

Will politicians take politics to the Tribal region?

Haroon Rashid *

Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari in a historic announcement on 14 August 2011 allowed all national and regional political parties to start their activities in FATA - the militancy-hit tribal region. The aim was to help defeat the "militant mindset." These reforms were meant to usher in an era of democratisation, mainstreaming and de-marginalisation of the tribal areas in the political, socio-cultural and economic spheres.¹ But have they achieved any significant results since then? The answer unfortunately is disappointingly - 'No'. The progress is very slow. Some trifling movement has been made but the main target it seems is still far away. The idea of giving tribesmen much-needed pluralism even now is a far cry. Above all, the top priority goal of bringing the area into the national political mainstream is still to be achieved.

Since Pakistan's creation in 1947, political parties were barred from entering this strategically important area. However, by completely ignoring all restrictions, some of the religious parties not only freely operated there but built a strong support base for them. The authorities too turned a complete blind eye to these violations for obvious reasons as they needed cannon fodder for their armed ventures in Afghanistan.

Such developments laid the foundations of a tribal-society constantly tilting towards hard-line religion. With little outside interaction for centuries and intentional introduction of extreme religious narratives, the ground was made fertile for creating war machinery – first against the Soviet Union and later against the United States and its coalition forces in post 9/11 Afghanistan.

* *The author is a renowned Journalist, Political and Security Analyst working as an Editor at BBC Pakistan.*

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This narrow, hard-line view is thankfully not a grass root phenomenon, but a tool in the hands of those who wish to acquire power. It is quite evident that opposition to US policies in the region does not mean that the people of FATA support either Al-Qaeda or the Taliban militants. More than three-quarters of FATA residents oppose the presence of Al-Qaeda and over two-thirds of the Pakistani Taliban (60 per cent oppose the Afghan Taliban led by Mullah Omar) in their region. Indeed, if Al-Qaeda or the Pakistani Taliban were on the ballot in an election, less than one per cent of FATA residents said they would vote for either group.²

These political changes, therefore, are considered instrumental in including the voices of the common masses in the mainstream political discourse of Pakistan; thus taking back from militant organisations and foreign jihadists the critical political space that they have been occupying for over the last three decades. First, it was the state that opposed any political mainstreaming of FATA and now the militants have taken up that agenda. This important region was used to facilitate a low-cost but high impact strategy of covert warfare. The high price for success of this strategy has been paid through the blood of the people of the region; which unfortunately is still continuing.

In fact, the denial of basic human rights such as the freedom of association spans over the last six decades. But even at this stage and point in time, no urgency is being felt to speedup implementation of the reforms. A lot of crucial time has been lost, and the fault lies not with the people but the indecisive rulers, overwhelmed security considerations, and persistent reluctance of bureaucracy. Each of them has its own axe to grind. The denial mode had been considered beneficial for them, but the last decade has shown that it's not any more.

Despite the passage of over a year's time after the vital changes in the law, political parties have yet not been able to go in a big way to cash-in on the hard-fought freedoms in the tribal areas. Political parties are generally reluctant! Even after over a year, no mainstream politician from a non-religious political party

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has gone into the tribal areas and held a public rally or even an indoor meeting in a secure environment. They have organized local chapters and held small and medium-sized rallies, but one still has to see mainstream central leaders of political parties going there. Pakistan Tehrik-i-Insaaf's Chief, Imran Khan, did call for a march against drone attacks to Kotkai, South Waziristan on October 6, 2012 but the participants returned even before entering the tribal region. Many say Imran Khan's party gained a lot of millage from the rally in terms of popularity but the tribal areas did not get anything positive out of it.

The FATA organiser of Pakistan Tehrik-i-Insaaf's youth wing, Naveed Mohmand, says the political administrations of all seven agencies is against the move and had opposed its implementation in letter and spirit. He alleges that political gatherings are still banned and prior permission is mandatory for any political activity in the tribal areas.

With the changes in the law, it was expected that the mainstream political parties will have an equal opportunity for political activities which could help creating a moderate and balanced society. Political parties are crucial as they assist in defining people's positions and beliefs on important issues. The absence of truly representative voice of tribal people is prime reason for the want of political parties in the region. One can agree to an extent about the performance, or lack of it, of these parties in rest of the country, but that is a separate debate. Their importance and significance in society cannot be underestimated.

The most ironic fact is that the most powerful politician of the country, and the one directly administering the tribal region has himself not been to the area since he took charge as Pakistan's president in 2008. President Asif Ali Zardari has refused to be forced into undertaking a visit to the tribal areas despite severe criticism in the media. Not only is he the president, he also heads the ruling and one of the biggest political parties in the country - the Pakistan People's Party. Besides, the most important cap that he wears is that of the commander-in-chief of the Pakistani armed

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forces. He has made some ground-breaking announcements from the safe environs of his presidency that include amendment in the laws governing Fata - to let political parties go to the tribal areas. Some analysts argue that had he gone to the tribal region himself and made such announcements there, it would have certainly encouraged other political forces to launch their activities in the same spirit. They further argue that until the major political parties overcome their fear and reluctance to go into the tribal areas, no meaningful political activity would take place in the region.

Some politicians and notables rightfully complain that, “It’s not just the president even the prime minister and interior minister have not been there in the last four and a half years. What sort of confidence they can give to politicians. Until you don’t own your own people, show them that you care for them, change can’t come.”³

At present no big military operation is going on in the tribal areas. One could see military activity on small scale from time to time, but no big campaign is underway as such. There is a persistent talk of an impending military action in North Waziristan, but nothing on the ground is seen to support this assertion. This inaction does not mean that all is well now in this volatile area. There are thousands of internally displaced people and active militants. Security definitely continues to be an issue. Although militants hold sway over large areas, still there exist relatively safe places. For any popular politician to go in and meet people impromptu on large scale or address large rallies may not apparently be possible but these can be planned easily if there is a will. “If the state wants, nothing can stop it. There will be risks and threats of course, but that is true of all of Pakistan in the current scenario. The state should be there to minimize the risks. It has to establish its writ by doing so, but if it remains reluctant or indecisive then it goes in favour of the militants,” says a politician from the tribal areas. He did not want to disclose his identity for the fear of security. “Taliban are not that strong that they can stand against the state,” he added.⁴

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But then there are those who do not find fault with the government. In the tribal areas, “there is no political government, but the one run by the security authorities ... who are responsible for the widespread disappearances of residents suspected of involvement in the insurgency”, says Maulana Rahat Hussain, a former senator from a religious political party JUI (F). “As long as power remains delegated to them, the democratic process won't work,” he maintains.⁵

Pakistan has deployed so far over a hundred and forty thousand troops in the tribal region. Until 2001 the troop's presence in the area was minimal. However, since then in the last ten 10 years the number of troops has surged to an unprecedented level. These combat forces also include the paramilitary Frontier Corps (FC) personnel; besides thousands of locals recruited from that area as tribal policemen called levies. Given the difficult nature of mountainous terrain, the presence of military has not helped much in restoring the needed stability for restoration of political and administrative activities. Some local administrators of areas such as South Waziristan are not able to sit in their offices in their own tribal areas. “A lot has been damaged and needs to be put back in order,” remarks a political administration official from Khyber Agency. “When we can't go to our offices how could we ask politicians to come and address rallies?”

The other among big power players are the militants. The militants operate freely in most of the tribal areas. They are in fact the de facto and invisible rulers of these areas. They are in a position to enforce their own decisions, hold their own courts and award severe punishments. According to the locals, various militant organisations like the Tehrik-i-Taliban, Lashkar-i-Islam, the Wana-based Maulvi Nazir group, North Waziristan-based Hafiz Gul Bahadur group, the Punjabi Taliban and others have acquired territorial and ideological control over large swathes of FATA. The working of civilian state institutions in the region is mostly dependent on the support of either the militants or the military.⁶

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Religious parties such as the JUI has held political rallies across the tribal areas, including one at Mir Ali in North Waziristan, a stronghold of Pakistani Taliban despite threats. Late Qazi Hussain Ahmed, a leading figure in another religious party Jama'at Islami (JI), escaped an attempt in Mohmand agency on October 09, 2012. Reports suggest a burqa-clad woman blew herself up near his convoy.⁷ No one claimed responsibility for these attacks, but it was clear the Taliban did not like some of his statements against them.

The next general elections are just around the corner. They are considered very important for the fact that for the first time an elected government would hold them on time after completing its constitutional term. Political analysts describe it as a defining moment in the country's political history. If at this very critical juncture, the tribal areas are again left out, it would definitely undermine overall progress of the country. With no solid security assurances from the government, political parties have little interest and inclination to go into these volatile areas. In such a scenario, it is feared that once again religious political parties will have an unchallenged playing field in the coming elections.

“All politicians must make it mandatory that they go there. If they don't go now the religious elements will again be strong in this region for the next five years,” Ajmal Wazir agrees.⁸

According to the census of 1998, the estimated population of the area was over 3.18 million. But figures in 2000 put the population at 3.3 million. The number of votes polled in last general elections was 397593 i.e. 31 per cent.⁹ Balochistan had the same ratio of voters' turnout as in FATA. The large number of polled votes and a high number of candidates contesting elections for each National Assembly seat in 2008 elections prove that the tribesmen have all the urge and keenness to be part of the democratic process. The number of candidates contesting for a single seat was more than 20.¹⁰

By denying the freedom to political parties to operate in the tribal areas, one negates the right of these tribal voters to choose their leaders from a balanced and fair list of candidates. Many say that they are being denied a fair selection process. The people of FATA already have no separate legislative assembly; they are represented in the National Assembly by 12 independent elected members and in the upper house called Senate by eight senators. These senators are elected by the 12 MNAs. These members can talk and make laws for the rest of the country but ironically not for their own region.

A committee comprising representatives of ten main political parties of Pakistan has recommended some basic electoral reforms in FATA, but it has fallen short of asking the government to ensure peaceful environment for fair elections. It has not accepted the weaknesses these parties have shown towards active politicking in the region. The committee comprising representatives from Awami National Party (ANP), Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam F (JUI-F), Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), National Party (NP), Pashtoonkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP), Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan Muslim League Quaid-e-Azam (PML), Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Qaumi Watan Party (QWP) has pointed out five very basic steps that the Election Commission of Pakistan, the registration authority NADRA and other state actors need to work on to lay the foundation of free and fair elections. Some of its recommendations suggested increasing Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC) registration and voter's registration.¹¹ "Historically disenfranchised, FATA voters deserve increased efforts to facilitate their participation in the upcoming general elections," the committee demands, but it did not specifically emphasize women voter registration and making sure that they cast their votes too. The committee has also asked for allowing internally displaced persons (IDPs) to cast their votes from camps and host communities for the candidates in their respective home constituencies. Political parties have also urged government authorities to ensure that judicial officers from neighbouring settled districts serve as returning officers and district returning

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officers, just as it is planned for elections in the rest of Pakistan.¹² The committee has not dwelt at all, and made no recommendations on the issue of creating conducive environment for launching election campaign freely.

In line with other recommendations from political parties, the FATA Committee requests that the ECP ensure polling stations are within two kilometers of voter's homes as required by the Supreme Court. The FATA Joint Committee recommends that the ECP meet regularly with the leadership of political parties in FATA to work together in addressing the numerous and complex electoral challenges.

A major and lethal stakeholder, the Taliban, have already made it clear that they are against democracy as it is an anti-Islam system of governance. But in a recent statement they said that they would come out with a detailed stance close to the election time. The general impression is that since Taliban won't contest the elections as they know they could not get elected their opposition to elections would continue - meaning more attacks. "We consider democracy and elections as western systems and hence are not in their support, but we will make our intentions clear about the general elections nearer the time," says Ehsanullah Ehsan, central spokesman of the banned Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) – the main umbrella group of militant outfits.¹³

Analysts say the reforms are generally viewed as positive by the population but posed a chicken-or-egg dilemma to the voters and the government. "There are two schools of thought: One says peace is impossible without democratic reforms; the other says there's no point to have the reforms unless peace comes first," said Ashraf Ali, president of the FATA Research Center, an independent research organization that studies the federally administered tribal areas.¹⁴

This would be the first time political parties would be able to contest elections openly. Therefore, Answers to these quagmires have to be found; otherwise FATA would continue to be on fire.

The region needs a comprehensive development plan, but for that to take place the state has to step in with strong will and establish peace. This would give confidence to the politicians who can go in an election campaign freely. Only democracy would lay the foundations of a strong justice and accountability systems in the tribal areas. The ball is again in the state's court, but its will is visibly weak at the moment. Free and fair elections in FATA hence could remain an elusive dream.

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