**[Merger and reform in ex-Fata](https://www.dawn.com/news/1700228/merger-and-reform-in-ex-fata)**

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THE government wants the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan to shun militancy and play their role in mainstream politics. On their part, the TTP [demand](https://www.dawn.com/news/1692892) that the government withdraw its troops from the now merged areas of erstwhile Fata, repeal the 25th Amendment of the Constitution to reverse Fata’s merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and implement the Sharia in Malakand Division. That much we seem to know. Right? But have you ever wondered what the people of those districts want?

According to a poll survey in 2016 by the Fata Research Centre, 68 per cent of the respondents in the ex-Fata region demanded the full abolishment of the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) and the introduction of a new governance system. The study further highlighted that 74pc of the respondents endorsed the option of merging Fata with KP. The idea of restructuring Fata as a separate province was endorsed by 26pc of the respondents.

Recently in 2021-22, the Community Resilience Activity North, a project sponsored by the UN and working in collaboration with the concerned district administrations, was implemented in the newly merged districts of KP to help the local communities build resilience against any community stressors and increase social cohesion for community development. The project was also meant to bridge the information gap between local communities and the newly established government departments for better and improved working of the latter to provide specific services to the communities where none existed before the merger in 2018.

Working as a consultant and trainer for this project, I happened to gain some insights into local conditions and the persistent issues that were limiting the success of any development in the region. Most local people I interacted with through community resilience workshops, seemed to be losing hope and developing grievances about the new system. The reasons were often different for the youth and the elders.

The merger has exposed the growing ideological gap between the elders and the youth of the tribal districts.

The majority of youth living in the ex-Fata areas tended to support the process of the merger in principle because they were not happy with the past system of FCR or the dictatorial powers of the political agent. They were also not happy with the overwhelming influence of community elders who, through the jirga system, played the role of intermediary between the political agent and the common people.

Many elders, youth, and government officials have said that the merger afforded them constitutional rights, like any other citizen of Pakistan. Many among the youth expressed their optimism that they would now be able to appeal against the jirga’s decisions as well as approach the higher courts in search of justice. This, they hoped, would give them a chance to a fair trial and just and timely decisions. They also seemed happy to be saved from the collective and territorial responsibility which was a cruel part of the FCR. The establishment of new government departments offering all kinds of services after the merger also promised more developmental work, a better law and order situation, relative peace, stability and modern living facilities.

Women participants at these workshops particularly said that the previous system was very repressive and that the jirga was manipulated by the rich and powerful. They talked about how women face limitations and often go unheard and are not even allowed to be involved in matters regarding their own lives. Female participants expressed their optimism over the new reforms, hoping they would address the repression and limitations that women felt in the previous system.

**Editorial:** [*Unacceptable demand*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1697629/unacceptable-demand)

Some of the older people, however, believed that the old jirga system had ensured peace and the quick dispensation of justice which was slow and faulty in the new system. They also seemed to have grievances about losing the privileges they had as elders in the previous system. They, however, still enjoy considerable influence in the community and people don’t generally seem to oppose them openly. Some workshop participants, particularly senior government officials, disagreed and claimed that the elders of the community do favour the merger and reform process as they cooperate with the district administration.

But many people seemed extremely disappointed as their expectations from the merger and promised reforms have not been fulfilled. They complained about the delays in the administration of justice, the crime rate that has risen after the merger, and drug addiction and corruption that have increased drastically. While some officials expressed frustration over the lack of funds for the newly established departments, others believed that the process through the merger was not smooth and a proper consensus had not been developed before taking this decision.

The merger also exposed the growing ideological gap and the perceptual difference between the elders and today’s youth in the newly merged districts. Where the youth appeared to lose the hopes they had from the merger because of unfulfilled promises and sluggish performances, the elders’ concerns have been more about losing the privilege and control they enjoyed previously.

There is an acute lack of awareness and trust in official procedures and services offered by the newly established departments.

Compared to the pre-merger system the new system is not delivering. Reasons include the lack of resources, no training of staff, lack of coordination between different departments, local conflicts, confusion about procedures, delay in court decisions, damaged infrastructure, the presence of extremist elements, and opposition from different segments of society. The administration is unable to meet the people’s expectations, and public frustration with the new system is growing while the security situation remains precarious.

Against the background of the current negotiations with the Taliban and their demand for the reversal of the Fata merger, the need to engage the people of these areas by the government and effectively address their grievances with assurances of a progressive future cannot be stressed enough.

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