**[Digital apartheid in ex-Fata](https://www.dawn.com/news/1662964/digital-apartheid-in-ex-fata)**

[Syed Irfan Ashraf](https://www.dawn.com/authors/481/syed-irfan-ashraf)Published December 10, 2021

The writer is the author of The Dark Side of News Fixing: The Culture and Political Economy of Global Media in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

MILITARISATION in ex-Fata has turned digital freedom into a security risk. What has followed is a digital apartheid which stops people from exercising the freedom of expression and attaining digital access as a basic right in today’s technologically dependent world.

Evidence of this undeclared digital policy can be traced to the ruling elite’s doublespeak. Addressing tribesmen on a visit to South Waziristan this year, Prime Minister Imran Khan said, “I am giving you good news: 3G and 4G internet facility will be opened from today.” This news electrified the youth attending the event in a barricaded zone of Wana city. “Pakistan Zindabad!” they chanted. Their joy, however, was short-lived. Connecting digital freedom with security threats, the prime minister warned, “They [the Indians] are trying to instigate the youth against Pakistan”, adding, “that is why there was a problem regarding 3G and 4G services which terrorists could also use”. He had made a similar promise two years ago on his visit to Khyber, but nothing came of it. Restoration of the internet is being awaited since 2014 when the Zarb-i-Azb operation was started in ex-Fata.

Displaced during military operations, most of the tribal youth have been living in other parts of the country where they managed to enrol themselves in educational institutions. On their visits back home, they found it hard to keep up with their studies. During Covid-19 lockdowns, for instance, they could neither stay in their dorm nor take online classes at home. Over 120,000 students, including girls, suffered. Some missed admissions; others failed to appear in exams and had to begin all over again.

In 2017, around 25 tribal students formed a delegation to talk to officials who oversaw everyday matters in the region. A few of them shared with me the details of their meetings with a Khyber Agency commander. Making their demands regarding schools and hospitals first, they came to the real issue: the internet. “Don’t mention the internet,” the official reportedly cautioned them. When the students remained adamant, the irritated colonel told them to “go and ask GHQ for permission”. While connecting with other tribal students, they stepped up their struggle, taking it outside Fata.

Internet services in ex-Fata are still considered a ‘security risk’ and are, therefore, denied.

They began to organise sit-ins outside the Peshawar Press Club. Holding placards, their strategy was to restrict their demand to digital rights only. But the all-powerful people in the provincial headquarters were apparently not influential enough to help them get what they wanted — the restoration of communication and the provision of 3G and 4G services. The club’s periphery was already congested because of the continuing protests by relatives of missing persons. So the students decided to take their plea to the actual power centre: GHQ in Rawalpindi.

Then came the idea of a ‘youth jirga’. As a conflict-resolution mechanism, the jirga works in every village and tribe, but the centuries-long tradition has been co-opted, divested of its collective political and civic role, and commercialised in the wake of the sociopolitical engineering in ex-Fata. Even TV anchors use the label to brand their talk shows; highly mediatised selective spaces fly in the face of the egalitarian spirit of the jirga. The idea of a ‘youth jirga’ also came from a celebrity TV host from the tribal region but who lives in Islamabad — close to the corridors of power. Using the term ‘jirga’ allowed the anchors to depoliticise their resistance, an effort to insulate these students from the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement, a progressive rights-based struggle against state atrocities.

Led by the celebrity journalist, the jirga finally met the army chief and was also later invited by influential politicians. One of its members told me, “We discussed Fata’s merger, an increase in Fata’s provincial assembly seats, extension of the judiciary to Fata, and also the three per cent NFC award share [for Fata].” When I asked if the internet was included in the agenda, he said, “No.” The more change was promised, the more things remained the same.

Perhaps the claims of the students can be challenged and details of these meetings may vary, but the fact remains that internet services in ex-Fata are still considered a ‘security risk’ and are, therefore, denied. And to impose this apartheid, an entire chain of deception is organised from the bottom up — all revolving around one principle: to give with one hand and take away with the other. This deception is the outcome of an official culture thriving on local deprivation as a legacy of colonial rule.

But the existential struggle of the tribal students cannot be celebrated as a game changer. Not only does the defanged nature of this domestic resistance reinforce the fossilised structures of oppression, any effort for neutrality also promotes jugglery and deception, a waste of the collective time and energy of the brutalised.

For instance, tribal students, while floundering on bureaucratic fences, took four years just to reach the actual power wielders — and thus lost time meant to be spent in classrooms or restoring routines that suffered due to the conflict. Sucking the energy out of the marginalised people, this system creates hurdles on a daily basis to sustain its negative power. Yet, these students preferred to insulate themselves from the larger organic struggle (read: PTM or missing persons). In our efforts to reform a colonial system, therefore, it is always crucial to guard against enforced official measures reproducing postcolonial conditions.

Technological apartheid in Fata, in other words, is not just a matter of depriving over 10 million Pakhtuns of 3G, 4G or 5G internet services; it is also a policy of engaging them in an endless waste of time, a collective loss. As one student said: “They [the ruling elites] really don’t clearly say what they want to do [with Fata].” It sums up the official double-dealing, a never-ending game of cheating in which the ruling elites say what they don’t do and do what they don’t say. The ongoing generational discontent in Pakistan’s tribal regions is the outcome of this doublespeak. Organic resistance is needed to rescue our bright youth from becoming a party to their own victimisation.

*The writer is the author of The Dark Side of News Fixing: The Culture and Political Economy of Global Media in Pakistan and Afghanistan.*

[**syedirfanashraf@gmail.com**](http://mailto:syedirfanashraf@gmail.com)

*Published in Dawn, December 10th, 2021*