



## Religions and Development Research Programme

# State-supported madrasa reform in Bangladesh

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Many donor agencies currently advocate madrasa reform, despite the varied and often limited outcomes of government reform programmes. Of the South Asian countries, Bangladesh has apparently been the most successful in implementing state-administered madrasa modernization: 30 per cent of secondary students in Bangladesh are in Aliya (reformed, state-supported) madrasas. It is, therefore, useful to analyse the nature of madrasa reforms in Bangladesh and to identify the factors that led to acceptance of the programme within the religious establishment.

Conducted as part of the DFID-funded Religions and Development Research Programme, this study analysed the madrasa education sector in Bangladesh and state-madrasa relationships, through a series of interviews with government officials concerned with the reform programme, the madrasa leadership and independent observers, supplemented by four case studies of Aliya and Qomi (traditional) madrasas in Dhaka and Chittagong.

In Bangladesh, 16 per cent of students enrolled in state-supported education institutions from primary to higher education study in Aliya madrasas (1.8 million) and at least an equal number in Qomi madrasas that have chosen not to accept government funding. Although founded primarily to provide religious education, some madrasas in South Asia have included secular subjects in their curricula since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Pressure for madrasa reform grew after the founding of Bangladesh in 1971. Enrolment in Aliya madrasas, which combine religious and secular subjects, has increased dramatically since the establishment of the Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board in 1978.

Earlier studies by Asadullah and Chaudhury suggested that:

- some of the Aliya madrasas (perhaps a third) were previously Qomi (traditional) madrasas, which converted

in response to a government-led modernization programme, especially funds for the salaries of teachers of both secular and religious subjects.

- increased female enrolment can be attributed to a World Bank-funded female stipend introduced in 1993.

This study, however, shows that:

- The expansion of Aliya madrasas cannot be explained solely in terms of these financial incentives; it is embedded in a complex interaction between Islam and the Bengali language movement, in pre- and post-1971 politics, and in support for the Aliya tradition within an influential segment of the Bangladeshi religious establishment, that is Jamiat-i-Islami.
- State-supported Aliya madrasas have, nevertheless, failed to displace the Qomi madrasas' control over the Bangladeshi religious establishment. Aliya madrasa students are being trained to compete for modern jobs (especially teaching children enrolled in secular schools), while Qomi madrasa students are being trained to fill religious positions in mosques. Thus control over religious authority and public interpretations of Islam remains in the hands of the ulema of the Qomi madrasas.
- The Bangladeshi madrasa reform programme should not be seen as a model for a more liberal interpretation of Islam, which is the focus of many current reform efforts. Rather it is a good approach to making madrasas an effective tool for promoting education in conservative societies, where there is a clear demand for combining secular with religious education.

The implications of the Bangladesh experience are that:

- madrasas that teach both religious and secular subjects provide parents with an alternative to the secular schooling system, especially for their daughters



- the introduction of good quality secular education into madrasas depends on long term funding sufficient to attract and retain trained teachers of both secular and religious subjects
- a modern interpretation of Islam cannot be achieved simply through the introduction of secular subjects in madrasas; it is only possible if the madrasa leadership, which is responsible for the education of religious leaders and the authoritative interpretation of religious texts, is convinced of the need
- reforms must recognize the functions of madrasas in educating future religious teachers and providing interpretations of the religious texts, as well as meeting parental demand for education with a significant religious content
- successful outcomes depend on the relationships between citizens, the ulema and the state as much as the specific design of a reform programme.

Based on Masooda Bano (2007) *Allowing for Diversity: State-Madrasa Relations in Bangladesh*, Birmingham: Religions and Development Research Programme WP 13 [www.rad.bham.ac.uk](http://www.rad.bham.ac.uk)

See also Asadullah, M.N. and Chaudhury, N. (2006) *Religious Schools, Social Values, and Economic Attitudes: Evidence from Bangladesh*. Oxford: Queen Elizabeth House WP Services QEHWPS139. and Asadullah, M.N. and Chaudhury, N. (2007) Holy Alliances: Public Subsidies, Islamic High Schools, and Female Schooling in Bangladesh, *Education Economics*, 17 (3) 377-94

<http://www.rad.bham.ac.uk/index.php?section=47>

