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Pakistan: Zardari should follow through on promise of reform in tribal areas

Pakistan's President Asif Zardari should use the occasion of Pakistan's Independence Day on August 14 to implement legal reforms that would help protect human rights in the country's conflict-ravaged and impoverished tribal areas.

On Independence Day in 2009, President Zardari promised to reform laws that currently exclude the citizens of the tribal areas from basic legal protections and disenfranchise them from the country's political system.

Millions of Pakistanis in the north-western tribal areas have for decades lived in a 'human rights free zone'. They've been caught for years between the depredations of the Pakistani Taleban and the brutality of government security forces, while also suffering some of the lowest rates of economic development and access to health care and education. It's time for the Pakistani government to follow through on its promise of extending basic rights and political participation to them, as President Zardari promised two years ago, Amnesty International urged.

President Zardari had promised to reform the Frontier Crimes Regulation, a colonial-era law that allows for communal punishment including the destruction of villages and guilt by association, imprisonment without trial, and arbitrary detention at the whim of the government's political agent. The people of the tribal areas are also excluded from protections provided by the Constitution and national courts.

Zardari had also promised to extend the Political Parties Act to the area, allowing the people of the tribal areas to join and establish their own political parties and send their representatives to the National Assembly. This would be an important step towards addressing the political vacuum that has fuelled insurgency in the area.

As Amnesty noted in its 2010 report on the human rights situation in Pakistan's north-west, ["As If Hell Fell On Me"](#), reforming exclusionary laws like the Frontier Crimes Regulation and extending the jurisdiction of the Political Parties Act to the tribal areas are urgently needed to begin the process of addressing the chronic abuses and impunity faced by people there.

The crisis in north-western Pakistan is now just one of the many problems facing the country, including escalating abuses in Balochistan, where targeted killings and enforced disappearances implicate both state security forces and non-state armed groups, and daily reports of fresh targeted killings in the city of Karachi.

Pakistan faces a host of serious human rights problems, and the government has to tackle them each. The conflict in the northwest seems to drive several other important problems, such as massive displacement of people, growing extremist attacks, and religious intolerance. Helping the people of north-western Pakistan could help the entire country.