

URGENT ACTION

DISAPPEARANCES OF FAMILY MEMBERS OF POLITICIANS

Three family members of political workers from the opposition party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) were forcibly disappeared in June 2024. Two brothers of PTI member Azhar Mashwani – Professors Mazhar-ul-Hassan and Zahoor-ul-Hassan – as well as Shahbaz Gill's brother, Ghulam Shabbir, were disappeared on 6 June and 9 June respectively. The whereabouts of all three individuals remain unknown despite their families' efforts to locate them by approaching the police and the court. A pattern of enforced disappearance is emerging, seemingly to intimidate those living abroad who are critical of the Pakistani government and the military. The government of Pakistan must immediately disclose their whereabouts and ensure an effective, independent, and impartial investigation into these disappearances.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Mr. Mohsin Naqvi, Minister of Interior
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Dear Minister Mohsin Naqvi,

I am writing to express my grave concern about the pattern of disappearances of family members of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)'s party members. Professors Mazhar-ul-Hassan and Zahoor-ul-Hassan were disappeared from their home in Lahore at approximately 2:45 am, on 6 June 2024. Both are brothers of Azhar Mashwani, social media focal person for former Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, who is currently in self-exile outside the country. Subsequently, on 8 June 2024, Ghulam Shabbir, brother of Dr. Shahbaz Gill, former Special Assistant to the Prime Minister (SAPM) for Imran Khan, also disappeared under similar circumstances. Despite their families' effort to retrieve them, including police reports and appeals to the Lahore High Court, the whereabouts of all these three individuals remain unknown.

It is worrying that family members who have no affiliations with political parties are being targeted, seemingly to intimidate, harass, and silence critics of the government. Additionally, this is not the first time one of those targeted, Professor Zahoor, was abducted from his home. A previous incident occurred on 10 May 2023, during which he was held in solitary confinement in a 6 by 8 feet cell with no exposure to sunlight, for 145 days.

I am seriously concerned for the safety and well-being of all three forcibly disappeared individuals and fear that they may be subjected to torture while in illegal detention. I worry that this practice of enforced disappearance might escalate, to clampdown on the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly in Pakistan.

Therefore, I urge your Ministry to ensure:

- that the whereabouts of all three disappeared individuals are made known and that their immediate and safe return is guaranteed;
- an effective, independent, and impartial investigation into the disappearance of these individuals and that all those suspected of criminal responsibility for the disappearance are brought to justice in fair trials before an ordinary civilian court;
- an end to the practice of enforced disappearance and disclosure of the fate and/or whereabouts of all forcibly disappeared people;
- considering the prompt accession to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance without making any reservation and recognize the competence of the Committee on Enforced Disappearances to receive and consider communications from or on behalf of victim and other states parties.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Mazhar-ul-Hassan and Zahoor-ul-Hassan, brothers of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) member Azhar Mashwani, were abducted in the early hours of 6 June 2024 by armed men who forcibly entered their residence in Lahore. Those entering the home consisted of plain-clothed men as well as officials in Counter Terrorism Department uniforms. Their whereabouts have not been known since and no contact has been made with the family. A habeas corpus petition was filed at the Lahore High Court, but the police refused to present them in court despite multiple directives from the court. Subsequently, Ghulam Shabbir, brother of Shahbaz Gill who served as the Special Assistant to the Prime Minister (SAPM) when Imran Khan was Prime Minister (2018 – 2022), was abducted around 11:45 pm on 8 June 2024 when he left his residence in Lahore to travel to Islamabad. His whereabouts ever since are unknown. Ghulam's disappearance happened just a few hours after the police raided the family's ancestral home in Faisalabad at 8 pm on 8 June.

This is not the first time that Azher Mashwani's family has been targeted. Zahoor-ul-Hassan was abducted on 10 May 2023, which was part of a massive crackdown on political opposition after the 9 May country-wide protests by PTI in the wake of the arrest of former Prime Minister Imran Khan. He was held for five months and released on 30 September 2023 after four unsuccessful habeas corpus petitions. During his abduction, he was subjected to mental and physical torture, including solitary confinement in a 6 by 8 feet cell and had no exposure to sunlight for the entirety of his abduction. The brothers' father, Qazi Habib ur Rehman, was also abducted on 10 May 2023 and released on 12 May 2023. Azher Mashwani was abducted on 23 March 2023 while serving as the social media focal person to Imran Khan and was released on 30 March 2023.

Mazhar-ul-Hassan has been a professor at Punjab College for the past 13 years. He is the father of two young sons, aged 5 and 7 and the sole breadwinner for his family. He suffers from severe uric acid issues, hypertension, and a knee injury from a recent accident, which requires careful management. He is not a member of any political party. Zahoor-ul-Hassan has served as a professor of computer science at Punjab Group of Colleges for 13 years and was promoted to Head of the Department 4 years ago. He is the father of 4 children, aged 12, 11, 7, and 1.5 years. Due to his last abduction, Zahoor experiences regular nightmares, difficulty sleeping, and other mental health issues. He has been unable to restart his job ever since his release, leading to a heavy financial burden and debt for the family.

Ghulam Shabbir is a businessman and a resident of Lahore with no affiliation with any political party. He has two sons. His brother Shahbaz Gill has been an active member of the PTI. Shahbaz was arrested for sedition and "inciting the public against state institutions" in 2022, after the PTI was ousted from power.

Both Azher Mashwani and Shahbaz Gill are currently outside of Pakistan and they believe that their families are being targeted for their continued support for the PTI, which has been subject to severe crackdown by state authorities since it was ousted from power in April 2022. The arbitrary arrest and detention of PTI supporters and political workers intensified after the 9 May 2023 protests across Pakistan, resulting in the arrest and detention of over 4,000 people. Nearly 105 people forcibly disappeared during that time were later tried and convicted by military courts, while 85 of them remain in military custody. Many political leaders of the PTI were detained and forced to resign from the party. During the 8 February 2024 General Election, severe restrictions were placed on the PTI's right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. The social media platform X, formerly Twitter, has been banned in the country since 17 February 2024 to curb allegations of election irregularities.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: English

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 31 October 2024

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUNS: Professor Mazhar-ul-Hassan (he/him); Professor Zahoor-ul-Hassan (he/him); Ghulam Shabbir (he/him)