**Chanting for Freedom**

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These days the country is swept by a storm where Pakistanis are demanding freedom, repeating the slogan of the jailed PTI chief. Manzoor Pashteen of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) chanted anti-state slogans while addressing a rally in Islamabad. He was surprisingly joined by Eman Mazari who is not an ethnic Pashtun.

This strange union of a privileged and urbane Baloch-Punjabi female lawyer with a tribal, conservative Pashtoon man of humble origins, is the strangest political alliance. They are not activists who joined forces for a noble cause. Eman Mazari has hopped on the PTM bandwagon for political expediency. Eman Mazari’s mother Dr Shireen Mazari, a PTI stalwart was arrested in the events succeeding the anarchy of May 9, 2023, and this is the casus belli.

As a lawyer, Ms. Mazari did not study the Pashtoon tribal society from a socio-anthropological perspective, to serve their cause. Against that backdrop, she should have spent time and effort to use her legal knowledge to frame a set of legal demands for the PTM. She has not done the homework required from a true activist leader. She simply stood up to deliver hate speech at a public rally. This is making a mockery of activism by pursuing a very personal and petty agenda. There is no principled stance behind this so-called activism.

Martin Luther King Jr. was a civil rights leader in apartheid US. He was successful, and popular and is still widely respected because he studied the non-violent and principled approach of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Martin Luther King Jr. led a civil disobedience movement but never instigated anarchy. Compared to him, Manzoor Pishteen comes across as an unscrupulous troublemaker and Eman Mazari as a vengeful opportunist.

The anti-army sentiment prevalent in Pakistan is almost always about an ego trip.

This current anti-military mood of the nation was whipped up by the jailed PTI chief, who clearly had a treasonous agenda. The PTI chief worked on three strategic goals: To dismantle Pakistan’s nuclear program; to weaken the Pakistan Army; to weaken national unity, to encourage anarchy and to encourage separatist elements to dismember Pakistan. The PTI chief created tremendous drama when he cried wolf about foreign powers meddling to oust him as the prime minister. The truth is that he was working for foreign masters and serving their nefarious agendas. He is on record to have received funding from hostile foreign elements and yet other unfriendly foreign elements rallied for him, upon his arrest.

The PTI chief has popularized the baseless demand for freedom. This catch-phrase has caught on and it is finding echo chambers even among the privileged. I see my neighbourhood social media group posting memes with this slogan. Someone posted an old clip of a Pashtun seminary student in his early 20’s, being rude to the late General Musharraf. The clip was shared as a testament to the Pashtoon boy’s bravado in the face of a dictator. While speaking truth to power is certainly bravado, since the young man had no principled stance, and was smug and smirking, it showed that it was only an ego trip masked as bravado.

The anti-army sentiment prevalent in Pakistan is almost always about an ego trip. The only exception to this is Dr. Qaiser Bengali objecting to the recent agricultural initiative of the army. Dr. Bangali is an intellectual activist and he spoke against corporate farming, as that is opposed by all environmental and social activists across the globe – from Dr. Vandana Shiva in India to the various agro-activists in the US.

That said, almost all big agricultural landowners in Pakistan are absentee landlords because the system of serfdom is very much in place in Pakistan. Land owners, especially those of Sindh are notorious in Pakistan. One of my old classmates happens to own land in the areas greatly affected by the floods in 2022. He was collecting funds from classmates for assistance and everyone chipped in. He kept posting pictures of him distributing rations to grateful peasants. Since he was living in his ancestral home during this time, I asked about a possible silver lining in this dark cloud. I wanted to know if these floods would transform soil fertility, given that water is the essence of life – a fact stated in the Quran. I was naively optimistic about the tragic floods paving the way for organic farming. This innocent question triggered him and he got rude. He blamed the army and said that the GHQ does not allow improvement of the soil. This ridiculous statement against the army is laughable, to say the least. The fact is that changing soil fertility after the floods would require serious effort on the part of the educated but absentee landlords residing in the city. He would have to roll up his sleeves and do gruelling work in the fields, to change the established ways of using pesticides and fertilizers. It’s a long-term commitment requiring grit and ingenuity, which absentee landlords lack. Therefore a cover story demonizing the military comes in handy to shift blame and be passive. The ego trip of seeing peasants bowing when receiving rations, and the social payoff from the optics through pictures shared on social media was the goal – which was fairly easily achieved. I must admit that I had no sympathy for him and felt amused when the same opportunistic optics led to his short-term kidnapping by scammers.

My immediate neighbourhood’s social media is full of people who whine non-stop and love to bash the army. One day someone shared a post with the idea of creating a zero-waste neighborhood. It had been successfully done in a similar Indian neighbourhood. The idea would have solved many of the issues everyone whines about, but it required a serious commitment and diligence on everyone’s part, hence it was completely ignored. The group was soon back to bragging, whining and army bashing.

During the torrential rains in Karachi last year, some entitled, socially irresponsible and ego-hurt people posted how the army ignored repeated rescue requests. The army was busy helping genuinely needy people, as could be witnessed from other posts from those rescued by the army.

Just yesterday, the Pakistan army made global news when commandos heroically rescued eight children in a cable car hanging mid-air amidst the mountains. The Pakistan army pretty much handles every disaster in the country and handles all challenges, and only receives flak from a thankless nation. In my June 24, 2023 column I covered in detail how the socio-economic crisis in Pakistan can be solely credited to the civilian democratic leadership. The anti-military sentiment sweeping the country is unfounded, grossly unjust and most importantly an existential threat.

Manzoor Pishteen engaged in realpolitik when he threatened the army, in his protest in Islamabad. Eman Mazari called the army terrorists. If these two want freedom from the army, then clearly they are inciting a civil war. Manzoor Pishteen talks about the constitution and supports the structure of the state. Since he keeps referring to his watan or state as the Pashtoon land, how does he intend to survive in a separate Pashtun land with the TTP? He spoke to a rally in Islamabad because the Pakistani state and the army have enabled the freedom required to do so. The Pakistan army has kept the militants at bay while sacrificing life and limb. Without the Pakistan army, KPK would descend into chaos.

The Taliban across both sides of the border, the militants from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and other anti-social elements would wreak havoc on an independent KPK. Manzoor Pishteen will surely see very dark days in a TTP-ruled Sharia state of KPK – after achieving freedom from the army. The nation must stop glorifying these young pseudo-activists inciting rebellion. We must condemn their anti-state agenda and speeches if we value our freedom and sovereignty.

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