NEWSTRIBES OF THE NORTHWEST

Saving Journalism in Pakistan's Tribal Districts

The state of free speech, safety of journalists, survival of press clubs and public interest journalism in 'merged tribal regions' of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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FREEDOM NETWORK
DEFENDING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

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Exective Summary

Five years since the merger of the tribal region of former FATA into the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, the threats to freedom of expression, journalists and journalism that marked the recent War on Terror years continue unabated under renewed insurgencies and terror attacks with the region as its chief theatre, stymieing the prospects and promise of a much-vaunted merger amidst unending waves of militancy and militarization.

Whether it is the state or the society, the government policies or the attitudes of the tribes and people towards media and journalism, they continue to be shaped by the security outlook in a region where both militancy and attendant securitization have bred threat, suspicion and paranoia, threatening prospects for peace, dialogue and development. It keeps the region embroiled in an insular combative, and a conservative tribal, mould that the merger promised to break it free from.

The former FATA region along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border saw some of the worst attacks and casualties among journalists through the “War on Terror” years post 9/11. Going by the experiences of journalists in the last five years of the merger, as documented in this study, it seems their worries about safety, and concerns about media freedoms, are far from over.

Then dubbed as one of the most dangerous places and assignments for journalists in the world, the region has been, and remains today, an imperilled and volatile zone where precious little has changed by way of favourable conditions for journalism and freedom of expression. It appears that not much has been learnt from the blood-soaked decades of the War on Terror, whose history is often written in the blood of journalists who died in the line of duty.

As one journalist said in Kurram: “If there is no safety, there cannot be real media work but controlled information that serves the parties to a conflict more than the people caught in it.” With journalists at the forefront of living and reporting the threat of renewed hostilities and attendant instability during these last five years, the state of media and journalism in the region illustrates the immensity of that threat like nothing else. Conflict and terror attacks have registered a gradual and consistent spike since the merger in 2018, getting worse over the months and years, threatening peace and forcing communities to rise in protest against the state’s failure to provide security and rid the region of the corrosive, festering militancy and militarization.

Now, as then, once again local journalists walk the tightrope of a profession that, instead of active and sustained support from the state and media bodies and organizations given the situation on the ground, turned alarmingly perilous as it continues to face hostilities from the state institutions, the pro- and anti-state militants active in the region, the authorities governing the tribal districts, the tribes caught between tradition and half-hearted attempts at modernization and mainstreaming, and most of all, parent media organizations based urban metropolises outside the region.

Post-merger, media development in the former FATA and access to information has increasingly become a tough call and journalism a hazardous calling, with the mobility of journalists greatly restricted due to widespread insecurity. This has resulted in a dynamic where information, especially security-related, is monopolized by the security establishment and district authorities because often it cannot be independently confirmed. Little has changed in the region since 2001 when active conflict came to the region; the culture of "intelligence" as a main source of information gathering, and the use of media to propagate state narratives remain entrenched more than ever.

The traditional long-standing gap between the citizens and the state within the tribal districts' political and governance system is huge, and a thorny issue. This could only be helped through dialogue between both, with the help of local media that allows free exchange of views. However, as in the past, the post-merger communication regime is aimed at only "strengthening the hand of the government through strategic communication", not strengthening local voices and empowering the citizens through independent, interactive media.

The "handling and managing" of media – whether on the ground, such as the local radio stations of official social media platforms, or the metropolitan mainstream media outside the region – is done within the confines and exigencies of "strategic communication" to contribute to "local and national visibility, and buy-in, for the reform processes." Such an agenda may be helpful to the development project in a difficult region, as the authorities see it but being "strategic" means it lacks often transparency and accountability. And more importantly, it hampers the inclusion of local voices in the debate and dialogue around development priorities - especially women's - and decision-making. While consultations do happen by way of public hearings where people participate in large numbers, they can hardly be an equivalent or a substitute for independent local media enabling free expression and participation – fundamental rights that are at a premium in the tribal districts.

Again, the "lack of support" from parent media organizations amidst a region traumatized by militancy and military operations has direly contributed to the vulnerability of journalists in the field, leaving them exposed to harm. And not just journalists but to the cause of journalism and people in the region, by and large. From Bannu to Bajaur, every single journalist interviewed for this study – and there were close to 50 interviews – said there was little interest on the part of mainstream media to explore the people's problems in the newly merged districts but conflict and security issues only.

This lack of focus on people's issues is a double-edged sword: It exposes journalists to harm because they are not seen by local communities as highlighting the real local issues and stances that affect them, and it makes mainstream media and its audiences in the rest of Pakistan perceive issues of the merged areas from a security and security establishment's lens. And finally, the development of the region that the merger promised, the progress or lack of it on those promises, does not come across in media discourse.

If one is to take the tenor of voices against the merger emerging from the merged areas, it is an indicator that the merger hasn't delivered. And yet, due to the media's emphasis on conflict, the debate about the region and its peoples' predicament of suffering both ways – due to the double jeopardy of militancy as well as lack of development post-merger - remains out of media and public discourse. A preponderance of conflict-related news has contributed to strengthening the war/conflict political economy from which different, unaccountable but powerful, interests benefit at the cost of the progress of the region and its people.

Proving the cynical anti-merger lobby right – "We told you so!" – the state is presently more occupied with strengthening its hold over the region, its people and land, with controls on media a testimony to that, than shaking the tribal boat amidst a suppressed storm of simmering discontent. In this "state within a state", one is not sure whether it is the nation-state or the "tribal state" that is stunting journalism and media development more. Pernicious attitudes towards media and freedom of expression have hardened within the limbo of 'neither here, nor there", a vacuum where a tentative security-obsessed state has abolished the pre-merger FCR rule but failed to enforce its writ completely and unequivocally when it comes to ossified tribal attitudes towards development.

In their struggle to give people a voice - especially in the tribal region where journalists themselves are tribesmen, running the risk of banishment through the label of "a traitor to the tribal cause" if they do not highlight tribal dissent in the face of decades of militancy and attendant militarization – journalists are

caught dangerously between their duty to uphold freedom of expression and the forces that seek to quash it.

The merger of the tribal districts – in essence, a fresh start for the former FATA region after 70 years of neglect and deprivation – is an opportunity lost in the domain of people-led development and the media's role in spurring such a paradigm shift. And thereby ensuring transparency, accountability, good governance, human rights and democracy for a territory that was promised the many rewards of national mainstreaming under the merger.

Starting anew, the region could have been a model for how the aspirations of a people, and resolve on the part of the state and authorities, could usher in a new era to end the trials of a long–suffering region and people. Instead, the failure to ensure media freedoms and freedom of expression in the tribal districts keeps the society and the state in former FATA embroiled in a mutually corrosive relationship, allowing undemocratic power centres and anti-state entities to strengthen roots – essentially, a perpetuation of the old repressive paradigm, only under a different name.

Chapter 1

Introduction – Bitter Pills To Swallow

In an interview with reporters at the Wana Press Club in South Waziristan in late 2023, during what was the last stop in a series of visits to Pakistan's northwestern tribal areas and adjacent districts bordering Afghanistan, a reporter spoke of the need for having a trauma centre for journalists based in what are now the "merged districts" of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

"The government, both at the provincial and federal level, promised us a trauma centre for the tribal journalists but nothing came of it", said the journalist.

The journalism school at the University of Peshawar (UoP) had established one such centre, in 2014, with help from the DW Akadamie.[1] At the time, the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) was still that – a semi-autonomous buffer zone on the border with Afghanistan, governed by the centre and its representatives - the President, the provincial governor of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the province abutting it, and the political agents in the 7 tribal agencies and the bordering "frontier regions." This was done under the discriminatory Frontier Crimes Regulation, a legacy of the British era, since Pakistan's independence that allowed no freedom of speech and assembly, and collective punishment for individual actions. There were no courts or police, no media and political rights. For more than 70 years of Pakistan's independence, the people of the region had lived without fundamental human rights when citizens in the rest of Pakistan had access to them under the constitution.

The trauma centre was built in December 2014, the year and the month that saw the massacre of children at the Army Public School in Peshawar, a devastating culmination to 14 years of a bloody conflict – the so-called "War on Terror" – that befell the region post 9/11. The APS attack, claimed by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) or the Pakistani Taliban, was in retaliation to the military operation, *Zarb-e-Azb*, against the TTP militants[2] in North Waziristan. The Operation, launched in June that year, displaced close to a million people[3] from the tribal agency, including journalists.

[1] https://akademie.dw.com/en/home/s-9519

[2] Here on, the terms TTP and militants would be used interchangeably, suggesting armed insurgents/fighters associated with the TTP.

[3] https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/displaced-persons-dps-crisis-post-operation-zarb-e-azb-situation-report-15-july-2014

Six years earlier, in May 2009, another military operation, *Rah-e-Rast*, against militants in Swat had displaced 2.2 m in August 2009. All this time, detentions, displacement and killing of journalists were common, as was the debilitating psychological trauma of covering a protracted conflict with widespread death and destruction. To the trauma centre at UoP came journalists suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, those local to the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and others from the neighbouring FATA, in a region where journalism was immersed "in the extreme violence and daily threats"[4] of a relentless conflict.

When the trauma centre was launched that December, News Lens[5], an online news cooperative with which the author served as an editor for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan – the south-eastern border province of Pakistan with its own history of a simmering conflict, and where, too, journalists were frequently targeted and killed at the time – did a story to cover its inauguration. In the story, a Peshawar based Journalist Muhammad Irshad said that he had "not been able to sleep properly lately."[6] Irshad said he had been "suffering abnormal sleep patterns due to the burden of work and covering violent incidents day after day."

A Recurring Nightmare

Now, nearly a decade after that inauguration – and five years since the much-hyped merger of former FATA to the rest of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in 2018 – I turned to the journalist in Wana Press Club and asked a question I knew well the answer to: Why do you need a trauma centre?

Having had many conversations investigating how the conditions had changed for media in the wake of the merger – with journalists and press clubs in the seven "newly merged" tribal districts of former FATA, those in the adjacent "settled districts" affected by the post-2018 resurgence of militancy in the tribal region where displaced journalists from the region still live and work, and with authorities in the districts – I had little reservations about the legitimacy of the demand for a trauma centre for journalists in the merged areas.

Still, I wanted to hear it from the journalists. After all, 2023 was the year when Pakistan relived "the scary spectre of 2013" – when terrorist attacks "peaked at nearly four attacks a day, with nearly 2,700 total fatalities."[7] With resurgent

[4] https://www.dawn.com/news/1146809
[5] https://newslens.pk/
[6] https://newslens.pk/2015/03/18/trauma-center-helps-journalists-deal-with-stress/
[7] https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2023/03/29/explaining-the-resurgence-of-terrorist-violence-in-pakistan/

Talibanization and a growing incidence of terror attacks, that spectre is haunting the region again. Once again, it is in the news for all the wrong reasons; not that it has ever emerged into a peaceful, hopeful place from its last bout with bad news. And nowhere is that threat more palpable than in the merged districts, with military operations, suicide bombings, targeted killing, extortion by threats and violence, attacks on military and police installations and the consequent tightening of security and restrictions on civil liberties happening all over again, amidst increasing militarization of the region.

With journalists at the forefront of living and reporting the volatile situation, naturally it is the state of media and journalism in the region that illustrates the immensity of that threat like nothing else. But instead of active and sustained support given the situation on the ground, now, as then, once again local journalists walk the tightrope of a profession made hazardous by a witches' brew of hostilities emanating from the tribes unhappy with lack of peace and opportunity, the pro- and anti-state militants active in the region, the state institutions, the authorities governing the region and most of all, their parent organizations in mainstream media.

This "lack of support" from their employer media organizations - a complaint that surfaced in every *single interview* conducted for this report - in the face of rampant odds and threats has direly contributed to the vulnerability of journalists in the field, leaving them exposed to harm. Even when not actively "hostile" to their workers, the disregard for safety of their workers certainly puts the media organizations on the side of "harm". Just as the race for breaking news and a focus on conflict jeopardized the life and limb of journalists in the War on Terror years, it once again threatens the wellbeing of journalists during this renewed spike in terrorism-triggered insecurity in 2023. And not just the journalists but the very cause of journalism and people in the region, by and large. Not much has been learnt from the blood-soaked decades of the War on Terror, whose history is often written in the blood of journalists who died in the line of duty. That war may have morphed in its global context, shifting in shape or focus to other theatres, but for the people including the journalists in the region it continues, a recurring nightmare.

Said the journalist asking for a trauma centre: "Here we live under threat, a constant risk to our lives and wellbeing. We are a region amidst another cycle of the War on Terror. Bomb blasts and targeted killing have virtually unhinged our minds."

And then he added something that echoed the predicament of journalists in the region not long ago. Like the journalist in that 2014 News Lens story about the

inauguration of the trauma centre at the journalism school, he said: “There is no sleep for us.”

Left to their own devices

In 2006, when he came to receive us at the Mir Ali market in North Waziristan on a hot summer afternoon, Hayatullah Khan, the slain journalist from North Waziristan, looked more like a gun-toting militant than the friendly tribal journalist I knew. Both Khan and his brother had around their shoulders that great mower of men in these parts, the AK 47. “Why the gun, Hayatullah?”, I asked, amazed he was armed. “The government has told journalists that it can’t provide security to them”, he said, adjusting the white cap he always wore. “We are left to our own devices to stay safe.”

It was July, an uneasy time when the memory of several journalists killed in the neighboring South Waziristan was fresh. Usually not the safest of professions anywhere in Pakistan, journalism had turned deadly for reporters who stayed the course in the tribal areas. Others had simply packed up and left for towns in the “settled areas” where they could report on developments in the troubled areas from a safe distance.

“Let’s go home”, Khan grabbed me by the elbow, pulling us out of the little ice cream shop near the bus terminal in a hurry. Like he was afraid of being in a public spot. Quickly, we got into his old but sturdy pickup truck. His brother got in the back, gun on the ready, vigilantly scanning the landscape as if expecting a threat to materialize out of the desolation of dusty plains and villages we moved through.

As we drove through the market of Mir Ali - one of the three subdivisions of North Waziristan, and now, as then, a tense setting for the renewed targeted killings, terrorist attacks and military operations - with a signboard announcing that carrying firearms was prohibited in public places, I asked Khan if his brother went with him everywhere to watch over him. “He has to, I can’t drive and use a gun at the same time should something go wrong”, he answered.

“But that means staying with you all the time. What about his career? Doesn’t he study or work?”, I asked.

“He does, but someone has to take care of us. If it is not me, it has to be him. That’s the way it is”, he explained, in his matter-of-fact way, the tribal tradition.

Now in late 2023, while researching this report in the unstable districts of former FATA, I observed and learnt that the government had provided armed police guards to journalists for security. As we drove from Tank to Wana to meet journalists at the press club there, a journalist colleague who took me there had an AK47 placed by the driver's seat.

"The conditions are far from safe here. To be a journalist here is nerve-wracking," he said when I asked the question I had of Hayatullah Khan, all these years ago – why carry a gun? "In March this year, there was an [alleged] drone attack[8] in the south and a militant commander there called me to say that two children of his family were killed in the attack. He wanted me to carry the story on my channel. I couldn't. Nobody [in the mainstream media] is willing to carry news from the militants. When I refused, he threatened me, saying we, the journalists, were paid minions of the state."

His heightened threat perception - by no means exclusive to him but common to the entire journalism community in the tribal regions – is also borne out by a written statement issued by the Tehrik Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in August 2023.


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ترجمان تحریک طالبان پاکستان
MOHAMMAD KHURASANI

لا الہ الا اللہ

63/16-TTP-MDK_2023 حوالہ نمبر

خیبر پختونخواہ کے ضم اضلاع خاص کر ضلع خیبر اور وزیرستان کے صحافی، پولیس و فورسز کے چمچے / پالشی نہ بنے

تحریک طالبان خیبر پختونخواہ کے ضم اضلاع کے صحافی حضرات و سیکورٹی اداروں کے سورسز کو اطلاع دیتے ہیں کہ چمچہ گیری سے باز آجائیں۔ انشاء اللہ چمچے گیر صحافیوں اور سورس والوں کو نہیں چھوڑیں گے۔ پولیس اور مرتد آرمی والوں کو ہلاک اور طالبان کو شہید کا الفاظ استعمال کیا جائے، ستمبر 2023 میں ان دو اضلاع میں ہمارا اصل ٹارگٹ صحافی حضرات ہوں گے۔ اسلئے اگر زندگی پسند ہے تو انقلاب لانے کے لئے طالبان کا ساتھ دیں۔ شکریہ

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www.umarmedia.bz

[8] https://dissenttoday.net/news/drone-attack-kills-2-children-in-waziristan-locals-claim/

It warned journalists in the Khyber and Waziristan districts to desist from being "lackeys" of the police and military. It said militants killed in the conflict should be honored with the title *shaheed* – martyrs. In September, it warned, the TTP would be targeting journalists in the districts of Khyber and Waziristan. While there have not been any attacks on journalists from the militants, and some journalists say the announcement was fake – not issued by the TTP – it caused alarm and panic among journalists of the merged districts.

An anxious existence

Over the years, a continuation of the precarious conditions in which the tribal journalists live and work, now as then, raises the uncomfortable question: If 2006 was when the government wanted journalists to take measures for their safety, and 2014 was when journalists were losing sleep for want of peace, it appears not much has changed for media and journalists in the tribal region in 2023 - five years after the former FATA was merged into the rest of Pakistan, with the legal and constitutional guarantees spelled out under the "25th Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan, 2018."

"It is up to us to care for our safety and wellbeing," said the journalist, as we left the plains of Tank, the district neighbouring South Waziristan, and entered a mountainous terrain on our way to Wana. "We work in a region where always one or the other party [to conflict] is unhappy with us. We tread with care, but we also have to take measures to protect ourselves."

It was when I asked him how the conditions around him affected his psychological well-being that I learnt it wasn't just the "gun" he kept for safety, but he also took "pills" to sleep: "You cannot report here as you do in Lahore or Islamabad. It's a state of constant mental torture and anxiety. Once I took Lexatonil. Now I am on Citanew [both anti-anxiety, anti-depression drugs] and Rizek [for anxiety-related gastro-intestinal reflux]."

From guns to addictive pills, 2023 is the year when one would be forgiven for having the unsettling *deja vu* that the troubles that journalists and journalism - indeed the hapless, long-suffering people living in the tribal region - have historically faced in the region are far from over. And with it, a lingering question mark over the prospects for peace and progress, and participatory, transparent development, as promised under the merger.

As a journalist in Bajaur puts it: "Asleep or awake, ours is an anxious existence."

Chapter 1

Asphyxiating Expression

Alongside the occasional presser, it is common for protestors to hold *dharna* or sit-ins in front of the press club in Miranshah, the district headquarters of North Waziristan. North Waziristan, in late 2023, is yet again a district seething with danger and discontent and even though one does get to see the stream of news about soldiers and militants dying in security operations, one needs to visit the district to know that people's protests against the government and district administration are developments just as common. Alternately, this could also be witnessed and ascertained on social media platforms, in independent posts from the community and tribal journalists on ground, even as the mainstream media stays oblivious to such expression of people's sentiment and demands.

Any given day and the roadside plains along the Mirali to Miranshah road draw protestors from all over the district: Tribesmen demanding peace, services, and occasionally, the dead bodies of kin killed in security operations. Or they go to sit before the press club in protest, expecting local journalists to take their voice to the media.

In 2023, when a Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM)[9] sit-in in front of the Miranshah press club demanded that its arrested activists be released, the journalist Noor Beham, a former president of the press club, got a call from the administration that he was "facilitating the *dharna*, giving food to PTM activists and allowing them to use the press club toilets."

"I said if the administration does not want the *dharna*, it could always stop protesters at Sidgai [the main security check post at the entrance to the district] but once people turn up at the press club, it becomes a responsibility for media to listen to their grievances," said Noor Behram, adding that the authorities blamed him of working against the state.

The rise of PTM coincided with the merger of the former FATA in 2018 when the social movement, with leadership from the former FATA, took to the streets to protest the state's violation of human rights in the border regions. The government's stiff response, and its no-holds-barred policy, of arresting PTM

[9] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pashtun_Tahafuz_Movement

activists and denying it mainstream media coverage is well established. What is less debated is that at a time when media, and freedom of expression, in the region should have transformed for the better after a much-hyped constitutional merger, allowing equal and proportionate human rights to the tribal people in the wake of 7 decades of constitutional limbo - including the 15 years of brutal insurgencies in the wake of War on Terror and consequent militarization, and death, destruction and displacement in its wake – it underwent a deliberate setback, instead.

Five years on, this policy of snuffing dissent and controlling information, amidst a renewed wave of terror attacks, bombings and targeted killings with the region remaining as its chief theatre, continues to shape the conditions undermining media freedoms in the merged tribal areas of former FATA. The region along the border with Afghanistan saw some of the worst attacks and casualties among journalists through the War on Terror, post 9/11. Going by the experiences of journalists today, it seems their worries about safety and concerns about media freedoms are far from over.

In their struggle to give people a voice - especially in a tribal region where journalists themselves are tribesmen, running the risk of tribal banishment through the label of "a traitor to the tribal cause" if they do not endeavor to give voice to tribal dissent in the face of decades of militancy and attendant militarization – journalists are caught precariously between their duty to uphold freedom of expression and the forces that seek to quash it.

Consider the case of Gohar Wazir, the displaced tribal journalist who used to report from Bannu, the district adjacent to his native North Waziristan. Kidnapped in April 2023, and physically tortured with electric shocks and whiplashes, Wazir now lives in fear and anonymity, with no job and little support from his media organization. He was released after promising his abductors that he would not criticize the authorities. No one knows of his whereabouts as he lives in hiding, away from his children and family, facing threats and fearing attacks on his life.

It wasn't the first time he was targeted for his work: In 2019, he was briefly detained for covering a PTM meeting. In a career spanning 15 years, Wazir has covered public protests, militancy, military operations and displacement in the troubled tribal region. "I was repeatedly told to stop covering protests where the issue of dismantling pro-government militant groups is always a major demand," Wazir told RFE/RL in May 2023. "They can kill me at any time."[10]

[10] https://www.rferl.org/a/pakistan-journalist-attacked-abducted-press-freedom/32393605.html

“Whatever my plans for myself have all been washed away by this unfortunate chain of events; I have become psychologically handicapped, seeing no hope, avoiding communication with everyone for fear of giving away my whereabouts and my state of mind, and all movement,” said Wazir, despairing for his future. “Now I only want my children to have an education and a life.”

This struggle to give voice to dissent against systematic suppression could be seen as a concrete, visible barometer for the freedom of expression – more so because, after all, as a woman journalist from South Waziristan puts it, the PTM demands are also what the people want. They are in response to an immediate, desperate threat – a spike in insecurity, targeted killing, kidnapping, extortion, free movement of militants in the region, etc.

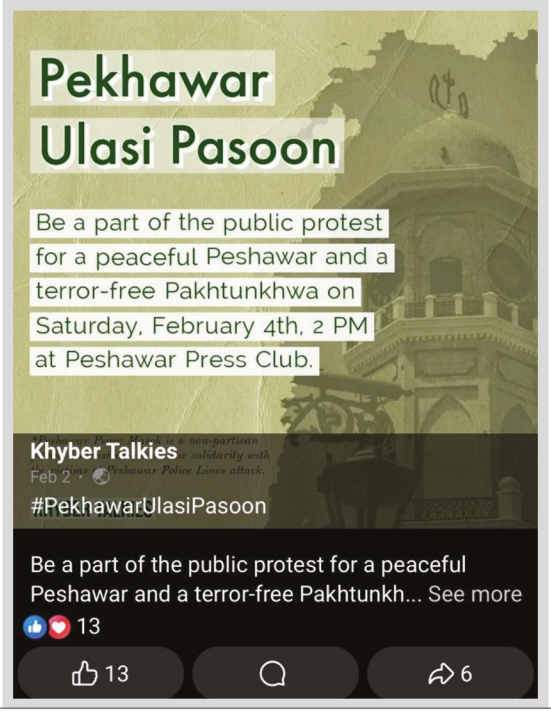
Since *the context and occasion for dissenting voices and expression is hinged to the situation of ongoing emergency alongside growing securitization of the region*, from which former FATA never completely emerged over the last 23 years, it may not be a *standard measure* for freedom of expression as it *obtains in peacetime*, some might say. Authorities in the tribal areas invoke the emergency situation and argument in support of their own curbs on

freedom of expression. They even argue for *emergency state measures* to fight *the emergency of militancy*; desperate times calling for stringent, desperate measures, even at the cost of civil liberties. But precisely because it is a state of emergency where local voices and sentiments are deliberately silenced, and local conditions about which little is known and debated in the rest of the country, such voices, and their expression or oppression, become important indicators of freedom of expression – not to mention the grave and persistent threats to lives and livelihoods of people caught up in that emergency.

For a region with a long history of marginalization and conflict, it is an immediate and powerful indicator of the people's collective will to assert themselves in the face of pervasive threat and oppression. In the absence of local media and platforms for participatory public debate to have a say in matters of governance and decision-making, the sole avenue left to people for expression against repression is to protest in the public domain. To this, tribesmen in the region have resorted, culturally and historically, to let their views known. And for their grievances against, and demands from, the government and the state be heard. Because of the urgency of the situation and its widespread impact on people and livelihoods, and because journalists have received threats, advisories and on occasion detention and attacks for covering it, this expression of dissent amidst growing insecurity and conflict with

multiple hostile actors serves as an apt frame to understand the current state of journalism and freedom of expression in the region.

In recent months and years, widespread insecurity and its paralyzing impact on the business of life has forced people in the tribal districts - and other "settled" districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa – to unite against the resurgent militancy and the state's failure to guarantee security. Those who have returned after years of displacement after the first wave of terrorism post 9/11, complain about the insurgents still active in their lands. Where they aren't, the villages and towns have turned into high-security zones, virtual garrisons under the control of the military. The general public sentiment is that people have had enough over the last couple of decades; enough of losing lives, livelihoods, land and resources to militancy and military operations.



Earlier in 2023, there were local rallies and widely attended demonstrations from Bajaur to Khyber, Malakand to Mohmand, Swat to Swabi and Lakki Marwat to demand peace and security through peaceful people's movements such as the local chapters of *Ulasi Pasoon(s)* – "public rising" in Pashto - and PTM. In January 2023, it was Bajaur[11], in July Khyber[12], where activists of different

political parties in Bara Khyber - the Bara *Siyasi Ittehad* - organized a peace rally, the *Tirah Amn March*. Even as the protestors demanded peace all over the province, a suicide bomber struck a mosque inside a police complex in Peshawar in January 2023, killing 84 people, most of them police officers.[13] This, and other consistent episodes of terror attacks throughout the year, kept everyone in the province and the rest of the country on edge, fueling mass disaffection and protests for peace, especially in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and its newly merged tribal districts.

The peace protests happened despite threats, and efforts on the part of local actors, both maliks and political leaders close to the establishment, to make them controversial, saying these were funded by foreign interests. Police registered cases (FIR) against certain leaders for speaking up against the state, and its institutions, for their failure to check militancy. This resistance to militancy has morphed into resistance to militarization because the local people see both, by their very nature, as flipsides of an untenable situation – insecurity. In Tirah, one of the two most vulnerable areas in the Khyber district alongside Bara, the Bar Kamberkhel and Shalobar clans of the Afridi tribe objected to army plans to establish security check-posts on local hills. Parleys and jirgas ensued, eventually forcing the army to abandon the plan because the tribes didn't want the *purdah* of their homes and villages to be violated by security outposts at high altitudes.

Since media and tribal journalists has clear instructions from district authorities not to cover such protests, a natural consequence of this is to resort to social media to organize such rallies, for public mobilization and outreach, indicating reliance on alternative digital media in a region where a controlled mainstream media continue to ignore local sentiment and voices.

The motivation on the part of the local youth, galvanized and politicized by the absence of human rights and enduring insecurity in all its human, strategic, and violent dimensions, has made social media a formidable political platform for local voices that have rallied behind the people's movements of PTM and *Ulassi Pasoon(s)* to participate from all over the country, including the merged areas. Such "freedom of expression", if that's what it may be called, appears to be "snatched" – as opposed to freely allowed and duly ensured – under the active threat of militancy and military presence. And with the tribes, peace activists and the political parties taking the lead, and the people following in their stride, it suggests that freedom of expression allowed willy nilly, is only realized in the

[11] https://www.dawn.com/news/1730174
[12] https://tnnenglish.com/tirah-aman-march-calls-for-peace-amidst-rising-unrest-in-khyber-district/
[13] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2023_Peshawar_mosque_bombing

beleaguered merged areas when a critical mass of people unite and rise for a collective cause, disregarding threats that stalk individuals, such as reporters, who are often silenced if they assert the freedom to report on local issues that go against the interests of militants, the military, and the new entrant into the former FATA's administrative landscape: the bureaucracy and the police. If an individual oversteps these invisible, yet palpable limits, as evidenced by widespread self-censorship – outside or within the official domain, as in the case of certain PTM followers with government jobs - they suffer a fate as grave as targeted killing as in case tribal elders for resisting militancy. Or stand to lose jobs, provoking official censure, lawsuits or getting transferred to far off locations away from the home district, for criticizing the state.

In the case of tribal notables, politicians or tribal maliks condemning militancy or refusing to pay ransom to militants, there are direct threats of violence with the militants target killing them or throwing grenades[14] at their houses to harm their families and destroy property. Many within or outside the folds of PTM and other movements have suffered such attacks. The PTM's dissent, widely suppressed by the state's apparatus and media, has ironically become a measure of freedom of expression: "Other than the PTM, everyone else including the politicians only speak in hushed tones," said a journalist in Khyber district.

As for the youth's vociferous resistance against militancy and militarization, another factor cited by locals, ironically, is the hounding of Imran Khan's PTI by the establishment. Where the party's largely youth following initially saw movements like PTM through the establishment's lens and narrative – anti-Pakistan, funded by foreign interests – they, the PTI, now walk in the same shoes as the state-hounded PTM, feeling more sympathetic and amenable to its demand for rights. While this may not be of great significance in the context of official curbs on freedom of expression and assembly in the tribal areas where youth, with or without PTM, are compelled to protest the growing insecurity and violations of human rights in any case, the PTM peace rally in Islamabad in August 2023, said an organizer, was hugely attended by PTI followers.

However, the fact that scores of activists and PTM leaders were detained, and roads blocked to the *jalsa* site, illustrates the challenges that dog freedom of expression in the region. If it asserts itself in the form of collective protests and demonstrations, it is precisely because of the people's will to break the silence prevailing under conditions of fear and oppression.

[14] https://twitter.com/khorasandiary/status/1678743239241629699

Chapter 2

Between The Devil and the Deep Sea

Since the resurgence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in the wake of the Pakistani state's decision to mainstream them[15], and the grim environment of fear and insecurity in its wake, space for media and journalism has shrunk drastically in the merged districts. As before, one defining characteristic of this second wave of insurgency is tighter control over information, more so if security-related, by the district administration, the army and its information wing, ISPR.

As a result, so is the media's dependency for such information on the state institutions that have a monopoly over it – since insecurity and related mobility limits access to information. They brook no resistance from media to carry its version of events. There have been instances where journalists have been attacked or harassed for the stories they have done – instances too many to cite here widely spoken of in the company of journalists. Consequently, they have drawn lines for themselves; increasingly they do not report proactively but wait for institutions – the administration, the ISPR – to release information to them. "We do not take risks ourselves to probe or push for information. By now we are all clear about what our limits are," said a journalist based in the former "frontier region" of Tank.

While journalists agree that the district administration and the security establishment are "generally helpful and accommodating", they speak in the same breath of "warning phone calls from them, when they report something as innocuous as the local party representatives of PTI cutting a cake on the birthday of Imran Khan, the PTI leader."

With the Taliban a party to the hostilities in the merged districts, the media has manifest instructions from authorities not to carry their side of the story – other than when they "claim" responsibility for a terror attack. The militants get in touch with reporters all the time, demanding their version be carried in media but it stays out of the news. While it translates into a backlash similar to the one that killed Mukkaram Khan Akif[16] - the Mohmand journalist who was killed

[15] https://newlinesinstitute.org/nonstate-actors/preventing-violent-extremism/pakistans-latest-attempts-to-mainstream-extremist-groups/
[16] https://tribune.com.pk/story/323271/targeted-attack-taliban-gun-down-senior-tribal-journalist-in-charsadda

when his employer, the VoA, refused to carry the Taliban version of the event – it also means that the story that emerges is sieved and perceived through the institutional standpoint, providing only the information that is cleared for the public, with little analysis or details to help audiences make sense of the conflict. Even though no one has been killed post-merger as Mukarram was, journalists are not safe either from serious violence, tortured as in the case of Gohar Wazir or wounded in incidents aimed at parties other than the press. Samiullah, a cameraman of Geo News based in Bajaur tribal district, was seriously injured in a suicide bomb blast on 30 July 2023 during a public gathering of Jamiat Ulema Islam-F. It killed 57 people and left 130 injured. He was rushed to a local hospital in Timergara for treatment, but due to the unavailability of adequate health facilities, was relocated to Peshawar for treatment. He has had several surgeries and is now back at work. Even though Geo TV helped with surgeries, such support is not widely or always available to journalists. With his cameraman Samiullah wounded, Hisbanullah, the Geo TV journalist in Bajaur, was called upon to report the bombing and its bloody aftermath singlehandedly, camera in one hand and a mic in another.

With the mainstream media refusing to entertain the Taliban's version, journalists find themselves with demands from militants to carry it on their personal social media platforms. They refuse in most cases, but when they do carry it in the face of a threat, it incites antagonism on the part of the security establishment that only wants its version of the story to reach people. "Today, I got a call from the Taliban, claiming they have killed two soldiers in a skirmish on the border," said a journalist in Bajaur. "How can I carry it on my Facebook without inviting the wrath of the security establishment? But I have also upset the militants. You are damned if you do and damned if you don't."

"We are caught between the devil and the deep sea," said another journalist long displaced from North Waziristan and now living in Peshawar.

Alongside those that were quite the norm during the conflict before the merger, new threats have emerged from the new power structures and centres including the district administrations and the police. Security, religion, culture, tradition (rewaj), and local politics all contribute to undermining free expression. Neither do journalists feel free to move about in their daily pursuit to gather news. In certain volatile places, like Mirali in North Waziristan, people cannot move around freely after 4 pm because everything closes down given the insecurity. Likewise, if there is a skirmish between security forces and militants, roads are closed for all movement. Curfews too are imposed as and when the situation demands. In all of the tribal districts, the local district administrations

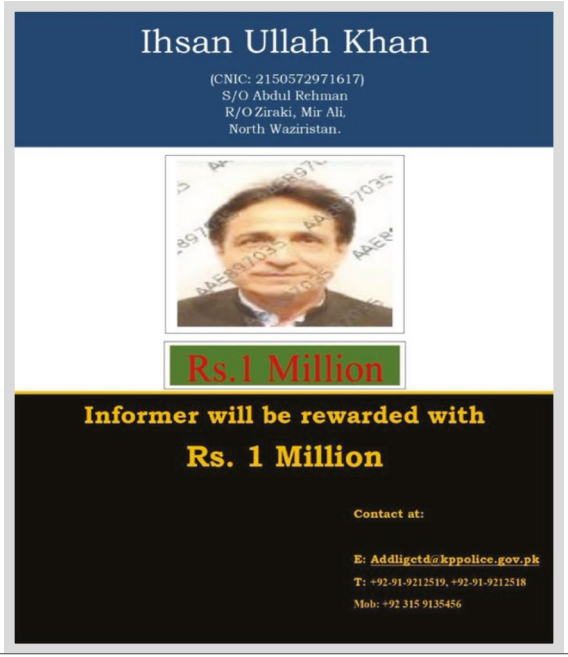
have provided security through police guards who stay at the press club or accompany them in the field.

"I am 44 now," said Hisbanullah, who looks every bit close to 60. "The last 23 years of these, every day we have spent dealing with a bombing here, a killing there, a kidnapping here and a disappearance there. Curfew, operations, pitched battles between the military and the state, rocket attacks…. Sometimes I feel like I should be doing an investigative story, something different by way of in-depth journalism, but how could I if there is no break from conflict and its reporting? Again, I can only do one if I am free to move around, visit an area or people to see for myself when I can hardly leave this [district administration] colony and go beyond the bazaar outside. Different groups and institutions are stopping us from our work, and from moving around. Every day, there are targeted killings and bombings; the threat has never abated here."

This, however, is not the case with embedded journalists brought in from Islamabad or elsewhere. They can travel to designated locations with the army and police providing security, but the local journalists cannot. "A journalist from Islamabad has seen the border but I haven't," said a tribal journalist in Wana. "The one from Peshawar has but I haven't. Again, the stories they leave with are what they are given or told; not what they have found themselves after interacting with the community. They can hardly move around freely if they are here embedded."

This lack of access to news due to restricted mobility becomes even more dire when one considers that different major tribes live in different, often remote, locations: For example, in North Waziristan, the Dawar in the plains of Mir Ali in North Waziristan, the Wazirs in the mountainous Razmak and beyond, well into the mountains and plains of the South. Similarly, the Mehsud are in mountainous Makin, Ladha and Kanigurum in South Waziristan.

Most people, including journalists, displaced by military operations in both South and North, remain in towns and cities adjacent to the region. While the state of widespread insecurity is a big concern, affecting mobility and disrupting lives with little access to electricity, access to water, schools and hospitals, it is the absence of communication facilities which forces journalists to stay out and away from their native villages. Nor can they go visit the site of a security operation to independently verify information. In Orakzai, for example, it is difficult because its journalists almost entirely live in and work from the neighbouring Hangu district. In North Waziristan, only a few of the press club members remain in the district and nearly all of them have a history of getting detained by authorities and then released. They report remotely or keep coming



In November 2023, the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province released a list of "most wanted terrorists", featuring the name and picture of a prominent tribal journalist and author from North Waziristan, Ihsan Dawar.

and going, often anonymously under the cover of night, as and when the situation in the district – mostly unstable or threatening for media – becomes favorable. "Travelling at night is actually more safe for us because no one recognizes us, and we travel without telling anyone about our travel plans", said one journalist in North Waziristan.

When journalists cannot access a site of military operation due to insecurity and lack of mobility, they depend on statements from ISPR - both for information and photographs. Here, occasionally, individuals from the community would release independent content on their social media platforms, refuting the official version. But for the authorities, journalists and the media remain suspect. And because they are well known within the officialdom, information is kept from them or shared on a "subject to subject" and "need to know" basis, and only when it is in the interest of the district administration or other authorities, as part of their "image building" exercise. Said a journalist in Miranshah: "It is hard to police the community everywhere but when a journalist uses his phone [to photograph or record video], we are stopped because the authorities know us all. Mobility is difficult to begin with, but we avoid travel and do not go around the district much if we can help it. We even

leave the press club by 4 pm [before dark]. When I see an ordinary person who does not dabble in the news criticize authorities, or reveal instances of corruption and misgovernance, and getting kidnapped, disappeared or killed, it affects us. How can we, who do all that as part of our job, be safe, then?"

According to Noor Behram, the former president of Miranshah Press Club, the journalists present on the ground in North Waziristan can be counted on fingers. Mostly they stay away, reporting from Bannu or Peshawar on developments back home. Some journalists maintain local residence in the tribal district and another in a nearby "settled" district or the provincial capital of Peshawar. Since they are just as vulnerable as the common person out in the street, they tend to keep their movement restricted.

Even then, threats come to them in the press club. In September 2023, gunmen attacked the Miranshah Press Club, claiming Noor Behram had posted personal pictures of the assailant, a police station house officer (SHO), on Behram's Facebook page. The assailants, tribesmen from the district, were the kin of the SHO. They brutally beat up Behram, breaking his wrist and leaving him wounded. He had to be rushed to the hospital for medical treatment.[17]

Incidents of violence against journalists are common, sometimes as a bombing or firing gunshots at the property of journalists – as in the case of Tahir in Mamond, Bajaur, where a bomb was planted before his house. He had reported that the security forces had killed three terrorists – also extortionists – and arrested their leader. The news was provided by ISPR and also confirmed by Hasban Media, the Bajaur-based media network Tahir works with. The leader then issued a threat from jail against Tahir and soon thereafter happened the incident of a bomb being planted at the entrance of his house.

In January 2023, unknown men attacked the house of a Parachinar-based journalist Mohammad Ali Turi with a hand grenade. This followed an earlier attempt on part of unknown assailants to set fire to his house. Turi works for the ISPR's Suno Radio and a private TV channel. The attack damaged different parts of the house; his family remained safe and unhurt. Turi is not sure what may have caused the attack but says he helped his friend, a journalist with DW, do a story on enforced disappearances. That may have been the reason, he says. In December 2022, someone had left a written warning for him near his house, saying he should "behave or face the consequences." Turi has greatly reduced his movements and activities since the attacks. No one has been arrested in the case so far.

[17] https://tnnenglish.com/attack-on-miranshah-press-club-sparks-outrage-among-journalists/

Even more alarming is the case of a journalist in Orakzai who reported a land dispute between two tribes, after he received a press release from the local administration saying the matter was resolved in favor of one of the rivals. He posted the story on his Facebook page, only to receive a call from the other group asking to remove the post, threatening to behead the journalist if he did not. His complaint against the callers is still pending with the police.

Another journalist from Orakzai, Mohammad Ismail, has had his house fired at, and in another case, a suicide bomber coming to his home. He has CCTV footage for both. He says he has enmity with no one, that it is his work as a journalist that has put him in the way of harm. His brother, also a journalist, has received death threats for reporting a corruption case against a local MNA. Police also have the footage of the bomber but there has not been any progress in the case so far.

In Orakzai, Osama Orakzai of Hum News and Mashriq, with his colleague Asmatullah of Sach News, went to an area DaraDar-Mamazai. He doesn't clearly remember the date but says it was in 2020. There was a cricket match he wanted to cover there. While there, there was firing at the spectators and played in the stadium from the surrounding mountains, causing everyone to flee the ground. Since then, no sports events have taken place there.

On 26 November 2022, when PTI's Imran Khan asked his followers to gather at Faizabad for a "Haqeeqi Azadi March", men associated with the PTI's member of national assembly (MNA) from Orakzai attacked reporters covering the local gathering before it left for Islamabad. They did not want the fact that it was a small rally, drawing few local participants, go to media. This happened in the presence of the police who took no notice of violence against media. When journalists went to the police, they refused to take action but warned journalists if they sought to avenge the violence themselves, following the tribal tradition, the police would register a case against them.

In July 2016, a former MNA of Hangu, Pir Haider Ali Shah, complained to a local journalist that there were too many security check-posts on the Hangu-Thal road. He filed the story and when it appeared the next day, unidentified men "kidnapped" him from his office.[18] They took away his phone and covered his head with a cloth bag. He was taken somewhere, beaten up and told he had blackmailed the police. After his fellow journalists agitated against his disappearance, he was released one night on the roadside on Attock-Rawalpindi Road, still blindfolded.

[18] https://dailytimes.com.pk/69467/missing-journalist-safely-reaches-home-in-hangu/

He groped through the dark. “I tried to remove the bag from my head but couldn’t. I could hear the traffic on the road and knew if I moved from the spot, I would be hit by a vehicle. After a while, I rose and felt my way to an electricity pole near where I stood. A security guard came out of somewhere and shouted at me, thinking I was a thief because my face was covered. I raised my hand saying ‘Don’t shoot, don’t shoot’! I said I am a journalist. He removed the bag from my head and I was able to find a vehicle to drive me back to Hangu.”

Said another journalist in Upper Kurram: “I can’t go out for a walk in the morning or a run in the evening.” He has reported curfews and disruption of travel and internet services in recent months, first due to the Tiri Mangal incident[19] and later, sectarian clashes after a controversial video went viral.[20] For weeks, cellular networks remain suspended and all routes in and out of the district were closed for traffic. Locals were stranded and many others, who arrived from other parts of the country could not move out of the area. “I should be able to do that [walk and exercise] as a citizen. Go to the mountains. But I cannot be alone anywhere. I am afraid of the common man - in my house, in the press club, in the marketplace. If there is a press conference and someone speaks against another tribe, the government, the army or the state, it is the press club and its members who are blamed.”

Years after the merger, some places in the merged areas are still a security risk for locals and journalists because they have yet to be cleared of mines, as in the Orakzai district, where even the displaced population don’t feel secure enough to return to their lands.

The Mehsud journalists of South Waziristan work out of a press club in the neighbouring Tank district because their press club in Ladha does not have internet and mobile connection and no regular power supply either. The time it takes to travel from Wana, the headquarters of South Waziristan, to Ladha is nearly four hours through a mountainous, unsafe terrain where anything can go wrong. Neither the terrain, tough and unsafe, nor the economic situation of journalists who do not get paid regularly, inspire the motivation to undertake travel for newsgathering.

Even if journalists do venture into their native lands and villages despite security concerns and the many security checkpoints, to file stories they have to travel back to towns that have mobile or internet connection. As a result, for instance, there are few stories from the mountainous Ladha - with its two subdivisions, seven tehsils and a population of 500,000 people, especially when

[19] https://www.dawn.com/news/1750909
[20] https://www.dawn.com/news/1784394

the population is all there during the temperate summer months.

In South Waziristan, as in Orakzai, the administrative bureaucracy – the police, and the office and support staff of the district commissioner – is based in "settled areas" close to the tribal districts, not able to venture in themselves into the tribal districts they are supposed to administer, for want of security. The Mehsud Press Club, according to its members, "is in Tank because this is where the district administration is based, not in South Waziristan." This "dislocated media and government" makes it hard for media and district authorities to respond to emergency situations in the nick of time, when timely intervention could save lives and keep incidents such as local tribal feuds over land from flaring up into full-blown conflicts, as has happened in Kurram and Wana in recent months.

"If the administration cannot go, if the jirga is still called upon to resolve local issues, if the media cannot move around, if all the departments stay out of the area for reasons of security and lack of facilities, if the police and courts are operating from here [Tank], what was the point of merger then?", said a member of the Tank Press Club. "It's practically leaving the field empty for the militants and the military. If the idea was to strengthen civilian institutions, it hasn't happened. And amidst this, there is no media to report on that agenda, its failure or success."

During his maiden visit to North Waziristan in 2022, a local journalist Rasul Dawar told the caretaker Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif about how, despite the legal and constitutional merger, the practice of tribal collective punishment was still intact in the tribal districts. The prime minister, said a journalist in the Tank press club, expressed ignorance because "it wasn't in the [mainstream] news." As one tribal journalist puts it, "Under FCR we had no freedom to write and speak; now we have that right but we still cannot exercise it. If anything, the threats have multiplied. The militants and a hostile administration are still there, but now we have the police, the political figures, the common tribesman who is not media savvy, and an out-of-control social media. Since we are hampered from openly reporting events and local issues, the impression among the local population – the people and the politicians – is that we are 'sold' to the powers that be, even when the authorities treat us as their Enemy Number One. We are as threatened by hidden hands as by the mob. But our biggest enemies are our media organizations that won't support us. They don't even pay us money for a mobile phone connection, let alone the minimum pay."

Lack of communication and mobility makes adherence to principles of responsible journalism - accuracy, objectivity, verification, diversity of views,

balance and fact-checking etc. – an abiding challenge for journalists who say they are frequently stopped at check posts, and if the authorities know their identity, sometimes they are denied access in the name of security. Moreover, the communication system is patchy and unreliable so they cannot call sources in case of emergency or to check facts.

Journalists feel that they are also watched by secret agencies, especially when they are out travelling to cover a "sensitive" story on security or border-related issues. "We are approached by people in plain clothes, asking us what the administration or the police told us [by way of information about a story]. A lot of stories get killed here because I am afraid, or the people are afraid, or the actors within the story do not wish the story to become public", said a tribal journalist.

Source protection is a recurrent concern because journalists are always being called upon by authorities to reveal sources. "It isn't possible due to the threats; even when we have a local source, we cannot confirm a story or event because people do not want to speak as they face the same threat as us if they divulge information."

As for the authorities, they have little inclination to be a source of information unless it is in their interest. In an operation against militants in Central Kurram, it was reported on local social media accounts run by community members that there had been casualties among the FC men carrying out the operation. It happened in an area close to the Pak-Afghan border so a local reporter called to confirm from the police in Parachinar who said it was not their job to confirm but the FC's. The FC said he needed to go to ISPR or the army commandant in the district.

"The doctor here says he cannot talk because he is not allowed to; the officer in charge of security says it isn't his remit to speak to media; the police chief doesn't receive the call or his PRO says he is in a meeting and therefore not available to speak to media; so confirmation of an event in a place that is so far removed from everywhere is tall order. While you are running from pillar to post to confirm news here [in a place where sources are reluctant to speak], someone in the bureau offices in Peshawar gets away with "zarai kay mutabiq – according to unnamed sources" to carry the story. The ground reality becomes a casualty because the sources or authorities here won't speak to us. Where it is in their interest, they will send you a car to cover a meeting or an event. Or you wait for weeks to get news confirmed by the administration. No one takes the responsibility to speak to the media, so no one is accountable."

In North Waziristan, a journalist did a story on the Ghulam Khan border where, he alleged, Afghan refugees were allowed into Pakistan for a bribe. He was asked to remove that story from his Facebook page and to reveal the source of information. He resisted, saying that he could not. This demand to reveal sources is something that journalists encounter frequently and has implications for freedom of expression and journalism that have the protection of sources as its cardinal ethic, more so in a theatre of conflict. “I said if you think this news is without evidence then I do have it [the source], but for the court only.”

At times, journalists are asked to post stories about military operations on their Facebook pages, or about authorities claiming to have killed TTP militants, but caught between a long war and shadowy forces that have put them wise to the politics of conflict where information is often controlled and conflicting, exposing them to peril, they are now wary of being seen as partisan. But when it comes to the community and the district administration, they try and include both sides of the story even when the tribes may put pressure on journalists to be critical of the government for its failure to provide security or services.

“I simply refuse”, said a tribal journalist, about requests from authorities to post their stories on his social media account. “I tell them you have a huge information apparatus to do it for you. Why put us in danger? I say why don’t you wear plain clothes like us and go to the market after publishing such a story? By the evening that day, you will know the result [when targeted for the story]. But even when I don’t entertain either side, there are threats from all directions. It leaves me no choice but to consider leaving this place with my family if we have to stay safe.”


Attack on Miranshah Press Club Sparks Outrage Among Journalists

In response to this harrowing incident, journalists affiliated with the Miranshah Press Club have declared an immediate boycot of police coverage.

By TNN Editor - September 8, 2023

Muhammad Abid

Armed gunmen unleashed an attack on the Miranshah Press Club in North Waziristan, leaving a trail of violence in their wake. The assailants brutally assaulted club member Noor Bahram, subjected him to verbal abuse, and ransacked the club premises. Security personnel present at the press club were not spared either; their uniforms were torn,

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January 2, 2024

Alarming Surge: Suicide Attacks Spike by 93% in

A screengrab showing Tribal News Network story of attack on the Miranshah Press Club

OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER
NORTH WAZIRISTAN DISTRICT
Ph: (0928) 300903, Fax # (0928) 300642
Email Address: dcnwtdofficial@gmail.com

No. 6991 – 7002/PS/Reader/CRPC-144 **Dated 17/12/2023**

ORDER UNDER SECTION 144 CR.P.C

WHEREAS, it is reported by District Police Officer, North Waziristan vide office letter No. 6840-43/PA, dated 17-12-2023, that there is apprehension of threats from the unscrupulous elements of society with the aim to create law and order/untoward situation to achieve their nefarious designs and disrupt the peaceful atmosphere of the district and create situation detrimental to public security.

AND WHEREAS, in my opinion there are sufficient grounds which necessitate the imposition of ban under section 144 Cr.P.C on some activities in the District North Waziristan.

NOW THEREFORE, I, Manzoor Ahmed Afridi Deputy Commissioner, North Waziristan District under the authority of the power vested upon me U/S 144 Cr.P.C, do hereby impose complete ban on the "unlawful assembly of more than five persons/gatherings (except political gathering subject to prior no objection certificate NOC from District Administration as per SOP circulated by Home and Tribal Affairs Department Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Peshawar vide letter No. DD(SAW)/HD/Protest/SOPs/2023, dated 12-10-2023) and carrying/Display of weapons, aerial firing, strikes, protests, Objectionable/ Hatred speeches and misuse of loudspeaker for a period of 15 days from 17-12-2023 to 01-01-2024, in the District North Waziristan in the best public interest.

Any person (s) contravening this order shall render himself or themselves, whatever the case may be, liable to punishment under section 188 PPC.

This order shall be given wide publicity through publication in the Govt. Gazette, affixing copies on all the prominent places in District North Waziristan and by electronic, print and social media.

Given under my signature and seal of the office this day the 17-12-2023.

Office Seal

(Manzoor Ahmed Afridi)
DEPUTY COMMISSIONER
North Waziristan

Copy forwarded for information to the:

1. Additional Chief Secretary Home & Tribal Affairs Departments, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Peshawar.
2. Commissioner, Bannu Division Bannu.
3. District & Session Judge North Waziristan District at Bannu.
4. Regional Police Officer, Bannu Region Bannu.
5. PSO to Chief Secretary Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Peshawar.
6. District Police Officer, North Waziristan.
7. Headquarter 7-Division Camp Area Miranshah.
8. Director of Information, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Peshawar.
9. All Additional Deputy Commissioners, North Waziristan.
10. All Assistant Commissioners in North Waziristan District.
11. All Additional Assistant Commissioners in North Waziristan.
12. Station Manager, Radio Pakistan Miranshah.

(Manzoor Ahmed Afridi)
DEPUTY COMMISSIONER
North Waziristan

A recent official communique declaring imposition of 144 CR.P.C, banning public assembly

Chapter 3

Mainstream Media Killing District Journalism

In May 2023, armed men entered a school in Teri Mangal, an area close to the Afghan border in the Upper Kurram, shooting down eight men including schoolteachers. The incident, apparently a revenge killing, followed another where a man, also a teacher, was killed by unidentified men in a drive-by shooting. Kurram, which has a long bloody history of sectarianism and resisting Talibanization,[21] remained shut down for days after the incident, all communication down, for fear that it would trigger another sectarian conflagaration.

A journalist based in Parachinar reported the Teri Mengal story saying it was a sectarian issue but when the story appeared the next day, his newspaper said it was a land dispute between two tribes. The local community in Parachinar, dominantly the Shia sect that had lost eight men including teachers, didn't approve of the newspaper twisting the facts. They blamed the reporter – its local face.

When the reporter spoke to the editors, they said the provincial information secretary told them it was a land dispute. "The least the editors could have done was to call and confirm with me because I had filed the story after directly accessing information here", said the reporter.

Even more detrimental to local journalism is the role of media bureau offices in Peshawar. When the same reporter did a story about a local library taken over by the district administration – with its stance on the issue included in the story – the Deputy Commissioner in Kurram called his bureau office in Peshawar to dictate another story that contradicted everything the reporter had said in his story, making him look like "someone with a personal vendetta against the administration."

"It is not just [his paper], every paper and channel does this. Instead of standing up for their reporters, they submit to pressure from authorities, leaving

[21] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11486528

reporters vulnerable to bullying from local officials. I have, on my mobile phone, a history of conversations with editors telling me that they cannot carry this story or that because of pressure from authorities."

From Bannu to Bajaur, every single journalist interviewed for this study – and there were close to 50 interviews – said there was little interest on the part of mainstream media to explore the people's problems in the newly merged districts but only conflict and security issues. This lack of focus on people's issues is a double-edged sword: It exposes journalists to harm because they are not seen by local communities as representing local interest and stance, and it makes mainstream media and its audiences in the rest of Pakistan perceive issues of the merged areas from a security and security establishment's lens. And finally, the development of the region that the merger promised, the progress or lack of it on those promises, does not come across in media and public discourse.

If one is to take the tenor of voices against the merger emerging from the merged areas, it is an indicator that it hasn't delivered. "The system is at a standstill, the [government] plans have flopped", as one journalist put it when asked why were there so many public sit-ins in North Waziristan. Due to the media's emphasis on conflict, people too are psychologically disturbed – *zahni mareez* – and the preponderance of bad news has contributed to strengthening the war/conflict political economy from which different, unaccountable but powerful, interests benefit at the cost of the progress of the region and its people.

A tribal journalist in Sada, Lower Kurram, said if the record of his stories over the last 20 years was analyzed, it would be either about a drone attack, a suicide killing, targeted killings, sectarian conflict, kidnapping or border issues. He said this focus on conflict on the part of media organizations hasn't allowed real journalism to take root in the region. Reporters are not asked to diversify and so conflict in the region, its image as a "troubled spot" in the public imagination at home and abroad, becomes a self-fulling prophecy. "As if people in the merged areas do not have the same aspirations, concerns, ambitions, dreams, as people everywhere else", he added.

This focus on conflict, and the impression it creates, then justifies the state's high-handed militarized policies in the region. It is, then, deeply ironic that the media should converge, carrion-like, on Parachinar when a hungry leopard comes down to the city from Spin Ghar but rarely report on threats more grave and enduring, despite the state's constitutional promise to ensure freedom

Tribal journalists still face security threats after merger

Ibrahim Shinwari | Published May 3, 2023

KHYBER: Extension of almost all the regular laws to the merged districts after the region's merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018 could not ensure any qualitative change in the nature of reporting in the militancy-affected areas as tribal journalists are still faced with threats and intimidations from both state and non-state actors.

While journalists across the globe celebrate World Press Freedom Day today (May 3), mediapersons in the seven merged tribal districts believe that the environment has become more confused for them during the last five years of merger as they are yet to know, who is wielding actual authority in their districts and to whom they approach to redress their grievances.

Shams Momand, a senior journalist from Momand district, told *Dawn* that tribal journalists were now increasingly worried about their safety as they were once again faced with the 'frightening' phenomenon of 'good' and 'bad' Taliban that resurfaced in some southern parts of the merged districts.

Citing the abduction and torture of Bannu-based tribal journalist Gauhar Wazir by apparently 'good' Taliban few days ago, Mr Momand said that that police were yet to

Screengrab of Dawn story a May 3, the International Press Freedom Day. https://www.dawn.com/news/1750546/tribal-journalists-still-face-security-threats-after-merger

of expression, employment, clean drinking water, education, health, women empowerment, good governance etc. in the merged districts.

As paralyzing as conflict and the media's focus on it is, it also keeps people's outlook, aspirations mental growth and horizons at a very basic level of intellectual, social and cultural development because hostilities, Talibanization and militarization are all they ever see and hear, expecting little to change, or improve – in fact not even capable, through the clenched, unshakeable vice of conflict and its reinforcement through media – to envision a better world beyond conflict and unrest.

Again, what the national mainstream media covers about the region is mostly related to conflict, and that too from the perspective of the security forces not people, in a region with a plethora of issues in every sector post-merger. For example, Kurram has sectarian and tribal conflicts related to lands but it also has a huge potential for tourism and border trade. As much as it keeps real voices and opinions from breaking free of the security blanket, this focus on conflict reporting has also undermined journalism and its scope so that with the arrival of courts and police and local government, journalists and people struggle to understand the legal and constitutional regimes under which they function. All that most of them, especially those associated with mainstream media, do is report conflict, as sieved and served through the ISPR lens. Hardly any enterprise reporting seeking to break the mould comes from the region, except in the case of foreign radio and digital channels like the BBC or RFE/RL that push for a wider news agenda. Their popularity lies in casting a wider news net in the region, and of course from the perspective of the local population, and in local

voices, language and idiom. “When I used to work for VOA, an added appeal for local people alongside having their issues highlighted was to have their voices heard about those issues”, said a tribal journalist, a veteran who has reported on the region for several decades.

And in that “less than perfect world”, then, any exercise - social, religious, economic, development, militaristic – with grave implications for locals becomes kosher when wrapped in the language of securitization and good intentions.

“I don’t remember if my organization has ever asked me to report on issues like climate change, or what the local communities will do for fuel in view of the approaching winters, the social sector development – why education in Parachinar is good and why schools in Central Kurram were never rebuilt in the wake of militancy? – agriculture or tourism. It could have asked why the leopard came down from the mountains and I would have reported on deforestation as a cause, how the forest department is involved in it, the timber mafia in smuggling, but no, that is not what it has time or space for. It is just the fear and death that matters – but what about people dying due to floods or torrential rains? I have thrice filed stories on deforestation in Kurram blaming the forest department and they have been turned down but if I did a story on how three men were killed fighting over a tree, it would be big news.”

Instead of the press clubs being built by media organizations, they are established and sustained by the authorities, which then expect a grateful journalist community to return the favour through favorable reporting. It appears that both journalists and journalism in the districts – settled or the newly merged - are caught up in a web where the media colludes with the government and the state in this ongoing corruption of itself and the newsmen.

Except for a few journalists that one could count on fingers, a large majority of reporters in the merged areas are not paid wages by their organizations, leaving them to their own devices which in the districts, invariably, translates into becoming complicit with power or influence, such as the district authorities, the politicians or other sources of revenue. Professional ethics take a backseat to vested interests in both cases and when the media employer tells a journalist to use the organization’s press card “to earn both for himself and the employer.” Little wonder, then, that in the popular public imagination, journalists are seen as “blackmailers”, using their profession for personal aggrandizement rather than making authorities accountable for public interest.

In the absence of salaries and for want of a financial incentive, journalists are mostly disgruntled and unmotivated to fulfill their duties responsibly. They

do not take the trouble of to visit the field for newsgathering even when they could, and are content with getting information on the phone or through WhatsApp where internet connection is available. Only in the case when a story is big enough, and a visit cannot be avoided, do they pool money to minimize cost and potential threat by going together to cover it.

Chapter 4

An 'Indirect Approach' to Criticism

During an interview with Dawn's correspondent in Mohmand, Fauzee Khan, at the Ghalanai Press Club, another journalist brings his news script for Khan to read. Ghalanai press club is the first ever built in the merged areas and here, as elsewhere in the tribal districts, journalists, often paranoid and unsure of what might rub the audience, including the stakeholders in their tribal district, turn to their colleagues to lend extra caution and gumption to a story. They have their stories read by fellow journalists who, in absence of an editor but more than that as an informal gatekeeper for mutual wellbeing and safety because they face a similar threat, are hyper-alert to them. The concern, as the journalist in the Ghalanai Press Club said, is not accuracy, or other principles or ethics of journalism. It's a form of "self-censorship" – Is there something by way of language and information in the story that should not go there?

"We often say here that eighty per cent of local stories are not reported because of self-censorship," said the journalist. "We negotiate a minefield of tribal *rawayat* (traditions that don't allow for criticism of tribes), of people who are not media literate – if they see their criticism in the news they could hurt you – of the administration that bristles at the bad press. It is essentially the same mindset that was under FCR, seeking to control media, security, militancy and military operations. It's good to have someone read your story with fresh eyes just in case."

It is not rare for journalists to sit around a story and see how it could be framed without riling someone up. Having done that, they leave the story alone because once they have "accommodated everyone's concerns and interests", there is no "Jan - life" left in the story

But still then, it is hard to omit the triggers for harm or a threat. The journalist who wanted his story reviewed by Khan filed another not long ago. It was about the girl's schools in Mohmand from where many teachers had left for other districts, leaving only one teacher at each school. The teachers, originally appointed for Mohmand, a tough appointment, had received NOCs from the Education Department to go work in the non-tribal districts of Mardan, Nowshera, Charsadda, Swabi etc. When the story appeared, the DEO [district

education officer] who faced criticism called the Assistant Commissioner who summoned the journalist, demanding to know why he did the story. The journalists had also asked the AC for information for his story which he, the AC, had promised but never provided. So the journalist had used his sources, instead.

Journalists in Mohmand also have relatives working in the education department. The administration brought about pressure on journalists to retract the story and to desist from reporting such stories in future. If they did not, their relations could lose their jobs or they may be transferred to a district not native to them. But an even bigger issue is that the administration and the military could influence newspapers to kill a story. “Should I receive threats or suffer harm, would my organization stand by me or disown me?”, asked the journalist.

Journalists say it is not uncommon that when they write a story for their newspapers or channels, they run it by the district administration to see if they approve – and this is virtually the case with every channel. At the start of the merger, a local Deputy Commissioner in one of the districts claimed prices of food items were monitored to check inflation. The local journalists did a story, with one of them deciding to check. He surveyed the market, only to find it wasn’t the case: The shopkeepers were not following the administration pricelists. The story appeared in his newspaper and he got a summons from the DC office who had written a rejoinder himself and wanted the journalist to publish it under his, the journalist’s, name in the same paper. In a way, he wanted the journalist to contradict the story he had filed earlier. The journalist, of course, refused. The DC made his displeasure known but the journalist mollified him saying he should take action against those who overcharge and he, the journalist, could report the story then.

Self-censorship is rampant among journalists in the tribal region associated with the national mainstream media but also extends to digital news platforms like the Peshawar-based Tribal News Network (TNN) which takes an “indirect” approach to criticism of authorities or militants, careful not to provoke them.

There have been “visitors” to their office advising them not to cover PTM activities which they did at the time. They don’t cover PTM rallies directly anymore, but only when PTM leaders are a part of someone else’s efforts for peace like the recent province-wide people-led demonstrations in the settled and merged districts. In other, more sensitive instances – whether to use the term “martyr” or “killed” for soldiers or militants dying in combat against each other – they stay on the side of caution.

In a recent case, they had to delete from the TNN website the video of a tribal woman gymnast from Khyber who had earlier asked for coverage of her sports event, only to request the removal because the video had resulted in honour-related threats to her family. In another case, the editor at TNN who provided context on militancy in Bara to a reporter for his story through WhatsApp messages said he asked the reporter to delete them because he did not trust technology, suggesting that a heightened threat perception renders even editorial support a delicate matter.

Journalists are "careful" about what they ask by way of information and what they report. If it doesn't get them into trouble with the local authorities, it could with the tribes, as in Parachinar, a sectarian flashpoint, where the Teri Mangal episode, a sectarian event, was carried in the mainstream media as a land dispute because that is how the provincial authorities wanted it reported.

The July 2023 bombing of a Jamiat Ulema Islam-F, a religious political party, gathering in Bajaur had people raising slogans against the security forces for failing to end terrorism but "nobody could dare report it as such."[22] In Bara Meri Khel Aka Khel in Khyber, hardly 15 km from Peshawar, the Taliban are said to "have raised their flag" locally – a major development by any measure in a province where similar situations have led to conflict and military operations, displacing millions, but local journalists cannot report it. If a journalist receives a video from a reliable source in the community but other sources cannot say it on the record, the journalist cannot confirm it therefore. Not that he could report it. People are reluctant to talk and journalists afraid to report.

Reporting a Jirga meeting in one of the merged districts where the elders refused to be part of a security arrangement against the Taliban, asking the state to protect people, a journalist received a call from an army official denying the meeting took place. The journalist had sources with impeccable credentials – two of the Jirga representatives themselves were journalists, as maliks of their tribes. Such calls and summons consequent to sensitive stories are par for the course for tribal journalists - where any security-related event naturally involves the military in control of the border regions.

When it comes to the mainstream media, it doesn't directly criticize the state, the military or militancy but resorts to euphemisms. Said a journalist in Mohmand: "Mainstream media is small [just a few channels], its reporting [from merged areas] easily controlled because the elements who do not want

[22] https://www.dawn.com/news/1767493

freedom of expression are in touch with their owners and editors already. It cannot afford to overstep its limitations because of the stakes involved, such as advertisements or fear of threats or closure."

On the other hand, social media – used by the youth supporting people's movements like the PTM or the *Pasoons* – is uncensored, widely followed through intensive, individual consumption patterns different from mainstream media. They allow uploading of content in real-time such as news and videos of demonstrations and rallies that have become increasingly frequent across the tribal hinterland due to insecurity but also disillusionment with the merger as it has failed to bring peace and prosperity to the region.

"If it wasn't for social media, movements like PTM would not have existed; nor would there be any free expression", said a journalist in Miranshah.

Journalists also speak of having unwritten instructions from bureaucracy and the military not to air or publish news that "bring a bad name to state institutions"; that all news should be shared with officials for vetting, confirmation and verification; that information should not be treated as "breaking news". Likewise, they were once told to allow press club premises to publicize Imran Khan's PTI but are now asked not to let party workers enter. Some journalists even say that the situation of expression of freedom has worsened since the merger.

With journalism schools established in several universities where tribal students, including women, have the opportunity to study the subject, more and more qualified journalists have entered the work stream. However, not all of them are "trained" for the field as these schools lack newsrooms, nor are there opportunities or room for internships in media newsrooms to learn the ropes.

More significantly, even for the "trained" journalists, a reporting opportunity in merged districts doesn't offer freedom to exercise their learning. Any quality journalism about the region – as in investigative, people-centric stories seeking accountability of authorities – still comes by and large from reporters outside the merged districts, whether of tribal origins or not.

The press club at Wana in South Waziristan

Chapter 5

The Tribal Threat

In September 2023, a local journalist in South Waziristan was threatened by the powerful local *jirga* with, ironically, having his house demolished after he posted on the social media platform X his opposition to the Jirga's practice of demolishing houses of local residents as collective punishment for going against tribal traditions. He was threatened both with the flattening of his house and a fine of Rs0.5 million that the Jirga imposed on him.

Meraj Khalid, who eventually was forced to leave South Waziristan, had long been "raising a voice against these excesses". The tribes expelled him, but journalists say the local MNA, the MPA [member of provincial assembly], the maliks, and the district administration were all instrumental in the decision because he had become a problem for them due to his outspoken views. "They made him an example for all of us", said a Wana-based journalist.

Another Journalist in Wana resisted the call of his tribe to boycott the district administration that the tribe felt was not cooperating with them to settle tribal matters. The journalist said he needed to stay in touch with the authorities as part of his job. When he went to the DC office to get information for a story, his tribe fined him Rs 70,000 for going against its edict.

The journalist, thinking he was upholding the writ of the state, went to the authorities to seek relief, only to find, to his chagrin, that the authorities wanted him to succumb to the tribe and pay the fine. "Imagine, the state that is meant to protect you [under the constitution after the merger] tells you to pay up instead. When it comes to coercion of journalists, the authorities and the tribes are in it together, hands in glove."

Again, the tribes have other ways to force a journalist into submission. For the forty-day deadline to pay the fine, tribesmen keep visiting the house of the person daily to demand the money. All this time, he is expected to arrange meals for a large tribal delegation. These daily visits are a trial for those fined because the family and children live with the terrible reminders of the imminent destruction of their house if they do not pay. If he doesn't feed the tribal delegation, it is taken as a slight. For each day that he fails to pay the fine, he

has to arrange meals for tens of people which adds to his financial burden. The idea is to make him pay immediately, instead of taking on additional expenses. And if he still does not pay, the tribe would go to the elders in his family to reiterate their demand for demolition or to build up pressure to pay the fine. Even if the person fined resists the punishment, the elders of his family may not be capable of that and often they pay the fine themselves.

Through all this, the police told the journalist to have a settlement *jirga* with the tribe, when it should have had recourse to law. At last, it was the father of the journalist who paid because the journalist refused to, with an additional Rs 130,000 for the delay in payment, during which time the fine had more than doubled. In the case of Meraj Khalid, the Zali Khel tribe initially fined him Rs 500,000. When he resisted, it was increased to Rs 1 million.

Even if his house was demolished, the tribe ordained his "generations" would still have to pay for the offence, with the community refusing to provide water to his family. Not stopping at that, they went to the extent that whoever fed Meraj Khalid would also have to pay a fine of Rs 1 m. This finally forced him to migrate. Under a tribal edict, the entire community is compelled to socially boycott a person – in this case a journalist. Anyone refusing to follow the tribal decree would face the same fate. Even though FCR is gone, the tribal tradition of collective punishment is alive and strong and one way of ensuring tribal cohesiveness – in the tribal worldview – is through collective responsibility.

Meraj Khalid's brother at the Islamabad Press Club in the capital, demanding legal and constitutional measures promised under the merger to end the parallel tribal system of collective punishment.

Said a journalist in Wana: "Why would a journalist take a risk when the state or his organization is not willing to provide him security? I am a journalist as well as a tribesman, so my priorities include my honor and that of my tribe and people."

In July 2022, a Jirga of the local Salarzai tribe in the Bajaur tribal district banned women from entering picnic spots alone or as couples, terming it against the local traditions. Anwarullah, a correspondent with Dawn, reported it. He received a call from the community to desist from reporting such stories because it brought dishonor to local tribes and traditions.

The Jirga's threat of demolition of Khalid's house and his relocation to Islamabad illustrates a Catch-22 dilemma for tribal journalists. They are called upon to report on tribal affairs, including sensitive matters related to honor and tradition (*rewaj*) when they are part of the tribal milieu with delicate inter-tribal relations, having tribal associations and identity, and therefore subject to tribal modes of punishment that goes beyond the individual to the collective. A journalist's reporting has implications not just for him but his family, indeed his tribe.

Miraj Khalid's statement about Jirga's decision - "I do not believe in a state within a state"[23] – and his relocation in view of threats reflects how tribal journalists continue to grapple with tribal traditions in an altered reality where institutions like the police and court have been extended to the merged districts but tribal attitudes and institutions remain entrenched and relevant. They have hardened within the limbo of neither-here- nor- there, a sort of vacuum, with a tentative state abolishing the pre-merger FCR rule but failing to enforce its writ completely and unequivocally when it comes to ossified tribal attitudes towards progress and modernization.

Proving the cynical anti-merger lobby right – "We told you so!" – the state is presently more occupied with strengthening its hold over the region, its people and land, with controls on media a testimony to that, than shaking the tribal boat amidst a suppressed storm of simmering discontent. In this "state within a state", one is not sure whether it is the nation-state or the "tribal state" that is stunting journalism and media development more. Even if uncomfortable bedfellows otherwise, it appears both are joined together against freedom of expression within their strictly self-serving domains – one only wants media for strategic communications and the other is for media but strictly within the tribal tradition. In both cases, state repression and tribal traditionalism are perpetuated, and when an honour-killing or criticism of collective punishment

[23] https://voicepk.net/2023/09/i-do-not-believe-in-a-state-within-a-state/

as in the case of Miraj Khalid goes unreported or uncontested, the state and the tribe are strengthened and freedom of expression undermined.

However, eventually, all blame must go to the state because, as one journalist puts it, "the merger has happened but the strengthening of institutions hasn't." As the case of Miraj Khalid illustrates, it is the tribes, maliks and warlords that have been strengthened, not the rule of law.

Where urban-based journalists may face threats and pressures from political parties, bureaucracy, politicians and intelligence agencies, in merged areas all these challenges exist alongside the local tribal and media-illiterate population, all within a high-pressure and volatile security environment. Over the years, as society has become increasingly politicized in the wake of the conflict, the community also see journalists in black and white – they are with us or with the state, which they blame for all their troubles. In the case of the state, they are seen either with the state, the army, the anti-state elements, the militants, or the community, as in the case of protests for peace and demands for services.

When journalists do not raise their voice on behalf of an aggrieved community, there is hostility towards them. In Parachinar Kurram, in the wake of a bombing in 2017 that killed more than 130 people, the community laid siege to the press club, throwing bricks and rocks at the building and forcing journalists to flee the premises. And when they turned up at a demonstration in the wake of the bombing, their cameras were snatched because "they are spies for the agencies." It is either "why are you not there to cover something?", or "why are you here to cover [the suggestion being that they are spies]?"

"[We work within an environment] where the community does not trust you, the administration does not trust you, the militants do not trust you, nor does the military", said a journalist. The problem is that all these elements wish to use media for their own purposes, which are obviously, at cross-purposes with each other's information needs, and within that it is the messenger who becomes suspect because no matter what he reports, it will always rub someone the wrong way. And that someone is always the powerful, the influential or the armed and dangerous. In a highly divided community like the Kurram's, journalists are expected to take sides and even something as routine as attending Friday prayers will have people whispering that journalists are there to spy for the government or the state.

In North Waziristan, where the Utmanzai Jirga was out protesting growing insecurity in the region in October 2023, the elders initially banned media from

attending their gathering unless they were on the Jirga's side. Journalists had to convince them that they cannot take sides. However, such refusals are rare, and journalists do play in the hands of multiple state institutions and interests, and tribal loyalties. Where they don't, they incur the wrath of tribes and the district administration like Miraj Khalid.

A pan view of the press club at Parachinar, district headquarters at Upper Kurram

Chapter 6

The Promise and Pitfalls of Social Media

There was a time when journalists in FATA would send their stories on CDs to regional bureau offices, from where they would be directed to main media offices in metropolitan centres. That has changed with the availability of internet connection but it is not available everywhere and that leaves certain places out of media attention. For instance, Central Kurram, which is home to four big tribes of the Kurram, with a population more than either Lower or Upper Kurram.

While there are private companies that provide Wi-Fi at homes and offices, internet through data connection is still not accessible in many areas. And whenever there is a security situation, they are completely cut off – such as the recent incident at Tiri Mangal in Upper Kurram, in the wake of which, 3G and 4G connection was suspended for nearly a month.

With internet availability, the shift from conventional to digital media is well-established and the trend is equally rampant in former FATA – the only difference being that people access it on the go through mobile data where it is available and where it is not, through Wi-Fi connections at homes and offices.

More and more people, mainly youth, in the districts of former FATA are using digital social media platforms to access information, a trend substantiated by a drastic decline in the circulation of newspapers in the region. With media and information widely controlled in the merged districts and released often with an official spin, the only silver lining is the social media platforms that allow for independent local voices to call out state repression or spin-doctoring of issues.

Journalists and the public are able to make local authorities accountable through their personal hyper- local social media platforms because these are interactive, immediately receiving feedback from the local population. Almost every journalist based in and out of the tribal districts has a social media page, where news and updates are regularly posted, with followers running into millions at times. This has also contributed somewhat to the community's

education about how media works – It now understands better the journalist's job of gathering and processing news for media. More and more people now look up to press clubs as a platform to help highlight their problems; they depend on journalists to highlight a story on their social media portals in the absence of mainstream media to do so. This has made some local journalists very popular and powerful. However, at the same time, it has given birth to huge ethical issues – journalists posting to "blackmail" remains an area of grave concern. Naturally, it has also contributed to threats because of the unguarded nature of social media even when used conscientiously.

Beyond cities and main towns, however, internet availability and connectivity remain inaccessible in remote areas or subject to the security situation. Even regular phone connections are down in such an eventuality and people are left stranded, often amid a conflict as the case of Kurram in recent months and years abundantly illustrates, as roads and communication close down.

Wi-Fi is available in offices and homes, but the further one goes away from cities and towns, especially in the mountainous regions of Waziristan, Orakzai, Kurram and others, access to the internet tapers out. The terrain is tricky and insecure, locations are remote and internet availability is inconsistent so journalists have to travel back to cities to file news or they mostly work from the office in the press clubs.

In the cities, the process to get a NOC – an official No Objection Certificate - for a Wi-Fi connection is cumbersome. In some places like North Waziristan, one has to get guarantees from two maliks - tribal elders - that the internet connection would not be used "for anti-state activities", which by itself is a slippery slope because the state or the government conflates media or individual criticism of its abuse of power as "anti-state" - in the treasonous sense of the word - as in case of Gohar Wazir or the long detention of Ali Wazir, the PTM leader.

News platforms on social media managed by local journalists have followers in thousands, at times millions. Managed by local journalists, they act as both news and marketing platforms for local businesses as well as public relations portals for local politicians to conduct a political campaign – unless a journalist is highly conscientious and ethical, which is rare given the tribal, highly politicized and securitized nature of the place.

At times, a single Facebook page has several administrators and different journalists are posting information, with no gatekeepers. These Facebook pages

have become so influential that they are monitored and followed by the security establishment and district administration. Journalists say they have helped solve hyper-local issues where mainstream media has failed. But unethical practices abound and journalists, few of whom are trained in professional ethics or principles, often overstep the line between the personal and professional.

Consider the case of Ziarat Gul, a former Naib, or mayor, in Hangu district - where most of the journalists from Orakzai are based, working remotely from their district – who has a medicine shop in Hangu city. Some time ago, he sold spurious medicine to someone. The person reported it to the police who arrested Ziarat Gul and the police handcuffed him to a tree, in plain sight.

Khan Zaman, a local journalist who works of Mashriq, a regional Urdu newspaper in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, took a picture of him and posted it on his Facebook page, with a caption saying the police could mete out better treatment to criminals, suspected or otherwise. Ziarat, as soon as he was released on bail, filed a case against the journalist for payment of Rs 7 million because Zaman had defamed him by putting a picture of the mayor in chains on his Facebook page. After three years and spending Rs 200,000, the court case was decided in favor of the journalist.

During this time, no one helped him. The story was also carried in the Mashriq. Even though their circulation has dwindled drastically, regional newspapers like Mashriq and Aaj, based and published in Peshawar, are still subscribed to locally. The Nazim had also named the chief editor of Mashriq in his lawsuit.

Other than journalists, local social media influencers are also increasingly entering the news domain and there are instances where the public knows not a journalist from an influencer. Even when the influencers cannot travel widely, are not as networked as journalists in their community or other districts, cannot access the district administration or the army, and most of all, are not qualified or trained in journalism, they still have a big audience of followers to command and influence.

In Kurram, for example, a local influencer reported that in Shublan, a locality, tribes were using heavy weapons in a feud. The local journalists who knew that the area was used for training of the paramilitary Frontier Corps and were informed by authorities, did not. Still, it created widespread fear and panic because of the large following of the influencer.

In another case where the same story was covered both by a journalist and a social media influencer resulted in violence for the latter. A shopkeeper in the

Sadda Bazaar had complained about extortion at the hands of a local police official. The journalist had the shopkeeper speaking about it on camera. The influencer however posted the picture of the official saying, “This man is demanding extortion money from shopkeeper.” The official sent his men to beat up the social media influencer, and he was taken to the police station and detained for hours.

To avoid sectarian conflict and bloodshed, journalists do not name a sect in a conflict in the Kurram district but the tribes instead, whereas social media influencers talk to people in general, often using the premises of the press club, using inflammatory sectarian hate speech and posting it without editing. Which when it grows viral, frames the conflict in a sectarian context than tribal.

Journalists cannot stop social media influencers who use the “news” or “media” label frequently and unscrupulously, when they do not know the first thing about news or the principles of journalism. They are community people and stopping them from using the press clubs can create tensions in the community. Often, these influencers are also associated with the bureaucracy and the military, meant to cover their events or conduct PR for them, and therefore assert *that authority* to use the press club premises for their personal videos.

Increasingly, the district administrations also engage these influencers to propagate their work and events. The administrations in different districts also have their own official social media accounts. The journalists in Sadda, for example, have let the police know that the influencers should not be using the press clubs but the influencers have a lot of that - local influence. Where mainstream media cannot afford a minute to spare for a local problem, they have hours for it and unedited, unchecked content uploaded to the internet in real-time.

The local people who are not media literate cannot tell the difference; all they want is to vent their spleen on an immediate issue affecting them. But precisely because they cannot tell the difference, this makes the social media influencers both a threat – should their reporting create or contribute to a conflict, or be equated to journalism because people cannot tell the difference - and a competition. “There are so many of them – “chay beroz gara day”: Anyone jobless, has a logo and a YouTube channel”, said a journalist in Sadda, Lower Kurram.

Posting of news and content on social media presents a challenge that is perhaps not peculiar to the tribal areas but certainly creates more serious challenges than anywhere else. This is because it remains a theatre of ongoing

conflict where tribesmen, kept insulated and therefore conservative for close to 70 years, are not media savvy. Whereas not everything is news, to be carried on a TV channel or newspaper, a social media account is free for all.

In a tribal society with deep tribal associations, journalists cannot entirely escape being drawn into situations where they are called upon to take sides. But journalists are also known to be partisan. In central Kurram, a stronghold of the religious party Jamiat Ulema Islam-F, a pro-PTI journalist reported against JUI-F, posting on his Facebook page. When the journalist's father died, the leading JUI-F mufti in the region issued a fatwa that people should not attend his funeral.

Every journalist interviewed for this study had a personal Facebook page and one – Hasban Media[24] - in Bajaur has 9 million followers, with a dedicated staff of its own, preparing videos and infographics on local, national and international news, with content advertising local business thrown in for "sustainability".

Other platforms managed by individual journalists elsewhere in merged areas have similar large followings even though they are more focused on local content giving audiences in the region, and its diaspora, platforms on Facebook and YouTube channels dedicated to news and information from a particular district.

When compared to the negligible share of merged areas on mainstream media – much like other places on the periphery –these Facebook pages provide hyper-local content and what's more, an outlet for people to have a voice in local matters in an otherwise voiceless region when it comes to mainstream media and decision making about matters that affect them.

For this reason, and their huge local following, the Facebook pages are very influential locally, with the local administration and the army courting journalists with popular Facebook pages. This popularity of local pages is also a factor of the fact that they provide local content and locally relevant information that people hunger for.

Said a veteran journalist from Khyber: "There is no doubt about it; they are representative of local aspirations and issues, even if the person processing that information is not quite qualified - as in citizen journalists. But, by and large, yes, they do fill an important gap where news like the PTM activities and the

[24] https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100063973212880

recent disgruntlement among the police after the bombing of the police lines, unreported in national media, only became public through such platforms."

For the mainstream urban media, local news from the periphery is only important when it fits into the national narrative about an issue – such as the expulsion of Afghan refugees through the Torkham border in the wake of government policy to extradite them. But an issue of local significance with a sensitive edge like a police DSP making his displeasure known to his superiors publicly is subjected to blanket omission from national media and hence, discourse. This is why perhaps there is more coverage from Khyber, where a Key international border crossing than there is from Waziristan where virtually every day there is a sit-in, a protest or a jirga going on against rampant insecurity and the authorities.

In the final analysis, the occasional effort notwithstanding, the mainstream media by and large produces neither quantity nor quality journalism from the region. More so because it is controlled. "Mainstream media neither has space nor inclination to give us all the coverage we need whereas my Facebook page is my own, it's ours", said Javed Hussain, a journalist in Parachinar. In the case of national media, "there are clear policy constraints that are intimated to journalists in the field", beyond which the channels or their reporters cannot venture.

Where a journalist hits these well-established limits, he switches over to the digital option – his Facebook page – to make up for better, wider coverage. But this sort of coverage is not without its hazards, as the case of Khalid Miraj in South Waziristan illustrates, because local Facebook platforms, with their huge following, evince instant feedback from a very vocal community politicized by years of conflict.

Nobody, much less the tribes or the administration, wish to be in the crossfire of that feedback, especially if it is negative. Counter-pressure from authorities has many journalists deleting their posts from Facebook when they, the authorities, find themselves facing the heat of negative opinion.

Another important gap that social media posting fills is that even when a local story is covered by a newspaper or a TV channel, it cannot be guaranteed that it has been viewed locally. Newspapers arrive late in former FATA and long power cuts mean few watch TV – even otherwise, people do not consume TV the way they do in metropolitan Pakistan; whereas the youth are mostly hooked to the grid. Journalists tend to post their stories on social media – Facebook, YouTube

channels, TikTok – even if it has been covered by their newspapers or TV channels, knowing that they do not have the same audience.

The more popular, widely viewed Facebook pages even earn money by way of producing promotional content because people, politicians, and businesses want to be seen on those pages. This is also borne out by the fact that certain journalists have hired staff to quickly film, edit and upload content on their Facebook pages.

In Mohmand, Saeed Bacha, a local journalist has a Facebook page and TikTok channel for local news. Trained by the International Federation of Journalists, he even does fact-checking on national issues. He takes up issues of the Pashtun diaspora working in the GCC countries on his news channels, something seldom explored in local media.

There are many committed and eager journalists like Saeed wishing to have their online news portals but they need training and equipment. Increasingly, journalists and press clubs have launched or are mulling to launch online content. Almost every press club is now considering having their studios launch local programming with the help of member journalists. The Mohmand Press Club already has one.

Local issues are numerous and social media is the only hyper-local platform for local news, with no limits on space. For example, the Hasban Media in Bajaur has 43 members on its panel, often journalists in remote, even unstable, areas. These journalists share stories with Hisban Media, which then goes on its Facebook, YouTube channel, TikTok etc.

The Hisban Media Channel has been monetized and member journalists are paid for their efforts, or provided equipment like mobile phones or tripods, according to Hisbanullah Khan, president of the Bajaur Press Club and owner of Hisban Media. The reporters on its panel are everywhere within the headquarters and outside, generating content that, occasionally, also makes it to the mainstream media if relevant for a national audience.

“I feel the time for digital media is now”, said Hisbanullah, sharing his learning from the experience of running a digital news platform. “We have made mistakes and learnt our lessons. Sometimes we would be partial, not objective. But in time we learnt how to work in a region teeming with intelligence agencies, the Taliban, the military. We have learnt to be patient, not to break news and not to become part of a story. I am the editor for the content [that

goes on Hisban Media] and several fellow journalists review the stories regularly before posting them. In the past, we have reported on divisions/factions among the Taliban and it became a big threat, with the District Police Officer warning us to lie low. Even now, I live and work here in the administrative high-security zone due to threats."
Internet penetration has increased in the former FATA in recent years, but it has also happened alongside growing insecurity and attendant restrictions on civil liberties and rights – or whatever little there was of it – leading to growing politicization and disillusionment of the local population with the state and its institutions.

Before the merger, there were none under FCR and even when the merger happened, with legal and constitutional guarantees to ensure equal rights, it happened under conditions of conflict in the border regions and therefore the rights promised to tribesmen never really came to fruition.

In this situation, the internet and digital platforms also provide the freedom that the local population pine for most. Even more importantly, it offers alternative media to a region that has very little share by way of local voices and concerns in national media. With the merger also came demands and rallies for peace and people took readily to digital platforms and social media to get their voices heard.

Digital penetration, and portable technology like cell phones, should also be seen in the context of a place where traditional media like TV and newspapers are still not available to many or not favored by a conservative population, as in TV. Newspapers arrive late and a low literacy rate means few get to read them.

Radio is there but it has never been strengthened as a news medium in Pakistan, and remains predominantly a "strategic communications" tool for the governments and the state. This is a big reason why foreign radio channels like the VoA, Deeva, and Mashaal have became popular in the border regions in the first place because they focus on pressing local issues - not infotainment, selling skin creams with mercury and steroids, peddling homoeopathy without qualification or regulation, and music, as in case of local FM radio.

The Miranshah press club at North Waziristan

Chapter 7

Women Journalists: Treading with Care

While there are women reporting on tribal areas, some even from the field, they mainly live outside in the settled districts adjacent to the region, in proximity to towns and villages in the tribal districts where they go in and return the same day or the next to file a story. These are often women with nativity in the region and in the course of reporting, if they have to stay back because it is too late to be on the road or the story needs more work, they do so at their family homes.

But the distances are huge and data internet is not available everywhere so they have to travel anyway to a city or a town to be able to access Wi-Fi at an office or home. This puts women reporters at a cultural disadvantage because in the tribal region, they cannot freely stop to ask someone for help unless accompanied by men.

Based in Dera Ismail Khan, freelance journalist and social activist Razia Mehsud – women journalists in the tribal areas often double up as rights advocates because of their personal, firsthand experience in the field of the obstacles women face in the tribal, patriarchal merged areas - was able to report for the *Dawn*, a publication she was happy to write for.

But often, when she returned from deep within South Waziristan, her native district, with a story to a location with internet so she could file it, the editors had already received the story, often from a male journalist who is more connected and relatively more mobile than a woman. “I would often stop at the army checkpoint or outpost along the way, asking to use the internet to file the story. They helped but it created its own challenges because the locals thought I was spying on them.”

The distances are huge and travel unsafe, with long stretches of uninhabited mountainous terrain where anything can go wrong. It takes Mehsud 12 hours to reach her native Ladha in South Waziristan, gather news, and get back to Dera Ismail Khan to file stories. She is accompanied by her husband, also her camera person, on these journalistic incursions into the South. Without him, she said, she would not be able to work at all, emphasizing that support from men is essential to the work of female journalists in the male-dominated tribal region. But not everyone has that support; unlike Mehsud, women journalists in the

region often give up journalism once married. This holds true for the rest of the "settled" districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as well. But while they may or may not find this support from men in the family, it's also their male colleagues in the profession of journalism that may make (through support) or break their career (by not supporting but also due to competition from male journalists who are culturally free of the encumbrances that women face in tribal areas).

For example, they struggle to find membership in local press clubs over which male journalists hold sway, and just like the rest of the tribal society, these men are beholden more to their tribal traditions and outlook than gender equality. In the rare case that women do find membership, it is grossly disproportionate to men or a merely symbolic – a token representation because there are few women in journalism and a press club would look good to have one on the team, suggesting open-mindedness. But even when they do have support from male journalists and press clubs, real or token, a woman journalist's efficacy as a reporter in the field is a factor of patriarchal societal attitudes that become harsher when seen in concurrence with the tribal milieu and a male-dominated conflict. It cannot be viewed in isolation from that.

For women, the fact of a traditional region also being a high-security zone, with men as the face of tribal, administrative, military and militant fronts every step of the way, makes journalism an uphill task because women, their visibility and mobility, are most affected by a triad of cultural, religious and militaristic dynamics, against the backdrop of a long conflict. The malik has a male face, and so has the mullah, as has the man in uniform. The military – the Frontier Corps composed of tribal paramilitary units - carries the face and baggage of traditional, patriarchal masculinity as does the militant. If it begins with a tribal family at home that she has to resist and convince, out there are myriad barriers other than the security checkpoints in a field of constant conflict that has set back her lot by centuries.

A tribal woman as a journalist and an activist, speaking up for the woman population oppressed by tribal traditions, patriarchy and militarization is the last person to find support in the conflict-driven socio-political milieu of former FATA. Kept out of the press clubs and the information networks men have access to, little wonder that she gets to hear about the visit of a provincial minister to DI khan from someone in Peshawar than one of her colleagues in the local press club.

The threat - be it real peril to personal safety or lack of support from tribal society and colleagues – is everywhere. "We report in a way that 'saanp bhi mar jai aur lathi bhi na tootay'", says Mehsud – the kind of reporting that is akin to

"a blow that kills the snake but doesn't break the club", essentially highlighting a problem but also protecting the self.

"We don't get into controversies. But you cannot completely evade them. I have been threatened for covering the PTM but its demands are also the demands of the people. When I speak of women's rights, the community bristles. Some say I am leading tribal women astray because naturally, once empowered, they would demand their rights. *Yeh baghawat par majboor kar rahi hai*!" – *she is compelling our women to rebel against tradition*.

Women journalists also cannot continue in journalism for want of financial difficulties. Since they often work freelance, with a certain sense of duty to the voiceless women in their region, they need financial support to continue or find it in other jobs while they work as journalists.

When they don't have a source of income or if journalism doesn't pay enough despite a degree and experience, the family also forces women to take up another profession. Given the warlike conditions in the border areas, the mainstream media prefer men who are relatively free to move around and better connected than women with the community, experts and officials to dig out information.

It is to the credit of digital media that young women from the region continue to find their voice and vocation in journalism, despite immense challenges. They post stories on their social media accounts that garner immediate feedback, highlighting issues that often get responses from authorities, and sometimes solutions to the problems people face.

Mehsud posts her stories on social media platforms – she is there on all of them, from Twitter to TikTok, with 215,000 followers. In a recent news story on how digital media helps women journalists break traditions in the border regions, TNN mentioned the "burqa journalist" Sabiha Shiekh "emphasizing the difficulty of securing opportunities in mainstream media, where financial insecurity, job instability, and the prevalence of 24-hour duty schedules hinder journalists.[25] In contrast, freelancing in digital media offers flexibility, enabling a focus on regional issues through allowing ample time and space. Digital media, particularly social platforms, provides an ideal space for independent work aligned with journalistic principles."

[25] https://tnnenglish.com/rising-influence-women-journalists-thrive-in-digital-media-breaking-traditions/

Digital news platforms such as the TNN, BBC, Independent or Urdu News also pay well for their hard work, and are an incentive for continuing in journalism where financial rewards are few and hard to come by. Perhaps more rewarding is the fact that these young women journalists get celebrated for the important work they are doing, as in the case of Jamaima Afridi from the Khyber district, who was the finalist for the Thompson Foundations Young Journalist Award Finalist 2023.[26]

The newly formed Pakhtunkhwa Union of Journalists that integrates press clubs from merged areas and the rest of the province – as opposed to the Khyber Union of Journalists or KhUJ which only includes journalists from Peshawar – has a woman from Orakzai district as a general secretary. Alongside Nosheen Orakzai, the rest of the male office holders are also from former FATA.

The Tribal News Network (TNN) has trained several women from the tribal region as reporters and citizen journalists, with some in editorial and reporting positions based in the office at Peshawar, but they too work under precarious conditions as far as the field and the societal attitudes are concerned, said Khalida Niaz, an editor with TNN. “A blogger from merged areas working with TNN was forbidden by her brother when he saw her opinion piece on the website. She had to change her name to go unnoticed.”

Another reporter and blogger had to come secretly to a TNN journalism training because her family did not permit her to have a career in journalism. A reporter with TNN, when she did a report in Peshawar on why girl students couldn’t ride bikes to school when boys could, she invited the wrath of commentators that left her demoralized, especially when her brother criticized that report and stopped her from reporting after seeing all the negative comments.

The commentators didn’t even spare the other women commentators who spoke in favor of the idea, especially those who did dare to drive a bike. In the case of a woman gymnast from Khyber who had asked for coverage of her sports event in Qayyum Stadium in Peshawar, and whose video TNN had to delete from its website later, what triggered honour-related threats within her family was the torrent of negative comments from viewers who didn’t take kindly to her participation in sports.

[26] https://www.thomsonfoundation.org/latest/jamaima-afridi-young-journalist-award-finalist-2023/

A newspaper stall at Mir Ali market in North Waziristan

Chapter 8

Radio's Wasted Potential

Once a people's medium in the merged districts, the decline of radio may be because of the rise of digital media but is also a sad reflection on the misplaced priorities of the state in a region where radio was treated as a primary focus of strategic communications at the height of War on Terror and remains stuck there. That objective – strategic communications – is dominant still, with virtually no space or policy for local news. As a journalist in Khyber puts it: "The region is in crisis whereas the [local] radio is playing music."

In the rest of Pakistan, too, the private radio on the periphery has virtually become a promotional tool for quacks and sellers of skin cream (with mercury and steroids) - the kind advertised on walls in the crowded unplanned semi-urban towns - and cheap entertainment.

Its great potential to educate, inform, to engage people as an interactive hyper-local medium around local issues, especially in towns and villages whose population and problems are not a concern of corporate mainstream media, has been willfully thwarted by the state and PEMRA, the electronic media regulator. Where it is not abused by unscrupulous owners to make money out of harming people, their health included, it has become a tool for "strategic communications" for the state.

The former FATA is no different. In a way, radio in its thwarted potential is a metaphor for the tribal region. Just as curbs on freedom of expression has suppressed popular voices and entrenched anti-people power centres, radio's use for strategic communications and commercial aggrandizement on part of private and state managers have undermined the full potential of radio as a people's medium, making dominant only state narratives and unscrupulous commercial forces like quacks and unregulated, unlicensed products harmful to people.

The radio stations in the merged areas are either with the military (Sunno FM) or the government (Pakhtunkhwa Radio) – except for a commercial radio station in Bajaur, Shamaal Radio, a license awarded on political basis; one in Mohmand, the Abaseen Radio, also a commercial radio station, and Radio Tehzeeb which is not strictly in Khyber but at Peshawar's border with that district.

Numerous studies in the past have established that in the merged districts, radio remains popular due to the local oral culture. And within that spectrum, foreign Pashto language radio stations are more popular because their news agenda for the region encouraging local voices, as opposed to the local state and government radio stations where independent voices are discouraged.

Where local radio stations have an edge at all, it is because they are hyper-local with local dialects – based as they are locally within a district and focusing on that alone, but even there, independent local news is not what they aim at. Mashaal/RFE/RL or Deeva/VoA does programming in Yousafzai dialect that is widely spoken and understood but locals prefer their own idiom, with their own sensibility, which only a locally based radio station can deliver.

In the years leading up to the merger and beyond, the Peshawar-based Tribal News Network, an organization advocating local media and news in the tribal region, used to create news bulletins and get them aired on partner radio stations. It does no more, saying its short bulletins - ten minutes each; three times a day - cannot influence the news and information agenda on the radio that does 18 hours of entertainment and music. “A radio station cannot become a news and current affairs medium unless it dedicates most of its time to that sort of programming”, said Said Nazir, Director and co-founder of TNN. Knowing the control that the state exerts on radio content and the eternal question of sustainability in a revenue-starved eco-system like former FATA and other peripheries, that is nearly impossible, of course. Indeed, decades of private radio in Pakistan, and one would be hard put to find a model that could truly represent the aspirations and issues of its audiences. The shift to digital media and preponderance of social media hasn’t helped but there are examples aplenty where radio stations have adapted to the new environment, survived and indeed, remain relevant to their audiences.

In the merged districts, the government radio does studio-based local programming by inviting guests. But based as they are in high-security zones in a region with few subject experts, these programs – alongside religious content, a hangover from the Talibanized decades; not that the situation is any different now – do little to address local problems through interactive programs. “That sort of freedom of programming is not there on army or government radio stations,” said a radio producer in Miranshah.

A producer in Pakhtunkhwa Radio in Kurram did a program on “sasta bazaar” during Ramazan, taking care to balance it with official voices because locals at the bazaar said merchandize on sale was hardly cheap. The Deputy Commissioner took a strong exception to it, for allowing local voices to

criticize the district administration even when the program had official voices responding to public grievances.

“You are a government person on a government radio; how could you use it against the government?”, he was told. “We are virtually reduced to cover the DC jirga with locals on something like a land dispute, for example, in which alongside the district administration, the local MNA, the Maliks, the Brigadier and others participate. What decisions are taken in the jirga is not shared with us - even when everyone knows that local peace hinges on the decisions of the jirga and wants to know what they are.”

The idea that radio is an effective medium for religious programming took root since the example set by Mangal Bagh in Khyber, Fazlullah in Swat and Mullah Radio in other locations. Even when they used radio to whip up conflict through religious sermons calling for Jehad against the state, that idea has, ironically, stuck, so that on the one hand radio may not have relevance to the local population by ignoring real issues but continues to appeal to the deeply conservative outlook of a region already heavily Talibanized.

While the Pakhtunkhwa radio stations are always in a state of crisis – lacking staff, funds, equipment, and power – and frequently off-air, the state-owned Suno, also a mouthpiece for ISPR, is regular. Alongside local programming in local languages, it broadcasts news bulletins in Pashto and Urdu language. They are prepared in Peshawar and Islamabad, and strategically aimed at the integration of a remote region that, barring Khyber, has remained in little contact with the rest of the country.

Radio could have been relevant to women - and the elderly population - in the merged areas where they do not have access or aptitude for technology as widely as men or youth, but that opportunity too is lost because of the conservative nature of the region where local women’s voices on radio are not looked upon kindly.

At the time of writing this, the Pakhtunkhwa radio stations in Parachinar and Wana were not functional because of a lack of equipment and power in a region where electricity is available only for two hours out of 24. In the odd case when the station has an electricity generator, it’s only on air for a couple of hours in the morning and evening.

Other than Razmak in North Waziristan which has had a proper studio since before the merger, the government radio stations in Kurram, Bajaur, Mohmand

and Wana remain without studios and electricity. Orakzai doesn't even have a government radio station.

In October 2023, PEMRA announced to auction radio licenses for merged areas and Buner district. With two private stations allowed for each of the seven merged districts, radio could potentially still be a "people's medium" if done properly in combination with new media formats, but it comes in the midst of a muzzling conflict, and at a time when even popular media like TV is inclined to producing cheap content like studio-based programming, not to mention the popular drift to digital media platforms. As a medium, radio has always been monopolized by the state. Even though there are more and more private radio stations through the length and breadth of the country, their content agenda is clearly dictated by the state through PEMRA regulations.

And with PEMRA's record of stifling the radio industry through its information controls and excessive fee regimes in urban Pakistan, radio stands no chance in former FATA where there are virtually no prospects for financial sustainability. These stations, if and when they come on air, would be more of the same – mediums for strategic communications, quack promotional content, beauty creams, music and entertainment, established and run with little investment and even lesser thought to local needs and aspirations.

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government also plan to set up two of its radio stations in Miranshah and Khyber that currently don't have one, but again, the provincial government stations remain in a state of crisis and neglect, their broadcasts subject to availability of electricity and only when the equipment works.

But in a province where their "mother radio station" in Peshawar, the district headquarters, lacks power because there is no fuel available in case of power cuts, it is hard to guarantee resources and facilities to those built in remote districts. The long history of dysfunctional stratcom government radio in the region doesn't inspire confidence either, as they remain dependent on donor funds for everything from equipment to training, including staying on air through the chronic power cuts that plague the region.

Another characteristic of these radio stations – whether Pakhtunkhwa or the ISPR's Sunno, Shamaal in Bajaur or Tehzib outside Khyber – is that they are not licensed but "special case" radio stations, allowed to the military (against which the late lawyer-activist Asma Jehangir had filed a still-pending court case) during the 'War on Terror' years. They are now renamed and run as commercial broadcasters.

These radio stations also have Facebook pages with thousands of followers. Local journalists say that the people complain that programs or music aired on the state-owned radio are not “culturally sensitive.” “They should be doing more information than music, and bring in staff that is “mature”, doing quality productive programs.”

Chapter 9

Press Clubs: Divided We Fall

If one goes looking for an analogy for the state of former FATA, one will find it, aptly, in the state of its press clubs. Long neglected, sometimes without a building of their own and often monopolized by a group of local journalists whose leadership is disputed by others who avoid the premises. They are monuments to the individual ego rather than the cause of journalism in the region, under-equipped and mostly based in government buildings or buildings built by the government or the army.

Due to these divisions – duly exploited by the state and governments, the political elements and vested interests, and finally media organizations that seek to play one group of journalists against the other – a district often has more than one press club. This in itself, is perhaps needed when one considers the distances of towns and villages from the district headquarters that is supposed to house a single, recognized district press club in every district. Again, journalists are situated in different locations within a district: For instance, they are there in Landikotal, Bara and Jamrud in the Khyber district, and it makes sense for a journalist, especially women with socio-cultural hindrances on mobility, to go to one's town and press club than to another. There are also tribal affiliations where the Masud tribe has its press club in Ladha in upper South Waziristan and the one in Wana in lower south is dominated by the Wazir tribe.

Most of these press clubs are not registered and do not fulfil the criteria set for official grants through the government's Public Information Department that insists on a single press club in every district, as elsewhere in the country. Press clubs based in different towns of a district including the headquarters also have claims to being the "district press club"- a title bestowing the recognition that it is the sole representative body for journalists in that district. This issue can be sorted out if the government recognizes one, but it provides buildings and patronage to all, contributing to competition and divisions over these, and eventually corruption where journalists could be played against each other and the media in its interest.

The divisions become more apparent in the case of the distribution of government-allotted funds because only the registered press clubs get

it, and since not all are, funds lapse. The journalists also complain about the "complicated" registration process saying it is cumbersome and time-consuming.

Elections are infrequent, with one of the two or more rival groups in control of the press clubs and their affairs for years at end. For example, in Bajaur, there haven't been any elections in the press clubs for the last five years. In such a scenario, all groups claim to individually represent local journalist instead of one collectively.

These divisions make way for exploitation at the hands of authorities where they either do not recognize them for support – several unregistered press clubs haven't received the provincial grant fund; others have split it between two or three press clubs. Or one group is patronized against the other by the authorities for their vested interest, pressuring the *other* not to carry a story that is not in its favor. Likewise, the groups close to authorities have easy access to information.

Most press clubs are also based in government buildings, either allotted as in Mohmand, the oldest press club in merged districts, or temporarily housed there as in Bajaur, where it waits to move to a new location for which funding is promised but not forthcoming for years now. In other places like Parachinar and Miranshah, they are built by the army.

With any discussion about press clubs, what is unavoidable is their reliance on government funds to run their affairs. Like elsewhere in Pakistan, press clubs in former FATA are dependent on government largesse but it has turned

less generous in the wake of the merger. Earlier, press clubs would get regular funds from the governor's house, political agent and the FATA secretariat that were unaudited and varied in scale, depending on the whims of the institution involved.

With few avenues to raise funds – other than the occasional press conferences and forums – in a milieu that is not media-savvy and by now also inclined to digital media, press clubs need funds to pay bills, buy equipment, and maintain the premises. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government, soon after the merger, had announced a one-time grant of Rs 2 million for the press clubs in the region but not everyone got it, given the contested claims of different press clubs to be the real representative body of journalists in a district. While the fact that not all of them are registered with the government puts them at a disadvantage, the fact that the government only treats the one at the district headquarters as a bonafide press body, and therefore deserving of its support, also sets them back.

Khyber, for example, has three press clubs in its three tehsils – Landikotal, Jamrud and the oldest, Bara. The Jamrud and Bara have their own government building, Landikotal is in a rented building with the government promising to build one. Compared to other merged districts, Khyber claims a lion's share of news in the national media – a factor also of proximity to Peshawar with regional news bureau offices. And due to the busy border at Torkham in Landi Kotal; on account of trade and security relations with Afghanistan that are never out of the news.

The press club at Bannu, the town that is also home to the displaced journalists from North Waziristan

But even otherwise, in terms of news generation, the district is quite vibrant because there are more journalists in Khyber than any other in the merged areas. Bara is home to diverse tribes with considerable commercial activity – from cloth to weapons, and electronic goods to auto parts - and Landikotal is equally vibrant, being a trading town close to the border. In Khyber, all these geographical and commercial aspects come together with the fact that its journalists have had much exposure and training, and this has led to more processing of news and information, at times of high quality, coming out of the region. Even under FCR, the district had become less dependent on the Political Agent's office – his *farmaan* or summons - as the source of all news due to the strategic nature of the region. Post-merger, that dependence on the local administration for news is even less. More news about education, health, development, trade, and security means the range has expanded and diversified – for Khyber, at least.

Even more importantly, this diversity, mobility and enterprise point to relative openness that makes Khyber – at least for the towns close to Peshawar, if not its remote regions like Tirah – a test case for better integration post-merger when compared to the rest of the former FATA which is remote from Peshawar, the provincial capital, and has little of the Khyber's intrepid journalistic traits because of greater insecurity, tightly controlled information regimes, underpinned by fear, threats, restrictions on mobility amidst general insecurity.

The Bajaur Press Club at Khar in District Bajaur

And yet, Khyber still lags far behind the rest of the country by way of journalism studies, follow-up news, investigative journalism and a sustained media dialogue with people on the development and integration process. The district's integration, the visibility of government infrastructure in its urban towns

and relatively better development markers (through abysmal in its remote and mountainous regions like Tirah), and its relative journalistic openness, has probably more to do with its strategic and geographical proximity to the provincial capital of Peshawar.

While having three press clubs in different tehsils cater to the journalists all over the district, local office holders also argue that with the insecurity and distances involved, a press club in one locality – the district headquarters – means journalists in the rest of the district will have no place to go.

In the case of Kurram, for example, these are also divided by sectarian conflict and stringent security regimes where the one in the largely Shia Parachinar, in Upper Kurram, cannot readily access across security checkpoints the one in Sunni Sada, in Lower Kurram, and vice versa. Likewise, both of these cannot access Central Kurram, for the same reason.

The same holds true for journalists from areas other than Kurram to access Parachinar, the largest city in Kurram and its administrative headquarters, which remains a sectarian flashpoint, and alongside Central Kurram, access to them remains a security-negotiating nightmare within a highly tense militarized zone. Even in the rest of the tribal districts where the sectarian threat is absent – except Orakzai, where the press club is situated in a Shia neighborhood, and where journalism was banned for months in the wake of the merger[27] - it is the same: Swathes of land and population beyond the district headquarters stay out of bound for security reasons.

In Orakzai, for example, the majority of its journalists are based in the neighboring Hangu district due to insecurity and displacement, but also due to the absence of basic amenities like internet connectivity, schools and hospitals in their home district. They only travel very early to news locations within Orakzai and leave the district before 2 pm, long before dark, to get back to Hangu.

This uncertain juggling of time and travel in relation to widespread insecurity is a dominant concern for journalists all over the merged districts. They only travel in daylight to arrive or leave a place. In case of long distances like travelling from Wana to Ladha in South Waziristan, they have to plan where to spend the night if it falls along the way. Journalists at times have to apply for a “NOC” to travel within the same district, say from Khyber to Tirah, even when both areas fall in the same district, and the reporter is native to Khyber.

[27] https://www.fnpk.org/fn-slams-ban-on-journalism-in-orakzai-tribal-region/

Until very recently, Wana in South Waziristan did not even have a press club. It was only recently built, established by the army after 2018. It provided the land and paid for construction. Through the decades of the War on Terror, there was no place for journalists to work from in a critical tribal agency where the people's lives and official activity stayed virtually in a state of limbo for years due to conflict.

The press club at Ghalanai in District Mohmand

When seen in the context of non-payment of salaries by media organizations to reporters, and the absence of a press club close to home, newsgathering - with all its security-related impediments, hazards and challenges of mobility through long stretches of perilous desolation between towns - becomes a disincentive even in a place where there are few opportunities. This, in turn, makes journalism in former FATA either a labor of love or a source of self-aggrandizement. This latter aspect is entrenched and strengthened not only by non-payment of salaries but also by the corrupting demands of media organizations that journalists be their marketing persons, bringing advertisements and other revenue in exchange for the privilege of a press identity card confirming that they are associated with one.

In a peripheral region like the former FATA where power and its associations help open closed doors, a media card goes a long way in guaranteeing a certain influence and stature among the population and bureaucracy, even if access to information and safety remains elusive still. Whether it is due to the shift to digital technology or a deliberate policy to engage media only on a need-to-know basis, the impression that journalists have lost "respect" under the new system is dominant in the merged districts. Journalists say they are left high and dry by the merger, "jobless" in the sense that their keep – in the absence of

salary from the media organization - used to be the favors they derived from the political agent's office.

Now the police, the trade associations and others occasionally donate funds – irregularly, when available – to local press clubs for which financial conditions are "hand to mouth", as a veteran journalist described it. He says press clubs where pressers are held do earn something but it is barely enough because these are infrequent.

Journalists do agree though that this dependency on government institutions for financial support compromises freedom of expression. The expectation in return for the favor is that nothing adverse against the administration goes to the media. By and large, the journalist community complies.

The Pakhtunkhwa Radio studio at Razmak in North Waziristan

Chapter 10

Media and the Reform Agenda

When journalists in the Orakzai agency were asked if the media figured anywhere in the tribal districts' scheme of things and the reforms promised under the merger, one replied thus: "For the government, yes, to use strategically for its plans, and to look good. For the people, for their voices to figure in those plans, no. I don't see it. I don't see it because if as a media representative, I have to plan my visit to my district days ahead of time; when I have no access to communication and electricity, and the authorities inside Orakzai, to access, send or retrieve information; if I have to leave early in the morning so I can return before dark, fearing for my life and safety, how can media [development] be on the agenda? Moreover, the entire district administration is based in Hangu, from DC to every line department. The power companies, the courts, and the health department are in Hangu. The MNA is here. The police line officer is here in Hangu. Hangu is the Orakzai headquarters."

Except for tribal districts close to Peshawar like Khyber and Mohmand, this state of affairs persists throughout the former FATA. Given the state of play, the question then arises: If the agenda is to develop the merged areas, to help integrate it, where is the media within this scheme? And if it is not there, how is the process participatory, transparent and accountable – factoring in people's aspirations in decision-making? Little wonder then that from Khyber to Wana, one hears that development projects and resources are claimed by influential people within and outside the tribal districts, and the media cannot report this because local journalists are not strong enough to stand up to them.

To the question, if media reforms or initiatives had been pursued over the last five years since the merger, an official at the KP Information Department, who had long been in different official and consulting positions related to communications and public relations in the merged areas, said there was "zero-interest" on part of authorities to create an environment for free media and freedom of expression in the region.

There are endless meetings to plan a media event but little follow up. Deeply frustrated with the "non-serious" attitude of officialdom, he narrated how a "year of meetings" to organize a region-wide sports tournament in the merged

areas finally led to the conclusion that it could not be held because the finale would have the governor attending, and what if there was a bombing of the event? As much as it shows the lack of will, there is, on the part of bureaucracy not just in Peshawar but all over the tribal districts, also a certain uncertainty about their freedom of decision-making in a region with highly unstable amidst a law and order situation. Insecurity, naturally, is readily proffered as a reason for official inability to make any deliberate or sustained improvement in any situation, not just media.

There are tentative, gradual attempts at opening up to media scrutiny such as the extension of the RTI Act to merged areas. Before the merger, journalism was "confined" to the whims and views of the political agent. Now there is the RTI Act whereby journalists can access information but it is not forthcoming always, and if it does at all, it is after inordinate delays.

This keeps the odd intrepid reporter frustrated and cynical about the sincerity behind the initiative. "There are "corrupt mafias" in every sector", said a reporter in Mohmand. "For example, journalists point out that the allotment of tender under government projects is not done transparently; jirgas do not invite us unless someone is a "ladla" – blue-eyed – of tribes, the police, district administration or the army that are stakeholders in such gatherings; the police does not even provide them FIRs to get details of a crime."

The problem, he said, is not with mechanisms like RTI but official mistrust and attitude towards media. "RTI cannot work in isolation from the general environment for media which is unfavorable, stymying access to information

The Pakhtunkwa Radio station at Ghalanai, Mohmand, lacks a proper studio and equipment

and mobility in a security environment. If RTI is about investigative reporting, then that is like inviting trouble. Journalism, as it is here, is about dodging bullets every step of the way. Why stir up a hornet's nest when there is no support coming from anyone?"

A journalist in South Waziristan did two stories on the border trade, targeting the "mafias" involved in illegal trading. He got death threats the moment he posted them on his Facebook page – he said he could never send it to his channel because "the institutions in control of tribal districts also control the mainstream media." The state institutions do not come forward directly but exploit tribal traditions and culture as a weapon to create threats for journalists. "They don't need to leave the office; there are people available to do their bidding for money or favors."

The RTI Act was extended to the merged areas in 2019, soon after the merger. Establishing implementation structures with dedicated public information officers is currently underway, with training held for public information officers in all of the merged districts.[28] The KP government has a website identifying these for different districts, including the merged areas.[29] However, journalists say these are only for a few departments and do not cover the entire spectrum of government.

Moreover, the experience of local journalists with RTI leaves a lot to desire. In some cases, they say, those appointed as focal persons are not information officers but assistant commissioners in the district administration, or a head of department. "How could they provide journalists information if they themselves head the department about which questions are asked?"

In 2022, the then chief minister of KP, Mahmood Khan visited the flood-affected district of Tank. A journalist who had been regularly seeking official information through RTI asked the deputy commissioner's office how much it had cost the government to have Khan visit the place for a very short time. The answer he got was that the Town Municipal Administration had organized the visit, but everything at that level of official engagement with a VIP falls under the DC office. There was no figure provided for the cost incurred on the CM's visit. He was asked to write another application to the TMA office. "The process is slow and painstaking, and information comes after many delays if at all," said the journalist. "One has to persist. I feel delays are part of the official policy and

[28] https://www.kprti.gov.pk/two-days-training-on-rti-law-for-the-pios-heads-of-the-line-departments-of-district-kurram-on-31st-aug-1st-sep-2022/
[29] C:\Users\Administrator\Desktop\FATA Research\(https:\www.kprti.gov.pk\pios-list\

character to discourage sharing of information, and it's even worse in the tribal districts where an environment of secrecy surrounds everything."

The same goes for tribal citizens who are afraid to speak to the media despite the desperation of living in high-security zones because if they do, they are singled out by authorities for harassment. This sort of environment, challenging for men, is even more discouraging for women who are in any case at a disadvantage due to tribal patriarchal strictures and values.

In terms of access to information, little has changed in the region since 2001; the culture of "intelligence" as a main source of information gathering, and the use of media to propagate state narratives remain entrenched more than ever. "We don't ask for information; we can't. They give us information if it serves their [official] interests and objectives."

The freedoms and protection that that media and journalists should have are not there. "We are as afraid of jirga as we are of Lashkar; of a mob, as we are of the district administration. Journalists get beaten up all the time for reporting on schools or hospitals." In tribal areas, schools lack teachers and hospital staff or facilities. The schools are built on the land belonging to a Malik supported by the administration and the education department.

According to a journalist in Mohmand, media correspondents who work on the ground in the tribal areas are like "orphans", with no help coming from any quarter. Not from their parent organizations but only in extreme circumstances like the bombing in Bajaur. The district administration may help in case of an emergency but even that is not consistent because often the very threat to media originates from the authorities themselves and when it does, it stands by its own, supporting its own.

From Miranshah to Bajaur, journalists have been taken to court by the district based line departments. Hisbanullah, the Geo TV reporter from Bajaur, reported that a woman doctor who was supposed to be in the hospital's Outpatient Department at 11 am wasn't there to attend to patients. The story went on air on Geo, with comments from the Medical Superintendent of the district saying they would take action against her. Instead, she filed a writ petition in the court against the journalist.

After nearly five years of fighting in the court, the journalist won but at a heavy cost. He had to hire a lawyer and attend regular court hearings, often neglecting his journalism.

Ziarat Gul, a former Naib in Hangu district, took Khan Zaman, the journalist from Orakzai and his newspaper Mashriq to court for taking pictures of him when the police arrested him for selling spurious drugs. The journalist and his media organization was slapped with hefty lawsuits running in to millions of rupees. When Noor Behram, the journalist in North Waziristan, posted on his Facebook page news about a woman losing her baby because the woman's doctor wasn't available to assist in delivery, the doctor filed a lawsuit against him demanding Rs 20 million.

The press club in Miranshah was also attacked by relatives of a local police officer who said Noor Behram had posted his "private" picture on Behram's Facebook page.

As for government "advisories", journalists also get them on a "need basis", an observation confirmed by a high-ranking government official in district administration who used the same expression "need to know need basis", while explaining the authorities' modus operandi on media engagement.

Almost every journalist interviewed for this report insisted that their status has diminished within the official circles after the merger, and consequently, access to information at the official level. Except for those close to the administration and army, few get invited to meetings and briefings on matters related to the public.

If there is information that the administration feels should go to the media, journalists get "statements" on WhatsApp groups or phone messages. In some places, journalists describe the administration as friendly and forthcoming but not necessarily proactive in engaging media.

Journalists at the Wana Press Club in South Waziristan

Access to information has increasingly become an issue post-merger, especially with security and development funds utilization, the two dominant, and "closed" issues, enshrouded in official secrecy in the former FATA. The statements issued through official WhatsApp groups are all there is, with added information rarely provided should a journalist wish to follow up.

And yet, officials insist that media is a partner when it comes to post-merger integration and development of the tribal districts.

Said an assistant commissioner based in the merged districts: "I have spent two years here and I have spent more time than others. In our district, 95 per cent of issues are related to land and that means my interaction with media is greater than anyone here. There is a clear impact of mergers on media because politically, every segment of society has become more conscious. For example, earlier we had the political agent – he was all in all; three in one. He was the legislature, the judiciary and the executive. Since the merger, we have a proper judiciary here and the (despotic British era) FCR is no more. People now have different avenues to help address their issues. People now know about their rights. We have the local government system where we have 158 candidates including women and so a huge chunk of the population as contestants, with the female participation as something historic, with at least three women contesting on one seat. The turnout was above 55 per cent, with the local bodies now interacting with the administration. We now have taxation, and employment in police and army, including minority faith members. In all this, we try to involve media."

So where does the media stand within this reform agenda? The district administrations insist they try to engage media at every level – "To involve media in all our activities, we feel, is very important to us," said an official in Kurram. However, nothing exists on paper when it comes to this claim. If challenged, officials cite as an example the fact that almost all of the press clubs in the merged areas are built by the government or housed in government buildings.

The policy, however, not communicated formally but in effect informally, is to involve media on a "case to case basis." This has to do with the "sensitive nature of the region" but also because media is a "double-edged sword", as one official in Parachinar puts it.

"There is a lot of sensitive information that cannot be released to media immediately, as and when it happens. Media has its own character and it even goes by rumors. Where public interest is concerned and where matters are

in public policy, we openly discuss them. But with something like sectarian violence, we cannot have the media responding in its traditional way because that means we will have a war here and the district will not recover for a year. Other than that, to reach out to the public, to get their response in time and respond to it on public matters is just not possible without media. But if a media house or a journalist wants access to everything, I don't think it is [that level of transparency] anywhere in the world."

At the same time, there is an attitude in the official circles that if information is freely provided to "minds that are not ready for it yet it will only create chaos."– the attitude, a "set practice" behind the official emphasis on "slow, gradual" integration of the tribal districts. But a lot is happening during this "gradual integration" that needs interrogation, transparency and accountability, and that is not happening because media is not allowed to.

An official in the information department said that if there were parties interested in setting up a newspaper or radio station locally, they could do so. "There is no policy to discourage that." In support of that assertion, one may cite the recent radio-licensing regime announced for former FATA, allowing at least two private radio stations in each tribal district. But at the same time, the Pakhtunkhwa radio stations in the merged areas do not have studios, are on-air for a limited time or not at all whenever there is a power cut – there are places in merged areas where electricity supply is only for two hours out of 24 - and often these stations do not have electricity back-up.

This "informal, vague" approach towards media is also there in policy documents. The much-hyped Tribal Decade Strategy 2020 – 2030[30] that spells out the provincial government's "commitments……to enhance human potential, generate economic opportunities and improve livelihoods" in the merged areas mentions the word "media" only twice: Once concerning a media survey the authorities undertook to assess needs in the past, and again on how social media radicalizes the youth.

Regarding any media development plans to help engage the local population in its development agenda, or even how to propagate it, it has nothing to say. The government's biggest donor and development partner in the region, the United Nations Development Programme, under the first five years of its FATA Governance Project (2018-2022) aimed at improving "democratic governance of state institutions, including Parliament, provincial assemblies, local

[30] C:\Users\Administrator\Downloads\Tribal Decade Strategy.pdf

governments and electoral management bodies, strengthened to be responsive to citizens and accountability, for improved service delivery." Nowhere, though, does it indicate media as a crucial component if governance is to be made "responsive to citizens". Its assistance, however, extends to providing "strategic communications support to the government (SAFRON, the Governor House and the FATA Secretariat)" contributing to "local and national visibility and buy-in to the reform processes."

Such an agenda may be helpful to the development "project" in a "difficult region" as authorities see it, and the UN endorses it. But being "strategic", it lacks local input and voices, especially women's, in decision-making. While consultations do happen under the local government structures supported by UNDP and certain international donors and NGOs, as do public hearings where people participate in large numbers, they can hardly be equivalent or a substitute for independent local media enabling expression and participation – fundamental rights that are at a premium in tribal districts.

Again, the gap between the citizens and the state within the tribal districts' political and governance system is huge, and a thorny issue. This could only be helped through dialogue between both, with the help of local media that allows for exchange of views. However, as in the past, the post-merger communication regime is aimed at only "strengthening the hand of the government", not strengthening local voices and empowering the citizens through independent, interactive media.

Journalists at the Orakzai Press Club in Distict Hangu

Bajaur Press Club at Khar in District Bajaur

Chapter 11

The Cure – Recommendations

1. Self-help: First and foremost, any effort or support to strengthen media in the merged areas has to come from media organizations and bodies. Right now, as elsewhere in the peripheries, they are completely hands-off, contributing more to the weakening of media than helping it become independent and ethical, working in the public interest. Parent organizations need to invest in capacity building, support and provide for the logistics of journalism.

2. Salaries: Media organizations must pay regular salaries while implementing the wage-board award. Salaries to journalists be paid according to the wage board or as minimum wage – Rs 35,000 - fixed by the state. It is because of the lack of salaries that journalism does not flourish in the merged areas because there is no incentive for good journalism or enterprise stories. Journalists continue to regurgitate statements and cover events, with little or no motivation to do investigative stories. The non-payment of salaries on the part of media organizations also corrupts journalism and journalists locally, leaving them open to exploitation by elements – private, government and militant - that seek to control media and information.

3. Free to report: The district administrations and the security forces need to ensure freedom of expression, access to information, safety and mobility of journalists.

4. Electricity and internet: Without access to power and internet, especially in remote parts of tribal districts like Central Kurram and Upper Orakzai, the issues and concerns of populations there would remain in the dark. For media to work effectively, and for authorities to respond to people's needs and aspirations as part of the reform process, the government must prioritize the provision of electricity and internet to such areas.

5. Information access: The Right to Information Act has been extended to the merged tribal districts but not everyone knows about it, certainly fewer journalists exercise it, and there too they face inordinate delays for information to become available. Combined RTI training for journalists and district information staff would create a culture of information sharing and transparency

at the official level while also giving journalists access to information in an otherwise closed society.

6. Information officers: Information focal persons should be available at the administrative official levels. High-ranking officials are not always available to speak to media and journalists depend on these Public Information Officers (PIOs). In certain districts, they are there and are active in responding to information requests. However, RTI, even though extended in 2019 to the newly merged tribal areas, is very much a nascent feature of local governance. The availability of PIOs and swift processing of RTI requests would go a long way in building and strengthening an information-sharing culture and greater access to information.

7. Support press clubs: Press clubs in the merged areas have few facilities and funds. Media organizations need to work on an "Adopt a Press Club" plan for the merged areas, both to sustain them and keep them independent. They need to be brought on a par with the rest of the districts. They should have a regular auditable monthly grant, to be spent transparently on press club affairs only. Press clubs should have security around the clock.

8. Representative journalism: Regular elections that unite and strengthen the journalist community should be held in press clubs because otherwise journalism is weakened by forces seeking to divide journalists and use them for vested interests.

9. Dealing with stress: Stress/trauma counseling for journalists at local press clubs by making available mental health practitioners to work with local reporters. First aid training at the press club level and for journalists in the areas that do not have one are also needed.

10. Conflict-sensitive journalism: Training for journalists of the region in conflict-sensitive reporting is essential to empower them and optimize their safety through ethical reporting.

11. Financial support: Financial and medical support for families of journalists threatened, injured and killed in violent incidents is important, indeed necessary, considering the closed environment of the tribal region where incentives for responsible journalism are few. Nearly two dozen journalists have been killed in the tribal districts in recent years. Support for them should be ongoing, or at least someone in the family should be able to support it, preferably with a job afforded by the government. The government declares

them as martyrs but does not support their families. There is little insurance or support from news or journalism support organizations, local or international, and that too, is not sustained.

12. Safety training and gear: Media organizations need to provide first-aid and safety training and gear to journalists. The security establishment and police should provide access, space and protection to journalists while covering sensitive stories.

13. Legal support: Legal support for journalists embroiled in court cases related to reporting is necessary because there is little backing coming from their organizations. Media law clinics for journalists can also help them understand the legal framework governing their profession.

14. Capacity enhancement: Exposure visits and capacity building training – both journalism and technical - for the younger journalists. Those who have been trained and mentored are far better journalists than those who haven't received any teaching.

15. Thematic training: Training in political, governance, court and crime reporting, now that the districts have courts and police. Reporters have little knowledge of law and legal processes related to crime, land settlements, human rights abuses, etc.

16. Digital savvy: Digital media training for Journalists, including women, who, by and large, have access to the internet through mobile or DSL and use digital technology for reporting. They have their own social media new platforms. Not all of them, however, know how to use digital media ethically and responsibly, leading to threats and intimidation from tribes, militants and district administrations. Journalists need training in digital content production, editing and fact-checking.

17. Independence: Media support organizations need to explore avenues to make press clubs and journalists independent of support from the government. The explosion of digital media offers opportunities, especially at a time when journalism and conventional media are threatened with extinction. For press clubs to become hyper-local journalism platforms, with member journalists contributing news. Digital/social media portals of press clubs could have senior, experienced colleagues acting as editors and gatekeepers. This way the website/ pages could be regulated by journalists and run professionally through editorial oversight.

18. Radio-friendly: Outdoor radio programmes like *Kalay pa Kalay* or *Hujra* (on Mohmand Pakhtunkhwa Radio) were very popular. Local journalists were engaged to produce programming but in time the station ran out of funds. Journalists are available in all districts to do relevant, information-based programs, but the stations are inconsistent in terms of programming and support policy. Instead of playing programs recorded in Peshawar and Islamabad, radio stations should engage them to do programs locally because they are aware of local issues and mindful of local cultural sensibilities.

19. Local/community media: Local media is badly needed because mainstream media is only interested in breaking news like terrorism. Time and again, journalists have tried to start newspapers – *Qabail*; and *Da Qabail-o-Awaz* – but they fizzled out for want of funds and support because there is no industry or business to sustain them locally. The government needs to take affirmative action by giving ownership to local media and journalists who are committed to the cause of journalism and public interest. This can be done through facilitation by way of cheap licensing and easy, friendly registration regimes.

20. Training government functionaries: Media training and outreach training for officials and departments, especially for information officers dealing with media and RTI.

21. Expanded networks: Even though the provincial government policy allows for one press club at the district headquarters, ground realities make it inaccessible for journalists spread all over the district. For example, in Kurram, they say one cannot trust the weather or the security situation – it could go wrong anytime. Therefore, it needs to have press clubs in three different locations where journalists can work from and organize themselves. The press clubs should have regular and round-the-clock access to the internet and electricity or alternative resources in case of crisis which is a way of life in the merged areas.

22. Influencing influencers: Security and media ethics training for journalists and social media influencers to guard them against risks emanating from unprofessional approaches to reporting.

23. Media literacy: Journalists face threats from communities that are not media literate. For example, in Kurram, journalists from the Sunni community, and those from the Shia community, are under pressure to represent their community, and even take sides, in times of conflict. Media literacy sessions should be held for the community in town halls, beginning with tribal elders and then taken to schools and colleges to educate youth.

24. Professionalizing press clubs: Journalists demand that the government should increase funding for the press clubs in the merged areas to bring them on a par with the rest of the province. The federations and bodies representing journalists at the provincial and federal level need to be the voice of reporters in the tribal areas because they work in a difficult, remote region. There needs to be frequent, regular coordination between the two because timely intervention, as in the case of the journalist Meraj Khalid, can make a difference in the well-being of a journalist facing threats. Parent organizations need to step up their support for journalists through vocal, even legal interventions. Beyond regular salaries and support for diverse reporting and voices, they need to be responsible for the welfare and well-being of their staff working in a conflict zone through special allowances like health and safety.

25. Open support for media: The state institutions and the district administration need to be transparent and supportive of media and journalists. They need to ensure a similar imperative on the part of tribes, conveying the message through their supportive conduct that media in the merged areas is free to report on local issues and affairs. This sort of vocal and visible respect and support for media needs to come from the state first, and the tribes need to follow in the same vein. When it comes to tribal hostility towards media, they are not so strong as to stand up to the state, or the district administration, which has ways - including the law - to compel them to support an open, free media.

Journalists at the Parachinar Press Club in Upper Kurram

ABOUT FREEDOM NETWORK

Freedom Network is a Pakistan-based independent media and development sector research, advocacy and training organization registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP). It was established in 2013. In 2017, Freedom Network was awarded the prestigious global French Human Rights Prize 2017 by the Government of France for "its efforts for safety and protection of journalists and promotion of freedom of expression."

OUR MISSION: To protect civil liberties, including freedom of expression and access to information, and promote an informed society that sees media as a key partner in a democratic and pluralist Pakistan.

OUR OBJECTIVES AND EXPERTISE:

1. **To serve as a watchdog on the right to freedom of expression, including freedom of the press and Internet and of civil society**
   a. Through 24/7 monitoring of the rights to freedom of expression, including freedom of the press and online
   b. Through monitoring and documenting violations of freedom of expression, including Freedom of the press and Internet
   c. Through researching the causes, symptoms and case studies of the violations of freedom of expression in all forms of media
   d. Through monitoring violation of the right to expression of non-media sections of society such as human rights groups, development practitioners, and the performing arts industry

2. **To promote an ethical and professional media**
   a. By promoting, supporting and conducting advocacy, research, analysis and training initiatives for media
   b. By promoting, supporting and conducting initiatives to help civil society strengthen its stake in a pluralistic, independent, open and professional media with emphasis on professional ethics and journalism best practices
   c. By strengthening the interface between media and civil society by improving professional development communications within and for development sector organizations as well as for their supporters and donors.
   d. By promoting a culture of safety and security for journalists and media houses through advocacy, research and training on issues of safety and impunity against journalists.

3. **To serve as an advocate for freedom of expression and access to information as fundamental rights**
   a. Through a broad range of advocacy, research and analysis initiatives
   b. By promoting and building synergies between and among media and civil society stakeholders
   c. By promoting citizens' participation on issues relating to freedom of expression and access to information
   d. By conducting assessment missions, studies, research, translations of resources in multiple languages on its own and for other organizations for wider national and international audiences