
The Islamization of Pakistan's Educational System: 1979-1989

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The decade of 1979-1989 can be viewed as the turning point for Pakistan's educational system. It was the bedrock on which militant extremism was founded, and has left indelible imprints on the Pakistani nation.

Religion was the justification given by General Zia ul-Haq to legitimize his dictatorship, as well as to consolidate his rule, which spanned more than 11 years. Coupled with geopolitical and sectarian struggles, Zia's Islamization reforms completely transformed the educational system of Pakistan. Religious schools, or *madrasas*, not only mushroomed, but also received official government patronage and international funding. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the United States prodded Afghanistan and Pakistan to support a "holy war" or *jihad* against the Soviets. Arab states were asked to fund this *jihad* against the Communists, and also to contain the new Islamic Revolution in Iran led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Thanks to the failed educational policies of the previous regimes, Pakistan's educational system in the late 1970s was in total collapse. Zia's Islamization reforms, as well as the indoctrination of state institutions, instigated Islamic organizations that filled the gap by opening up *madrasas* in large numbers. In the first few years of General Zia ul-Haq's rule (1979-1982), only 151 new *madrasas* were opened, but over the next five years nearly 1,000 of them were established.¹ This was part of the strategy to mobilize *muja-hidin* in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

General Zia relied heavily on the religious constituency for the political legitimacy of his regime. He wooed the clergy in Pakistan by offering them financial incentives and official recognition. A special committee² set up for this purpose suggested improvement in the economic conditions of *madrasas* through "unconditional and direct government financial assistance." *Zakat* funds were suggested to be used as the source of government support³. As a policy to increase the employment prospects of *madrasa* graduates, the Government instructed the University Grants Commission, the body responsible for accreditation of educational institutions, to issue equivalency certificates



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1. *Pakistan: Madrasas, Extremism and the Military*, ICG Asia Report No. 36, July 29, 2002.

2. The Halepota Committee, named after its chairman, Dr. A.W.J. Halepota, an educator who also had been associated with Ayub Khan's commission for *madrasa* reform in the 1960s. Jamal Malik, *Colonialisation of Islam: Dissolution of Traditional* (Lahore: Institutions in Pakistan, 1996), pp. 133-134.

3. Malik, *Colonialisation of Islam*.

to graduates of religious schools with the highest certificate from a *Wafaq* (Religious Accreditation Body) recognized as Masters in Islamic Studies.⁴ This greatly boosted the importance of *madrasas* and encouraged their growth.

The New Education Policy of 1979 changed the educational landscape in Pakistan. Five thousand mosque schools were approved and the curriculum of the public schools was rewritten with an emphasis on *jihad* and Islamization. The message of *jihad* initially targeted Communism. International patrons supplied funds, arms, and religious literature that were used freely in Pakistani *madrasas*.⁵ The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) paid the University of Nebraska, Omaha \$5.1 million between 1984-1994 to develop and design textbooks to promote *jihad*.⁶ Overall, about \$13 million worth of such textbooks were distributed in Pakistan in the Afghan refugees camps,⁷ schools, and Pakistani *madrasas* where students learned basic arithmetic by counting dead Russian soldiers and AK-47 rifles.

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Foreign funding and patronage from the Gulf countries also fueled sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shi'ites in Pakistan.⁸ *Madrasas* became the recruiting grounds for the militant wings of various sectarian religious groups. In fact, Pakistan became a battleground for Arab-Iranian rivalry, with a tremendous rise in the number of Shi'a *madrasas* and militant groups in response to the rapidly increasing strength and numbers of Deobandi followers, in particular the Ahl-e Hadith sect, which is the closest to the official Saudi creed. Indeed, the roots of the destabilizing sectarian conflict in Pakistan can be traced back to the decade of 1979-1989.

Pakistan's educational system can be subdivided into four tiers of education providers. Private elite schools usually cater to the rich, while up to 90% of the population attends public government schools. Non-elite private schools primarily attract the upper middle class population, and offer a comparatively better quality education to those who can afford it. *Madrasas*, the fourth tier of the country's educational system, usually are attended by less than 1% of school-age children.⁹ From 1979-1989 and continuing until today, public education has progressively deteriorated. Not only was the state unable to provide access to education — the basic constitutional right of every citizen — but the quality of education also declined significantly.¹⁰ The big gap in the public education system was gradually filled by the other three providers, i.e. private schools, both elite and non-elite, and the *madrasas*. Although the enrollment in *madrasas* always has been grossly overestimated, the real worry arises from the fact that 10-15% of the

4. Malik, *Colonialisation of Islam*.

5. Zia Rukhsana, "Religion and Education In Pakistan: An Overview," *Prospects Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2003), pp. 165-178.

6. *Pakistan: Madrasas, Extremism and the Military*.

7. Joe Stephens and David B. Ottaway, "From U.S., the ABC's of Jihad," *Washington Post*, March 23, 2002.

8. *Pakistan: Madrasas, Extremism and the Military*.

9. Tahir Andrabi *et al*, "Religious School Enrollment in Pakistan: A Look at the Data," *Comparative Education Review*, Vol, 50, No. 3 (2006).

10. *Pakistan: reforming the education sector*, International Crisis Group Asia Report No. 84, October 7, 2004.

schools are affiliated with extremist religious and political groups.¹¹ It is this small but extremely potent minority that provides a pool of graduates for transnational terrorist networks. Extremist groups have been able to draw upon these students for furthering conflict in Kashmir, Afghanistan, Chechnya, and elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

After suffering from neglect and chronic under-resourcing due to an absence of political will in Pakistan's governments since its independence in 1947, the country's education system was damaged and transformed by Islamic indoctrination from 1979-1989. The current state of affairs in Pakistan reveals that policies which promoted the inclusion of extremist literature in *madrassa* syllabi are exacting a heavy price. In contrast to the years of 1979-1989, today's extremist message condones offensive, violent action against state infrastructure and ordinary Pakistanis, in addition to the Western world.

The future of Pakistan is a key concern for the world and there is an emphasis on the provision of health, education, and economic opportunity to its people. A concerted effort is required not just to reform a reluctant *madrassa* establishment, but also to channel domestic spending and international aid towards quality education — one that is affordable, offers employment prospects, and fosters open-mindedness.

11. P.W. Singer, *Pakistan's Madrassahs: Ensuring a System of Education not Jihad*, Brookings Papers, No. 41 (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2001).