually sought to increase recruitment among Pakistan's ethnic minorities, aiming to increase Pashtun representation in the force from 13.5% to 14.5% in the period up to 2011. While most serving Pashtuns are typically not recruited from the FATA, the army has also been keen to increase its appeal in tribal belt, where all recruits tend to share the same political outlook regardless of their ethnicity.⁸⁰ Consequently, the conduct of counter-insurgency operations in the FATA has caused disquiet among Pashtun servicemen, especially young, social media-savvy junior officers who observers regard as sympathetic to the PTM's demands:

They are able to compare across countries and can see Pakistani military's involvement in politics and how it is having a detrimental effect...the younger cadre is not very happy with the way the military has dealt with the Pashtuns in the wake of 9/11 and want the policy to be changed.⁸¹

Here, the PTM appears to have become a *cause célèbre* for those within the military seeking to revise its counter-insurgency practices.⁸² Certainly, army operations became less indiscriminate after 2009, with non-kinetic activities also playing a somewhat more prominent role.⁸³ Notably, when senior officers did recognise the PTM's grievances as legitimate, this was articulated in the context of the tribal areas as a 'post-operation environment', recognising both the army's longstanding narrative of military sacrifice, but also the growing ascendancy of a 'hearts and minds' school of thought within the forces. It is no coincidence that the Army began to post greater numbers of Pashtun officers to XI Corps in Peshawar just as the PTM rose to prominence, including its first Pashtun corps commander for a decade.⁸⁴ Interestingly, PTM has capitalised on this very same narrative, using acknowledgment of the sufferings of the tribal areas to strengthen the legitimacy of its cause.⁸⁵

Importantly, the shift towards military repression was enabled by concerted attacks on the PTM's sources of societal legitimacy. As the movement gained popularity, the military repeatedly sought to deny it oxygen by curtailing media coverage of its activities and aims, typically by pressuring journalists to deny the PTM coverage. The military also periodically suspended access to internet and telephone signal in parts of the tribal belt, in an effort to contain PTM activism.⁸⁶ However, PTM support grew regardless, leading to a focus on undermining the movement's patriotic (and therefore statist and constitutionalist) credentials. While canvassing in Swabi, Pashteen was himself barred entry to the mausoleum of national hero Captain Karnal Sher Khan by his brother, 'out of respect for the armed forces of Pakistan and the national flag', following reports that the PTM had denied a man carrying the national flag entry to a rally.⁸⁷ The PTM actively resisted such attempts to paint it as 'anti-state'. In late October 2018, for instance, the PTM rallied in Bannu to highlight the case of a local police officer who had been kidnapped. Though government officials claimed he had been recalled to Islamabad on leave, his body was later discovered in Afghanistan with Islamic State claiming responsibility. The case highlighted the military's inability to provide security even for public servants, while also affirming the movement's essentially statist credentials. As one activist commented, 'Is this the reward for his [the officer's] honesty, bravery, and professionalism: to be kidnapped?'⁸⁸

Nonetheless, the military consistently aimed to tarnish the PTM's agenda with supposedly hidden irredentist aims, fuelling paranoia at their apparently meteoric rise.⁸⁹ Indeed, military warnings to the PTM shortly before the Khar Qamar incident were accompanied by (unsubstantiated and later repudiated) claims that the group was funded by both Afghan *and* Indian intelligence. The military also described the PTM as a vehicle for 'fifth-generation warfare' conducted by Pakistan's enemies.⁹⁰ That was clearly done in an effort to contest the legitimacy of their demands, mirroring long-standing military efforts to cast Pashtun political movements as inherently irredentist. Immediately prior to the 2019 crack-down, a significant controversy arose after locals in Khaisor withdrew previous allegations against the military, amid claims the PTM had fabricated the incidents and then attempted to silence opposition – a turn of events PTM leaders attributed to the hand of the security forces.⁹¹ Describing the PTM as Afghan agents, despite widespread recognition that their demands were grounded in genuine deprivation, should be likewise seen as an attempt to malign their domestic agenda at a time when it was very difficult for the military to take more direct action against them.⁹² While such narratives may have been little more than a fillip to justify repression, their necessity nonetheless highlights the importance of perceptions of societal legitimacy in conditioning the military's behaviour. According to one Pakistani scholar, the PTM's popular appeal effectively forced the military to compete for the political support of the Pakistani youth, prompting newfound military interest in perceptions of acting 'fairly'.⁹³ Here, apparently contradictory statements by military spokesmen simultaneously recognising and denouncing the PTM appear entirely consistent with a concerted effort to undercut the movement's societal support by delegitimising the group while co-opting its agenda.

This endeavour was likely facilitated in part by the PTM's distance from most conventional political parties, many of whom were concerned by the movements' rival appeal to their own political bases.⁹⁴ In this sense, efforts to delegitimise the PTM reflected an attempt to reassert a traditional axis of *civil*-military relations, over and above the PTM's claims to *societal* authority. Indeed, even before Khar Qamar, some observers were beginning to question the PTM's lifespan as a movement unwilling to transform itself into a conventional political party.⁹⁵ Tellingly, while the military has continued to persecute prominent PTM figures after Khar Qamar, it has also sought to distance itself from the repression of ordinary Pashtuns. The government announced a compensation scheme for relatives of the bereaved at Khar Qamar, while the commander of XI Corps was transferred later that year, cutting his tenure short. Nonetheless, the movement continues to draw significant support from

the Pashtun heartlands, in testament to its enduring societal legitimacy. Counter-productively for the military, though, the crackdown also served to unite once-divided opposition parties behind the movement.⁹⁶

Conclusions: Societal Legitimacy and Tacit Negotiation

This article examined the Pakistani security establishment's varied and apparently contradictory responses to the PTM, as a vehicle for understanding wider pathways to military accountability and democratic change. The PTM provides an interesting window onto the domestic political calculus of the Pakistani military – and by extension, other praetorian armed forces more generally – by highlighting unexpected military sensitivity to narratives of societal legitimacy. As a protest movement, the PTM's aims and methods were calibrated to garner broad-based popular sympathy, using the language of constitutional rights to develop a perception of societal legitimacy that constrained military responses. As the PTM gained popularity, military reactions shifted from humouring the movement towards impeding its activities and coercing its leaders. However, the military initially stopped short of wholesale repression, with military leaders instead constrained by the resilience of PTM's societal base. On the one hand, senior officers appeared unwilling to risk domestic stability or military cohesion at a time of increased strategic tension. On the other, the PTM's constitutional narrative directly attacked the military's long-curated image as protector of the nation, simultaneously demanding both attention and caution. Consequently, the military was forced to compete openly for public opinion, vociferously seeking to undermine the sources of PTM legitimacy while concurrently co-opting some of its aims and agenda.

Ultimately, the PTM was unable to prevent the escalation of military reaction into violent repression, highlighting the tightrope non-violent movements walk in challenging armed forces' domestic balance of power. Nonetheless, the PTM still wrung notable concessions from the military during its year-long rise; both in the open recognition of its claims as legitimate, and in practical movement towards the rectification of Pashtun grievances in FATA. Its legacy provides a precedent for future change based on the very constitutional ideals it championed.⁹⁷ Importantly, the societal legitimacy enjoyed by the movement marks it out from previous ethnic movements in Pakistan, permitting a degree of tacit negotiation on the domestic role of the military that has long eluded more traditional mechanisms of civil-military dialogue. Moreover, the PTM retains significant public support in spite of the recent military crackdowns, signalling that repression may not be the final end of the movement. The relative success of the PTM, together with the centrality of social narrative in facilitating a more hard-line military response to it, reinforces the long-overlooked importance of societal-military interactions in the construction of national civil-military relations. Indeed, the case of the PTM in Pakistan underscores the need to pay closer attention to the space between harmonious democratic control of military forces, on the one hand, and extreme ruptures, on the other. Instead, the development of greater military accountability in transitional democracies may lie in the ebb and flow of more minor, single-issue movements upon which wider civil-military compacts are continually built and re-built. Indeed, the centrality of societal legitimacy to understanding the case of the PTM suggests that the key to domestic military behaviour may lie in the societal-military *discordance* that belies wider civil-military shifts.

Notes

1. Hashim, "Legislator Denies Checkpoint 'Attack'".
2. Sirajuddin, "Kharqamar Attack Case".
3. Dawn, "Army Will Continue to Exercise Restraint"; Alikozai, "Hats Proliferate".
4. Finer, *Man on Horseback*, 5.
5. Janos, "Authority and Violence," 132; Lipset, "Social Requisites of Democracy," 86.
6. Buchanan, "Political Legitimacy," 689.
7. Huntington, *Soldier and the State*; Janowitz, *Professional Soldier*; Moskos, "Institution to Occupation," 41-50; Feaver, "Civil-Military Problematique," 149-78; Feaver, *Armed Servants*.
8. Albrecht and Ohl, "Exit, Resistance, Loyalty," 38-52; Nassif, "Generals and Autocrats," 245-75.
9. Bellin, "Lessons from the Arab Spring," 132, 135.
10. Ibid. 127-149.
11. McLaughlin, "Military Defection," 333-50; Lutterbeck, "Arab Uprisings," 28-52.
12. Albrecht and Ohl, "Exit, resistance, loyalty"; Nassif, "Generals and Autocrats".
13. Taylor, *Military Responses*; Barany, *How Armies Respond*; Stacher, *Adaptable Autocrats*.
14. Schiff, "Civil-Military Relations Reconsidered," 7-24; Schiff, *Military and Domestic Politics*.
15. Feaver, "Civil-Military Problematique," 168; Wells, "Theory of Concordance," 269-75; Schiff, "Response to Recent Criticism," 277-83.
16. Ali, "Contradiction of Concordance Theory," 544-67; Schiff, "Concordance Theory in Pakistan," 226-34; Ali, "Four Objections to Schiff," 463-9; Hussain, "Failure to Understand in Pakistan," 368-78.
17. This is an important point made by one of the reviewers for which we are grateful. For a comparative discussion of the role of civil society in democratization more broadly, see for example, Mavrikos-Adamou, "Challenges to Democracy Building", 514-33.
18. Lundåsen, "Civil Society and Political Participation," 140.
19. Fox, "Civil Society and Political Accountability," 1.
20. Elkner, "Committee of Soldiers' Mothers," 1-22; Douglas, "Civil-Military Relations in Russia," 511-32; Douglas, "Top Down or Bottom Up?" 746-768.
21. Stephan and Chenoweth, "Why Civil Resistance Works," 7-44.
22. Barany, *How Armies Respond*, 36-7.
23. Perlmutter, "Praetorian Army," 382-404.
24. Rizvi, "Civil-military Relations in Contemporary Pakistan," 96-113; Aziz, *Military Control in Pakistan*; Staniland, Naseemullah and Butt, "Pakistan's Military Elite," 74-103; Shah, "Constraining Consolidation"; Fair, *Fighting to the End*; Siddiq, *Military Inc*.
25. Hashim, "Pakistan Releases Leading Pashtun Activist"; Dawn, "Time is up".
26. Fair and Jones, "Pakistan's War Within," 161-88.
27. Lieven, "Counter-Insurgency in Pakistan," 166-90.
28. Chaudry, "Non-Violent Movement".
29. Interview Afrasiab Khattak; Khan, "New Wave".
30. Siddique, "Grievances Echo".
31. Siddique, "Living Dangerously"; Rumi, "Young Pashtuns".
32. Khattak, "Unprecedented Protest".
33. Ahmed and Stephan, "Fighting for the Rule of Law," 492-513; Shah, "Constraining Consolidation," 1007-33.
34. Khosa, "Where is the PTM headed?"; Interview Aasim Sajjad Akhtar.
35. Khan, "The New Wave".
36. Siddique, "Living Dangerously."
37. Chaudry, "Non-Violent Movement".
38. Only two brief academic commentaries of the PTM exit, both providing narrative overviews of the movement's aims and origins. Mir, "Pashtun Nationalism," 443-450; Yousaf, "Pakistan's 'Tribal' Pashtuns," 1-10.
39. Interview Aasim Sajjad Akhtar.
40. Siddique, "Living Dangerously".
41. Siddique, "Grievances Echo."
42. Interview Ismat Raza Shahjahan; Radio Mashaal, "Pakistanis Rally".
43. Chaudry, "Non-Violent Movement".
44. Interviews Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, Ismat Raza Shahjahan.

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45. Khosa, "Where is the PTM headed?"
 46. Sattar, "We Still Have a Soul".
 47. Interview Aasim Sajjad Akhtar.
 48. Ibid.
 49. Siddique, "Living Dangerously"; Siddique, "Grievances Echo"; Dawn, "Geography as Destiny"; Mir, "Pashtun Nationalism," 444-6; Yousaf, "Pakistan's 'Tribal' Pashtuns," 4-7.
 50. Interview Afrasiab Khattak.
 51. Interviews Afrasiab Khattak, Ismat Raza Shahjahan.
 52. Interview Ayesha Siddiqa.
 53. See for example, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, "'Authorities' Response to PTM is unjustified"; Amnesty International, "Pakistan: End Crackdown on PTM and Release Protestors."
 54. Interview Matiullah Jan .
 55. Radio Mashaal, "Pakistanis Rally"; Sayeed and Bukhari, "Pakistani Rights Group."
 56. Interviews Aasim Sajjad Akhtar; Ayesha Siddiqa.
 57. Sattar, "We Still Have a Soul".
 58. Shah, "Mazari Red Cap".
 59. Interviews Matiullah Jan, Parvez Hoodbhoy, Adnan Rehmat, Manzoor Ahmed Nazar.
 60. Sayeed and Bukhari, "Pakistani Rights Group".
 61. Malik, "Crackdown on PTM Activists".
 62. Kakar and Siddique, "Grueling Detour".
 63. Alvi and Zehra, "Every Single Person".
 64. Alikozai, "Hats Proliferate". Here, the spokesman is playing on the traditional view of unmarried single men in Pakistani society as 'boys', and by extension diminutive, dismissible and not fully able to make legitimate independent arguments.
 65. Interview Afrasiab Khattak.
 66. Geo News, "Anti-state Agenda".
 67. Pakistan Today, "Gen Bajwa"; Dawn, "PM Imran Endorses Grievances".
 68. Interviews Senior military officer, Manzoor Ahmed Nazar.
 69. Quoted in Aziz, "A Leaf from History".
 70. Interviews Afrasiab Khattak, Matiullah Jan, Adnan Rehmat, Masood ur Rehman Khattak.
 71. Guardian, "US Suspends Security Assistance".
 72. Sabawoon, "Going Nationwide."
 73. Interview Ayesha Siddiqa.
 74. Interview Senior military officer.
 75. Reuters, "Behind-the-scenes Push".
 76. Interview Ayesha Siddiqa.
 77. Interview Instructor at a military institution.
 78. Peled, *Question of Loyalty*; Nassif, "Second-class," 626-649.
 79. Fair, "Manpower Policies," 82.
 80. Ibid., 74-112; Fair and Nawaz, "Pakistan Army Officer Corps," 63-94.
 81. Interviews Ayesha Siddiqa, Instructor at a military institution, Security Analyst.
 82. Interview Tauqeer Hussein Sargana.
 83. Interview Ayesha Siddiqa, Senior military officer; see also, Fair and Jones, "Pakistan's war within".
 84. Dawn, "PTM Itself 'Not an Issue'"; Interview Senior military officer.
 85. Interview Aasim Sajjad Akhtar.
 86. Interview Matiullah Jan.
 87. Express Tribune, "Manzoor Pashteen Heckled".
 88. Siddique, "Living Dangerously".
 89. Taj, "Reflections on Pashtun Nationalism".
 90. Dawn, "Time is up"; Syed, "Gross Interference".
 91. Khan, "Unrest in Khaisor".
 92. Interview Afrasiab Khattak.
 93. Interview Tauqeer Hussein Sargana.
 94. Farooq, "Workers Continue".
 95. Interviews Ayesha Siddiqa, Senior military officer.
 96. Akbar, "KP Chief Minister"; Yusufzai, "Change of Command."

97. Interview Ismat Raza Shahjahan.

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Appendix (Interviews, Islamabad, Pakistan, January 2019)

Interviewee 1: Afrasiab Khattak, Former Member of Pakistani Parliament

Interviewee 2: Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, Professor and PTM activist

Interviewee 3: Ismat Raza Shahjahan, PTM activist.

Interviewee 4: Ayesha Siddiqa, Researcher specialising in Pakistan military, London, United Kingdom, February 2019.

Interviewee 5: Matiullah Jan, Senior journalist.

Interviewee 6: Parvez Hoodbhoy, Professor specialising in civil-military relations in Pakistan.

Interviewee 7: Adnan Rehmat, Media and Communications Consultant.

Interviewee 8: Manzoor Ahmed Nazar, Professor specialising in civil society of Pakistan.

Interviewee 9: Senior military officer; location, date withheld.

Interviewee 10: Masood ur Rehman Khattak, Professor in security studies.

Interviewee 11: Senior military officer; location, date withheld.

Interviewee 12: Instructor at a military institution; location, date withheld.

Interviewee 13: Security analyst.

Interviewee 14: Tauqeer Hussein Sargana, Professor in Security Studies.