**Educating merged districts**

BY U S A M A K H I L J I 2021-04-12

STUDENTS from the merged districts (erstwhile Fata) of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa ended their monthlong sit-in outside Governor House in Lahore when the governor finally met them a day after students on hunger strike had to be hospitalised, and accepted their demands. This protest has highlighted the emerging post-merger governance gaps, as well as the need for the state to address the basic needs of citizens of the newly merged districts with urgency.

It goes without saying that students should not have to go through month-long sit-ins and hunger strikes to ask for scholarships from the government when they come from impoverished areas that have no universities. The seven merged districts of KP Bajaur, Mohmand, Khyber, Orakzai, Kurram, South Wazirist an and North Waziristan with a combined population of over five million, do not have a single universit y. The Fata University established in 2013 is ironicallylocatedoutsideformerFata;intheFrontier Region of Kohat.

It is important to note that with the merger of Fata with KP in 2018, the Fata Reforms Committee had mandated the doubling of reserved scholarship quota in five universities of Punjab and one university in Sindh for students domiciled in Fata, a decision that was implemented by the KP governor in 2019.

However, last year the university with the largest number of seats for students from the newly merged districts Bahauddin Zakaria University in Multan and Islamia University of Bahawalpur decided to reduce the number of reserved seats, rendering much fewer options for students who are already disadvantaged due to violence in their areas and the resultant disruption, and low quality of education they have received.

That should be a major cause of concern for the present government. The number of schools in the merged districts drastically reduced in the past two decades, with a disproportionately high number of girls schools 1,195 having been destroyed by militants and military operations, and the total number of schools destroyed still have not been reconstructed.

The military operations led to mass displacement from this region, with families then returning to a land ravaged by war and unemployment, and facing danger due to land mines, as well as the resurgence of militants that are, of late, again threatening security. The recent murder of three youths in Jani Khelis one instance of many where the safety of young people and elders alike is threatened.

The protesting students had very reasonable demands. First, the implementation of Punjab Governor Chaudhry Sarwar`s promise from last year of continuation of scholarships for students from the merged areas until 2027. Second, the revival of the four reserved seats for students from merged areas in each department of the Bahauddin Zakaria University, Multan. Third, restoration of the quota for Frontier Region scholarships (Frontier Regions were buffer zones between the erstwhile Fata andKP province). Fourth, re-allotment of hostels for students from merged areas at university.

Further, demands also included the removal of certain officials from Islamia University of Bahawalpur who allegedly discriminated against students from the newly merged districts, and reopening of hostels for students from ex Fata so they could attend online classes as internet facility is still not available in most of the new districts of KP despite promises from the highest office of the prime minister.

The Punjab governor-led committee after holding negotiations with the protesters accepted all the demands, whereby scholarships will continue till 2027 for students from the merged districts, with universities bearing 50 per cent of the cost of scholarships, the KP government 25pc, and the Punjab government the remaining 25pc. It has also been committed that 200 out of the 1,000 scholarships will be reserved for women from the districts.

Another important announcement is the commitment to set up a sub-campus of the University of Punjab in the newly merged districts consideringthat not a single university exists there. This should lead to plans and commitments from the federal and KP governments to establish universities in the newly merged districts, with a special focus on encouraging women to attain higher education.

For enrolment to improve, infrastructure for schools must be set up on a priority basis and ghost schools made functional so that teachers who have been withdrawing salaries paid by taxpayers actually do their job. Moreover, the recently trained parent-teacher councils in the districts must be heard by the government to establish trust and enable inclusive decision-making when it comes to policies related to education in the region.

It is also important to recognise the important role the students from the districts have played in their persistent and peacefulprotest that ended up bearing fruit after an entire month and a hunger strike that could have gotten worse. This signifies how under-represented the voice of students really is; something that could be solved by lifting the ban on student unions in Pakistan imposed decades ago by a military dictator. Student representatives must be allowed to organise, be heard, and included in decision-making if we are serious about democratic statebuilding as laid out in the Constitution.

It is time that colonial attitudes towards the newly merged districts were done away with, the encouraging step having been the passage of the 25th Amendment that did away with the Frontier Crimes Regulation and extended fundamental rights to the region. It is now time to amend the mindset of governance as well as go towards a system where the state respects the electoral mandate of the people, instead of arresting representatives for giving voice to the issues of their constituents, as in the case of All Wazir who has been behind bars for more than three months for a mere speech.

If students who grew up during militarised conflict and displacement are willing to peacefully participate in sit-ins or join peaceful movements that demand fundamental rights including quality education, such a golden opportunity of delivering should not be missed by the state.  The writer is director of Bolo Bhi, an advocacy forum for digital rights.

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