

My father had had enough. ‘You have no business here,’ he shouted. ‘Go away!’

The *mufti* had failed to close our school but his interference was an indication of how our country was changing. My father was worried. He and his fellow activists were holding endless meetings. These were no longer just about stopping people cutting down trees but were also about education and democracy.

In 2004, after resisting pressure from Washington for more than two and a half years, General Musharraf sent the army into the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), seven agencies that lie along the border with Afghanistan, where the government had little control. The Americans claimed that al-Qaeda militants who had fled from Afghanistan during the US bombing were using the areas as a safe haven, taking advantage of our Pashtun hospitality. From there they were running training camps and launching raids across the border on NATO troops. For us in Swat this was very close to home. One of the agencies, Bajaur, is next to Swat. The people who live in the FATA are all from Pashtun tribes like us Yousafzai, and live on both sides of the border with Afghanistan.

The tribal agencies were created in British times as a buffer zone between Afghanistan and what was then India, and they are still run in the same way, administered by tribal chiefs or elders known as maliks. Unfortunately, the maliks make little difference. In truth the tribal areas are not governed at all. They are forgotten places of harsh rocky valleys where people scrape by on smuggling. (The average annual income is just \$250 – half the Pakistani average.) They have very few hospitals and schools, particularly for girls, and political parties were not allowed there until recently. Hardly any women from these areas can read. The people are renowned for their fierceness and independence, as you can see if you read any of the old British accounts.

Our army had never before gone into the FATA. Instead they had maintained indirect control in the same way the British had, relying on the Pashtun-recruited Frontier Corps rather than regular soldiers. Sending in the regular army was a tough decision. Not only did our army and ISI have long links with some of the militants, but it also meant our troops would be fighting their own Pashtun brothers. The first tribal area that the army entered was South Waziristan, in March 2004. Predictably the local people saw it as an attack on their way of life. All the men there carry weapons and hundreds of soldiers were killed when the locals revolted.

The army was in shock. Some men refused to fight, not wishing to battle their own people. They retreated after just twelve days and reached what they called a ‘negotiated peace settlement’ with local militant leaders like Nek Mohammad. This involved the army bribing them to halt all attacks and keep out foreign fighters. The militants simply used the cash to buy more weapons and resumed their activities. A few months later came the first attack on Pakistan by a US drone.

On 17 June 2004 an unmanned Predator dropped a Hellfire missile on Nek Mohammad in South Waziristan apparently while he was giving an interview by satellite phone. He and the men around him were killed instantly. Local people had no idea what it was – back then we did not know that the Americans could do such a thing. Whatever you thought about Nek Mohammad, we were not at war with the Americans and were shocked that they would launch attacks from the sky on our soil. Across the tribal areas people were angry and many joined militant groups or formed *lashkars*, local militias.

Then there were more attacks. The Americans said that bin Laden’s deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri was hiding in Bajaur and had taken a wife there. In January 2006 a drone supposedly targeting him landed on a village called Damadola, destroying three houses and killing eighteen people. The Americans said he had been tipped off and escaped. That same year, on 30 October, another US Predator hit a