

# Taliban rule: The case of Orakzai

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**Both Shias and Sunnis all over Orakzai suffered atrocities at hands of the Taliban. The Taliban, especially those linked with the Punjab-based anti-Shia groups did everything to divide Orakzai on Shia-Sunni lines. No state help whatsoever was ever provided by the civil or military authorities to the Ali Khels for their anti-Taliban stance before or after the assassination of their tribal leadership.**

Orakzai agency in FATA is bounded by Khyber agency in the north, Darra Adam Khel in the east, Hangu and Kohat in the south and Kurrum in the west. Relentless Taliban commanders like Hakimullah Mahsud from Waziristan and Tariq Afridi from Darra Adam Khel, are based in Orakzai. Local Orakzai Taliban commanders, like Aslam Farooqi, Nabi Mullah and Tufan Mullah, are an equal threat and they too are thoroughly barbarous. In Orakzai, which is a mix Sunni-Shia agency, both Sunni and Shia Orakzai tribesmen and women have suffered at the hands of Taliban brutally.

Ali Khel is the biggest Orakzai tribe. It has a mix Sunni-Shia population. In 2008 when the Taliban entered Orakzai they began their activities in the Ali Khel areas. They tried to create a Sunni-Shia divide in the tribe by threatening the Sunni Ali Khel to impose a social boycott on the Shias and plundering the Shia households. Resultantly, many Shi-ite families fled for life and became Internally Displaced Person, IDP's. The Ali Khels rejected the Taliban orders and decided to make a joint Sunni-Shia lashkar to remove the Taliban from the Ali Khel area. A grand Ali Khel jirga met in Khadezai area to work out the details of the lashkar. One of the first things the jirga did was to send a message to the Shia Ali Khels IDP's to come back to their homes because the lashkar would protect them from the Taliban. A vehicle filled with explosive material, driven by a suicide bomber, rammed into the jirga, by the virtue of Taliban. A huge explosion followed. Entire mix Sunni-Shia Ali Khel tribal leadership perished on the spot.

No state help whatsoever was ever provided by the civil or military authorities to the Ali Khels for their anti-Taliban stance before or after the assassination of their tribal leadership. The Taliban strengthened their position following the annihilation of the Ali Khel tribal leadership. Both Shias and Sunnis all over Orakzai suffered atrocities at hands of the Taliban. The Taliban, especially those linked with the Punjab-based anti-Shia groups, like the group led by Tariq Afridi and Aslam Farooqi, did everything to divide Orakzai on Shia-Sunni lines. But some recent events in Orakzai have indicated that the Taliban atrocities might very well just have strengthened the Sunni-Shia alliance in Orakzai.

Stori Khel, for example, is also a mix Shia-Sunni tribe in Orakzai. A few months back, the Taliban burnt down each and every house in a Sunni Stori Khel village called Chamanjana and the villagers fled the area. They were all given refuge in a nearby Shia Stori Khel village called And Khel on the basis of shared tribal relations with the Sunni Stori Khels.

Both the Ali Khel and the Stori Khel cases show that the traditional tribal affiliations are surpassing the sectarian differences that the fiercely anti-Shia Taliban want to exploit. Both Shia and Sunnis have lived in Orakzai for centuries. Most of the time, they lived peacefully. The tribal socio-political

system ensures sectarian harmony in the society as demonstrated by the Ali Khels and Stori Khels.

However still, it is not uncommon to hear of sectarian violence incidents in Orakzai. What lacks that is perpetuating the violence, the writ of the state of Pakistan. The tribe or clan based communities in Orakzai, just as in rest of the FATA, neither have the resources nor the organizations to successfully counter the multi-ethnic Taliban who are battle hardened, armed with much sophisticated weapons and above all have transnational networks, like Al-Qaida, at their back. The tribes wish to live in peace but complain that the state lacks the will to enforce its writ all over FATA for the sake of strategic goals in Afghanistan.

Interestingly, Orakzai also presents an example of how the tribes neither have the will nor the wish to challenge the writ of the state, if the writ is imposed with a determination and for the greater public good. The example comes from the shrine of Syed Anwar Shah in Orakzai. The shrine is revered by the Shias. It is built on a Sunni land. The Shias claim that the land belonged to them several decades ago. So this is also a land dispute between some of the local Shia and Sunni communities. There have been some clashes between some Shia and Sunni groups over the ownership of the shrine in 2006. The state intervened and put the shrine in the custody of the FC. Neither Sunnis nor Shias are allowed to go to the shrine. There has never been any Shia-Sunni clash over the shrine since the FC's deployment on the holy site. My interviews with Sunni Orakzai tribesmen show that they have no objection over the Shias coming to the shrine to pay their homage. Also, they want a peacefully negotiated settlement for the land dispute concerning the shrine.

Due to their indiscriminate atrocities against Shia and Sunni tribesmen and women the Taliban have no public support in Orakzai and all over FATA. The people welcome any state action against the Taliban, provided it is undertaken with a firm determination to eliminate the Taliban and to restore the writ of the state. It is precisely for this reason that people all over FATA have serious reservations about the ongoing military operations in the area. The military has not been able to kill even a signal Taliban commander in the operations, but have killed and injured thousands of innocent tribesmen and women. The Orakzais, just like other people of FATA, argue that on-going operations are meant to strengthen the Taliban writ over the area to deceive the world in believing that tribesmen of FATA have taken up weapons against the state for its becoming ally in the US war on terror. The generals are playing a double game with blood of Sunni and Shia tribesmen for its strategic goals in Afghanistan.

## **Farhat Taj**

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