



The Effects of Militancy and Military Operations on Pashtun Culture and Traditions in FATA

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Abstract

Two events in the last five decades proved to be disastrous for the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), now part of KP province: the USSR invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and 'War on Terror' initiated by the US against militants in Afghanistan in 2001. After the incident of 9/11, FATA became the centre of global terrorism and emerged as the most dangerous place. Taliban's rule was overthrown in Kabul, and they escaped and found refugees across the eastern border of Afghanistan with Pakistan. This paper aims at studying the emergence of Talibanization in FATA and its impacts on the local culture and religion. Furthermore, the research studies the effects of military operations on FATA's cultural values and codes of life. Taliban, in FATA, while taking advantage of the local vulnerabilities and the state policy of appeasement, started expanding their roots and networks throughout the country. They conducted attacks on the civilians and security forces particularly when Pakistan joined the US 'war on terror.' Both the militancy and the military operations have left deep imprints thus affected the local culture, customs, values, and religious orientations in FATA.

Keywords: War on Terror, FATA, Militancy, Military Operations, Cultural Impacts

1. Introduction

This study explores different aspects of the militancy and military operation in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan and its impacts on the culture and traditions of the area. In this research paper, the scholars summarise a dearth of literature on militancy and its impacts on the culture and traditions of the tribal belt of Pakistan. Furthermore, the scholars suggest the literature based on militancy and counter-militancy in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in general and tribal belt particularly amidst heavy debates on the conflicts among the religious extremist and state of Pakistan. For the case of religious extremism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA, the scholars contended that since Afghan war, the support of religious extremists and militants have badly hurt the 'Pashtunwali Code'. Though the cultural identity and Pashtunwali were not eliminated, but these are seriously suppressed for the last four decades. The Pashtun community, especially the people of FATA did not acknowledge the vehemently vaccinated ideology of radicalism and extremism. They have shown strong resistance from

time to time against these terrible and self-made notions and thinking about their culture and religious attachments.

The era between 1979-1991 is known as the new Cold War in the history of international politics. It was a period of extreme tension and hostility between the then two superpowers i.e., the United States and the Soviet Union based on many indirect conflicts, disputes, and small-scale skirmishes. In this context, the Afghan crisis of the 1980s became the watershed to the Soviet Union as an “evil empire” and the US made this war as a heap of history for Moscow. The end of the Cold War was winded up on the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and unification of Germany after the fall of Berlin Wall and Eastern Europe’s gaining freedom from the hard hold of socialism. It was a general concept that cultural, ethnic, Radical, and religious extremism disturbed the world peace (Roy, 1999). In this context, the popular Huntington theory of the post-Cold War era “*The Clash of Civilizations*” predicted revolutionary changes in the contemporary world and this theory is thought to be applicable in the regions of Europe, and South, Southwest, Southeast Asia and Africa (Huntington, 1996). During the Cold War, the existence of religious ideology in Pakistan to counter Soviet Union threatened the concept of national integration and stability of the country. This phenomenon of religious extremism and militancy existed in the North-West of Pakistan which adversely affected the concept of the cultural identity of the Pashtun community (Salim, Semetko, & Zehraa, 2018; White, 2008).

2. Literature Review

The rise of extremism started in FATA after the Soviet Union’s intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979. During this period, many traditional mullahs and religious clerics started a holy war in Afghanistan but affected the Pashtun populated areas on both sides of the border. The proxy war, directly and indirectly, affected the culture, art, and literature of Pashtun society. The Pashtun were used as fuel for fire during this war in the name Islam and holy Jihad. The curriculum of Pakistan, generally and in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa particularly, were prepared in University of Nebraska (USA). However, after the defeat of Soviet Union, the single superpower United States and its allies left the religious extremist groups unturned, which strengthened its roots in the tribal belt of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The poison of this proxy war has been still facing by the people of FATA. It brings its devastating impacts on the culture and religion of the Pashtun community, especially the people of FATA (Shafiq & Rehman, 2018; Kakar, 2017; Hilali, 2017).

The invasion of Afghanistan by Soviet Union provoked an anger in the local population. They started a holy war commonly known as ‘Afghan Jihad’ against the USSR. Besides, the local Afghans, the tribal people of FATA had supported the Afghan mujahidin against Soviet’s occupation due to ethnic, cultural, and religious affinities. The withdrawal of the USSR from Afghanistan did not prove to be attractive because a civil war erupted among different religious and ethnic factions. The emergence of the Taliban government in Kabul that was very much supported by Pakistan, not only attracted the local Afghans, but also the tribal people of FATA. After the incident of 9/11, for which the Taliban and Al-Qaeda were held responsible, the US initiated war on terror in Afghanistan. The Taliban government in Kabul was overthrown, and the top leadership of Taliban “managed to escape and found refuge across Afghanistan’s eastern border with Pakistan, i.e., FATA (Gunaratna, 2008; International Crisis Group, 2006). However, the militants got stronger after every passing day. The tribal people provided them safe havens and other help due to cultural factors. Besides, the military forces and government of Pakistan issued a policy of appeasement, as “from 2002-2004 military did nothing to prevent

Talibanization movement in FATA from consolidating their bases in South Waziristan” (Naazer, Mahmood, & Ashfaq, 2017; Rashid, 2012).

‘War on Terror’, initiated by the US in Afghanistan, has direct links with the emergence of militancy in the tribal areas. After the attack on Al-Qaeda and Taliban bases and infrastructure by US-led coalition forces in 2001, the epicentre of terrorism shifted from Afghanistan to the tribal belt of Pakistan. The region proved to be a hunting ground for Al-Qaeda and its offshoots to breed new outfits (Rehman, Rahman, & Ali, 2018; Ahmad, 2002). The support from the local people, and local cultural codes, and the policy of appeasements from the state, encouraged them to proliferate in various parts of the country. Initially, the Taliban focused on providing the Afghan Taliban and foreign militants with human resources and shelter. However, they also started undermining the local socio-cultural system, disturbed the law and order, and challenged the writ of the state. They destroyed the local culture, kidnapped, and killed local Maliks who were alleged to be pro-government. From January 2002 until the spring of 2004, the military did nothing to prevent the Taliban from consolidating their bases in South Waziristan. Having confidence of their safety, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda started their fiefdoms in South Waziristan, killing tribal elders, who they believed, were spying for the US (Burki, 2010; Rashid, 2012).

Taliban, in FATA, started expanding their roots and networks throughout the country and conducted attacks on the civilians and security forces. To wipe out the Taliban and militants from FATA, several military operations have been conducted. Operation Zarb-e-Azab was the most prominent one that destroyed the very bases of the militancy in the tribal areas. It is pertinent to mention that the wave of militancy and military operations has deeply affected almost all walks of FATA. Hundreds of thousands of local people got displaced. The operations left deep religious, psychological, and social impacts, and “terrorist activities and military operations have destroyed the local culture of FATA” (Chughtai, 2013).

3. Materials and Methods

This section focuses on the methods, techniques and research questions and its response applied for doing the field work. After that, the scholars explain Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan as a field site as a case study. The sub-sections of the study discussing the field work, access to a various region and well-educated experienced people in the field are chosen to collect the relevant data related to this research. The scholars discuss and explain the related issues and problems of sampling and collection of data. As religious extremists and Pashtun ethical issues have been expected to come out of this data collection, the scholars have discussed them in the later section. In the end, the scholars elaborated and explained the limitations and suggestions based on the available data. The method used in this article is qualitative, historical, and analytical. The scholars have used primary as well as secondary data and applied mixed method approach for analysis and discussion.

For the primary data, interviews are conducted with various experts and other relevant people, who belong to FATA. In secondary data, books, journals articles, newspapers and internet sources are used to make this study more authentic and get its findings materialised for the future scholars. The authors worked and tried to use both analytical and descriptive methods, along with the empirical method. The research is qualitative as it defines facts after finding required information from primary and secondary sources. The main objectives of the researchers have been to conduct structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews with

writers, scholars, diplomats, academicians, politicians, journalists, and bureaucrats, so the qualitative techniques are applied. In this regard, a purposive sampling is used in this study. The study is critical because methods of authentication, interpretation, reinterpretation, and comparison of the evidence being linked to the changing movements in religion and nationalism are used in this research.

4. Discussion and Findings

4.1. Benefits of Local Culture for Taliban in FATA

Along with other factors, the culture of FATA and its people have played a decisive role in the emergence and expansion of Talibanization and militancy. Since its inception, the movement has always been Pashtun-led and dominated by tribal Pashtuns. Taliban have been "intelligent enough to exploit the tribal ethnic and religious sentiments in their favour" (Rana, Sial, & Basit, 2010). The tribal people provided full support under the cultural codes of 'Pashtunwali.' Pashtunwali is a set of codes that govern the lives of the tribal people. It is the cornerstone of the tribal society, and "is practiced as a religion." (Rehman, 2015). It is Pashtunwali that shapes the behaviour of the local people from cradle to the grave. The tribal codes of Pashtunwali have benefited the Taliban and militants in the following ways:

a. Panah Warkawal (Shelter Giving)

Panah means to take someone in personal protection. As per codes of Pashtunwali, even the most notorious criminal will be given protection if asked for Panah or Shelter. So, the reason for the presence of foreign and local militants in FATA at that time is simple: the tribal concept of 'Panah Warkawal' or Shelter giving. Therefore, under Panah "unconditional refuge and hospitality to Arabs, Chechen's and Uzbeks have made the area as a hotbed of militancy." (Kakar, 2014).

b. Badal (Revenge)

Taking revenge is considered to be an obligation in the tribal codes. Pashtuns never used to forgive any wrong done to them irrespective of the consequences. The local people of FATA whose family members have been killed in military operations joined hands with the Taliban to take revenge. However, the families whose members have been either kidnapped or killed by the Taliban supported the military forces to take revenge. This led to a civil war in FATA among different clans and tribes. "The Taliban used the concept of Badal to recruit new fighters, citing civilian casualties in counter-Taliban operations and also in US drone attacks" (Afsar & Samples, 2008).

c. Melmastia (Guest-ship, Hospitality)

Melma means guest and Melmastia means serving and protecting the guest. It obligates the Pashtuns to provide and offer protection and serve the guests, transcending race, caste, and economic status. A Pashtun must and should give honour to guests as long as he/she does not violate cultural codes, and no one should harm the guests. "The Taliban have benefited from Pashtun hospitality while traveling in the Pashtun belt, availing food and shelter as a built-in auxiliary for the insurgency" (Afsar & Samples, 2008: p. 26). When military operations were conducted in FATA, tribal people resisted it because they were of the view that they were

fighting our guests due the strategy of Pakistan's government to help US against the Taliban in the war on terror.

d. Nanawatey (Forgiveness)

The concept of Nanawatey or forgiveness can be interpreted in different ways in the Pashtuns culture. The term is flexible and means seeking forgiveness from the victims. It also means asking for protection against enemies. Among Pashtuns, it is the sign of weakness to ask for forgiveness and a kind of self-humiliation. But, once requested, it is obligatory to accept the request. Taliban, after the war on terror, asked the local people for protection under Nanawatey. Nanawatey is the only alternative to Badal (Revenge). Through this method, the "Taliban has exhorted the aggrieved persons to join the insurgency to restore their honour or avenge the death of family members" (Rana, 2009).

e. Tarboor (Cousin)

The tribal people always used to be involved in the inter-tribal rivalries. They used to be in enmity with their cousins or Tarboors. With the emergence of the Taliban in FATA, those families who were weak and unable to take revenge of the stronger families "found a chance of increasing their strength by joining the Taliban" (Baloch, 2016). Therefore, such families warmly welcomed the Taliban to showcase their company as a source of strength against the cousins etc with whom they had conflict.

4.2. Impact of Militancy on Culture and Religion of FATA

The global war against terrorism after the 9/11 incident and the consequent rise of militancy in FATA not only affected the very peace and stability of Pakistan, but the social and cultural fabric of FATA also got disrupted. The culture and religion of FATA was affected in several ways as follows:

a. Maliks (The Tribal Chief)

In FATA, Maliks remained key figures in social and political activities. Their words were final, and everyone was bound to follow them. They remained a source of history, authority, and inspiration. It was Malik through which the Political Agent controlled his administration. With the emergence of militancy in the tribal areas, Maliks' role and influence decreased in their respective areas. "The militants deliberately killed 150 pro-government tribal elders, members of peace committees, specifically the government-backed Maliks to destroy the traditional source of authority and consolidate their grip in these areas" (Ghumman, 2006). The Mulla (cleric) who was subordinate to the tribal chiefs replaced the Maliks and emerged as arbitrator between the local people and the state. "Such tactics have greatly undermined the status and efficacy of the traditional structure that had been prevalent in the tribal society for centuries until the post-9/11 onslaught of militants" (Nawaz, 2009).

b. Hujra (Guesthouse or Outhouse)

Hujra remained a centre and a platform for social gatherings and interactions. It is a place where tribal elders and the people used to come together for discussing different issues. After the rise of militancy and Talibanization in FATA, the role of Hujra was affected and replaced with

Mosque. “The rise of militancy propelled the Mullah from mosques to Hujra” (ICG Asia Report No. 126, 2009). It favoured the Taliban because doing so, they were able to exploit the religious sentiments of the local people in their favour.

c. Jirga System (Council of Tribal Elders)

Along with the abolishment of the institution of Hujra and its replacement with the Mosque, the militancy has also deeply affected the traditional conflict resolution mechanism of tribal Jirga. Jirga has been used to solve the issues and problems of the local community. But the Taliban undermined Jirga system and imposed their own brand of Islamic governance (Mahmood, Ullah, & Ashfaq, 2018). It was useful for them because they could easily interpret the Islamic laws according to their own needs. Instead of Maliks and tribal elders, “the clerics participated and the guaranteed the implementation decisions of Jirga being arranged in Mosques. Such guarantees were previously provided by the tribes and Maliks, but due to decrease in their influence, it is now given by the Mullah” (Basit, 2010). Jirga interpreted issues through the prism of local customs and codes. But the Taliban implemented a harsh and strict version of Islam through their own version of governance system in FATA and PATA (Azim, Mehmood, Hussain, 2018).

d. Attan (Traditional Dance)

Attan is the local dance of the tribal areas in which men and women dance, singing songs on the beats of drums or Dhol. Even in the Hujras and guesthouses, there used to be a music program, followed by local dance or Attan. “It started vanishing during Afghan war and particularly due to the emergence of Talibanization in the aftermath of the 9/11 incident” (Mahsud, 2016). Taliban banned the music and “the familiar beat of Attan Dhol is hardly heard in public” (Ullah, 2016).

e. Religious Conservatism

While pursuing their interests, the Taliban have sponsored the extremism and conservatism in the Pashtun society. Textual literature was distributed to Islamise and radicalise the society. New social order was deeply coloured, and conservatism was installed. Training centres were created for the physical and mental hypnotisation of the youth of FATA and Islamic principles were misinterpreted to pursue their personal interests. Before that, both men and women used to sit together and perform various traditional rituals, including the local dance. Nargis Bibi, 60 years old, told the author while recalling the Attan dance that "there was a time when we used to dance together that were held regularly in Waziristan." She says that "we were participating it among the male members but hardly anyone dared to humiliate and disrespect us" (Bibi, 2019).

Moreover, women and girls in the mountainous regions of FATA used to go to ‘Gudar’ i.e., small river to fetch fresh water from the natural reservoirs. They used to go for collecting woods from the fields and mountains for household cooking. "Hence, there were hardly any restrictions over the movement of women in these mountainous areas. Though they used to move freely, no one could dare intruding in the honour of women" (Baloch, 2016). But with the rise of militancy in FATA, going to Gudar was banned and strict rules of Purdah for women were applied which restricted them to remain at homes. Music was declared as Haram and against the Islamic laws and Shariah.

4.3. Impacts of Military Operations

Initially, the activities of militants were confined to the areas of FATA. But with every passing day, they expanded their networks and started targeting civilians and military forces. As a result, military operations were to counter these militants and terrorists in FATA. The operations include Operation Enduring Freedom (2001-2002), Operation Al-Maizan (2002-2006), Operation Rah-e-Nijat (2007-2008), and Operation Zarb-e-Azab (2014). These operations left certain lasting impacts on the religion and cultural outlook of FATA.

a) Positive Impacts

The militants in FATA had enforced their own version of Islam mainly to exploit the local people of the area. Religion was used to spread their ideas and convince the people for getting specific political interests. They asked the local inhabitants to join hands to fight jihad, and by doing so, they will be awarded Heaven in the next world. If they refuse to fight against the US and Pakistan's military forces, they are Kafirs and will go to the Hell. According to Wahid Mehsud, the Taliban asked the local people that fighting jihad is the only way of going to Jannah (Heaven). The Taliban "induced the local youth with hope for paradise, in exchange for giving their lives for the glory of Islam." He further states that "boys were told that army personnel of Pakistan are not true Muslims and should be killed as they are helping America" (Mehsud, 2019). Sadaf Wazir shared that "the notion of Suicide which was once considered an illegal practice in Islamic injunctions was not only legalised but highlighted as an act of ultimate sanctity. Even the phonetics of words like suicide was changed into Fidai were changed to make it easy for the social understanding of the people and to fit best in the social order" (Wazir, 2019).

When military operations started in FATA against the local militants, they not only targeted the local militant groups but also brought awareness among people about the ideology of the Taliban. Majority of the interviewees shared that the local people started abandoning Taliban groups when they came to know that Taliban are fighting not for the sake of Islam, but for their self-interests. Khan Zaman argued that "after migrating to other parts of the country because of military operations, people belonging to FATA came to know the exact identity of the Taliban. They realised that Taliban are fighting for personal or some vested interests especially for monetary benefits and have nothing to do with the concept of Islam" (Zaman, 2019). Regarding resistance of local people for military operations, most of the respondents were of the view that initially, the people opposed the military operations because of their ideological orientations and their misunderstanding of Islam. But later, their perception about fighting their arm forces changed. "After interacting with the outside world beyond FATA, the tribal people started thinking out the box and rationally. They cooperated with the armed forces to root out militancy and terrorism from the region. They realised that resistance, which is considered to be the most dominating trait of the tribal people, and the use of force are not the good options in social relations" (Wazir, 2019).

Regarding the impacts of the military operations on the cultural outlook of the tribal people, 90% of the respondents are of the view that migration and displacement have left positive impacts. The alien cultural traits are adopted after migration to the new habitats. People after migration into an alien habitat are constrained to live their lives following norms and mores of the new society. People of the new habitats used to make fun of the traditional traits of migrated people, thus they got constrained to adopt new ways and ethos. Another argument has been

that “people to people contact in cities and towns exposed them to the outside ecosystem, thus they became more secularised. They moulded their behaviours and started behaving in new ways” (Ullah, 2019).

Most of the respondents believe that the dresses of both male and female got changed when they settled in the metropolitan cities. Male started wearing jeans and dress pants. Women used to go outside for shopping in the malls. The people of FATA never experienced such things. The conservatism that was inculcated in the region of FATA has decreased because of military operations and peace is restored. Non-Governmental Organizations which were considered to be foreign funded to a conspiracy, are given space and even appreciated by the local people. The local culture has promoted in certain aspects. It is also assessed that cultural traits like Adabi Sangar, Rabab, Hujra and Mehfil are given the same sanctity after eradication of terrorism through military operations.

b) Negative Impacts

Although military operations have played a vital role in eradicating terrorism, extremism, and militancy, it has let negative effects on the local culture in many ways. Military operations distorted the cultural institutions and cultural traits of the people of FATA. While asking about the impacts, 80% of respondents are of the view that cultural institutions like Jirga, Hujra, Gudar, etc. are no more functional in true sense. The glorious cultural symbols like Shalwar Qamees, Chadar, Pagri (Turban) are portrayed as an identity of terrorists. At certain phases of military operations such stereotypes were tagged in such a way that tribal people with peaceful culture and values considered it justified and valid to be called as terrorists” (Zaman, 2019). Key cultural traits like ‘Ghairat’ and ‘Namos’ have been violated during military operations in FATA. 70% of the respondents are of the view that cultural values have been breached at check posts through traditionally punishing the people, and sentimental places are destroyed in shelling. During the operation Zarb-e-Azab, markets that symbolized the cultural heritage are destroyed and even the material has been auctioned. Auctioning of the markets hurt the sentiments of the local people, as people considered it not the bargain of their goods and land, but bargain of their honour."

Khan Zaman further says that "people were forced to live in camps which they took as an offense on their honour. Similarly, inhuman treatment of the people by the security forces and authorities constrained the people to consider themselves second class citizens. It was the worst time for the people of tribal area, and they considered it like burning in the hell to see their women insulted in camps and check posts. Similarly, women’s honour was breached at registration and ration points. Most of the respondents believe that in the entire process of eradicating terrorism from the tribal areas through military operations, the Pashtuns, particular the people of FATA have been portrayed as terrorists. They argued that, although, the state has countered the terrorist groups through serotyping, "it implicated more loss than the benefit because the whole Pashtun community was tagged as terrorists. The word tribal was synchronized as a terrorist" (Zaman, 2019). "Portraits of the tribal people were installed in the training camps and the cops were shown how terrorists look like. Films and movies like ‘War’ were aired depicting the tribal language in negative aspect, even though most of the terrorists were either Uzbeks or Arabs” (Rafiullah, 2019). Briefly, the respondents mentioned that during the entire campaign against terrorism, the tribal people were portrayed negatively, and were considered as terrorists.

5. Conclusion

Both the militancy and military operations have left deep impacts on the culture and social norms of the tribal people. On one hand, the militants and Taliban destroyed the cultural institutions of Maliks, Hujra and Jirga by imposing their version of Islam to achieve their self-interest. They brought conservatism, extremism and radicalism and exploited the local people of FATA in the name of religion. On the other hand, military operations have affected the local culture of FATA in both a positive and negative ways. The positive aspect is that it eradicated the menace of terrorism and militancy and revived the cultural activities and routine life in FATA. People who migrated to other parts of the country adopted and learned alien traits and adopted which suited them. People to people contact exposed the tribal people to the outside habitats, thus they became more secular and broad-minded. Military operations, along with positive impacts, negatively affected the local culture as well. The people of FATA were portrayed as terrorists in the entire counter-terrorism campaign. Those who adopted cultural values and local symbols were humiliated at check posts, rations points and in IDPs camps. Markets, that symbolised the cultural heritage and people had a sentimental attachment, were destroyed and auctioned. The word 'tribal' has been synchronised with militant and terrorist which has affected the people of FATA.

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