**Farmers and more**

B Y A A S I M S A J J A D A K H T A R 2020-12-11

THE huge demonstrations of farmers in Indian Punjab against the Modi regime`s promulgation of laws that subject producers to the whims of the mythical `free market` have garnered significant attention in Pakistan. Unsurprisingly, however, the actual political content of the protests has gone un-interrogated.

A segment of social media has depicted the largely Sikh farmer protest as a Khalistani rebellion against the Indian state, while mainstream news outlets have reported that New Delhi could even order a `false flag operation` on our eastern border to distract from its `internal issues` The Modi regime has certainly resorted to nationalist grand-standing in the past, and could do so again. A BBC commissioned report released this week provided concrete evidence of disinformation campaigns against Pakistan apparently orchestrated by the Indian establishment in the pursuit of strategic interests. Notwithstanding our own establishment`s incessant claims that it is a victim of so-called fifth generation warfare, Pakistani regimes including this one employ the same no-holds-barred methods to secure the `national interest` as their Indian counterparts.

It is clear that the Indian farmer protests are anything but a grand conspiracy to dismember the country. Similar farmer protests took place in Lahore at the beginning of November. On both sides, the farmers have faced repression; in Lahore one protester lost his life.

Spontaneous protests are in fact erupting across society. State-owned enterprises like Radio Pakistan and Pakistan Steel Mills are firing workers, forcing them to come out onto the roads. Doctors, nurses and paramedical staff of public hospitals like Pims in Islamabad are protesting its proposed privatisation during a pandemic! villagers facing eviction on the outskirts of Karachi and other big cities so that Bahria Town and other gated housing communities can be established, are regularly up in arms. Locals whose livelihoods rely on mineral and forest resources in former Fata, Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir raise their voices daily against state-sponsored resource-grabbing. Fishing and other indigenous communities call attention to the threat to their existence on the Sindh and Balochistan coastlines, and even around the Ravi river in Lahore! And we are yet to witness truly mass protests against the fallouts of the pandemic, including food inflation.

It is old news that both the Pakistani and Indian states routinely decry those who come out to protest, as well as those who support them at large, as `security threats`. Yet repression of ethnic peripheries like held Kashmirand the northeast in India, and ex Fata, Balochistan and Sindh in Pakistan is old news. Punjabi farmers coming out on the roads represents a higher-order problem for both states.

Lest there be any confusion, these farmers are hardly the wretched of the earth. During the heyday of peasant mobilisations in the 1960s and 1970s, rural politics revolved around the slogan of `land to the tiller`.

Landless and small peasantries were rebelling against big landowners and demanding that the state undertake redistributive reforms. The last such movement of this kind was that of tenants on the Okara military farms in the early 2000s.

Today a more affluent class of farmers is on the roads. They fear being wiped out by the influx of multinational agribusiness, and want age-old government price support schemes that will guarantee at least some protection against MNCs to remain intact.

These farmers ask not for land reform, only some defence from the rapacious logic of big capital.Modi has responded by saying that `we cannot build the next century with the laws of the previous century` In short, even middling farmers are now considered relics of the past that have little place in the capital-intensive, digitalised and finan-cialised 21st century. Whether in India, Pakistan or the rest of the postcolonial world, to be a `competitive emerging market` means eliminating anachronisms that represent an obstacle to `development` as the rich and powerful define it.

The plains of Punjab have, since colonial times, been the breadbasket of the subcontinent, and supplied the bulk of recruits to both the Indian and Pakistani armies. The order of today is industrial agriculture, and so even relatively well-to-do farmers in Punjab must give way to MNCs and real-estate moguls.

The farmers` protests, like so many others, will likely subside through a combination of coercion and co-option. On the whole, the megalomaniacs and establishments that rule us will continue to propagate a hegemonic mix of `development` and state nationalism to keep an ecologically, culturally and socioeconomically unsustainable model afloat. The challenge, as ever, is to build a politics that unites hundreds of millions of working masses across the subcontinent to defeat hate, exploitation and tyranny. The writer teaches at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.