[**What is solidarity?**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1605573/what-is-solidarity)

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THIS past Wednesday, global celebrities tweeted in support of the ongoing farmer’s protest that has arguably become the most serious challenge to Narendra Modi and the BJP since 2014. As solidarity tweets go, the interventions by pop icon Rihanna and climate activist Greta Thunberg (among others) were relatively low key. The reaction that followed, however, was ferocious.

Major Indian sports personalities and Bollywood stars tweeted barely veiled threats to ‘outsiders’ meddling in India’s internal affairs, adding tokenisms about the centrality of farmers to the Indian economy and imploring the government to fashion an ‘amicable resolution’. Greta Thunberg was subsequently booked for conspiracy by the Delhi police.

The support for the Modi regime by domestic celebrities confirms how it shapes popular culture via digital technologies. Modi is not the only contemporary political leader to use online spaces to buttress his appeal. Donald Trump was arguably the pioneer. Imran Khan is on the list.

The use of social media by troll armies affiliated with the populist right is the subject of scholarly analysis around the world. The Pakistani mainstream has finally paid heed to the horrific online harassment of many progressives, prominent women journalists, legal practitioners, artists and activists especially so. In short, demagogues exercising governmental power are a microcosm of a much deeper societal phenomenon.

Merely expressing solidarity is not sufficient to redress global crises.

Trump’s demise has led some to suggest that this is the beginning of the end for right-wing populists. Whether this happens will depend on the extent to which the roots of majoritarian hate in social and political life are identified and addressed. Given that the online space has become the primary terrain of hate-mongering, it is necessary to undertake a critical take on the solidarity politics that has come to represent the primary mode of engagement on the political left.

By solidarity politics I mean the largely social media-driven activism of progressives that takes place across multifarious geographies. On any given issue, a certain number of like-minded supporters express solidarity with a protest movement, often when it is facing repression. In the moment, this mode of political engagement can ruffle the proverbial feathers of the rich and powerful, as it did in India this week. But this form of solidarity does not necessarily equate to a well-defined political narrative that challenges the status quo. Expressing solidarity is necessary, but not sufficient to redress the underlying crises that afflict the world.

The 24 hour news cycle — and the standard social media timeline in particular — does not permit considered, political narratives and skirts back and forth from issue to issue within no time. Right-wing forces thrive in such an environment. What might broadly be called the progressive camp, on the other hand, is defined as much by its fragmentary nature as any clear, coherent set of political ideas.

During the heyday of the left in the 20th century, to be progressive meant clearly identifying with a broadly socialist political programme. These days, systemic cultural, political, and economic transformation is rarely on the agenda. To address the fears of farmers, for instance, we would need to overhaul ecologically devastating and for-profit industrial agricultural practices, and also redress the proverbial divide between town and countryside.

Solidarity politics can also be delimited by state establishments. Think of the troll armies that hound class, ethnic-national, feminist and other progressive struggles in Pakistan, while dominating the ‘solidarity’ conversation with popular struggles in ‘enemy’ countries like India.

Today is Feb 5, the day that ‘official’ Pakistan expresses solidarity with Kashmiris. I am certain Pakistani progressives are more committed to the emancipation of Kashmiris than most right-wing forces. But the same trolls that will make hay about the plight of Kashmiris on this day persistently vilify all who speak up for Pakistan’s own ethnic and religious peripheries.

For the political left, then, expressing solidarity on an issue-to-issue basis on social media is not helping to build counter power in the face of the tidal wave of majoritarian hate that is being mobilised in online spaces. Progressives can certainly win important battles through solidarity politics as I have defined it here. But most of those who are ‘woke’ online still reinforce classed, gendered and racialised structures of power, and take pro-establishment political positions more generally. The Indian farmer protest is noteworthy because thousands with a stake in real change are out on the streets. Only grassroots movements with transformative potential can take solidarity politics to the next level and give us a chance of transcending militarism, capitalism and patriarchy.

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