**Polls in ex-Fata**

BY G H ULAM QADIR K H AN | 5/19/2019

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| ON Monday, May 13, the National Assembly unanimously passed the 26th Constitutional Amendment Bill. It was perhaps the first time in Pakistan`s parliamentary history that a private member`s bill was passed without a single opposing voice.Mohsin Dawar, the MNA from North Waziristan, tabled the bill on Friday, which was backed by both the government and opposition. The amendment increases the number of seats for former Fata in the National Assembly and KP Assembly. The tribal districts will now have 12 seats in the National Assembly, and 24 general seats in the KP assembly. Practically, the provincial elections in the tribal districts now stand postponed for six to eight months.After the recent accusations against the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement, the government`s all-out support to achieve this milestone decision comes as a surprise. Saner elements had always supported dialogue with the PTM. A Senate committee meeting with its leadership was the first step towards this, but that was before the accusations. In any case, good sense prevailed and the government chose the carrot over the stick approach. For the first time, the National Assembly showed it could mainstream nonconformists by removing their genuine grievances through legislation.Under the 25th Amendment, delimitation of erstwhile Fata and provincial polls were to be held within a year of the general election. Pursuant to constitutional directions, the election schedule was announced by the ECP according to which polls in the tribal districts were to be held on July 2. Those at the helm, in their wisdom, dragged the process out till the last permissible days. The tribal people, especially the youth, are enthusiastic about the polls, but will now have to wait a little longer.Though the move has largely been welcomed, there are those who would have preferred that elections were not delayed. They are suspicious of the government`s intentions.To them, numbers do not matter; they say that the two PTM-affiliated MNAs have raised issues related to their area more convincingly than the 12 MNAs of former Fata ever had in parliament. These are volatile times for the tribal districts, and increased representation in the KP Assembly would have had a positive impact on the process of merger, such as funding, human resource allocation/adjustments and legal issues.The way the government has been handling the grand merger exercise should have been an eye opener. The three per cent share in the NFC Award, which translates to more than a hundred billion rupees, is a case in point. They believe that all the MNAs from ex-Fata were lured into delaying elections bytheirresistible temptationof additionalseats.Then there are conspiracy theorists that doubt the capacity of these MNAs to bring all political parties on board and push the amendment through parliament so quickly and easily. Even the parties opposing the merger supported the bill. Not a single person in the house rejected the bill on the ground that it had been moved by a `foreign agent`. To them, how it all happened is the million-dollar question.The original plea of the MNAs was that a large number of residents in the tribal districts were temporarily displaced persons at the time of the 2017 census, and were thus not counted. They believe that the actual population of the area is much higher than in the enumeration, so their seats in the assemblies need to be adjusted accordingly. The number of TDPs, according to the Fata Disaster Management Authority, is much higher than the census numbers, thus supporting theirargument. The increase in seats, however, is not because of the faulty census but is rather a favour to the tribal areas for sacrifices rendered.Though the number of seats standsincreased, the MNAs plea off aulty census is not accepte d.The tribes were assured that their sacrifices were recognised and would be rewarded. They deserve to be embraced, so that their wounds may heal. Unfortunately, this rhetoric does not necessarily translate into action. All the on-ground activities relate to the provincial government. Hence, the urgent need of MPAs.No matter what people think of the MNAs from former Fata, they cannot be denied credit for the increase in seats, especially MNA Dawar. Now that the bill is passed, delimitation must be focused on. If seats are distributed based on the existing census, then those not represented in the official figures will remain uncounted and the purpose of the increase in seats will not be achieved. How to determine the real population (counting the uncounted)is the real test. In spite of all odds, there is progress (albeit very slowly) being made in the tribal districts. A few vocal MPAs representing ex-Fata in the KP Assembly will play a positive roll in giving it a direction and achieving the merger targets amicably.  The writer is a former bureaucrat and author of Cheegha: The Call gqkhan57@yahoo.com |