**[Sowing hate](https://www.dawn.com/news/1876945/sowing-hate)**

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THE dust had barely settled on the crackdown by the state’s coercive apparatus against the PTI on the night of Nov 26 that the ruling regime embarked on a campaign of racial profiling with reckless abandon. Immediately after the protest route was wiped clean, the interior minister alleged that the PTI had mobilised ‘illegal’ Afghan refugees and that strict action was to follow.

Over the next few days, Islamabad’s police went into overdrive, randomly arresting any working-class Pakhtun they could lay their hands on, from drivers at check-posts to street vendors in the city’s bazaars. Charged under anti-terrorist legislation, those detained were presented in the courts with their heads covered by black cloth, reminiscent of the show trials that took place in the US military’s infamous Guantánamo internment centre at the height of the so-called ‘war on terror’. The crackdown has even seen young men randomly stopped and having their phones checked so as to identify PTI supporters.

Such scare tactics have been deployed in the federal capital before. In 2015, the then PML-N government, armed by an order of the Islamabad High Court and assisted by the ever-willing bureaucratic behemoth that is the Capital Development Authority, ruthlessly bulldozed a 30-year-old katchi abadi in Islamabad’s I-11 sector. The settlement was home to some 25,000 working-class Pakhtuns, the vast majority of whom made their living in the nearby Sabzi Mandi. The lead-up to the operation featured incessant propaganda that the abadi housed illegal Afghans, with the settlement even being given the moniker ‘Afghan Basti’ by the CDA.

In fact, most of the residents were second- or third-generation residents of Islam­abad whose forefathers had migrated from the Mohmand, Mardan and Charsadda districts. After the violent eviction, both Isla­m­­abad and Rawalpindi police made public announcements warning property owners nearby against renting to ‘illegal’ Afghans. Then too, anyone who spoke up against the government’s rank racism and classism was subject to repression.

It was the rank-and-file PTI political worker that bore the brunt.

Fast forward almost a decade and a PML-N government, propped up by the establishment, is back at it. It has been scapegoating Afghan refugees for the best part of two years, and is now ratcheting up the hate against politically vulnerable Pakhtun populations in the name of countering the PTI.

It goes without saying that the regime’s desperate and grotesque measures will do nothing to suppress PTI’s popularity. It will only fan the flames of ethnic discontent in a country that is already tearing at the seams particularly in the war-ravaged Baloch and Pakhtun peripheries.

The PTI’s own leadership is not offering an alternative political imaginary that counters the seeds of hate. Most of its mass mobilisations since the February 2024 elections have featured a disproportionately large Pakhtun component, with the KP government providing the material infrastructure required. On this occasion, too, there was very little representation from other parts of the country, Punjab most notably. A party is, of course, entitled to mobilise from wherever it wants, but the narratives peddled by PTI online media accounts invoking the ‘martial’ qualities of the Pakhtun nation felt like a throwback to colonial-era orientalism.

Of course, not all Pakhtuns are being targeted as the government pulls out all the stops. There is a clear class angle to all that is taking place, as is almost always the case when it comes to mainstream politics. As Abbas Nasir noted in his most recent column, it was the rank-and-file (Pakhtun) PTI political wor­ker that bore the brunt of the violent crackdown, while the leaders that otherwise talk a big talk ended up beating a rapid retreat. While the PTI leadership has spoken out to an extent, other mai­nstream party lea­derships have done nothing to resist the post-protest clampdown on working-class Pakhtuns.

The PML-N, still reeling from the decisions made by voters in Lahore and some of its other major stomping grounds in Punjab in the general election, is doing its best to stoke majoritarian sentiment that has been the bane of democracy and federalism for the best part of Pakistan’s existence. Meanwhile, the PPP, with all of its claims to progressive ideals, has little else to say about the Pakhtun national question than to have some of its highest profile leaders wax lyrical about the Afghan Taliban.

It is left to genuine anti-establishment progressives, both within the Pakhtun nation and more broadly, to push back against the sowing of hate. Among others, members of the legal community are resisting the criminalisation of Pakhtun workers. They are the moral conscience of a society wilting under the weight of state-sponsored hate.

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