**Setting the agenda**

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| THE approach to reforms in former Fata has been misguided from the start. At the heart of this are widely held assumptions, lacl( of historical perspective and a flawed objective guiding the reforms agenda. Fortunately, if addressed, there is still hope the process will achieve what it was intended to.  In Pakistan, the Fata tribesman is stereotyped as an illiterate, turbaned, bearded, gun-slinging individual whose main talent is smuggling. Historically, for the people there, this image kept unwanted outsiders from interfering in their way of life. However, the advent of the `war on terror` changed everything. While globally Muslims were portrayed as terrorists, in Pakistan the tribesmen were seen in that light.  This resulted in an already deprived populace bearing the brunt of the cost of conflict and subsequently being ignored during the restoration and reformation process, based on the attitude that they were suf fering from the seeds they themselves had sowed. This was evident in the outpouring of support for victims of the 2005 earthquake and the 2010 floods compared to the indifference towards the suf fering of displaced tribes.  It was also widely accepted by the country`s policymakers, intellectuals and the donor community that an illiterate populace `living in the past` is unlikely to know what is good for them. Thus, debates on the type of reforms necessary were mainly restricted to upscale hotels in Islamabad to which the people of Fata had no access.  A lack of historical perspective further exacerbated this. Before 9/11, there was little interest globally or nationally to understand the tribal areas. But as the war took centre stage there and donor funding poured in, everyone wanted a piece of the action.  Unfortunately, given the dearth of prior literature on Fata and its culture, studies and observations made during this period on the violent reality of war began being accepted as a historical norm. In actuality, the war disrupted centuries of norms and has led to serious misunderstandings of tribal culture. In essence, they are being judged at the very moment their way of life was decimated by outside powers.  To global and national societies that have known nothing but public institutions governing their lives, it was unfathomable that a society could run smoothly in the absence of such structures. Accepting the chaotic barbarism of this period as the traditional norm made more sense to outside observers. They became convinced they were saviours, rescuing these barbaric people from their own dark society.  And although officers who had served there had an appreciation of Fata`s history, they imprudently longed for that system tobe restored. They failed to realise that the war had taken an irreversible toll on the political, economic and societal structure of the area. What was needed was a new social contract between the state and these people: one that should have taken place through an inclusive dialogue. However, this never truly happened.  All this resulted in the wrong objective being decided at the outset. Instead of aiming to bring Fata districts to the same level of development as adjacent districts, its goal was to make them identical. This was based on two wrong assumptions: firstly, that the environment in these districts is conducive to government institutions prevalent in the rest of Pakistan and, secondly, that governance structures in adjacent districts are better at providing services than those in the tribal areas. In reality, all that is being achieved is replacing one set of problems with another.  One sign of hope though is that the new PTI government has identified governanceas a key constraint to progress in Pakistan. The prime minister has even proposed starting from scratch with certain institutions like the FBR.  Given the country`s precariousfiscal position, the revenue body hastaken centre stage, but the problems it faces aren`t any more daunting than what many other public institutions struggle with.  Dismantling and reforming existing institutions with deep-rooted interest groups is an almost impossible feat, but this problem doesn`t exist in former Fata: war has completely dismantled governance structures.  Therefore, the opportunity is ripe to reform institutions in Fata along the lines of what many would ideally like to see in the rest of the country. One must ask why the tribal districts should endure the same mistakes made elsewhere when we can instead learn from them.  The government has an appetite to pursue reforms in erstwhile Fata. Never have so many high level public office-bearers, including the prime minister, visited the area as they have over the past few months. Vitally, all that is needed now is a tweak in the approach to the reforms and implementation process to give the people of this region a life they so desperately deserve.  The writer is an Islamabad-based economist, originally from the former Orakzai Agency |