**Development of newly merged tribal districts**

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The former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (ex-FATA) were merged into the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by the parliament of Pakistan through the 25th Constitutional Amendment, which was approved in 2018. The FATA Reform Report of 2016 outlined plans for rehabilitation, reconstruction, socio-economic development, capacity building of law enforcement agencies, and land settlement to enhance FATA’s well-being. The people of ex-FATA were promised development, fundamental rights, quality education, and justice. However, these developmental promises were not fulfilled. Previous attempts by civilian governments to reform and mainstream FATA failed due to a lack of budgetary provisions and inconsistent policies. Ex-FATA residents remain unhappy after years of the merger, and the government’s commitments have not been fulfilled yet. This has led to lawlessness and socio-economic grievances that appear to be facilitating terrorists.
The establishment of a new government promised greater development, improved law and order, stability, and a better quality of life. While the merger granted citizens constitutional rights like any other Pakistani, many young individuals believed they could now challenge jirga decisions and seek justice through higher courts. However, as promises went unfulfilled, it caused an increase in citizen frustration. Despite government and military actions, certain factions of TTP and other extremist elements remained dismantled.
Since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, ISKP and TTP gained movement in FATA. According to the USIP (United States Institute of Peace) report ISKP attacks in Afghanistan jumped from 83 in 2020 to 334 in 2021. Furthermore, ISKP claimed 119 attacks that started on September 18, 2021, and lasted until the end of the year. In 2020, only 7 percent of its attacks targeted the Taliban, but that rose to 33 percent in 2021 and to 72 percent in 2022. According to the report of PICSS (Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies) Khyber Pakhtunkhwa emerged as the most affected province during the first half of the year 2023, with 174 reported militant attacks. Among the reported attacks, 100 occurred in mainland KP, while 74 incidents occurred in the tribal districts (FATA). The PICSS Database shows a 51% rise in terror attacks in the tribal communities of KP during the first half of 2023 compared to the same period in 2022.
Most tribal and religious voices in FATA oppose TTP, but the people of FATA continue to bear and fear the brunt of terrorism. According to the UNDP Report 2022, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) remain one of Pakistan’s most underdeveloped regions. The continuous exposure of ex-FATA to violence in Afghanistan and subsequent military operations appears to be a gulf in the region. Underdevelopment, lawlessness, and prolonged militancy seem to have created conditions conducive to terrorism. Regrettably, FATA has become a haven for extremist and terrorist groups who have successfully taken advantage of unstable circumstances such as poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and state negligence. TTP leverages the law and order gap to extend ideological support for Islamic emirates and capitalize on local grievances regarding justice and order. There were some mistakes made by the Pakistani government in the reform efforts, such as insufficient implementation capacity, lack of sustainability, negligence of local cultural aspects, inadequate budget allocation, and failure to foster local political trust, which has also contributed to the situation.
In a developing country like Pakistan, grappling with a growing population, unstable governance, and external challenges, it became ever more difficult to bring FATA fully under governmental control. Nevertheless, it remains the State’s foremost responsibility to unify and care for its territory and people. Moving forward, a collaborative strategy involving FATA’s political forces, the federal government, and the KP assembly is essential to formulate a responsive plan for deradicalizing active militant factions such as TTP and Al-Qaeda. The government must prioritize developmental initiatives, quality education, and engagement with political stakeholders as well to enhance conditions in these newly merged districts. The ongoing instability is a consequence of years of negligence, and the state must have to take preventive measures to counter the insurgency emerging from the region.