

PAKISTAN'S MADRASSAHS:^S

Consequences for Democracy and Free Society: Some Public Policy options.

1. Background and Context:

The main goal of the Education for Democratic Citizenship is building of a modern and democratic society, meaning high level of political, ethical, social and cultural conscience of its members. Education and democracy are inextricably linked.

Democracy, peace and development have become crucial factors in the evolving pattern of societies. There can be no sustainable development without peace, no peace without development, and neither peace nor development without democracy. The key is education *and* democracy.

Heart of democracy and open society are the values of tolerance, understanding and acceptance of differences, cooperation, self-respect and respect for others, and the peaceful and political settlement of conflicts. The value system been taught at Madrassahs is diametrically opposed to this, in Pakistan Madrassah education is being used as a means to fight democracy. The concept of open society is based on the recognition that people act on imperfect knowledge and nobody is in possession of the ultimate truth. Open societies are characterized by a reliance on the rule of law, the existence of a democratically elected government, a diverse and vigorous civil society, respect for minorities and minority opinions, and free market economy. A closed society expends most of its energies in preserving the existing order, whereas an open society takes law and respect for rights of others as its starting point and creates progress and prosperity from that base. The Madrassah system of education stands for every thing that threatens free open society, it symbolizes the doctrine where in student are taught as if they have the ultimate truth, dissent political or religious can be anti-state or blasphemous.

The Madrassah system of education has become a powerhouse of intolerance, violence, status quo, radicalism and conflict with in Pakistani society. The growing intolerance, violence and threat of terrorism fueled by indoctrinated religious products of Madrassah system are striking at the heart of free democratic society in our country.

In Pakistan Madrassahs are producing a generation of citizens who are in the vanguard of movement of religious extremism and intolerance. These religious extremists have no time for separation of church and state. They are engaged in what they perceive as a life-and-death struggle with the forces of pluralism and secularism. The economic progress and tolerant society are *sin quo non* for each other. The career work of Amartya Sen¹, 1998 winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics, focuses on the close connection between freedom and economic development. Freedom House and its Center for Religious Freedom annually publish a ranking of over fifty countries in terms of the level of religious freedom. The membership in its lowest two rankings ("unfree") is remarkably parallel to the countries at the bottom of The World Bank's ranking of

* Islamic Religious Schools

¹ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1999).

countries in terms of their economic progress. In these countries capitalism exists only in name and usually operates almost exclusively to benefit the advantaged.

A practical manifestation of how Madrassah education in Pakistan, is influencing larger society is the sweeping election victory of religious extremists in 2002 General elections. Recent political developments in Pakistan are expected to have immense impact on democratic polity. The fact that approximately 60 (25%) of newly elected parliamentarians are either Madrassah graduates or managers (this ratio in Senate is 35%). Chief Minister and the cabinet in NWFP belongs to religious parties dominated by Madrassahs graduates, in Baluchistan nine Ministers are Madrassah graduates and were actually managing Madrassahs before being elected to public office. This has serious implications for free debate, political dissent, secular thought, civil society and minority and women Rights in Pakistan.

2. Issue:

The proliferation of Madrassahs or Islamist schools in much of the Muslim World has been noted with particular consternation following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001² The linkage between radical Islamic education and militant behavior against Western interests, has led development agencies and governments to focus their resources on educational reform³. It is believed that Pakistan's religious Islamic schools--**Madrassahs**, play a critical role in sustaining domestic sectarian terrorism and regional militant movements.

Madrassahs provide free religious education, boarding and lodging and are essentially schools for the poor. About a third of all children in Pakistan in education attend Madrassahs. A Madrassah student learns how to read, how to memorize, recite, and render the Quran properly. Madrassahs issue certificates These seminaries produce indoctrinated clergymen of various Muslim sects, believing in radical Islam and Militancy. *These Madrassahs epitomize intolerance, status quo, and regimented thinking.*

3. Are Pakistani Madrassahs Ensuring a System of Education and not Violence?

Some researchers trace the tradition of Madrassah education back through nearly a thousand years of Islamic teaching.⁵ However there seems to be a consensus that Madrassahs are proving to be breeding grounds for religious intolerance and violence. Professor Akbar S Ahmad regards Madrassahs a “cheaper, more accessible and more Islamic alternative”⁶, Singer calls them

² Joe Stephens and David B Ottaway, “The ABC's of the Jihad in Afghanistan”, The Washington Post, 23 March 2002. Peter Pritsch, “With Pakistan's Schools in Tatters, Madrasa Spawns Young Warriors”, The Wall Street Journal, 2 October 2001

³ Looney, Robert (2002). *A U.S. Strategy for Achieving Stability in Pakistan: Expanding Educational Opportunities*. Center for Contemporary Conflicts, U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA

⁵ Singer, P.W (2001) Pakistan's Madrassahs: Ensuring a system of education not Jihad. Analysis paper. Brookings Institutions. Washington DC.

⁶ Ahmad, A S (2002) “Ibn Khaldun's Understanding of Civilizations and the Dilemmas of Islam and the West Today” *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 1, Winter. The Middle East Institute, Washington, DC.

“Displacement of Public Education System”⁷, Jeffrey Goldberg terms them “Education of the Holy Warrior”⁸, Jessica Stern while describing them as emblematic of “Pakistan’s Jihad Culture”,⁹ uses epithets and sub-headings like: “Schools of Hate”, “Jihad International Inc”, “Exporting Holy War” and “Addicted to Jihad”. But there is no intensive empirical study to prove diverging points of view.

In the foundations of traditional Madrassahs are the seeds of factional, religious, political and cultural conflict. Defining feature of Madrassahs is an education that creates barriers to modern knowledge, stifling creativity and breeding bigotry.¹⁰

At independence in 1947, there were only 137 Madrassahs in Pakistan. According to 1956 survey, there were 244 Madrassahs in all of the West Pakistan (present Pakistan)¹¹. Since then, even by official accounts, their number has doubled every ten years. It is speculated presently there are around 47000,¹² nobody is sure how many actually exist.

4. Objectives of the proposed study:

The provincial governments in provinces controlled by religious parties are opposed to regulation of Madrassahs, and want them to be treated as NGOs or community based initiatives for religious education. They even propose more public funds, and less regulation, for development of Madrassahs. These political developments have important bearings for the public policy on Madrassahs. Challenge is that no scientific empirically research study of Madrassahs is available, this project intends to bridge this gap. *The study will analyze the issue and help formulate politically possible strategy/Policy on the reform of Madrassah system.*

5. Strategy:

The proposed study will achieve its objective in following manner:

- 1) By studying the regulatory framework prevalent for Madrassahs, and suggest future course of action.
- 2) Critically evaluate the government’s “Madrassah Reform Strategy” and suggest improvements, also look at international best practices.
- 3) Inform the public debate in Muslim and non-Muslim countries on educational reform initiatives based on a systematic, rather than a symptomatic, understanding of the phenomenon.

⁷ Singer, op.cit. iv

⁸ Goldberg, J. *New York Times Magazine*, June 25, 2000.

⁹ Stern, Jessica (2000) *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 79, No. 6

¹⁰ International Crisis Group (2002) *Pakistan: Madrassahs, Extremism and the Military*. ICG Asia Report. No.36 Islamabad/Brussels

¹¹ Nadhr Ahmad’s 1956 survey quoted by Jamal Malik, “Colonialisation of Islam: Dissolution of Traditional Institutions in Pakistan”. (Lahore, 1996)

¹² International Crisis Group (2002). Op cit ix.

- 4) Review the syllabus being taught in Madrassahs, and explore how the teaching content, which breed's intolerance and radicalism, can be reformed. The syllabus taught at Madrassahs is most under researched area, the books and syllabi taught at these schools is highly dogmatic and instills intolerance and theological tendencies in students.
- 5) Examine the government and private funding/financing methodologies, provincial and Federal funding is being provided to these schools and quantum has increased in recent past.
- 6) Propose viable, market-based, community based quality alternatives, which can help weaning off poor people from Madrassahs.

6. Research Methodology:

Considering the complexity of the issue, multiple research methodologies (primary and secondary data resources) will be employed to achieve the research and policy objectives of the project.

a) Literature Review:

- i) The proposed Madrassahs reform strategy of government of Pakistan will be analyzed. The research and academic literature available on the subject will be extensively reviewed. The official reports and documentation on the subject will also be consulted.
- ii) The legal framework for Madrassahs along with current and contemplated Madrassah regulations will be reviewed.
- iii) Course Syllabi will be reviewed.

b) **Survey/Primary Data Collection:** Primary data collection by actual physical survey of all Madrassahs in the two representative geographical regions – Ahmedpur (Southern Punjab) and Islamabad (Capital City) will be carried out. Data on the following key variables will be collected:

- School enrollment and age cohorts of students and teachers;
- Qualifications of teachers;
- Curricular subjects and time devoted to each subject;
- Services offered to students – free meals, board, books, travel expenses;
- Funding from sources such as local land-owners, foreign donations, political parties, government grants and other sources
- Specific questions on political pluralism, democracy and freedom of opinion and religion will be asked ;

- c) **Interviews with other stakeholders:** Structured and semi-structured interviews will be held with the following stakeholders: managers and teachers at Madrassahs and schools; leaders and officials of local government; alumni of Madrassahs and notable donors from the community; senior government officials dealing with the issue at Federal and Provincial level, in Ministry of Interior, Education, Home and Religious Affairs, and members of newly established Pakistan Madrassah Education Board
- d) **Focus Group Discussions:** Once data is compiled, and analyses done focused group discussions will be held, with leading religious leaders, government functionaries and officials of Education Ministry in order to revalidate the findings.

7. Final Project Product: Major Report

The main objective of the study is to help policy makers understand this very important issue, and facilitate effective policy toward addressing the problem. The final project output would be a monograph/Research study addressing different facets of Madrassah issue.

It will be extensively shared with National public policy institutions and public policy framers responsible for Madrassah Reform Strategy, including members of parliament, federal and provincial governments, public sector training institutions. International donor community especially USAID, World Bank which is focus on Madrassah reform will be targeted. The study will identify gaps in present legal, financial framework and suggest future options. The study will also be disseminated to Think Tanks interest in this important area of research

After a multi-dimensional analysis of the complex and complicated issue, this policy based research, can make recommendations in the realm of economic, political, social and security policy, so that it helps in addressing the problem and its allied manifestations effectively