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PARTIES CALL FOR IMMEDIATE EXTENSION OF POLITICAL PARTIES ACT AND OTHER REFORMS IN FATA

ISLAMABAD – Senior level leadership of 10 major political parties unanimously called today for the immediate extension of the Political Parties Act along with major changes to the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) and a number of other reforms to mainstream Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

During day-long discussions at a roundtable forum, the political leaders emphatically agreed that political reforms were fundamental for sustainable peace and development decisions that reflect the genuine needs of the people of FATA.

The roundtable forum on “Mainstreaming FATA: Moving Forward” arranged by NDI was a follow up to earlier roundtables with approximately 300 tribal representatives from all agencies of FATA. The political parties mainly supported their recommendations to democratize and mainstream the system of governance and justice in FATA.

The parties participating in the roundtable included PPP, PML-N, PML-Q, ANP, MQM, JUI-F, National Party, Pashtunkhaw Milli Awami Party, JI and PPP-S.

The participants said that it was the right time for people of FATA to be treated as equal citizens of Pakistan and integrated into the mainstream. Representatives of all 10 parties agreed that Parliament should immediately pass a resolution to extend the Political Parties Act to FATA, which would create new opportunities for FATA residents to engage in mainstream party politics like the rest of the country.

The parties also called for the establishment of FATA councils elected on an adult franchise basis and that the civil administration should be accountable to the councils for a more transparent system of governance. Options regarding the status of FATA were also discussed with most parties supporting representation of FATA in the NWFP Assembly.

The parties agreed that the FCR should be replaced or heavily amended to bring it in line with the Constitution of Pakistan and international norms of justice, including safeguards for fundamental rights. They also called for extending the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court and High Court to FATA in order to grant right of appeal to disputing parties.

The parties also supported the tribal representatives' recommendation that Khasadars and levies as a regular force should be equipped with sufficient training, modern equipment and handsome packages as a way to maintain law and order. They recommended that the government prepare a post conflict strategy for dialogue, development and maintenance of law and order.

In his presentation of the recommendations from tribal representatives Shaheed Bhutto Foundation Board member Farhatullah Babar emphasized that it is critical to take into consideration what the people of FATA want for themselves and what will be acceptable to them. He added that consensus among all the parties is key to implementing the reforms because the government alone can not resolve the current crisis.

PPP Secretary General Senator Jahangir Bader said that socio-economic development along with the political reforms should be part of the strategy on FATA.

ANP President for NWFP Senator Afrasiab Khattak said that FATA should not be ruled directly by the President but it should be governed through the parliament. He also supports representation in the NWFP Assembly for FATA. "Ultimately FATA, PATA and NWFP should all constitute one province for the people of Pakhtunkhwa" he added.

PML-N leader and former Chief Minister of NWFP Sardar Mehtab Ahmed Khan Abbasi said that all reforms in FATA should be in line with the democratic system of governance. PML-Q leader Saleem Saifullah Khan advocated a regional approach with immediate actions involving Afghanistan, India and Iran.

PkMAP leader Senator Abdul Rahim Mandokhel said that terrorist strongholds in FATA should be eliminated and reforms should be undertaken in view of the traditions and customs of the tribal society. National Party Vice President Senator Hasil Bizanjo supported the inclusion of FATA in the NWFP and said that consensus among the political parties and civil society was required in order to move forward with reforms.

Jl's Sahibzada Haroon Rashid insisted on the need for negotiations and the immediate establishment of peace and stability. PPP Sherpao leader Anisa Zeb Tahirkheli emphasized the need for full political, social and economic integration of FATA with the rest of the country. MQM Deputy Convener and Minister for Overseas Pakistanis Dr. Farooq Sattar said "the people of FATA should decide the status of FATA."

During the plenary panel discussion Human Rights Commission of Pakistan Director I. A Rehman advocated guarantees of human rights, access to justice and equality with other citizens of Pakistan to win back the confidence and trust of the people of FATA adding that time is running out for such reforms.

Former President of Peshawar High Court Bar Association and ANP leader Abdul Latif Afridi said that there is no place for tribalism and exclusion from the mainstream in the 21st century. He

charged that the task at hand is the restoration of peace and stability followed by governance and writ of the state.

Justice (Retired) Mian Muhammad Ajmal presented the findings of the FCR Reforms Committee that he chaired, which have been approved by the Cabinet and are awaiting the President's signature. Justice Ajmal stressed that the recommendations made by the tribal representatives at previous roundtables were duly considered in the committee's deliberations.

NDI Country Director Sheila Fruman in her opening remarks said that political parties form the cornerstone of a democratic society and serve a function unlike any other institution. "Only political parties have the capacity and motivation to offer choices to citizens because of the need to win their support in elections," she noted. She warned, however, that if parties don't offer citizens solutions, especially in a crisis, others will do it for them and parties will lose the legitimacy they have struggled to restore.

Other participants in the roundtable included; PPP- Senator Nayyer Bukhari, Senator Mian Raza Rabbani, Fouzia Wahab, Fouzia Habib, Nafisa Shah, Federal Minister Najam ul Din Khan, Senior Provincial Minister of NWFP Rahimdad Khan and Syed Akhundzada Chattan; PML-N Ahsan Iqbal, Faiz Mohammad and Rehmat Khattak; PML-Q: Marvi Memon; ANP-Bushra Gohar, Hashim Babar; JUI-F- Senator Muhammad Azam Swati; JI- Professor Muhamamd Ibrahim and Siraj ul Haq; PPP-S Sikandar Sherpao and Jamal ul Din Khan; PKMAP- Raza Muhammad Raza; NP-Senator Dr. Malik Baloch; and MQM- Haider Abbas Rizvi.

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