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From Structural Reform to Local Legitimacy: Evaluating the FATA-KP Merger in Khyber District

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ABSTRACT

The 2018 merger of Pakistan's erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa marked a significant constitutional reform aimed at extending political representation, legal rights and institutional governance to historically marginalized regions. This article examines the post-merger experience of Khyber District through the lens of Conflict Transformation Theory, focusing on education and security as key domains of reform. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research draws on survey responses (n=30), semi-structured interviews (n=21) and policy analysis to assess structural, relational and cultural dimensions of integration. Local legitimacy is operationalized in this study through residents' perceptions of whether post-merger institutions are trustworthy, accessible and effective in addressing education, security and governance needs. The data were analyzed thematically with interview and survey responses triangulated against policy documents to identify implementation gaps and uneven resource distribution, community participation and state-society trust. The findings indicate that while institutional reforms such as the extension of provincial administration, reconstruction of schools and integration of policing structures represent significant structural progress, relational trust in state institutions remains limited. Persistent challenges include inadequate education infrastructure, gender disparities, perceived police inefficiency and continued reliance on traditional dispute resolution mechanisms. The study argues that sustainable integration requires moving beyond formal institutional change toward trust-building, accountability and culturally responsive governance. By situating district-level experiences within a conflict transformation framework, the article contributes to broader debates on post-conflict state-building and governance reform in fragile contexts.

Keywords: *FATA merger, Khyber District, governance reform, education, security, conflict transformation*

INTRODUCTION

The merger of Pakistan's erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa through the Twenty-Fifth Constitutional Amendment in May 2018 marked a historic shift in the country's governance architecture. For over a century, FATA operated under the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), a colonial-era legal framework introduced in 1901 that concentrated administrative, judicial and policing authority in the hands of political agents while denying residents access to constitutional rights and formal judicial recourse (Spain, 1961; Yousaf,

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2018). This exceptional governance structure, retained even after Pakistan's independence, institutionalized political marginalization and reinforced perceptions of the tribal areas as peripheral to the state's constitutional order (Yousaf, 2019). The 2018 merger sought to dismantle this dual system by extending the jurisdiction of provincial institutions, integrating policing structures and promising long-term socio-economic development through a ten-year reform plan (Government of Pakistan, 2018).

While the merger represented a significant constitutional reform, integration is not merely a legislative act but an ongoing process of institutional adaptation and socio-political transformation. Historical analyses emphasize that governance in the tribal borderlands was shaped by strategic imperatives rather than developmental inclusion, positioning the region as a buffer zone rather than a fully integrated political entity (Caroe, 1958; Spain, 1961). Contemporary scholarship further demonstrates how this legacy contributed to institutional fragility, governance deficits and the emergence of militancy in the post-9/11 period (International Crisis Group, 2009; Shinwari, 2020). Military operations, including Khyber I-III and Zarb-e-Azb, weakened militant networks but also resulted in displacement, infrastructure destruction and social disruption, leaving complex post-conflict recovery challenges (Abbas, 2020; Shinwari, 2020). Against this backdrop, the merger was framed as both a corrective measure to colonial exceptionalism and a pathway toward normalization, civilian governance and sustainable peace.

Khyber District, formerly Khyber Agency, offers a particularly instructive case for examining how this reform has unfolded in practice. Strategically located along the historic Khyber Pass and bordering Afghanistan at Torkham, the district has long been a site of cross-border trade, migration and military significance (Caroe, 1958; Spain, 1961). In the years preceding the merger, it experienced intense militant activity and counterinsurgency operations, followed by phased stabilization efforts. As a result, Khyber embodies the intersection of security, governance reform and socio-economic reconstruction. Its post-merger trajectory therefore provides valuable insight into whether structural reforms translate into meaningful transformation at the local level.

Much of the existing literature on the FATA-KP merger has focused on constitutional reform, administrative integration and security dynamics (Yousaf & Khan, 2021; Zeb & Ahmed, 2019). While these studies document important institutional changes such as the abolition of the FCR, extension of the judicial system and integration of Levies and Khasadar forces into the KP Police, they often emphasize structural dimensions of reform. Less attention has been given to how local communities perceive these changes and whether they have fostered trust, legitimacy and inclusion. In fragile and post-conflict contexts, institutional reform alone does not guarantee sustainable peace; transformation requires parallel shifts in relationships, perceptions and cultural practices (Lederach, 1997; Miall, 2004).

The specific research problem addressed in this article is whether the legal and administrative merger has translated into meaningful improvements in education and security as experienced by local communities in Khyber District. Building on the gap in existing scholarship on district-level perceptions, the article asks how integration has affected education and security in relation to infrastructure, social services and local perceptions of governance. It proceeds from the core assumption that the merger has produced limited but notable progress in educational access and security, while implementation gaps and weak state-society trust continue to constrain full transformation.

This article applies Conflict Transformation Theory to assess the integration of Khyber District into KP beyond formal institutional change. According to Lederach (1997), sustainable peace requires attention to three interrelated dimensions: structural reform, relational trust and cultural transformation. By focusing on education and security, two sectors central to post-conflict recovery, this article evaluates whether the merger has addressed both institutional deficits and community expectations. Drawing on survey responses (n=30) and semi-structured interviews (n=21), the research explores how residents interpret governance reforms and whether these reforms have enhanced legitimacy and participation. The sample size was deemed sufficient to achieve thematic saturation within the scope of the study.

The central argument advanced in this article is that while the merger has delivered important structural progress including political representation, administrative extension and formal policing reform, relational trust between citizens and state institutions remains fragile. In education, infrastructure expansion has not consistently translated into quality or gender-inclusive access. In security, the decline in large-scale militant violence has not fully resolved perceptions of institutional inefficiency or disconnection from community needs. These findings suggest that integration in Khyber District reflects partial transformation: a break from colonial governance structures that has yet to fully achieve relational and cultural inclusion.

By situating district-level experiences within a conflict transformation framework, this article contributes to three strands of scholarship. First, it advances empirical understanding of post-merger governance in Pakistan's former tribal areas by foregrounding localized perspectives. Second, it bridges security-focused and development-focused analyses by demonstrating their interdependence in post-conflict contexts. Third, it applies conflict transformation theory to a case often examined through strategic or constitutional lenses, thereby highlighting the importance of relational legitimacy in state-building processes.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature on colonial governance, conflict dynamics and post-merger institutional reform to situate the study within existing scholarship. This is followed by a theoretical framework outlining Conflict Transformation Theory as the analytical lens guiding the research. The subsequent section details the methodological approach employed in the study. The findings section then examines education and security in Khyber District, followed by a discussion that applies the conflict transformation framework to interpret the qualitative findings. The article concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of post-merger integration for governance, legitimacy and sustainable peace in Pakistan's former tribal districts and offers policy recommendations based on the findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The merger of Pakistan's erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) has generated significant scholarly attention across legal, security, governance and development domains.

Existing literature broadly engages with four interconnected themes: (1) colonial governance and institutional exceptionalism, (2) conflict and militancy dynamics, (3) post-merger administrative and security reforms and (4) education and development challenges in fragile contexts. Reviewing these strands provides the intellectual foundation for situating this article within ongoing academic debates. Existing studies explain the legal, administrative and security

changes introduced after the merger but pay less attention to how local communities perceive these reforms. This gap is important because the success of post-merger governance depends not only on the presence of new institutions but also on whether people view them as trustworthy, accessible and responsive.

Colonial Governance and Institutional Exceptionalism

Historical scholarship underscores the distinctive governance status of FATA under colonial rule. The Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), introduced in 1901, institutionalized indirect rule and granted extensive discretionary powers to political agents, including the authority to enforce collective responsibility (Spain, 1961). The region was administered primarily as a strategic buffer between British India and Afghanistan, prioritizing security concerns over political integration (Caroe, 1958). This framework entrenched a dual governance structure that distinguished FATA from the rest of the subcontinent.

Post-independence retention of the FCR has been widely critiqued as a continuation of colonial exceptionalism. Yousaf (2018) argues that maintaining the FCR reflected the state's reliance on indirect governance mechanisms rather than democratic incorporation. Similarly, Yousaf (2019) describes the legal regime as a symbolic and institutional marker of marginalization, reinforcing the peripheral status of the tribal areas within Pakistan's constitutional order. These analyses provide critical background for understanding why the 2018 merger was framed as a corrective measure aimed at dismantling long-standing structural inequalities.

Conflict, Militancy and Security Governance

A substantial body of literature examines the security dynamics that shaped FATA, particularly in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. Weak institutional oversight, limited-service delivery and porous borders contributed to the region's vulnerability to militant mobilization (International Crisis Group, 2009). Groups such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Lashkar-e-Islam exploited governance gaps, transforming the tribal districts into arenas of violent contestation.

Military operations, including Zarb-e-Azb and Khyber I-III, significantly reduced militant capacity but also generated displacement, infrastructure destruction and socio-economic disruption (Abbas, 2020; Shinwari, 2020). Scholars note that the state's response to instability was predominantly security-centric, with limited parallel emphasis on institutional development or long-term socio-economic reform (International Crisis Group, 2018). While counterinsurgency operations altered the immediate security landscape, questions remained regarding sustainable governance and civilian normalization.

Post-Merger Institutional Reform

The Twenty-Fifth Constitutional Amendment (2018) marked a formal shift from exceptional governance to provincial integration. The extension of judicial jurisdiction, integration of Levies and Khasadar forces into the KP Police and commitment to a ten-year development plan were central components of this reform (Government of Pakistan, 2018). Yousaf and Khan (2021) highlight that the merger raised expectations of political representation, administrative normalization and enhanced public service delivery.

However, the literature also identifies implementation challenges. Khan (2020) points to bureaucratic constraints and capacity limitations affecting administrative integration. Zeb and Ahmed (2019) emphasize that structural violence and governance deficits cannot be addressed solely through constitutional reform. Scholars caution that institutional integration must be accompanied by effective implementation and local legitimacy to achieve meaningful transformation.

Education and Development in Fragile Contexts

Education has received particular attention within discussions of post-merger development. Conflict significantly disrupted schooling infrastructure, resulting in destroyed facilities, teacher shortages and pronounced gender disparities (Ali, 2020). In fragile contexts, education is not only a service delivery mechanism but also a long-term stabilizing factor that shapes opportunities and social cohesion (Novelli & Smith, 2011).

Despite policy commitments to expand educational access following the merger, progress has been uneven. Ali (2021) notes that persistent education and socio-economic development challenges continue to limit meaningful integration in the former FATA region. Persistent gaps in infrastructure, staffing and quality highlight the complexity of translating policy commitments into tangible improvements in marginalized regions.

Governance, Justice and Public Trust

Governance reform has also centered on judicial access and policing transformation. The integration of Levies and Khasadar personnel into the KP Police was intended to formalize law enforcement structures and strengthen accountability (Abbas, 2020). However, transitions of this nature often encounter institutional friction, training gaps and public skepticism (Bryden & Hänggi, 2005).

Yousaf and Khan (2021) observe that while formal judicial access represents symbolic inclusion, procedural delays and limited legal awareness may constrain its effectiveness. Continued reliance on jirgas for dispute resolution reflects the enduring cultural legitimacy of traditional mechanisms, particularly where formal institutions are perceived as inefficient or distant (Shinwari, 2020).

Identified Gaps in the Literature

Although the existing literature provides important insights into legal reform, security governance and development challenges, several gaps remain. First, much of the scholarship treats the merged districts collectively, with limited district-level analysis that accounts for local variation. Second, community perspectives are often underrepresented, as studies tend to focus on policy frameworks or institutional outcomes. Third, conflict transformation theory has been underutilized in evaluating the merger's broader societal implications.

This article addresses these gaps by focusing specifically on Khyber District and foregrounding local perceptions of education and security reforms. By situating empirical findings within a conflict transformation framework, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how structural reforms intersect with relational trust and cultural legitimacy in post-conflict governance contexts.

These gaps directly inform the study's objectives by linking post-merger institutional reform with education, security and local perceptions of governance in Khyber District. The review therefore supports the article's focus on whether structural integration has translated into community-level legitimacy and meaningful transformation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Conflict Transformation and Post-Merger Integration

This article is grounded in Conflict Transformation Theory, which provides an analytical framework for understanding post-conflict governance beyond formal institutional change. Unlike approaches that focus primarily on conflict management or resolution, conflict transformation emphasizes long-term social and political change that addresses the structural, relational and cultural dimensions of conflict (Lederach, 1997; Miall, 2004).

Lederach (1997) conceptualizes conflict transformation as a multidimensional process operating across three interconnected levels. The structural dimension refers to institutional arrangements, governance systems, legal frameworks and access to resources. Structural reform seeks to address systemic inequalities and institutionalized exclusion. The relational dimension concerns the quality of relationships between social actors, including trust, legitimacy and perceptions of fairness. Within this study, legitimacy is understood as a relational judgment shaped by citizens' perceptions of institutional fairness, effectiveness and responsiveness rather than by formal legal authority alone (Suchman, 1995; Tyler, 2006). Finally, the cultural dimension encompasses shared norms, narratives and values that shape how authority, justice and inclusion are understood within a society. Sustainable peace, according to this framework, requires transformation across all three dimensions rather than isolated institutional reforms. This framework provides the conceptual basis for assessing whether the FATA-KP merger represents merely administrative incorporation or a deeper process of socio-political transformation.

Applying this framework to the FATA-KP merger enables a deeper assessment of integration in Khyber District. The abolition of the Frontier Crimes Regulation, extension of judicial jurisdiction and integration of policing structures represent significant structural reforms. However, structural inclusion does not automatically generate relational trust or cultural legitimacy. In historically marginalized regions, formal incorporation into state systems may remain fragile if communities perceive institutions as ineffective, distant or unresponsive (Miall, 2004).

In this article, education and security are examined as key domains where structural, relational and cultural dynamics intersect. Education reflects long-term investment in social inclusion and human development, shaping intergenerational opportunities and social mobility. Security institutions, particularly policing structures, influence everyday interactions between citizens and the state, directly affecting perceptions of justice and authority. Analyzing these sectors through a conflict transformation lens allows for an assessment of whether post-merger reforms have moved beyond formal institutional change to foster trust, participation and legitimacy at the local level.

By positioning Conflict Transformation as the guiding framework, this research shifts attention from constitutional reform alone to the lived experiences of governance in Khyber

District. This approach enables a more nuanced evaluation of whether the merger represents merely structural integration or a broader process of social and political transformation.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study design to examine the post-merger integration of Khyber District into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. A qualitative approach was selected to explore community perceptions, lived experiences and interpretations of governance reform following the 2018 merger. Given the study's focus on relational trust, institutional legitimacy and cultural dynamics, an interpretivist orientation was adopted to understand how residents make sense of structural reforms within their local context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2014).

Khyber District was selected as the case site due to its strategic location, history of militancy and centrality in post-merger administrative and security reforms. As a district that experienced intense militant activity followed by phased stabilization and institutional integration, it provides a relevant setting for examining the interaction between structural reform and local legitimacy.

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify participants with relevant knowledge and experience of post-merger developments (Patton, 2015). Participants included teachers, youth, former Levies and Khasadar personnel, community elders and local officials. This diversity enabled the study to capture multiple perspectives on education and security reforms.

Snowball sampling was subsequently used to reach additional respondents, particularly in contexts where formal access was constrained due to security or logistical considerations. The sample size was guided by relevance to the study objectives, feasibility in a sensitive field setting and the recurrence of themes across participants, rather than statistical representativeness.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through two methods: survey responses and semi-structured interviews. A total of 30 participants completed the survey, which included open-ended questions designed to elicit perceptions of governance reform, security conditions and educational development. In addition, 21 semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain in-depth insights into participants' experiences and interpretations.

The survey instrument included closed-ended, scaled and open-ended questions on educational access, infrastructure, security perceptions, social services and governance reform and was administered through Google Forms during the late 2024 and early 2025 fieldwork period. Data collection covered participants from Bara, Jamrud and Landi Kotal, while survey responses, interview narratives and policy documents were triangulated to cross-check recurring patterns across the education and security themes.

Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility while maintaining thematic consistency across discussions. Questions focused on perceptions of institutional change, trust in state authorities, access to services and experiences with policing and educational reforms.

Secondary sources, including government policy documents such as the FATA Ten-Year Development Plan (Government of Pakistan, 2018), academic literature and relevant reports, were used to contextualize primary findings.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Interview transcripts and survey responses were coded to identify recurring themes related to structural reform, relational trust, institutional legitimacy, education access and security perceptions.

The coding process involved initial open coding, followed by categorization into broader themes aligned with the structural, relational and cultural dimensions identified in the theoretical framework. Rather than quantifying responses, the analysis focused on identifying patterns in narratives and perceptions that illuminate how residents interpret post-merger integration.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were observed throughout the research process. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and provided voluntary consent prior to participation. To protect confidentiality, identifying details were removed from transcripts and pseudonyms were used where necessary (Orb et al., 2001). Given the sensitive security context of the district, particular care was taken to ensure that participation did not expose respondents to potential risk. The study adopted a reflexive approach by avoiding leading questions and interpreting participants' accounts in relation to their local, professional and institutional positions.

Limitations

This study is subject to certain limitations. Security and logistical constraints restricted access to some remote areas which may have limited representation of some marginalized groups. Additionally, as a qualitative case study, the findings are context-specific and are not intended to be statistically generalizable. However, the emphasis on in-depth local perspectives provides valuable insight into the dynamics of post-merger governance in Khyber District.

FINDINGS

Education and Human Development

Education emerged as one of the most consistently emphasized themes across survey responses and semi-structured interviews. Participants widely described education as foundational to development, social mobility and long-term peace. Many respondents linked education directly to employment opportunities, reduction of militancy and integration with the broader province. As one interviewee stated, "*If there were proper schools and opportunities before, many young people would not have been attracted towards militancy."*

Despite the symbolic and structural significance of the merger, participants reported that educational conditions remain uneven. Data from official reports indicate that prior to the merger, literacy rates in erstwhile FATA were significantly lower than the national average (FATA Secretariat, 2018). Interview respondents confirmed that historical neglect under the FCR governance framework continues to shape present disparities.

While some infrastructure development has occurred since the merger, participants described persistent problems including dilapidated buildings, lack of functional facilities, insufficient teacher recruitment and weak monitoring mechanisms. One respondent observed that "*schools exist on paper but when you visit there are no proper teachers or facilities"*. Teacher shortages were repeatedly identified as a major obstacle, with some institutions relying on a single instructor for multiple grade levels.

As highlighted in prior scholarship (Ali, 2020), gender disparities remain especially pronounced. Female literacy rates remain substantially lower and girls' access to education is constrained by distance, safety concerns and cultural norms. A female participant explained "*parents want their daughters to study but there are no nearby schools and transport is not safe."*

Female respondents emphasized mobility restrictions and security anxieties as significant barriers. Mothers expressed willingness to educate their daughters but identified transportation insecurity and absence of nearby schools as deterrents. The data suggest that while structural incorporation into the KP education system has occurred, improvements in quality, accessibility and gender equity remain incomplete. These concerns were consistently echoed across both interview and survey data.

Overall, findings indicate that educational reform reflects visible structural progress but only limited transformation in everyday lived experience, particularly in rural and marginalized areas. This indicates that education reforms influence public perception not only through the construction of schools or formal policy commitments but also through visible quality, accessibility and reliability of services experienced by local communities.

Security and Public Trust

Security reform constituted the second major theme emerging from the data. Participants broadly acknowledged that large-scale militant activity has declined since the merger and associated military operations. Improved mobility and reduced overt violence were cited as significant positive developments. As one respondent noted, "*At least now we can travel without fear like before."*

However, respondents simultaneously expressed ambivalence regarding institutional trust. The integration of Levies and Khasadar forces into the KP Police, while structurally significant, was described as uneven in implementation. Participants reported confusion regarding jurisdiction, inadequate training and inconsistent accountability mechanisms. One former security official remarked, "*The system changed but training and resources did not improve at the same pace*."

Several interviewees described experiences of bureaucratic inefficiency, perceived harassment and bribery. As one participant stated, "*People still hesitate to go to the police because they perceive the process to be slow and complicated*." These perceptions align with existing scholarship noting challenges in security sector reform (Abbas, 2020; Zeb & Ahmed, 2019). While

formal policing structures have been extended, relational trust between communities and law enforcement remains fragile.

The continued reliance on jirgas for dispute resolution further illustrates this dynamic. Although formal judicial access has been expanded, many respondents described traditional mechanisms as more culturally accessible and expedient. This reflects a dual system in practice: structural integration at the institutional level but persistent reliance on informal structures at the community level.

The gendered dimension of insecurity was also highlighted. Women and girls reported heightened vulnerability due to social norms, limited policing responsiveness and broader instability. These findings suggest that securitization alone has not translated into comprehensive human security. The data therefore suggest that when security institutions remain slow, under-resourced or socially distant, formal policing reforms may fail to generate the confidence needed for local legitimacy.

Governance, Participation and Local Legitimacy

Across both sectors, participants expressed support for the symbolic significance of constitutional inclusion. The abolition of the FCR was widely described as a historic milestone. Many respondents framed the merger as a step in the right direction.

However, enthusiasm was tempered by concerns regarding implementation gaps, centralized decision-making and limited participatory mechanisms. Participants frequently described development initiatives as top-down and disconnected from local needs.

Developments such as the Pashtun National Jirga of October 2024 (Borthakur, 2024) further illustrate the persistence of grievances related to security, justice and inclusive participation. Its resolutions demanding security, justice, socio-economic investment and inclusive participation mirror the concerns raised by participants in this study. Respondents emphasized that meaningful integration requires more than administrative absorption; it requires accountability, dialogue and inclusion.

Taken together, the findings reveal a consistent pattern: structural reforms have been introduced but relational trust, participatory governance and cultural legitimacy remain in transition.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study, when examined through the lens of Conflict Transformation Theory (Lederach, 1997; Miall, 2004), reveal a pattern of partial transformation in Khyber District following the FATA-KP merger. While significant structural reforms have been implemented, relational trust and cultural legitimacy remain in transition.

Structural Reform and the Limits of Institutional Integration

The merger has resulted in substantial structural change. The abolition of the Frontier Crimes Regulation, extension of judicial authority, integration of Levies and Khasadar forces into

the KP Police and incorporation into provincial administrative frameworks represent a decisive institutional shift away from colonial-era governance.

However, Conflict Transformation Theory emphasizes that sustainable peace requires transformation across structural, relational and cultural dimensions. Institutional redesign, however, does not by itself generate trust or legitimacy. The findings indicate that although institutional incorporation has occurred, community perceptions of efficiency, accessibility and responsiveness remain mixed.

This suggests that administrative integration, while necessary, is insufficient to achieve comprehensive transformation without corresponding relational change. The relationship between governance performance and public perception is central to the legitimacy of the merger: where reforms improve everyday access, responsiveness and accountability, they strengthen trust; where implementation remains weak, public confidence remains fragile.

Education and the Structural-Relational Gap

Education illustrates the distinction between institutional restructuring and lived experience. The expansion of infrastructure and extension of provincial oversight signify structural inclusion. Yet persistent teacher shortages, gender disparities and uneven quality of service delivery indicate that transformation remains incomplete.

Education has been widely recognized as a central component of post-conflict recovery and peacebuilding (Novelli & Smith, 2011). However, its transformative potential depends not only on physical infrastructure but also on equitable access, community trust and institutional accountability. The continued barriers faced by women and girls underscore the need to address both structural inequality and culturally embedded constraints.

The analysis demonstrates that educational reform in Khyber District reflects institutional progress without full relational consolidation.

Security Sector Reform and Community Trust

Security reform presents a similar pattern. Participants acknowledged improved stability and reduced militant activity, reflecting the success of structural stabilization efforts. The integration of local forces into formal policing institutions aligns with broader security sector reform principles (Bryden & Hänggi, 2005).

Nevertheless, perceptions of inefficiency, bureaucratic rigidity and limited accountability indicate that relational trust remains fragile. The continued reliance on jirga-based dispute resolution mechanisms reflects the enduring cultural legitimacy of traditional structures alongside formal institutions.

These dynamics highlight the importance of relational engagement in security governance. Without consistent accountability and community participation, structural securitization risks reinforcing distance rather than strengthening legitimacy.

Cultural and Participatory Dimensions of Transformation

Conflict Transformation Theory underscores the cultural dimension of change, emphasizing the need for inclusive dialogue and locally grounded legitimacy. Developments such as the Pashtun National Jirga of October 2024 illustrate persistent demands for security, justice, socio-economic investment and meaningful participation in governance processes (Borthakur, 2024).

The convergence between these public articulations and the findings of this study suggests that integration remains an evolving process. Institutional incorporation has altered formal governance structures, yet long-term transformation depends on participatory mechanisms, consistent service delivery and sustained engagement with community concerns.

CONCLUSION

The integration of erstwhile FATA into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa represents one of the most consequential constitutional reforms in Pakistan's recent governance history. In Khyber District, the merger has clearly dismantled the legal and administrative exceptionalism that characterized the colonial-era Frontier Crimes Regulation and has extended provincial institutions into a previously marginalized region. Structural reforms including judicial incorporation, policing integration and educational expansion reflect meaningful institutional restructuring.

However, the findings of this study demonstrate that structural incorporation alone does not equate to full socio-political transformation. While formal governance mechanisms have been extended, relational trust between citizens and state institutions remains uneven. In education, infrastructural expansion coexists with persistent concerns regarding teacher shortages, gender disparities and service quality. In security, improved stability and reduced militant activity have not entirely resolved perceptions of bureaucratic inefficiency or institutional distance. The continued reliance on informal dispute resolution mechanisms further underscores the coexistence of formal integration and culturally embedded governance practices.

Through the lens of Conflict Transformation Theory, the post-merger experience of Khyber District can be understood as a process of ongoing transformation rather than a completed reform. Structural change has advanced significantly, yet relational and cultural dimensions of governance remain in transition. Sustainable integration requires not only constitutional reform and administrative redesign but also consistent service delivery, participatory governance mechanisms and deliberate trust-building between institutions and communities. The findings reflect community perceptions during the study period and highlight the inherently evolving character of governance consolidation in post-merger Khyber District.

The case of Khyber District illustrates that post-conflict integration in historically marginalized regions demands alignment between institutional frameworks and lived realities. The long-term success of the FATA-KP merger will depend on whether structural reforms are accompanied by inclusive governance practices capable of consolidating legitimacy and fostering durable peace.

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