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Peasants Not Terrorists

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International Peasants Day (April 17) was spent in Pakistan with the arrest of the leader of the farmers in Okara, Meher Abdul Sattar, General Secretary of the Anjuman Muzareen Punjab (AMP). This 'preventive detention', alongside imposing Section 144 — which does not allow a public gathering of more than five people — and denying the permission to hold a peasants' convention on the day, reflects the government's insensitivity to the plight of peasants in the country. What was once a tussle between the Pakistan Army and the tenants on army land working on cash contracts, now involves the government - as if the Army flexing its muscles was not enough. These are mostly small farmers and are politically powerless against the combined might that confronts them.

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It is a shame that the state is using its immense firepower to suppress the poorest hard workers of the country and the situation was not managed better. The tenant farmers around Okara are on cash contracts with the Pakistan Army since 1999, and efforts have already been made to force the tenants out of their homes and livelihood previously as well. While in the past, moves such as blocking access to water canals in a bid to keep rent rates down were unwise on part of the farmers, the state should remember that these are Pakistani people, those it has sworn to protect. Instead, by denying permission for a peasants' convention planned for Sunday and imposing Section 144, the government is displaying its penchant for the excessive.

Meher Abdul Sattar's immense popularity in the Okara region is evidenced by the fact that he came in third in NA 144, ahead of candidates of both PTI and PPP. Attempting to suppress the voice of the tenant farmers is only going to spark more tensions in the future. The government's policy on agricultural issues is two faced - at one place they allocate money for kissan packages, but when actual issues crop up like this, protest is silenced. If the government actually cares about farmers, and not just votes, these issues of land right have to be sorted. Throwing money at the problem right before elections is, frankly, hypocritical, and economically unsustainable.

The government needs to stop using terms such as 'land-grabbers' for these farmers, and freedoms of movement and expression should be restored to them. The Army should remember that it does not need to win this fight, considering it has a whole host of greener pastures all across the country.

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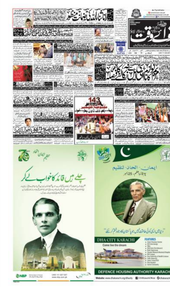

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