



Religions and Development Research Programme

Religion, politics and governance in India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Tanzania: an overview

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This comparative analysis of the relationships between religion, politics and governance in India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Tanzania draws on research undertaken as part of a wider research programme on religions and development. The starting point for these studies was the need to examine the implication of the 'return of religion' for 'good governance', in particular the extent to which religious actors (religious communities, faith based organizations and religious political parties) help or hinder development, especially with respect to pro-poor policy and practice. Each country study provided a historical evaluation of state-religion relationships since independence and detailed case studies of religious actors that assess contemporary patterns of governance and engagement with politics.

The analysis draws on the sociological principle of differentiation between politics and religion, set within the comparative historical context of the post-colonial state. What emerges is the gradual demise of the secular state to a condition today in which there are strong pressures towards conflictual relationships between politics and religion in highly differentiated polities and consensual relationships in integrationist (low differentiated) polities. These pressures, moreover, are reflected in the electoral mobilization of religious identities; state co-option of religious demands; modes of resistance by marginalized groups through 'religions of revolution'; and, post-9/11, new discourses and policy innovations centred on religious identities. Historically, the 'crisis of governance' in these states from the late 1970s onwards played a critical role in undermining the coalition of social and political forces that had underpinned the post-colonial secular state, in the process creating new public spaces for religious actors to occupy.

Case studies of religious actors engaged in contemporary politics in India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Tanzania provide some fascinating insights into the changing nature of governance in these states and also the transformations which are occurring within the religious traditions.

- First, democracy, even in religiously homogenous societies such as Pakistan, operates to undercut the power of religion and religious actors, while conversely, lack of democracy (e.g. under military regimes) encourages the use of religion as a means of exercising power, pressures towards a greater integration of religion and the state, and the use of religious actors by the state to increase its legitimacy. It also sets up a vicious cycle of radicalization.
- Second, the interests of poor religious communities are more likely to be articulated if there are specific incentives for political parties (such as increasing their size and electoral support base) and there are programmes intended to benefit these groups (e.g. affirmative action). Engagement with the political process by such communities can lead to changes in their sense of identity, as it sets up internal debates about the logic of political engagement.
- Third, religious actors sometimes have an ambiguous record on good governance and development. While most criticize *underdevelopment*, their ideas about the meaning and purpose of development diverge widely. Some are enthusiastic about the normative 'good governance' agenda, while others put forward alternative conceptions of development that foreground religious ideals and practices. However, the latter may not see gender discrimination, religious discrimination or exclusion of the poor or marginal religious communities, either by public policy or within the theologies of their own traditions, as a problem.

- Fourth, encounters between state and religion in these countries are dynamic, fluid and changeable. The ‘good governance’ agenda in Africa and Asia has impelled states to be more accommodating of cultural and religious diversity and gender equality, sometimes at the behest of external donors and multilateral development agencies. In the same way, in some cases, religious traditions and theologies have also provided creative responses to traditional dilemmas in the form of inter-faith dialogues that extend beyond mere tolerance and accommodation.

Overall, however, these departures and innovations remain marginal to the main debates about the state and religion in India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Tanzania. Their limited impact demonstrates how challenging it is for religious actors in Asia and Africa to be drivers of good governance and developmental changes.

An appropriate role for religion in contemporary governance in the South is more likely to be developed through understanding the nature and outcomes of general policies to improve governance and development than an exclusive focus on the role and performance of religious actors themselves. Recognizing this is the first crucial step towards a better understanding of the implications of the ‘return of religion’ in developing societies.

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