

VIEW: How to succeed and fail in FATA

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By Ahmed Rashid

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The resumption of attacks by the Pakistani Taliban and the withdrawal of the ceasefire offer by Baitullah Mehsud point to an early resumption of severe violence in FATA and suicide bombings in the rest of the country. This follows several weeks of relative calm in the aftermath of the general elections, even though the extremists had mounted their biggest coup earlier on by assassinating Benazir Bhutto.

The PPP-led coalition government at the Centre and the ANP government in the NWFP have both made it clear that they are keen to adopt a more comprehensive strategy towards bringing peace to FATA even though they face multiple pressures on the one side from the army for a quick, localised peace accord with Mehsud to give troops breathing space and on the other by the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, who look suspiciously at any accord because it will allow Pakistani militants to also focus on the Afghan Taliban's summer offensive in Afghanistan.

What is the way out for the government and the people of FATA ?

In the many words expressed about peace plans in FATA by the PPP and the ANP, one key ingredient has been missing. Before the elections, both Benazir Bhutto and Afsandiyar Wali spoke succinctly of the need to carry out political reform in FATA.

Yet today, now that they are in power the PPP and ANP are failing to spell out the desperately needed strategic vision which should provide the framework for all policies towards the extremists and the people of FATA.

At present there is no over-arching strategic vision for the future of FATA being articulated by the ruling parties. Such a vision should be based on direct consultations with the people of FATA to bring the region into the fabric of Pakistan's constitution and laws, offering them the same political, social and educational rights and opportunities that are available to all Pakistanis.

(This would include a massive development programme for which the US and other Western states have already expressed a desire to contribute.)

Such a strategy may take several years to implement because it has to be done with the consent of the tribes in FATA many of whom have to be won over first ~ but the building blocks should be set out now.

Ultimately the people of FATA must decide through a referendum or any other democratic means the future political status for FATA. Options could include becoming a separate province or joining the NWFP.

In the short term under the framework of future political reform the government can open a dialogue with all the tribes, Pashtun civil society and even the extremists.

In other words the government talks to everyone under the banner, changing the rules of the game in FATA.

But instead the PPP-ANP appear to be backsliding from their original commitments, declining to set out a strategic vision for FATA and instead getting bogged down in local negotiations with militant leaders.

At the moment only the extremists have a clear, articulated political vision for FATA ~ they want a sharia state

independent of Pakistan, where Al Qaeda and a whole host of other foreign groups can congregate and undermine the region and the world. No patriotic Pakistani can accept such terms of abject surrender.

The present under discussion 'Waziristan Accord' which is still to be agreed upon is totally inadequate. It was put together by the army before the general elections in order to give troops breathing space ~ although that breathing space would also be used by the extremists to regroup.

Moreover the so called Accord is almost the same as earlier failed accords by the Musharraf regime. While the militants pledge to cease attacks on the army and free the several hundred hostages ~ soldiers, civilians, government officials and the Pakistani ambassador to Kabul ~ that they are holding, the government would largely relinquish control of the region to the militants and free Taliban extremists it is holding. There would be no guarantees that the Pakistani Taliban would not join the war in Afghanistan.

The PPP-ANP attempts at modifying this Accord have largely rested on a stepped up aid and development agenda good in itself, but insufficient to provide the impetus for political reform, reduce the grip of the extremists or provide the security needed to bring back the tens of thousands of FATA tribesmen now living as refugees in other parts of Pakistan.

While the government tinkers with an Accord that is politically insufficient and militarily a concession, it is also creating major problems for itself in its relations with the US, Afghanistan and NATO countries who view any such short term approach with suspicion.

However before a strategic plan can materialise there are certain realities that need to be addressed.

Even though General Ashfaq Kayani has expressed his willingness and already taken several steps demonstrating his positive intentions to adhere to the wishes of the elected government, the army and the ISI remain the most important formulators and implementors of policy in FATA. It is impossible for the PPP-ANP coalition to come up with a plan that does not have army backing.

General Kayani has also told the political leadership that they must take "ownership" of the war on extremism, but the army too has to take steps to help the civilian government do so. So far the army has shown little inclination to back a policy of long term political reform in FATA. It has tinkered on the edges of reform with disastrous results.

For example since 2004 the army broke down the Political Agent system replacing it with military officers, then relented and has tried to re-establish the former system. There is talk of improving upon the draconian FCR Frontier Crimes Regulation which in fact needs to be done away with altogether.

The army needs to take three strategic decisions before it can deal with the problems of FATA much in the same way the army did after the Kargil war after which President Musharraf decided to open talks with India on Kashmir.

The first strategic decision pertains to the need for the military to wrap up the Afghan Taliban leadership who continue to enjoy sanctuary, re-supply, recruits and patronage from elements within Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban are playing a leading role in guiding the Pakistani Taliban in FATA. Since 2004 every one of the accords the army has struck with the Pakistani Taliban has been a result of Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar sending envoys to FATA to negotiate with the military side by side with the Pakistani Taliban leaders.

As long as sections of the establishment believe that there are good Taliban and bad Taliban, extremism will flourish in FATA and spread to other parts of NWFP.

The second strategic necessity is to understand that there can be no peaceful solution in FATA unless it is linked to a similar process in the Afghan provinces across the border. The tribes have been one and the same for centuries and they ignore the border.

President Hamid Karzai is also trying, unsuccessfully, to woo the Afghan Taliban, just as the PPP-ANP would like to do. But these two processes have to be one joint effort. Social and development programmes to FATA have to be linked to similar programmes on the other side. This obviously requires a far more improved relationship between

Pakistan and Afghanistan than has existed since 2001.

The civilian government is clearly determined to strike a more harmonious relationship with Kabul, but the army needs to give it public backing and express a willingness to deal with the Pashtun tribes of Pakistan and Afghanistan in a common fashion. The Afghan side must reciprocate by starting a serious debate about and ultimately recognising the border and the Durand Line.

The third strategic decision relates to the need for the army to publicly support major political reform in FATA and to help the PPP-ANP protect emerging civil society in FATA thereby allowing a strong anti-Taliban and anti-extremist ethos to emerge among the Pashtun tribes.

Since the first military action in 2004, the army has failed to protect tens of thousands of FATA residents who have fled to other parts of Pakistan as refugees rather than accept Taliban rule. The Pakistani Taliban have killed hundreds of tribal maliks and members of civil society in FATA such as journalists, educators, doctors and businessmen all charged with allegedly spying for the US but in reality the victims of Taliban ethnic cleansing to clear the region of all those Pashtuns who do not support the Taliban ideology.

The army must help these people return home and protect them while the government provides the social and economic backup for them to prosper. Only then can the state hope to develop a serious Pashtun lobby in FATA for progressive political reform.

These substantive issues are what the PPP-ANP alliance should be discussing and engaging with the army rather than trying to come up with a plan that abandons long term political reform in favour of short term quick fixes which will collapse within weeks.

Likewise the Bush administration with its terrible penchant for military solutions needs to be persuaded to be patient and prepare itself for a more long term solution that will make its offer of US \$750 million over five years in development aid for FATA, far more meaningful.

Similarly the madrassa culture in FATA needs to be countered by a massive educational and literacy program which the ANP government is best placed to carry out.

At present the government is caught in the conundrum of appearing to be soft on terrorism because it is advocating a dialogue with the terrorists. What it should be saying is that it is trying to establish a strategic political vision for FATA that is comprehensive and far reaching and will eventually give the people of FATA the same rights as all Pakistanis.

Ahmed Rashid is the author of Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia and Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia