



Madrasahs in Pakistan

Suba Chandran
Assistant Director, IPCS

There are an approximate 28,000 madrasahs in Pakistan with only 8,000 of them registered. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) 2002 report, by March 2002, there were around 600,000 students in 6,000 registered madrasahs with more than 250,000 students in Punjab alone. The proliferation of madrasahs began in the 1980s and continued in the 1990s. Compared to their number in 1979, when there were less than 2,000 madrasahs, their growth has been tremendous. They are now seen and portrayed as fundamentalist institutions and breeding grounds for militants to wage a jihad all over the world. From being established centers of learning in the middle-ages, they have traveled a long way. How did this change come about and what can Pakistan do about it?

Madrasahs: The Detrimental Growth

This change was neither sudden nor unintentional. Many events, both inside and outside Pakistan, impinged directly and indirectly on the madrasahs system. The Islamization policies of Zia have been repeatedly blamed for their growth, but other significant reasons have been underplayed. Apart from Zia's Islamization drive, Pakistan's policies during the Afghan War in the 1980s following the entry of Soviet troops into Afghanistan changed the nature and number of madrasahs in Pakistan; in their effort to sustain the war, the Afghan resistance groups and Pakistan, backed by the US, were in continuous need of the mujahideens. Since the Afghan refugee population in Pakistan was steadily growing, the refugee students became ideal recruits; neither the Pakistani government nor the refugees could afford to educate the Afghan children in state-run schools. The madrasahs in the NWFP and

Baluchistan were encouraged to enroll them. In due course, the madrasahs in these two provinces became recruiting grounds for the mujahideens. Secondly, the dynamics of the war also necessitated training in weapons and guerilla warfare, which the State encouraged directly - by providing funds, weapons and training - and indirectly - by turning a blind eye to what was happening. Thus, the proliferation of madrasahs and the change in their orientation in the NWFP and Baluchistan were the direct result of a deliberate state policy that was tailored for to Afghan policy.

However, the spurt in the growth of the madrasahs in Punjab and Sind in the 1980s and 1990s was for different reasons. It was unfortunate that in the 1980s Pakistan had to bear the brunt of the Khomeini revolution in Iran followed by the Iran-Iraq war. The war divided the entire Ummah along Shia and Sunni sectarian lines. The Shia and Sunni countries extended support to their communities against each other. With the interests of these sectarian groups being threatened by the Islamization measures introduced by Zia, these groups scouted around for external funds. Enormous funds started flowing into Pakistan to protect their sectarian interests. Punjab and Sind became the main victims of this sectarian struggle, and the alarming growth of madrasahs in the 1980s was primarily designed to safeguard these interests. The formation of militant sectarian organizations such as the Sipah-e-Sahaba and Sipah-e-Mohammad, and subsequent organized violence in select districts of Sind and Punjab changed the orientation of these madrasahs. While the madrasahs in Baluchistan and NWFP fed the Afghan war, those in Punjab and Sind became recruiting grounds for sectarian violence inside Pakistan. However, unlike Baluchistan and NWFP, the growth

of madrassas in Punjab and Sind did not result from any deliberate state policy. This distinction is important to bear in mind.

In 1989, a good opportunity existed to bring about changes in these madrassas; the war in Afghanistan and the war between Iran and Iraq had ended and a democratically elected government was emplaced in Pakistan. Unfortunately, the state failed to act and the growth of madrassas continued unabated through the 1990s, facilitated by three factors.

- First, the changed Kashmir policy of Pakistan since 1989. The jihad in Kashmir needed new recruits, especially after the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) led by Yasin Malik fell out of Pakistan's favour due to its pro-independence stand. Pakistan wanted its proxies and started using Afghans and Pakistanis in Kashmir. The growth of the Lashkar-e-Toiba out of the Markaz-dawa-al-Arshad was no coincidence. Thus the madrassas again became fertile recruiting grounds, only this time for fighting on the eastern front.
- Second, the failure of the Afghan mujahideen and the changed Pakistani policy in Afghanistan. In the 1990s, it started supporting

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the Taliban, students drawn mainly from the various madrassas in Pakistan. It is an open secret that these madrassas were closed down to allow their students to go and fight along with the Taliban against the Northern Alliance.

- Third, bad governance.

Governments led by Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto failed to improve the standards of education in Pakistan. As a result, the standard of state education fell dramatically. The democratic

governments spent less than one percent of their GDP on education, and even this minimum expenditure on education never reached the schools. With corrupt governments, governance levels declined continuously. As a result, many schools were without buildings and teachers. Worse, many schools became the party offices of local politicians belonging to either the PPP or the PML-N. The declining standards of education in state-run institutions, coupled with their economic non-viability, became the primary reason for parents to send their children to the madrassas. Additionally, parents, especially from the lower and middle classes, preferred the madrassas as they provided accommodation, food and some kind of scholarship. The madrassas also took care of their students' future of by employing them in madrassas or related activities to some extent.

Dealing with Madrassas

Notwithstanding their laudable objectives in the initial years, madrassas have come a long way on the negative path. If the main reason for the harmful changes in the 1980s were due to state policies or lack of them, then a change in policy or a different strategy could enable the madrassas to regain their original objectives. An integrated plan, focusing on various social, economic, educational and political aspects could enable Pakistan to rid itself of the present madness unleashed by the madrassas.

Given the social and economic setup of Pakistan, madrassas can play a positive role in shaping its society. In other words, by integrating them with the mainstream they can be shaped to play the original role for which they were meant. Besides, any plan to curb them would not be practical at the ground level, at least in the near term future, and it would be prudent for the government to initiate steps that would integrate the madrassas into the educational system. The strategy should be to integrate and not isolate them.

• Regulate the Curriculum

A major strategy could be to regulate their curriculum. As it stands now, the madaris, and not the state, has control over what is to be taught. In some madrassas, modern subjects like computer science are being taught, but in many others the

syllabi remains medieval and taught by ulemas with a narrow understanding of religious and global issues.

The state should take vigorous steps to integrate the madrassas into mainstream education. The education policy (1998-2010) of Pakistan also seeks to "evolve an integrated system of national education by bringing Deeni Madaris and modern schools closer to each stream in curriculum and the contents of education." Besides providing a uniform syllabus, the state should at least provide the salary of the teachers, and prescribe minimum qualifications for their appointments. Such a measure would regulate the quality of teachers, but also make them accountable to the state.

Gen Musharraf had initiated few measures to regulate the madrassas, but they have not been fruitful. The military regime promulgated the *Deeni Madaris* (Voluntary Registration and Regulation) Ordinance in June 2002 in an attempt to register the madrassas. More than a year after its promulgation, the Ordinance has not been fully implemented due to resistance from the madrassas. The government wilted under pressure from the *Ittehad Tanzeem-I-Madaris Deeniya* - a joint platform for the religious groups and the madrassas - which threatened to start an agitation all over the country. To reach a compromise, the government agreed to amend the ordinance to ensure its acceptance by the ulema and established a body of government representatives and religious leaders to redraft the ordinance.

- **Reform State Education**

Before reforming the madrassas, the mainstream education system run by the state ought to be improved. Unless the badly governed and ill equipped state-run schools are reformed and their standard of education improved, it would be futile to expect that people would send their children to these schools. For this, the government should increase public expenditure on education. The international aid agencies have an important role to play here. Foreign governments, instead of focusing their aid on addressing terrorism-related issues in Pakistan, should widen their focus to include educational assistance and persuade the Pakistani government to reform its educational system.

State control over education would reduce religious violence to a great extent. Sectarian violence, which was prevalent in educational institutions in the 1980s, has dissipated somewhat, primarily due to governmental efforts. Despite occasional violent incidents on campus, sectarianism is no longer the causative force.

- **Regulate the Funding**

While some madrassas have permanent sources of income which produce regular returns, most of them run mainly on funds mobilized inside and outside the country. There is no monitoring on how much money comes from abroad. For example, according to a news report in *The News*, a leading daily in Pakistan, foreign sources accounted for 74 percent of the funding in Punjab. Hence, the threat by the regime that only registered madrassas would receive assistance from the Zakat did not cut much ice.

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The military regime attempted to regulate the funding, but could not succeed given the resistance of the madrassas and groups supporting them. With the MMA joining the Parliament, Gen Musharraf should make efforts to reach an understanding with them on the issue of funding and its regulation.

- **Prevent Military training and remove the weapons**

The military government had initiated steps to prevent the madrassas from providing military training to its students, but it did not succeed owing to lack of will. The de-weaponization programme was mainly targeted against sectarian groups, especially the banned ones. Unfortunately, it did not cover all the madrassas; hence, military training in madrassas continues even today and they possess sophisticated

weapons including machine guns.

- **Initiate a dialogue with the religious parties and groups**

The madrassas in Pakistan are not a monolithic institution. The madrassas adhere to different sects - Deobandi, Brehlvi, Ahle Hadith and Ahle Tashi. For example, in Punjab alone, there are around 970 Deobandi, 1,200 Brehlvi, 100 Ahle Tashi and 170 Ahle Hadith madrassas. Each of these groups has its own curriculum and independent sources of funding.

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Apart from differences in terms of faith, the madrassas also differ in their political affiliations. In some cases, political parties maintain the madrassas to supply cadres for the party's needs, besides providing political support. Invariably, all major religious parties - Jamaat-e-Islami led by Qazi Ahmad Hussain, both the factions of Jamaat-e-Ulema-e-Islam led by Maulana Fazlur Rahman and Maulana Samiul Haq and Jamaat-e-Ulema-e-Pakistan - have their own madrassas.

Since these religious groups and parties have come under the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) banner, the government could initiate a dialogue with them on reforming madrassas. Recent surveys in Pakistan clearly indicate that the people are against using educational institutions for narrow religious and sectarian ends. An increased effort by the government along with public pressure may impress upon the MMA to take the lead and work towards reaching a compromise on how to utilize the madrassas system, and this could be done only by integration and not by isolation.

Given the street power of the madrassas, no government, other than a military one, would be able to tackle them by force. Gen Musharraf would do a great service to Pakistan, if he integrates the madrassas with the mainstream and gets rid of its weapons and jihadi culture.



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B 7/3 Safdarjung Enclave,
New Delhi 110029 INDIA