

p-ISSN: 2521-2982

e-ISSN: 2707-4587

GLOBAL
Political
REVIEW *empowering humanity*



GPR

GLOBAL POLITICAL REVIEW
HEC-RECOGNIZED CATEGORY-Y

VOL. X, ISSUE IV, FALL (DECEMBER-2025)

DOI (Journal): 10.31703/gpr

DOI (Volume): 10.31703/gpr/.2025(X)

DOI (Issue): 10.31703/gpr.2025(X.IV)

Double-blind Peer-review Research Journal

www.gprjournal.com

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Article Title

Political Reforms in Erstwhile FATA and its Implications: A Critical Study of the Government of Peoples Party (2008-13)

Abstract

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Keywords: Electoral Reforms, FATA, Local Government, Political Parties

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Pages: 1-6

DOI: 10.31703/gpr.2025(X-IV).01

DOI link: [https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2025\(X-IV\).01](https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2025(X-IV).01)

Article link: <https://gprjournal.com/article/political-reforms-in-erstwhile-fata-and-its-implications-a-critical-study-of-the-government-of-peoples-party-200813>

Full-text Link: <https://gprjournal.com/article/political-reforms-in-erstwhile-fata-and-its-implications-a-critical-study-of-the-government-of-peoples-party-200813>

PDF link: <https://www.gprjournal.com/jadmin/Author/31rvlolA2.pdf>

Global Political Review

p-ISSN: [2521-2982](https://doi.org/10.31703/gpr) e-ISSN: [2707-4587](https://doi.org/10.31703/gpr)

DOI (journal): 10.31703/gpr

Volume: X (2025)

DOI (volume): 10.31703/gpr.2025(X)

Issue: IV Fall (December-2025)

DOI(Issue): 10.31703/gpr.2025(X-IV)

Home Page

www.gprjournal.com

Volume: X (2025)

<https://www.gprjournal.com/Current-issue>

Issue: IV-Fall (December-2025)

<https://www.gprjournal.com/issue/10/4/2025>

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Citing this Article

| | | | |
|--|--|---------------|----------------------------|
| 01 | Political Reforms in Erstwhile FATA and its Implications: A Critical Study of the Government of Peoples Party (2008-13) | | |
| Authors | Fazal Muhammad Ehtaisham Ahmed Khan Mohammad Ayaz | DOI | 10.31703/gpr.2025(X-IV).01 |
| | | Pages | 1-6 |
| | | Year | 2025 |
| | | Volume | X |
| | | Issue | IV |
| Referencing & Citing Styles | | | |
| APA | Muhammad, F., Khan, E. A., & Ayaz, M. (2025). Political Reforms in Erstwhile FATA and its Implications: A Critical Study of the Government of Peoples Party (2008-13). <i>Global Political Review</i> , X(IV), 1-6. https://doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2025(X-IV).01 | | |
| CHICAGO | Muhammad, Fazal, Ehtaisham Ahmed Khan, and Mohammad Ayaz. 2025. "Political Reforms in Erstwhile FATA and its Implications: A Critical Study of the Government of Peoples Party (2008-13)." <i>Global Political Review</i> X (IV):1-6. doi: 10.31703/gpr.2025(X-IV).01. | | |
| HARVARD | MUHAMMAD, F., KHAN, E. A. & AYAZ, M. 2025. Political Reforms in Erstwhile FATA and its Implications: A Critical Study of the Government of Peoples Party (2008-13). <i>Global Political Review</i> , X, 1-6. | | |
| MHRA | Muhammad, Fazal, Ehtaisham Ahmed Khan, and Mohammad Ayaz. 2025. 'Political Reforms in Erstwhile FATA and its Implications: A Critical Study of the Government of Peoples Party (2008-13)', <i>Global Political Review</i> , X: 1-6. | | |
| MLA | Muhammad, Fazal, Ehtaisham Ahmed Khan, and Mohammad Ayaz. "Political Reforms in Erstwhile FATA and Its Implications: A Critical Study of the Government of Peoples Party (2008-13)." <i>Global Political Review</i> X.IV (2025): 1-6. Print. | | |
| OXFORD | Muhammad, Fazal, Khan, Ehtaisham Ahmed, and Ayaz, Mohammad (2025), 'Political Reforms in Erstwhile FATA and its Implications: A Critical Study of the Government of Peoples Party (2008-13)', <i>Global Political Review</i> , X (IV), 1-6. | | |
| TURABIAN | Muhammad, Fazal, Ehtaisham Ahmed Khan, and Mohammad Ayaz. "Political Reforms in Erstwhile FATA and Its Implications: A Critical Study of the Government of Peoples Party (2008-13)." <i>Global Political Review</i> X, no. IV (2025): 1-6. https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2025(X-IV).01 . | | |



Cite Us



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Abstract

The erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan (presently part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) had geo-strategic importance for British India as well as post-colonial Pakistan after 1947. Before its merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in 2018, political reforms were introduced by the then government of Pakistan People's Party (2008-13), which played a significant role in the socio-economic and political development of the erstwhile FATA. Due to its proximity to Afghanistan and the abundance of precious natural resources, the geo-political importance of the erstwhile FATA enhanced even after its merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Therefore, it is customary to study the impacts of political reforms on socio-political development in the erstwhile FATA. This research paper seeks to highlight important political reforms during the Pakistan People's Party government under President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani.

Keywords:

[Electoral Reforms](#), [FATA](#), [Local Government](#), [Political Parties](#)

Introduction

The erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) comprised seven Tribal Agencies and six Frontier Regions, which were merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in 2018. It has a long history and geopolitical importance before and after the independence of Pakistan. Historically, it had remained geo-strategically significant for British India, especially during the Anglo-Afghan wars in

the 20th century (Ayaz & Islam, 2022). Geographically, the erstwhile FATA adjoins thirteen provinces of Afghanistan through a border known as the Durand Line. The border - more than 2600 Kilometers - stretches from Bajaur in the north to South Waziristan in the south. Due to its geopolitical significance, the British Government initiated punitive policies towards the Tribal people, like the Punjab Frontier Crimes Regulation Act 1872



(Gohar, Khan, & Sajid, [2024](#)). However, after the creation of Pakistan, Mohamad Ali Jinnah called the grand Jirga of Tribal elders and introduced several political reforms. For instance, Muhammad Ali Jinnah established the Ministry of States and Frontier Regions (SAFRON) soon after independence in 1947. The ministry's sole aim was to look after the affairs of the Tribal Areas by keeping them at arm's length from the Afghan government and the Soviet Union.

Right after the Anglo-Sikhs war of 1849, in which the Sikh Army was defeated, the Pakhtun belt bordering Afghanistan was annexed to the Punjab province by the East Indian Company government (Khan, Ali, & Khan, [2023](#)). Soon after the war of independence in 1857, the British Government encountered with *Mujahideen*, who were earlier fighting the Sikh Army. The *Mujahideen* had established a military headquarters at Chamarkand, which was located at a strategic location on the Anglo-Afghan borderland in Bajaur. Maulvi Fazlullah, as representative of Chamarkand Headquarters, was also included in the office bearers of 'Provisional Government of India in exile' which was founded in Afghanistan in 1915. The *Mujahideen* had also established its sub-headquarters at Asthmas in Buner, with a wider network of connections and influence in the entire Pakhtunkhwa (Ayaz, [2023](#)). In 1897, Sartoor Faqir attacked the British forces at Malakand, which was a fatal blow at a time when the British Army needed military backup for the ongoing military confrontation with Umara Khan of Jandool (Dinakhel, [2015](#)). Thus, the *Mujahideen* and the revolutionaries shared the same anti-colonial struggle against the British government. FATA remained strategically important throughout the *Mujahideen* contestation with the British (Edwards, [2009](#)).

On the other side, the British authorities were very cautious about their political and administrative control over the NWFP, especially over FATA, which was a geo-strategically important borderland region. To control this Tribal borderland, the Government enacted special laws, like the Frontier Crime Regulation of 1872. Keenly observing the expected advancement of the Russian Empire towards Central Asia and South Asia, the British signed a border agreement in 1893 with Ghazi Abdur Rehman, the king of Afghanistan (Ayaz, Mohammad, Islam, [2022](#)).

In 1901, the NWFP was separated from Punjab and declared a separate province, with adjoining areas of FATA. After independence, Mohammad Ali Jinnah called the Tribal Jirga on April 17, 1948, at the Governor's House in Peshawar, where tribal elders attended that meeting. The Tribesmen assured their cooperation with the newly formed Government of Pakistan. Since then governments of Pakistan have brought some political reforms in this black law (Qazi, Naila, & Bashir, [2018](#)).

Pakistan People's Party Government (2008-2013)

President Gen. Pervez Musharraf announced General Elections for the 13th National Assembly, which were held in February 2008. Pakistan People's Party (PPP) secured a majority of seats in the National Assembly and formed a government. Yousaf Raza Gillani was elected as Prime Minister, while Asif Ali Zardari was elected as President of Pakistan after Pervez Musharraf resigned on August 08, 2008. Besides other important legislation, PPP initiated various reforms in the erstwhile FATA (Lashari & Mirza, [2013](#)), which are highlighted in the following pages.

Political Reforms Package 2011

The government of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) brought significant reforms in the administrative structure of the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan in 2011. This was the first time in the history of Pakistan that drastic changes in the century-old law called the Frontier Crime Regulation (FCR) were brought. The changes included the extension of the Political Parties Order, 2002, to the tribal areas of Pakistan. Other changes included curtailment of arbitrary arrests and detention as provided in the FCR. Similarly, a new provision was introduced which excluded the imprisonment of children under the age of sixteen, women, and people above 65 years of age. In addition, the audit of the funds received and disbursed by the political agents was to be carried out by the Auditor General of Pakistan.

Under a presidential order, considerable changes took place in the FCR. Previously, laws made by the parliament were not applicable to the tribal regions, and the constitution of Pakistan 1973 placed a bar on parliamentarians to make laws for the FATA region. However, President Asif Ali Zardari signed on Frontier Crime Amendment Regulation 2011.

(Hussain, 2012). The important features of the amendment, 2011 are as follows:

“The amendment in Frontier Crime Regulation decreases the harshness of the (Collective responsibility) provision by excluding the imprisonment of children under the age of sixteen, women, and people aged above 65 years. After these reforms, the male members of the family should be detained first by the subtribe and other sections of the clan (FCR, 2011, section 21(c) (iii) and 22 (d)). It gives human rights to the people of the tribal region. Now the people of FATA cannot be arrested for an indefinite period of time, as they also have the right to appeal in the FATA Tribunal. Within twenty-four hours, the arrested person should be brought before an assistant political agent, and the accused has the right to bail” (Taj, 2011)

The following are some of the striking points of the reforms introduced by the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) government in the period between 2008-2011:

Strengthening FATA Tribunal

The Political Agent (PA) had judicial powers in the erstwhile FATA in civil and criminal cases, and he would decide all such cases. After initial investigation and with the assent of the conflicting individuals, groups, or parties, the Political Agent would call a *Jirga* (council of elders. The PA had to decide the cases in the FATA tribunal (In 1997 an amendment took place in the FCR to establish FATA Tribunal to hear cases.). The decision of the PA was considered final, and no one had the right to challenge it. Hence, the tribesmen were denied their legal rights to go to the Supreme Court or other courts of the country to get justice.

The PPP government brought a reform package in 2011 for the FATA, where the power of the tribunal was enhanced by authorizing people of FATA to challenge the decisions of the PA through an appeal to the office of the Commissioner of the closest districts. Furthermore, the people were also authorized to challenge the decision of the Commissioner. After these reforms, the PA and the Commissioner were bound to review their orders and decisions (Dawn, 2011).

The membership of the FATA tribunal was restricted to secretaries of the federal, home, and law departments under section 48 of FCR. Under the

2011 reforms, it was introduced that the FATA Tribunal would comprise a chairman and two judges. The chairman must be a civil servant at least BPS-21 and familiar with the administration of tribal regions. Among other members, one must be a judge of the high court who has an understanding of the local customs, while the third one should be a civil servant at least BPS-20 (Chaudhry, 2011).

Under the reformed legislation, the FATA Tribunal was authorized to review its decision, and if a person was unsatisfied, he could file a review petition. There were two methods for such review: 1) either to challenge decisions of the PA by submitting an appeal with the commissioner within 30 days, or 2) to approach the FATA Tribunal within 90 days of the verdict passed. This was an important step to reduce the harshness of the FCR, as the people of FATA could not challenge the political authorities. However, they had no right to seek bail (Dawn, 2011).

Expansion of Jurisdiction *Qaumi Jirga* in FATA

The concept of *Jirga* (Council of elders) is not new in Pakhtun society and the Tribal Areas. It plays a mediating role to settle disputes or conflicts and has been given legal cover in the judicial proceedings. In the erstwhile FATA, issues or conflicts would be resolved through “*Qaumi jirga*,” which comprised tribal elders and the representatives of people at the agency level. After investigation, the *Qaumi Jirga* would usually solve matters according to the Islamic *sharia* or local *Rewaj* (customs). No conflicting group or party could challenge the decisions of the *Jirga*, while the aggrieved party could bring the case before another council of elders.

The new *Jirga* had to read the decision of the old *Jirga*, and in case they found the decision against *Sharia* or traditional law, they could issue a new decision that was binding on both parties. When the reforms took place in FCR in 2011, it also contained the role of the *Quami Jirga*. According to these reforms PA or the District Coordination Officer could consider the recommendation of the *Quami Jirga*. In civil disputes or in exceptional situations, the recommendation of the *Quami jirga* of the tribe was to include in the decision of Tribunals in the interests of justice and peace. However, the reform package did not give any judicial power of the PA to the *Quami Jirga*. Anyhow, the *Quami Jirga* could recommend that the authorities take notice of any

of the recommendations of the tribes in special matters. (The Tribal Times.com, 2013).

Jail Inspection and Audit

The reforms of 2011 created the provision of jail inspection, which granted access to the FATA Tribunal, the PA, District Coordination Officer (DCO), and the appellate authority to visit the jails twice a year, where the tribal convicts or detainees have been kept in custody. The prisoners of FATA have been kept in various jails and lockups of the NWFP, as there were no such facilities in FATA (Chaudhry, 2011).

Under these reforms, for the first time, the audit process was introduced in 2011. Before these reforms, there was no audit of the state fund given to PA or DCO for their respective agencies or frontier regions. Under these reforms, the office of the Auditor General (AG) had to carry out a proper audit of the funds given to PA and DCO. Thus, the federal government became aware of financial misconduct and irregularities of more than 24.13 million rupees in the erstwhile FATA in various development projects (Ghulam, 2008). The introduction of this provision was hailed by the people of FATA as a positive change in the existing FCR (Editorial, 2014).

Political Parties Act 2002

Political parties play an important role in the democratic process of a country and are fundamentally integral in the effective functioning of democracy. In case political parties do not play their due role in a democratic framework, it will badly affect the political, economic, and social structure of society. At the time of independence, the Muslim League was the leading political party of Pakistan, and several other political parties came into existence in due course of time. The political system gradually changed into a multi-party system in Pakistan. Due to the weak organization of these political parties, they often fell into internal conflicts. The country witnessed several martial laws, and some of the political parties and political leaders benefited from military dictatorships. These developments resulted in credibility issues of political parties, and it was viable to reform the working political parties by bringing constitutional regulations from parliament. (Mahmood, 2000). Unfortunately, these regulations and access of political parties were not allowed to prevail in FATA.

It was in 2011 that the Political Parties' Act of 2002 was extended to the FATA, which was appreciated by the people with the hope that this would bring positive changes in the region. Hailing this positive development, the political parties got permission to run their political activities in the tribal areas, as before these reforms, the political parties had no interest in FATA. Although there were many parliamentarians elected from FATA before this Act, they had no right to legislate for the tribal areas. Article 247 of the Pakistan constitution restricts parliamentarians of FATA from making laws for the tribal regions, which ordained that no act of parliament would be extendable to FATA. Article 247 also restricted the jurisdiction of High Courts as well as the Supreme Court to FATA (Chaudhry, 2011).

Although the FATA parliamentarians have no right to make laws for the tribal areas under Article 247, they could only raise their voice about the conditions and problems of the people of FATA. Thus, extending the constitutional provision enhanced the rights of the people of FATA.

FATA Local Government Regulation 2012

The government 2012 enacted local government regulations for the tribal regions, which were aimed at giving powers to the people of FATA at the grassroots level. Earlier, people were either nominated or selected by the political elites in consultation with the PA to name *Maliks* (Tribal chiefs) or elites of the society for the local bodies; however, in 2012, the system was based on an election method.

To introduce the democratic process in the tribal areas, Mr. Farooq H. Naek, the then minister of law and justice, discussed the enacted regulations with the then prime minister Raja Pervez Ashraf. President Asif Ali Zardari was interested in announcing the Local Bodies Regulation in FATA on Independence Day 2014. Under Article 247 of the Constitution of Pakistan, the President has the executive authority to make or change any law in FATA, as the parliament could not make the legislation. Unfortunately, the President of Pakistan did not promulgate the Local Government Regulation for the tribal regions as the term of the PPP government was completed (Ullah, 2013).

Under the FATA Local Government Regulation 2012, the Tribal Agency was to consist of a Municipal Council, which shall be headed by a Chairman and a Vice Chairman. Not more than three months after

the local council was supposed to start its work. The functions of these councils were to register birth and death certification, drainage and sanitation, fire services, etc. Other responsibilities were included, but not limited to, control of traffic, price control, collection of taxes, and annual budget. However, it was not fully implemented as the tenure of the government concluded, and the subsequent governments did not take it seriously.

Electoral reforms in FATA and General Elections 2013

Electoral reforms in Erstwhile FATA have a good impact on the social and political developments of Tribal people. More than ten political parties of Pakistan have extended their political campaign in FATA. Party-based elections were held in 2013 for the first time, where 356 candidates contested elections for 12 seats in the National Assembly; most of them were contesting from political parties. The turnout in General Elections 2013 was high compared to General Elections 2008, as it increased from 31% to 36% due to involvement of political parties (Lashari & Mirza, 2013).

Despite a security threat, many observers claimed that people would not come out to vote, the tribal people of FATA participated in the election process. It was considered strange that women came out of their homes to cast their votes. The participation and enthusiasm of people in elections reflected the vision of Tribal people in democracy, which defied the claims of international observers that people of FATA are conservative and orthodox. This also negated the notions that the people of FATA were linked with violent extremism and terrorism, as they showed their willingness to be ruled through democratic institutions.

After the 2011 reform package, the Pakistani government brought another significant reform in 2013. The government extended the power of the Federal Ombudsman to the Tribal regions. According to these reforms, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas would be brought under the authority of the high judiciary for the first time. The people of FATA under this system can move toward the Federal Ombudsman. The tribesmen can go against the FATA Secretariat and its subordinate organizations. The Ombudsman has the power to solve the problems of the people and give help in judicial cases in FATA (Iqbal & Khan, 2014).

Conclusion

The erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan (FATA), established during British colonial India, were merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan through the 25th amendment in the constitution of Pakistan. Although the 25th amendment took place in 2018 during the government of Pakistan Muslim League (N), the process of extending electoral and political reforms in erstwhile FATA had begun during (2008-13). The then-President Asif Alif Zardari tasked Senator Farooq. H. Naik, the then minister of parliamentary and law affairs to contemplate a well-documented constitutional reforms package for FATA to bring these areas to the mainstream socio-economic and political development.

During his tenure, President Zardari did all necessary legislation from the national parliament to extend political and electoral reforms to FATA. For the first time, General Elections were held in erstwhile FATA in 2013, where more than 10 political parties took part in the elections. The mainstream political parties contested elections in tribal areas by allotting tickets to their candidates in 2013. These developments were further strengthened by the 18th Amendment in the Constitution, where the share of erstwhile FATA was increased.

The merging of the erstwhile FATA in 2018 is therefore a result of a long process of the constitutional reforms package, which was initiated by the PPP and was complemented by PML(N). Thus, both the mainstream political parties of Pakistan have contributed to the development of erstwhile FATA by bringing it to the mainstream national politics. It is hoped that, in the near future, the newly merged districts of erstwhile FATA will be given their due share in the 7th National Finance Commission (NFC).

List of Abbreviations

- DCO:** District Coordinator Officer
- FATA:** Federally Administered Tribal Areas
- FCR:** Frontier Crimes Regulation
- NFC:** National Finance Commission
- NWFP:** North West Frontier Province
- PA:** Political Agent
- PML-N:** Pakistan Muslim League -Nawaz
- PPP:** Pakistan People's Party

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