Name: Gulalai Ismail
Country of origin: Pakistan
Date of birth: 30 October 1986
Status: FIR [First Information Report] raised for “sedition”

Pakistan human rights campaigner and women’s right activist. She is a Board member of Humanists International.

Ismail has previously faced accusations of “blasphemy” for example around her work promoting women’s equality, and accusations of being “anti-state” for taking part in Pashtun rights protests and criticizing authorities including the military for human rights violations or failures of justice.

Current status

May 2019 FIR and threat of arrest
An FIR (First Information Report) has been raised against Gulalai Ismail on 23 May 2019.

The FIR relates to a recent protest about a murder case. It falls under the anti-terrorism act for “delivering seditious speeches and instigating masses against the state institutions.”
Gulalai delivered a speech earlier in the week which was widely circulated on social media. The rally and the speech were held to protest the rape and murder of a minor girl known as Farishta.

The body of Farishta was found near the capital's Shahzad Town area after being allegedly raped. Subsequent to the protests, the government and state authorities have pledged to take action on the case. However, previously her family said they had tried to file a missing person report with the police on May 15, but it took police until May 19 to register the FIR and, even then, a proper search was not initiated. Protesters were objecting to the perceived lack of interest or progress in the case up to that point.

The accusation in the FIR is that this speech was “anti-state” or “seditious”. It is very common for Pashtun activists to be branded as “anti-state” or “seditious” in particular when they are critical of military or government actions constituting human rights violations.

Media sources on the FIR:
<dunyanews.tv/en/Pakistan/492803-Anti-state-speech:-Case-registered-against-PTM-activist-Gulalai-Ismail>
<geo.tv/latest/238103-fir-filed-against-ptm-leader-gulalai-ismail-in-islamabad>

Footage of Gulalai’s speech:
https://twitter.com/Stouryani1/status/1130936803433766912

It is particularly concerning that Gulalai Ismail faces the prospect of arrest and detention again, having faced similar accusation and process several times in the past few years, including in connection with activism through Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) and a “blasphemy” allegation linked to her work with Aware Girls.

There is also significant social media activity surrounding the speech and the FIR, with elements accusing her of “anti-state” activities and posting photographs of her with international NGO contacts (including Humanists International Board members) with the hashtag: “#GulalaiPTMExposed”. (The repeated insinuation is that she is connected to or funded by “foreign” agencies. This is a common allegation against human rights defenders, which endangers the accused by casting them as traitors, terrorists or seditionists.)
Gulalai Ismail background information

Human rights background

Gulalai Ismail is an award-winning Pakistani human rights defender. Co-founder and chairperson of Aware Girls, an organization which works to empower and educate women and girls on rights and leadership in Pakistan. Chairperson of the Seeds of Peace network. She regularly speaks at home and abroad on peace-building in Pakistan and women's empowerment.

Aware Girls aims to challenge the culture of violence and oppression of women in the rural Khyber Pakhtunkhwa area (north west Pakistan). The Seeds of Peace network, founded 2010, trains young people in human rights and political leadership, encouraging the participation of women in politics in Pakistan, and encouraging tolerance between religions.

October 2018 arrest

On the morning of 12 October 2018 Gulalai was detained by the FIA (Federal Investigation Authority) while re-entering the country from the United Kingdom. The arrest may have been made in connection with Pashtun rights activism.

Gulalai had apparently been placed on the Exit Control List (a Pakistan state mechanism to prohibit leaving the country) possibly whilst she was abroad at a conference in the UK.

Reports from contacts suggest that police in Swabi are demanding custody from the FIA (Federal Investigation Authority).

Reports from media say that a FIR (First Information Report, a police record of a complaint which initiates an investigation) was issued in September against Gulalai and 18 others for “organising and speaking at the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) jalsa [rally] in Swabi on August 12”. PTM activist Hayat Preghal has been in jail for now at least three months. Gulalai said “After the success of Jalsa, the state actors were in a frenzy, tried to destroy vehicles, tried to attack the guests, and at the end filed a police case against the speakers/organisers.”

The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) or Pashtun Protection Movement, is a social movement for Pashtun human rights. It is based in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. It originally started in May 2014 as the "Mahsud Tahafuz Movement", an initiative for removing landmines from Waziristan and parts of the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The movement rose to prominence in January 2018 when it demanded justice over the extrajudicial police killing of Naqeebullah Mehsud. After gaining popularity among the Pashtuns in January, its
name was changed from the "Mahsud Tahafuz Movement" to broaden its scope, and later the "Pashtun Tahafuz Movement".

PTM accuses the Pakistani military — echoing concerns voiced by Kabul and Washington — of permitting extremists a safe haven from which to launch attacks in Afghanistan, while only targeting insurgents who turn their guns on Pakistan. At a military press conference in June, Pakistani Army spokesman Major General Asif Ghafoor hit back at PTM, accusing the group of being manipulated by "enemies of Pakistan."

PTM activists have been calling for the return of disappeared Pashtuns allegedly detained during military operations in the region. The group also condemns what it describes as undue harassment of Pashtuns at checkpoints and demand authorities remove security posts.

Prior threats to freedom and security

Gulalai Ismail has faced a growing campaign of threats and attacks on her character in recent years, as well as repeated defamatory attacks on her organizations. Along with her members of her family, Gulalai was forced to relocate internally after on 16 May 2014 four armed men attacked her family home asking about her, claiming to be security officers who had come to search the home.

On 20 November 2017, Hamza Khan, a student, and president of Mardan Youth Parliament, uploaded a Facebook video calling for a mob to attack Gulalai for defending others accused of blasphemy. Gulalai was accused of “insulting religion and Pashtun culture” through her work and organizations. She responded by taking Khan to court for incitement.

On 8 June 2018, the office fo Aware Girls received notice from the Social Welfare Directorate suspending its governing board and demanding that the organization hand over all assets and records to the Directorate. The organization has released a statement calling it “an attack on [their] constitutional right to Freedom of Association and the right to Free and Fair Trial. … Aware Girls’ has been making Pakistan and the world a better place for young people especially young women.”

In an interview with the BBC she said, “I am aware that the security risks are high...at times I am afraid for the lives of my family...we had to relocate ourselves, again and again, we had to change our home because of the insecurities...One of the positive messages which it gives me is that the impact of my work is huge and they want to create fear in my heart so that I become silenced.”

Awards and recognition

She is a recipient of the Fondation Chirac Peace Prize, and the International Humanist of the Year Award 2014. She has also been awarded the Democracy Award from the National Endowment for Democracy, the Commonwealth Youth Award for Excellence in Democracy, and
the Anna Politkovskaya Award. In August 2017, she was elected by member organizations from around the world to the Board of Humanists International. She has previously been on the Executive Committee of Young Humanists International, and a Board Member of the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights. She also works for the Gender Working Group of the United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY), and is a member of the Asian Democracy Network.

Malala Yousafzai is an alumna of Aware Girls.

Gulalai Ismail (left) with Malala Yousafzai (right) at a meeting in the UK, October 2018. Malala is an alumna of Aware Girls.
Further images below from Facebook.