

Religions and Development Research Programme

Islamic education, the state and madrasa reform: lessons from South Asia and Nigeria



What factors influence madrasa-state relations and state-led madrasa reform processes? Research in Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and Nigeria examined the organizational characteristics of the madrasa education sector and the design and implementation of attempted madrasa reforms.

Background

Islamic schools and seminaries (referred to here by the South Asian term madrasas) are very influential among Muslim populations. They train religious leaders who provide guidance on issues of modern life and exercise significant moral authority in society. They often have strong community links and popular support, and some madrasa traditions also promote political involvement.

Madrasas have been the focus of reform in most Muslim-majority countries during recent decades. Government and donor interest in madrasa reform has increased since September 11 amidst concerns that some

madrasas may encourage radicalization and international militancy. The research does not explore the legitimacy of such concerns, but instead examined the ways in which madrasas are organized and state-madrasa engagement in Pakistan, Bangladesh, the states of Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal in India, and Kano State in Nigeria.

While only a small percentage of all students are enrolled full-time in madrasa education in the countries under study, most Muslim children do have contact with a madrasa-trained scholar in their early childhood, to learn to read the Quran. This makes the outreach of madrasa networks extensive. Further, since the late 1970s, female madrasas have emerged and their numbers are increasing rapidly, complicating madrasa hierarchies and expanding the reach of madrasa networks.

The study

Fieldwork was conducted during 2007 and 2008 in all four countries. It involved in-depth interviews with government officials, senior religious scholars, academics, journalists and intellectuals, plus case studies of individual madrasas and jamias (senior madrasas) of varying orientations. The research also drew on national data and reviews of secondary materials.

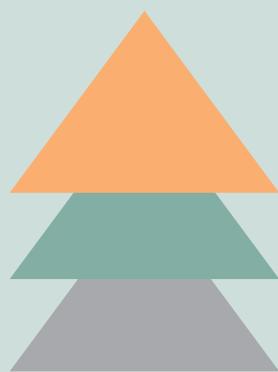
The dynamics of reform in brief

Reasons for state-led reform vary, but the usual explanation points to the modernizing ambitions of the post-colonial secular elite. Reforms have typically sought to introduce (or increase) secular subjects into the curriculum to boost graduates' employability outside the religious sector and create a religious leadership that will propagate a more liberal interpretation of Islam.

Policy Brief 6 - 2010

Some implications of madrasa-state engagement and state-led madrasa reform include

- Governments need the trust of the religious community and participation by religious scholars to promote effective reform.
- Government and the religious elite need a shared understanding of the aims of madrasas and madrasa reform, for example integrated secular and religious education.
- Governments and donors need to understand the demand for Islamic education in many Muslim societies, particularly in conservative rural areas, where religious schools can make education more accessible, especially for girls.
- Donors need to understand the factors shaping state relations with religious groups to identify the potential for government-led reforms and the likely responses of religious elites.
- Madrasas can strengthen their negotiating position with the state by forming collective platforms.
- To make attempted reforms more effective, governments must address problems of reform design and administrative capacity.
- More systematic information is needed to address gaps in knowledge about Islamic schools.



Governments and religious elites with contrasting ideologies and visions of learning may disagree on the purpose of madrasa reforms. Their views on whether secular or religious knowledge is more important, or whether knowledge is valuable for its own sake or for the economic benefits it can bring, may vary. Further struggles may occur if a government feels threatened by the political ambitions of Islamic elites.

Demand for both secular and religious subjects up to matriculation level (tenth grade) from governments, parents and some madrasas means, however, that a shared agenda can emerge, promoting both kinds of learning. In a conducive socio-political environment, where the proponent of reform is trusted, the study showed that reforms that increase the secular content of madrasa curricula can be introduced.

However, such reforms may not meet all a government's objectives, if part of its agenda is to foster more liberal interpretations of Islam. Modern interpretations of Islamic texts cannot be achieved simply through the introduction of secular subjects, nor can the acceptance of reform programmes be won solely by the provision of strong financial incentives. Ideological, political, socio-economic and historical factors are all influential in state-madrasa relationships.

The strength of links between the government and the religious establishment varies in different local contexts, and some state representatives are more inclined to push reform than others. In addition, relations are not one-sided, but interactive and responsive.

The historical context of state-madrasa relations

Historically, there has been close state-madrasa engagement in Muslim societies. In South Asia, the madrasa tradition goes back to the thirteenth century, when mosques were established to provide modern as well as religious education, and state-madrasa links were consolidated under the Mughal empire. Funded mostly by the state, madrasas trained society's elite. In the colonial period, however, state-supported Western education institutions were established, eroding the political and economic relevance of madrasa education. In order to survive, madrasas focused on individual piety and other-worldly concerns. Post-colonial rulers aspiring to modernize their economies found this other-worldly focus to be in need of reform. In contrast to South Asia, Kano in northern Nigeria experienced a shorter, more conciliatory, period of colonial rule, during which Western-style educational institutions did not become preeminent and the political and religious elites continued to overlap.

Types of madrasa reform attempted

Madrasa-led reform

There is a complex history of internal reform within South Asian madrasas. The birth of the influential Deoband madrasa tradition, for example, was an attempt to reform Islamic education in response to the changing political and economic situation of Muslims in the colonial period. Internal debate on reform continues, focusing on improving the quality of Islamic education.

State-led reform

- Government-led reform programmes have been most interventionist in Pakistan (from 2002). They have attempted to increase secular subjects at primary and secondary levels in return for funding the salaries of (state-appointed) teachers of secular subjects, and have included vetting and security checks.
- In India, the central government began a modernization programme in 1993 to improve school facilities and introduce secular subjects at primary and secondary levels. Funding covering the extra primary level teachers' salaries was provided between 1992 and 1997.
- In Bangladesh, funding of 90 per cent of salaries for all teachers and staff was provided in a madrasa modernization programme initiated in the late 1970s, again focused on offering secular in addition to religious subjects.
- In Kano State, Nigeria, the government has over the last twenty years provided teachers and teaching materials to primary schools that choose to register and adopt a state-approved curriculum containing both secular and religious subjects.

Key findings

Madrasas' responses to state-led reform

- In Pakistan, madrasas have strongly resisted reform. By early 2007, only 150 of 16,000 registered madrasas had accepted the programme.
- In India, only some of the smaller madrasas have participated; by 2006, according to the Ministry of Human Resource Development, 4,694 madrasas (fewer than 15 percent in the eight states where large numbers of madrasas are found) had received (limited) financial assistance.
- In Bangladesh, the government's programme has been supported, but not by existing traditional Qomi madrasas. While significant numbers of state-supported 'Aliya' madrasas have been created (constituting 30 per cent of the nation's state-regulated secondary education – Ministry of Education), this represents the rise of an alternative madrasa tradition.
- In Kano, support for Islamic schools responds to an agenda shared by the State government and religious leaders and is generally welcomed.

State-madrasa relationships and state-led madrasa reform processes are shaped by:

- Differing visions of knowledge: pragmatism versus purism
- The political aspirations of the Islamic elite: a religious agenda that seeks to impact society may increase government antagonism
- Level of trust between madrasas and the state: this is influenced by madrasas' fear of Western influence and state control, and the extent of government links with Islam
- The organization of Islamic schools into collective platforms: this strengthens their negotiating position with the state
- A madrasa's position in the religious hierarchy: 'lower' smaller madrasas tend to be marginalized by governments
- Weak state administrative capacity and poor reform design, which hinder reform processes

Factors shaping state-madrasa relationships and state-led madrasa reform processes

Differing visions of knowledge: pragmatism versus purism

The state and madrasas often have different visions of knowledge and therefore different perspectives on the purpose of Islamic schools and of madrasa reform. While governments tend to take a pragmatic approach, viewing education primarily as preparation for employment, religious scholars value knowledge for its own sake and for its contribution to individuals' personal growth. Secularist, modernizing governments, such as those in South Asia, tend to prioritize secular over Islamic learning, but placing a lower value on madrasas' core purpose of producing religious scholars causes tension in madrasa-state relations.

Further, a secularist modernizing agenda may seek to adjust the type of knowledge disseminated by madrasas, away from purist interpretations of Islamic texts towards engagement with the demands of modernity. However, many religious scholars seek to retain traditional interpretations, and particularly object to state involvement in higher religious education.

The political aspirations of the religious elite

The level of political engagement sought by religious elites influences relationships with governments. In Kano, Sufi groups have been more dominant – leaders' focus on individual piety and avoidance of engagement with politics unless Islam itself is seen to be under threat helps to explain their harmonious relationship with the government. In South Asia, however, revivalist Islamic movements dominate and their desire to establish God's order in the world has led to more friction with governments.

Levels of trust between the state and madrasas

Acceptance of madrasa reform is hindered by distrust between government and religious elites. Interviews in India revealed that madrasas were not, in principle, averse to curriculum changes, but they were uncomfortable with a government-led programme (because of recent Hindu-Muslim clashes and allegations of madrasas' association with terrorism). Factors influencing the level of trust include:

- **Fear of Western influence:** Modernization may be regarded as Westernization. In Pakistan, for example, the reform programme was viewed by the ulema (religious scholars) as a Western attempt to control Islam because of government links with the US.
- **Fear of state control:** In India and Pakistan madrasas fear that reforms may be intended to increase monitoring and control. Critics in India cite government secularizing 'interference' in madrasas in Bihar and West Bengal as examples of where 'reform' could lead. They question the government's stated aim of improving education when fewer than four per cent of Muslim children attend madrasas. Allegations of madrasa association with terrorism and perceived discrimination against Muslims (a minority group in India) in obtaining public sector jobs increase distrust of the state's agenda.

- **Government links with Islam:** Constitutional provisions may limit both a religious community's intervention in politics and a government's ability to intervene in religious education. Governments led by Islamic parties, for example in the Pakistani states of North West Frontier Province and Balochistan, can at times negotiate better with madrasas, as they tend to have more trusting and deeper networks in the religious community. However, the tension between the constitutional obligation to follow Islamic principles and the secular nature of the central state fuels madrasa-state tension. In Kano, where state support for religious education, including curriculum reform, is generally welcomed, most government leaders are Muslim and the State has adopted Shari'a law (despite religious political parties being formally banned in Nigeria).

Madrasa umbrella organizations

Networking and organization among madrasas strengthens their ability to negotiate with government. For example, the five *wafaqs* (madrasa umbrella organizations) in Pakistan function like trade unions. Together, they resisted government demands for the registration of madrasas for three years, successfully negotiating that madrasa registration be shaped according to their demands. Such organizations are especially beneficial for smaller and lower level madrasas.

A madrasa's position in the religious hierarchy

Governments tend to prioritize relationships with large and influential madrasas, seeking to win their support for reforms. Smaller and lower level madrasas tend to be marginalized, even though - having less financial independence - they are usually more willing to accept government reforms, despite their lack of administrative capacity, which makes it difficult for them to access government funding. Alternatively, if the most influential madrasas are antagonistic to reforms, smaller madrasas may seek to maintain or enhance their position in the religious hierarchy by adopting the same stance.

Poor reform design and weak state administrative capacity

In India and Pakistan, poor design, weak state administrative capacity, corruption and lack of resources have led to failure to implement reforms, even in madrasas willing to accept them.

Reform programmes are unrealistic and detailed implementation guidance is lacking. Important to acceptance and success, for example, is the long-term provision of adequate financial incentives. In Pakistan, support is only offered for the salaries of teachers of secular subjects, and only for three years. In Bangladesh, in contrast salaries for all madrasa staff are provided.

Nevertheless, some madrasas are already well-resourced and financial incentives are unlikely to win their support if significant differences of ideology and agenda remain. In Bangladesh, for example, apart from strong financial incentives, socio-economic and political factors have influenced the spread of Aliya madrasas, while traditional Qomi madrasas did not 'convert' to the Aliya system, despite the incentives offered.

Conclusions

Islamic schools are influential among Muslim populations, generally enjoying strong support and patronage. Financial support from the public gives larger, well-regarded madrasas financial independence and the ability to resist state intervention.

Ideological differences between post-colonial secular elites seeking to 'modernize' society and revivalist religious elites seeking to establish an orthodox vision of God's order in society cause tension between governments and madrasas. Different visions of society lead to different perspectives on the role of education, particularly religious education, and to clashing agendas.

A government may seek to moderate the influence of madrasa-trained religious leaders through madrasa reform where its agenda clashes with that of the religious elite. However, modern interpretations of Islam cannot be achieved simply through the introduction of secular subjects; the madrasa leadership must be convinced of the need for a modern reinterpretation of religious texts.

Governments may also attempt to draw on the religious establishment's power base to boost their own legitimacy. Where they seek to use Islam to win public support and legitimize their rule, they may be more motivated to invest in madrasas, but this may also, as in Pakistan, limit their ability to push through reform in the face of resistance.

There are also overlaps in the agendas of governments and madrasas. There are no serious objections to secular subjects being studied in madrasas up to matriculation level (tenth grade) in any of the countries studied. Objections to reform from madrasas arise largely where they are imposed by the (distrusted) government and extend to higher Islamic education.

State-madrasa relationships and state-led madrasa reform processes are shaped by complex historical, socio-economic and political factors that vary from place to place.

Policy implications

- Trust in the reformer is required if a reform is to be accepted; a state needs the trust of the religious community to promote effective reform.
 - Governments must understand the activities of madrasas and the complexity of madrasa networks before setting out to reform them.
 - Government reform committees must include senior religious scholars if reforms are to be accepted.
 - Clear statements on the reasons for proposed reforms can reduce suspicion of government motivations and intentions.
 - Funding should come from the general education budget, as programme-specific funds from Western donors may generate distrust.
- Government and the religious elite need a shared understanding of what constitutes valuable knowledge and learning, and therefore of the objectives of madrasas and madrasa reform. Common ground may be found in an integrated vision of secular and religious education.
- Before pursuing madrasa reform, governments and donors need to understand the demand for Islamic education in many Muslim societies, particularly in conservative rural areas, and the important role Islamic schools play in their surrounding communities.
- Strong demand for Islamic education means that religious schools can make education more accessible in conservative Muslim societies, as indicated by increased female literacy rates achieved by Aliya madrasas in Bangladesh.
- Donors need to understand historical and socio-political factors shaping state relations with religious groups to identify the potential for government-initiated reforms, the likely responses of the religious elite and suitable channels for providing support.
- Whether madrasas seek to modernize with state support or to advocate a different agenda, they can strengthen their negotiating position with the state by forming collective platforms.
- To make attempted reforms more effective, governments must address problems of reform design and administrative capacity.
- More systematic information is needed to address gaps in knowledge about Islamic schools: accurate estimates of the numbers of madrasas and students, the employability of madrasa graduates compared to those from secular institutions, and the outcomes of madrasa modernization.



This document is an output from a project funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) for the benefit of developing countries. The views expressed are not necessarily those of DFID.

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Further information

This policy brief is based on research conducted on state-madrasa relationships and the process of madrasa reform in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Kano

State, Nigeria. It also draws on the outcomes of two policy workshops in India and Pakistan. The research was carried out as part of the Religions and Development Research Programme (RaD). For full details, see the following at <http://www.rad.bham.ac.uk/index.php?section=26>

Bano, M. (2007) *Allowing for Diversity: State-Madrasa Relationships in Bangladesh*, Birmingham: RaD WP 13.

Bano, M. (2007) *Contesting Ideologies and Struggle for Authority: State-Madrasa Engagement in Pakistan*, Birmingham: RaD WP 14. Nair, P. (2009) *The State and Madrasas in India*, Birmingham: RaD WP 15. Bano, M. (2009) *Engaged yet Disengaged: Islamic Schools and the State in Kano, Nigeria*, Birmingham: RaD WP 29. RaD (2009) *Rethinking Madrasa Reform in Pakistan*, Policy Brief 1. RaD (2009) *Ambivalent State-Madrasa Relationships and Madrasa Modernization in India*, Policy Brief 3.

The research was carried out as part of the Religions and Development Research Programme, based at the University of Birmingham.