



Religions and Development Research Programme

Islam and Pakistani politics: partners or adversaries in social development?

What is the role of religion in the politics and governance of Pakistan? How has religion influenced development policy and public administration? Can religious organizations, which are inherently opposed to secular governance values, pro-actively support human development?

This brief examines the role of religion in governance in Pakistan as it relates to development policy formulation and public administration. It reports on a wide-ranging analysis of the relationships between religion, politics and governance at the national level and summarizes findings of a case study of the interplay of religion and politics in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). The findings have implications for national and local government actors and international donors involved in efforts to improve the effectiveness of governance in predominantly fundamentalist, religious states.

Pakistan's religious, institutional and analytical context

The role of religion in the politics of Pakistan in recent decades has been multi-faceted. Initially operating as pressure groups intent on establishing Sharia rule in the 1950s and 1960s, Islamists have since become involved in electoral politics and governance. Many also turned to violence as political expression in the Afghan resistance movement, insurgency in Kashmir in India and most recently, in Taliban-style suicide bombings. Since Islamists see the state as the focal point of power, their mission is to subjugate state authority in order to establish Sharia rule.

Pakistan's state structure is based on secular values and norms inherited from its colonial past. The specific colonial legacies of development and democracy occupy centre stage in its national vision. However, the failure of the state to deliver economic growth and social harmony has emboldened Islamist groups to seek to penetrate the state, while the state attempts to use religion for its own ends.

Since entering electoral politics, Islamist groups have failed to act as drivers of social change. Their record on high moral standards in the areas of corruption and accountability and their support for basic human rights is dismal. The Islamists' short-term objectives of acquiring and using power and their long-term transcendental goals have emphasized identity politics at the expense of social and political development policies.

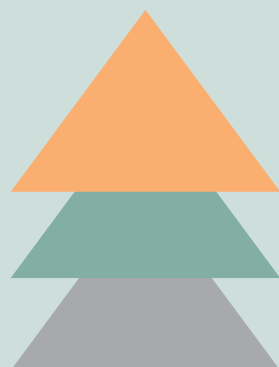
Despite their transcendental goals, Islamist parties still operate within legal, institutional, bureaucratic, judicial, educational and developmental frameworks that are fundamentally and comprehensively secular. In this context, Islamists have provided a counter-narrative to the secular legal and ideological discourse of the state.

The Islamists' short-term objectives of acquiring and using power, as well as their long-term transcendental goals, thrived on the politics of identity at the grave cost of the politics of issues and policies.

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Analysis of Pakistan's national politics and provincial rule by an alliance of religious political parties shows that

- Legal-institutional authority is rooted in a democratic constitutional state, buttressed by existing landed and tribal elites and the military.
- Constitution-making is ongoing: it has vacillated between Islamic and secular principles and will continue to do so. Islamic forces are unlikely to take over the national state.
- Religion is both a source of legitimacy for the ruling establishment and a mobilizing force. Pakistan's military rulers have turned to Islamists for ideological support.
- Pakistan's Islamic parties desire an Islamic state, but when elected in the North West Frontier Province had to operate within a centralized, secular and donor-dependent federal system.
- The Islamic parties enacted Sharia legislation, but to achieve development objectives compromised with central government and worked with external donors. However, limited progress contributed to their electoral defeat.
- The attitude of Pakistan's Islamic political parties towards a broad social agenda covering issues of poverty, gender, equality and justice remains ambiguous.



Given this counter-narrative and the predominance of the Muslim religion in Pakistani society, four ideological orientations are currently vying for dominance: a sacred state excluding human will; a sacred state admitting human will; a secular state admitting divine will; and a secular state excluding divine will.

Religion has thrived in Pakistan, essentially because of intra-elite conflict: the state elite, especially the officer cadre of the army, has increasingly relied on religious sources of legitimacy to thwart populist challenges. The political influence of Islamic parties and groups has depended upon their links with other groups and communities from conservative sectors of government, the middle class and the business community.

For example, the government's intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), is credited with helping Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), an alliance of religious political parties, rise to power. The MMA's governance performance in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) from 2002 until 2007 (see case study below) illustrates the impact of Islamist politics *vis-à-vis* Pakistan's secular governance structure, and the will and capacity of the Islamists to implement human development policies.

Islamist politics and governance in practice: the MMA in the NWFP

The overwhelming thrust of the MMA's election rhetoric in the NWFP in 2002 was "to enforce a complete Islamic system, the perfect code of human rights, one which guarantees justice, security and peace for all citizens and protects their honour and employment." While largely steering clear of both policy issues and means of implementation, the MMA made concrete pledges on education, provincial autonomy and accountability of members of the military and judiciary.

The performance record of the MMA in the NWFP during its term of office is a mixed picture, with emphasis on instituting a complete Islamist society, some social reforms, and improved performance in some respects despite inexperience and intractable fiscal problems:

- The MMA's 2003 Sharia Act, calling for the enforcement of Islamic laws in the NWFP in all areas of public life, was passed unanimously. However, the Act was criticized for not addressing the health, education and security problems faced by the people.
- None of the Islamic policies enacted by the MMA addressed poverty alleviation. Moreover, many MMA

policies drove out investment from the cash-strapped province, disempowered women and facilitated the creation of a tightly controlled society with stringent rules.

- Over the years, the NWFP has lost an efficient and effective bureaucracy as a result of the Afghan war, the installation of the MMA government, Talibanization and the American military presence across the border. While initially inexperienced in governance, MMA politicians proved to be fast learners. They quickly realized that learning the ways of the prevalent legal institutions was essential to the smooth running of government. Essentially, moving from opposition into a position of power, the MMA realised



Moving from opposition into political power, the religious political parties realised that ideology had to be put aside in order to control government institutions and fulfil electoral promises.

that ideology had to be put aside in order to control government institutions. It tried hard to shake off its fundamentalist image and prove that its electoral success was positive rather than retrogressive.

- However, once the MMA took over the reins of power in the NWFP, the public concluded that it was even more corrupt than previous governments. Party cadres were promoted regardless of their expertise and technical competence, resulting in ineffective governance and a significant loss of public confidence.
- The NWFP Economic Report of 2005, written jointly by the World Bank and the United Kingdom's (UK) Department for International Development (DFID), identified a number of problems faced by the province. These included: education and health achievements well below the national average, low literacy rates and high infant mortality, a poorly functioning land market, overwhelmingly agricultural and family business employment, and an undeveloped mining sector. With these economic realities in mind, the MMA government sought to create jobs, abolish the general sales tax, ensure free education, instigate interest-free loans, provide low-cost housing and ensure cheaper medicine – all within the first 100 days of office.
- In the province as a whole MMA social reforms resulted in a 96 per cent increase in the education budget and a 23 per cent growth in school attendance. In the health sector, immunization rates increased from 57 per cent to 76 per cent, with an overall budget increase of approximately 10,500 per cent. This was a massive step in social development from the previous administration. However, economic growth was slower than the rest of the country and progress was hampered by the MMA's reluctance to work with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as social and economic development partners.
- A comparative analysis of the three districts of Dir, one of the poorest in NWFP, Bannu (also a poor district) and Peshawar (the provincial capital) provides an opportunity to compare investment and development outcomes in districts with different levels of development at the outset

of the period of MMA governance. Figures for school enrolment show that increased enrolment was greater in the poorer districts than in Peshawar. Unexpectedly, increases in girls' enrolment exceeded those for boys, again particularly in the poorer districts (although donor assistance partly accounts for this achievement).

- Differences in investment and development indicators also reflect the personal links of MMA top brass with individual districts, including the potential influence of hierarchy, with the Chief Minister of the NWFP living in Bannu, and the Finance Minister in Dir. Both Bannu and Dir, falling in the '10 poorest districts' category, received more money than the 62 other districts.
- Analysis of selected development activities in the three districts shed light on a number of issues. First, prioritizing the backward districts incurred opposition from other districts, causing the MMA to lose wider support in other districts in the province. Also by prioritizing certain projects, it appeared to some to be losing its 'Islamic way of life' objective. Second, while people in Bannu were satisfied with the infrastructural development in their district, they did not generally support the MMA. In contrast, the people in Dir had expected more than the MMA delivered. Third, 85 per cent of development funds came from international donors; only 15 per cent was generated by the province. Such an imbalance in development funding threatens long-term development sustainability.
- Because of its desire to establish more autonomy, the MMA provincial government in NWFP had a tense relationship with the Federal government in Islamabad. National-provincial administrative and fiscal issues were compounded by problems of federal transfers, which constituted 90-92 per cent of total provincial revenue receipts. The province also grappled with the continuous issue of debt financing.
- Despite initial misgivings about working with a conservative, fundamentalist government, international donors such as the World Bank, DFID and the Asian Development Bank reported that their experience of working with the MMA was generally positive. MMA officials came to be seen as well-informed, receptive and good listeners.

Districts	Enrolment in government schools (primary and secondary)								
	2001-02			2006-07			% increase in enrolment		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Lower Dir	93,940	41,516	135,456	137,644	92,633	230,277	46.5	123.1	70.0
Upper Dir	70,168	16,142	86,310	82,968	42,404	125,370	18.2	162.7	45.3
Bannu	61,285	26,594	87,879	70,829	41,227	112,056	15.6	55.0	27.5
Peshawar	169,184	89,346	258,530	174,884	107,154	282,038	3.4	19.9	9.1

Source: Education Monitoring System, Schools and Literacy Department, Government of NWFP

Lessons learned and policy implications

Due to both domestic and international factors, the MMA failed to retain power after the 2008 elections. But Islamic parties continue to cast their shadow on electoral politics and public policy in Pakistan. In the absence of the combination of factors responsible for the MMA's rise to power in 2002, the future role of religious political parties in mainstream Pakistani politics is likely to be confined to a small but vocal presence both in and outside elected assemblies. Meanwhile, Taliban-style violence has played havoc in Pakistan's cities in recent years. Islamic elements have arguably moved away from electoral politics to a fight for survival.

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The following are lessons learned and some policy implications of the Islamists' recent entry into Pakistani electoral politics and governance:

- Pakistan represents a pattern of legal-institutional authority rooted in a westernized democratic constitutional state. However, informal clientelist structures based on the existing landed and tribal elites have continued to function and the military are very well-entrenched. By contrast, state authority structures in Iran and Afghanistan did not enjoy autonomy from the ruling classes. As modernization gained momentum, the modern over-layers of these states collapsed in the face of Islamic revolutionary upsurges in the late 1970s and 1980s.
- Pakistan's long process of constitution-making has been marked by vacillation between Islamic principles of rule on the one hand and a secular tradition rooted in the British model on the other.

- Religion in politics plays a role both as a source of legitimacy for the ruling establishment and as a mobilizing force of immense potential during elections and other agitations. Pakistan's military rulers have turned to Islamists for ideological support against challenges from both left-wing and ethno-nationalist forces.
- Typically, Pakistan's Islamic parties have one foot in the system and the other out of it: their ideological foundation defines them as oppositional forces. However, once in government, Islamic parties had to operate through the structural dynamics of the state, in which the Federal government is dominant, the bureaucracy centralist and the body of laws essentially secular. In the case of the MMA in the NWFP, Islamists targeted future electoral gains over their ideological agenda.
- Despite dissension among the MMA's parties, the alliance maintained a profile of unity from 2002 to 2007 and also softened its confrontational posture *vis-à-vis* the Musharraf government. Despite its ideological baggage and lack of experience, it also managed to establish communication, even trust, with the donor community.

Islamic political parties' attitude towards a broad-based social agenda covering issues of gender, poverty, equality, justice and the rule of law remains ambiguous.

- However, the MMA's attitude towards a broad-based social agenda on issues of gender, poverty, individual and collective security, equality, justice and the rule of law remained ambiguous. In addition, it was not able to establish good relations with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), particularly women's NGOs, which it judged were unduly influenced by Western culture. While progress was made on some issues, with donor support, overall little was achieved, helping to explain its electoral defeat.



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Further information

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http://www.rad.bham.ac.uk/files/resourcesmodule/@random454f80f60b3f4/1245229076_working_paper_27.pdf

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