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The Ethics of Representation in Pakistan: Who Speaks, Who is Heard, Who is Silent in The Erstwhile Fata Region

Wajid Mehmood[1], Sajjad Hussain[2]

1. Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, FATA University, FR Kohat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.
2. Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Chitral, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

Corresponding Author:
Sajjad Hussain
Email: sajjad.hussain@uoch.edu.pk

Abstract: *This study examines the ethics of representation in the tribal districts of Khyber, Orakzai, and Bajaur, which were merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa through the 25th Constitutional Amendment. Using a qualitative research design, the study draws on 63 semi-structured interviews, 12 focus group discussions, and discourse analysis of 410 news articles (2018–2025), along with parliamentary debates and post-merger policy frameworks. Grounded in postcolonial theory, epistemic justice, securitization, and symbolic power, the research explores who represents these districts, whose knowledge gains legitimacy, and whose voices remain marginalized. The findings reveal that centralized epistemic hierarchies within state institutions, urban academic spaces, and English-language media shape dominant narratives, while securitized discourses continue to frame frontier identities. Youth and women particularly face testimonial marginalization and hermeneutic exclusion in policy processes. The study argues that ethical representation requires redistribution of symbolic capital, participatory governance mechanisms, protection of dissent, and a decolonial approach in academia and media. Without epistemic justice, the political integration of the tribal districts remains incomplete.*

Introduction

Representation has often been referred to as visibility or appearance in the parliament, media or policy debates. However, it is more than visibility. A proper explanation of representation rests on power: the political power that determines as to what social reality is; what constitutes narratives as legitimate, and the decision of whose voices carry authority (Entman, 1993). Interestingly in post-colonial states, representation is often thought as something synonymous with colonial administrative legacies. Its essence is overshadowed by state building projects, ideological consolidation and uneven development (Chatterjee, 1993; Alavi, 1972; Mamdani, 1996).

Pakistan provides a compelling case to study ethics of representation. Since the independence of Pakistan in 1947, the state has relied on narratives that are embedded in Islamic unity, territorial integrity and security obligations (Jalal, 1995; Jaffrelot, 2002). These narratives have consistently been asking for homogenization of language, identity and historical consciousness (Anderson, 2006; Talbot,

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2012). These activities have resulted into administrative integration, particularly, of the peripheral regions while marginalizing them discursively (Alavi, 1972; Nichols, 2013). Formerly FATA, and now the merged tribal districts are a typical example of this dynamic with over a century rule through Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) rendering the region as a constitutional exception (Haroon, 2007; Ahmed, 2013). The people of the region, despite carrying Pakistan's "citizenship," remained constitutionally unprotected lacking access to the judicial mechanism of the country and provincial legislative authority (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2006). These dynamics helped the state politically incorporate, however, epistemically marginalize the region (Mamdani, 1996; Chatterjee, 1993).

The 25th Constitutional Amendment (2018) merged former FATA region into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province abolishing FCR and extending provincial governance mechanisms and structures (Government of Pakistan, 2018; International Crisis Group, 2018). Nonetheless, despite being a celebrated reform promising political equality and development, the constitutional inclusion itself does nothing to dismantle narrative hierarchies and ensure the materialization of the objectives it aimed to achieve (Mamdani, 1996; Spivak, 1988; Chatterjee, 1993).

It is in this context that the study asks questions as to who speaks as representational authority on behalf of former FATA? Which voices from the tribal districts of Khyber, Orakzai and Bajaur are prioritized and heard? And which voices are either silent, or marginalized/ structurally unheard?

The main argument based on the findings of the study is that, centralized symbolic power still plays a key role in structuring representation in Pakistan. Regardless of political integration, epistemic exclusion is intact and communities in the frontier regions experience testimonial injustice through securitized framing.

Theoretical Framework: Power, Knowledge, and The Ethics Of Voice

Postcolonial Critique and the Subaltern

The theoretical framework for this study draws on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential contribution, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak, 1988). The concept of epistemic structures is central to Spivak's argument through which elite filter, translate and mediate voices of the marginalized communities (Spivak, 1988; Foucault, 1980). This leads to domination of the discursive spaces by the elite who systematically renders the voices of the marginalized unheard (Spivak, 1988; Bourdieu, 1991). The problem, thus, does not relate to silence, rather structural misrecognition of these voices helps serve the interests of the elites at the expense of marginalized perspectives (Spivak, 1988; Rancière, 2004).

In former FATA the British colonial rule constructed a tribal population labelling it as "tribal," "martial." "frontier" etc. which rendered it into something administratively and culturally exceptional (Haroon, 2007; Ahmed, 2013; Metcalf, 1995). This categorization identified the population as objects of management rather than subjects of citizenship (Mamdani, 1996; Cohn, 1996). Pakistan inherited this administrative framework with a colonial epistemology where a subaltern condition was retained not only through economic deprivation, but also an epistemic marginalization (Alavi, 1972; Spivak, 1988).

Epistemic Injustice

Miranda Fricker's seminal contribution of epistemic justice (2007) also makes part of the conceptual and theoretical framework employed in the study. Her concept of epistemic injustice distinguishes between what are termed as testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. The former refers to injustice that occurs when a hearer bearing prejudice does not acknowledge credibility of a speaker while the latter to injustice which arises when a speaker does not know the vocabulary of how to communicate her/his experiences to the hearer losing its meaning in the dominant discourse. This concept is significant as it

unearths the mechanisms behind overlooking the voices of the marginalized. In our field interviews, it was repeatedly revealed that the voices of the tribal elders are not paid attention to simply because they were termed as parochial or outdated. Interviews with women activists also reveal that their experiences were either exoticized or reduced simply to narratives of victimhood. In the frontier regions, a hermeneutic injustice reveals itself in the national discourse which lacks understanding of the complexities of the local experiences because of being overshadowed by security based paradigmatic frameworks (Fricker, 2007; Taj, 2011).

Symbolic Capital and Narrative Authority

The power to define as to what legitimate meaning, argues Pierre Bourdieu, constitutes symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). Legitimate knowledge regarding former FATA in Pakistan is produced in metropolitan centers like Islamabad, Lahore, and Karachi, having most of the thinktanks, universities, bureaucratic institutions and media outlets. This knowledge is disproportionate as academics from frontier regions do not have access to adequate funding and publications. This renders voices from frontier regions into epistemic dependency while they navigate these metropolitan filters to become legitimate knowledge.

Securitization and Discursive Containment

While security discourse has profoundly impacted representation of these frontier regions in the wake of Afghan-Soviet war and especially after 9/11, the region gets framed as a global frontline against terrorism (Ahmed, 2013; Taj, 2011; International Crisis Group, 2006). Such a security discourse skews possibilities for alternative narratives as complexities of local socio-economic and cultural problems are subordinated. Further, this discourse not only provides a thick description of an imminent threat, it constructs it too. From an ethical standpoint representation of these regions must question the security narrative that privileges military expertise and set epistemic boundaries which marginalizes the civilian and indigenous knowledge (Fricker, 2007; Spivak, 1988).

Historical Trajectory: From Colonial Frontier to Post-Merger Governance

Colonial Frontier Administration

The main objective of Frontier Crimes Regulation (1901) which was kept enforced until the recent merger of these regions in 2018 was control (Haroon, 2007; Ahmed, 2013). It had limited appeals of the citizens and centralized authority in the hands of political agents that administered these regions through state recognized elders called *maliks* (Haroon, 2007). This type of governance resulted into a mediated representation rather than a democratic one (Mamdani, 1996; Alavi, 1972). Political participation never gained currency and was pushed to a secondary position (Mamdani, 1996; Chatterjee, 1993).

Postcolonial Continuities

The fronter regions remained outside the ambit of province as FCR was retained after independence of Pakistan in 1947 too (Haroon, 2007; Ahmed, 2013; Alavi, 1972). Despite extension of adult franchise to the region in 1996, administrative authority was retained as centralized. Elected bodies never received developmental funds as these were spent through political agents rendering further the representation of these regions marginalized (Mamdani, 1996; Haroon, 2007).

War on Terror and Militarization

In the wake of military operations from 2004 to 2017, millions of the former FATA population were displaced (International Crisis Group, 2016; Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2015). Experiences of the locals never got attention of the national media while they were portraying strategic success, and sovereignty restoration (Ahmed, 2013; Taj, 2011). One of the respondents from Bajaur responded, "we felt as if our feelings of suffering were just numbers. No one covered as to how we lived in camps?" It

shows how invisible their experiences were.

The 25th Constitutional Amendment

Despite promises under the merger to abolish FCR, extend judiciary, police and developmental funding to these regions, the transition process has been sluggish. While the legal status of the region has been changed, it has not been translated into narrative transformation yet making the promises unfulfilled.

Methodology

Research Design

The study is qualitative in its nature based on primary data collected through interviews and focused group discussions. A total of 63 semi-structured interviews and 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted. 410 news articles published between 2018-2025 were content analyzed besides review of policy documents. Participant observation during community meetings was also one of the data collection tools for conducting the study.

Field Sites

Field work was conducted in Jamrud, Bara, and Landi Kotal tehsils of District Khyber; Upper and Lower Orakzai District; and Khar, Mamund, and Salarzai tehsils of district Bajaur. These districts were purposively selected for variation in their conflict histories, socio-political structures, and their engagement levels after the merger.

Participants

Participants included a total of 15 tribal elders (*maliks*), 12 women activists, 9 political party workers, 11 journalists, 8 teachers and 8 youth activists with a gender distribution of 24 female and 39 males.

Ethical Protocol

Informed consent of the participants was obtained while ensuring their anonymity.

Who Speaks? Institutional Authority and Elite Mediation

State and Bureaucratic Voice

It was remarked by the participants that major decisions regarding development are made either in Peshawar or Islamabad. Although consultation meetings are held, however, they are just procedural. One of the political workers from Khyber district remarked, "our opinion is sought in consultations; however, they already come up with finalized decisions. They meet us just to announce their decisions and a sort of getting validation to that". In their opinion bureaucratic structures dominate decision making processes and dominate development discourse. "The issue is not that they are at the helm of the tribal affairs; it is that they sometimes don't have the slightest of knowledge of the local problems at hand" (an elder form upper Orakzai).

Security Establishment

The dominance of security institutions as narrators during crises makes journalists rely on official briefings. Owing to this situation, local incidents are contextualized as national threats suppressing narration of community dynamics. "Even sometimes the very local conflicts are projected as security threats for the state".

Urban Academic and Media Institutions

Research publications in Islamabad and Lahore speak about issues in frontier regions politics the most. This leads to geographical concentration of research production. Structural barriers discourage local scholars to publish on the issues of these regions. While media gatekeeping reinforces this hierarchy of knowledge production with English language enjoying national reach, journalism in Pashto language remains regionally confined and unheard. Researchers and media personnels even from Peshawar and the adjacent areas are considered as outsiders in the ex-Tribal region. Furthermore, local journalists,

while working in the conflict zones are continuously under considerable threats. There is no formal mechanism for their and their families' safety. Thus, leaving a space for urban academia and media institutions. Who with their own "corporate interests" give "voices to the voiceless".

Who is Heard? Mechanisms of Amplification and Selective Visibility

The question of who is heard starts from articulation. While speaking remains act of articulation, hearing makes it recognition. Institutions that determine credibility, relevance and legitimacy of a voice mediate these articulations. During this process, some articulations are recognized while others are not. Field data reveal that while certain actors from across FATA regions may not be truly representative, they are recognized because of their symbolic capital linked with institutional backing or linguistic privilege. Other remains unheard.

Language Hierarchies and Epistemic Access

In the context of representation of these regions, language functions as a significant gatekeeper. While English language dominates national and international level analysis and legitimacy, Pashto language analysis rarely gets attention beyond regional media outlets. Participants repeatedly marked English language elites dominating policy discussions leading to epistemic stratification. English speaking elites have greater access to policy discussions on national television, policy conferences and donor research funding while Pashto language analysis is peripheral to national policy discussions. One of the journalists from Bajaur remarked, "Writing in English means Islamabad listens. Writing in Pashto means only Bajaur reads." This situation nearly aligns with postcolonial critiques of politics of linguistics in Pakistan where Urdu with a unifying national language marginalizes regional linguistic narratives resulting into epistemic hierarchy (Chatterjee, 1993; Anderson, 2006; Dil, 2010). This hierarchy puts English at the top for being internationally legitimate, Urdu as a language of communication on national level in the middle rendering regional languages contained at local level (Taj, 2011; Ahmed, 2013).

Class and Educational Capital

It can be argued that class privilege also intersects with language. Participants noted that those who are educated in metropolitan centers and come from rich families/class are paid more attention in televised debates and policy discussions. One of the youth activists from district Khyber remarked, "whenever someone appears on media talking about our issues, she/he usually speaks fluent English. Speaking English fluently does not make one our true representative." This renders the representational apparatus into cites for cultural capital where those with modern education act as intermediaries between us as regional citizenry and the nation. A meager portion of these elites attempt to represent the grassroot perspective with most of them speaking the interests of the privileged. How and why class and language make someone representative of a people even he/she does not have any basic knowledge of the community/area?

Electoral Politics and Selective Legitimacy

While post-merger elections seem to have expanded political participation at the grassroot level, genuine narrative recognition is not yet guaranteed. It is because the ruling party elected members get greater media attention sidelining the opposition members or independent voices as fringe concerns. When it comes to campaign financing, patronage networks greatly influence as to whose voice is projected. Mobilization of resources become significantly difficult for youth activists and women aspirants due to presence of structural disadvantages. Institutional endorsement, thus, becomes important along with electoral participation. A participant from Khyber responded that "even before the elections, the people in the area know who is winning the elections". In response to a question (then the people vote for that candidate?). He replied it is not the case that a candidate with more vote wins

in the tribal region. The winner is the one who has the confidence of state institution(s) and the affiliated individuals with these institutions.

Who is Silent or Silenced?

It is not mere absence of speech that constitute silence, rather, there are structural and systematic suppressions that marginalizes and renders local voices into silence. The field work data show that there are multiple layers of silence across gender, generation and economic status or class of citizens.

Gendered Silences in Orakzai and Bajaur

Social norms still constrain public speech for women despite extension of political rights through post-merger reforms. One of the women activists from Upper Orakzai district remarked, "although we have been enabled to vote or contest elections, our appearance on television or other media channels is still controversial." Patriarchal norms prevalent in the society act as constrains on visibility of women in the public. Activist women are often labelled as agents from NGOs or influenced from the West. This undermines their legitimacy reflecting a testimonial injustice grounded in gender prejudice.

Further, either male members of the society or external NGOs are the ones to mediate women interests. Despite an advocacy role played by NGOs, they often miss grassroot concerns. Several activists from women emphasized establishment of platforms where they themselves can speak about their issues rather than being mediated by others. Even the decision "who to vote" in the elections are made by the male members of the family. They for the most of times are not permitted to go out of their homes by stating "*Khaza ya da koor da ya da ghoor da*" (women are either for houses or for graves).

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Narrative Reduction

While internal displacement during military operations have greatly shaped experiences of the displaced, participants reported that their true narratives were never represented. Instead, they were reduced to statistics. One of the elders from Bajar said, "TV reports emphasized number of the displaced people instead of reflecting their worst living conditions." Narratives concerning displacement overemphasized logistical arrangements: number of camps, food and aid distribution. Traumas, worst living conditions, and psychological impact were minimally voiced. This situation reflects hermeneutical injustice with a framework conceptualizing the whole experience as operational success metrics leaving little room for nuanced civilian experiences.

Youth Frustration and Political Marginalization

Field work data show frustration of youth with post-merger reform implementation across the districts in question. With initial hopes derailed, their feelings now show being excluded from participating in policy decisions making process. One of the youth activists from district Khyber remarked, "we are falsely told that we are the future, however, they do not invite us when decisions about the future are taken." Political participation by youth is often symbolic. They are mobilized during elections, however, excluded from governance consultation mechanisms. Their grievances are not nationally amplified unless linked to a protest or unrest.

Journalistic Self-Censorship

Journalists talked about their working in a sensitive terrain. With overt threats from militants significantly decreased, factors related to political pressure and defamation ask for caution. One of the journalists stated, "we cannot talk on certain topics as we know it will create problems for us." While silence seems strategic here, it still is shaped by power structures.

Media Framing and Securitized Narratives (2018–2025)

National media news articles were content analyzed showing persistent securitization. A quantitative pattern of analysis reveals that 59% of the articles were focused on security, 24% on development, 10%

on political integration, and remaining 7% on cultural or social themes revealing that security framing still dominates after the merger. Interesting the cultural and socials were at some points linked with extremism and security.

Discursive Patterns

Common descriptors extracted included, "militant-infested," "former stronghold," "restive district," and "security-sensitive." The vocabulary seems reinforcing risk identity. It was further noted that even developmental projects were often framed as stabilizing measures rather than the rights of the citizens.

Narrative Narrowing

All other interpretivie possibilities e.g. identities based on culture, intellect, etc. are overshadowed when a district is framed as conflict district. Participants expressed their desire for a genuinely diversified representation allowing them to project their other identities. One of the youth activists remarked, "we want the world to know that we have poets, intellectuals, doctors, engineers, not only militants."

Epistemic Hierarchies in Academic Knowledge Production

Research by Outsiders

Local faculty reported that most of the research publications on the region come from metropolitan centers. Although rigorous, they remarked the scholars often lacked engagement with the grass root. The local faculty complained about limited funding, restricted access to research journals and heavy teaching loads.

Publication Barriers

Local scholars remarked that publishing in international journals has become difficult for them because of heavy publication fees. Thus, spaces for a research-based knowledge production on local issues is often skewed form them rendering academia as sites of epistemic centralization.

Structural Barriers to Representational Justice

Several structural barriers were identified across the interviews leading to epistemic marginalization. These were: linguistic hierarchies, limitations on specified research funding, security clearance issues in field work, politics of patronage, digital divide, and concentration of media outlets in urban areas.

Decolonizing Representation in Pakistan

While symbolic inclusion does not guarantee decolonization of representation in Pakistan, a redistribution of epistemic authority becomes a must in this regard. This can be ensured by carrying out institutional reforms e.g. establishing universities in the frontier regions and strengthening them with research funding. Similarly, thinktanks to be established on regional level. Further, a decentralization of media, ensuring participatory governance, and curriculum reform may help decolonize representation of these regions.

Discussion: Integration without Epistemic Equality?

While merger of former FATA shows a constitutional progress, nonetheless, it does not automatically dismantle the embedded symbolic hierarchies. State institutions, security paradigmatic frameworks and metropolitan academia still centrally represents these regions. It is argued here that without ensuring epistemic justice, the merger may turn simply a procedural rather than transformative mechanism. An ethical representation of the regions demands listening to the local voices before narrating them, speaking with them rather than for them, providing protection to the dissenting voices, recognizing linguistic plurality, last but not least, valuing indigenous knowledge systems.

Conclusion

Ethics of representation in Pakistan requires a fundamental redistribution of narrative power. While the

merger of former FATA is a great constitutional achievement, however, the prevalence of narrative hierarchies still marks it an incomplete merger. Institutional authority often determines as to who speaks. Moreover, who is heard again depends on one's language, class, or political affiliation. Who gets silenced constitute women, youth, actors at the grassroot, and those displaced. To ensure an ethical representation, a shift from containment to that of collaboration is needed dismantling securitized framing and ensuring participatory mechanisms. It is through epistemic justice that the merger of FATA can become substantive.

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