

Religion, Politics and Society in Pakistan

Conference held at the Lahore University of Management Sciences, 11-12th February, 2010

This conference was held under the auspices of the Religions and Development Research Programme (RaD) based at the University of Birmingham, England, with the support of the LUMS Development and Policy Research Centre. It was organized by Professor Mohammad Waseem, of the School of Law, Humanities and Social Sciences, LUMS, coordinator of the research in Pakistan, and aimed to bring together researchers participating in the programme and others, to share findings and insights on various aspects of religious, political and social thought and practice.

In the inaugural session, **Carole Rakodi**, Director of the Programme, identified some of the issues that arise when researching the relationships between religion and development. She noted that the starting point of the research is that, while the importance of religion is increasingly recognized (or re-recognized), knowledge about its actual role in increasing (or hindering increases in) wealth and wellbeing remains patchy. She noted that there is now widespread acknowledgement that development means much more than economic growth, quoting Mahbub ul Haq's definition of 'human development'. She also noted that there is no consensus on the definition of religion within or between the disciplinary traditions, although many who study religion and society argue that both what religion is and its functions in society should be considered, despite the difficulties disentangling religion and culture. Much development studies literature and practice regards religion as an obstacle to achieving greater prosperity and wellbeing, while others believe that if religious teachings are put into practice, social and development problems would be solved, or if more development activities were to be handled by organizations with a religious motivation and/or institutional roots in a religion, then development objectives would be achieved more successfully. One of the tasks of the research programme is to move beyond seeing religion as a constraint or a panacea, but in doing so, it is faced with a number of challenges: the different ideas about the nature of knowledge and truth held by different academic disciplines and faith traditions; the extent to which social scientists (and religious adherents) can be objective, given their prior religious, cultural and disciplinary assumptions; how to ensure in-depth understanding of religious traditions and activities by 'outsiders'; and different interpretations of apparently similar concepts, requiring careful preparatory work to ensure a productive dialogue across disciplinary and cultural boundaries.

Gurharpal Singh, Deputy Director of the Programme, then considered some aspects of religions and development in South Asia, to provide a wider context for the discussions on Pakistan. He noted the legacy of colonization and Partition and the adoption of 'development' as the legitimizing ideology of post-colonial elites, embracing modernization, economic planning, social scientific knowledge and the rejection of tradition. However, the crises of the 1970s and 1980s, he noted, led to a loss of faith in this notion of development; ethnic and religious mobilizations in Punjab, Kashmir, Sri Lanka and India; Islamicization of the state in Pakistan and Bangladesh; and the evolution of diasporas, globalization and transnational religious mobilization. The responses to the crises were disparate: reaffirmation of the belief in modernization and secularism, but also the rise of religious fundamentalism within Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism, and the emergence of anti-secularist discourses, such as the rediscovery of Gandhism and alternative visions of modernity. Today, therefore, the secular modernization paradigm is facing a severe test, as religious organizations and communities remain (or have become) major service providers, post-9/11 states are increasingly responsive to demands based on religious identity, religious identification remains high, and new patterns of state-religions governance are emerging. In conclusion, he suggested, researchers and development actors need to rethink 'development' itself, how religions encounter

the state, the role played by religion in individual and collective behaviour, and change within religions.

Religion and Education

First, **Rubina Saigol**, an independent social researcher and human rights activist, reported on the findings of research on religious teaching, values and beliefs and attitudes to women's education carried out under the auspices of the RaD programme in Lahore and Peshawar. She outlined the religious, educational and women's rights provisions in the Pakistani constitution, noting that while access to education for all and women's fundamental human rights are strongly emphasized, so is the Islamic base for the state and education, and the rights of religious organizations to provide education with content of their own choosing. Because of the need to accommodate different interests, she asserted, there are inconsistencies in the constitutional provisions with respect to religion and equality (especially equality between men and women) and between the fundamental rights enshrined in the constitution and various laws. These contradictions have created spaces for religious groups to use state ideology to spread their own specific views. In both the more liberal religious and social setting of Lahore and the more conservative setting of Peshawar, faith-based organizations promoted women's education. They all wanted to retain strong control over the content of the curriculum, despite holding different views on what is appropriate. Their concern is to mould girls in line with their own conceptions of women as Muslims and citizens. For example, there is a strong concern with sexuality, promiscuity and morality, especially in Peshawar. The analysis compares the views of informants with different social characteristics, showing that there are many interpretations of Islam, influenced by ethnicity and class more than sect. It concludes that there are both convergences and differences between constitutional provisions, state policies and the activities of religious organizations.

A film entitled *A Small Dream* was shown, with an introduction by **Farida Shaheed**, a sociologist, women's rights activist and Director of Shirkat Gah. The film deals with the obstacles to girls' access to school and women's empowerment through education, focusing on a young Muslim woman who has started a successful school in the slums of Karachi. It was made under the auspices of the Muslim Women's Empowerment Research Programme and is available to download/view from <http://www.research4development.info/news.asp?ArticleID=50426>

A.K.Nayyar, Director of the Ali Education Institute in Lahore, and author of an earlier report on the government's curriculum for schools in Pakistan, noted that despite changes in the content of the curriculum at the national level, the content of textbooks and examinations has not changed: for example, they contain inaccurate historical information and externally influenced interpretations of Islam. In addition to revision of course materials to reflect changes in the curriculum, he asserted, more attention needs to be given to the actual teaching in schools, because most teachers have been trained in particular interpretations of Islam and to use earlier versions of the textbooks.

Civil Society Organizations, Religion and Development

Asif Iqbal, of the Social Policy and Development Centre in Karachi, summarized the outcomes of an attempt to map the scale and nature of development activities undertaken by 'faith-based organizations' in Pakistan, undertaken as part of the RaD research programme. He noted the difficulties in defining a 'faith-based organization' in Pakistan, where the majority of people working in and supporting NGOs claim to be faith-motivated, and some organizations deny that they are faith-based lest it imply that they favour a particular religious sect. FBOs, defined as those organizations that deliver at least one social service (or engage in advocacy), define themselves as faith-based (as manifested in their mission/objectives), and/or are affiliated with a religious congregation, comprise about a third of the country's nonprofit sector. Most provide social services, especially education and health, to compensate for deficiencies in state provision and live out

religious injunctions to care for those in need. In numerical terms, the largest group of FBOs are madrasas, the organization and curriculum of which has evolved in response to government policies and social change. While, as expected, most FBOs are Muslim, the role of the Christian FBOs in welfare provision and development exceeds the share of Christians in Pakistan's population. In contrast, FBOs associated with the small Hindu and Parsi communities has shrunk as their population numbers have declined. In the past, FBOs were little engaged in advocacy, but they are increasingly participating in public debates on pressing social and political issues.

Also as part of the RaD research programme, research is under way on the development activities of civil society organizations, especially FBOs, in Karachi, and some preliminary findings were presented by **Nida Kirmani**, RaD Research Fellow. Building on the mapping work, the study is carrying out a small number of illustrative case studies of organizations. It was reported that similar issues of defining FBOs and distinguishing them from other NGOs in order to identify their distinctive features and contributions had been experienced as in the mapping work. In addition, the researcher noted that externally funded organizations displayed greater willingness to discuss their activities and sources of funding – perhaps because they are used to the demands of external funders for transparency and accountability, but also perhaps because they have an incentive to assist in the generation of objective evidence on their aims and achievements, and are less suspicious of researchers than more typical organizations that rely on locally generated funds, mainly from individuals.

Amir Rana, of the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, author of *An A-Z of Jihadi Organizations in Pakistan*, analysed the discourse used by religious organizations that aim to Islamicize the Pakistani state and society. He suggested that their cause is political renewal; they have missionary, sectarian and militarization agendas; they include both traditional and newer religious organizations; and they are as important to understand as religious political parties. However, he also noted that the discourse is complex, reflecting ideological, political and tactical differences between organizations.

Religion, conflict and peace

Based on original research undertaken as part of the RaD programme, **Mohammad Waseem** analysed sectarian conflict and conflict transformation in Gilgit and Jhang. He identified a number of contrasts between the sectarian composition and socio-political characteristics of the two urban centres, and then analysed the period of conflict and its aftermath. First he noted that the pre-conflict period is generally characterized as a time of peace, although he noted that the calm was due to widespread acceptance of the existing power structure. In both districts, he noted, the conflicts have been simultaneously local, national and international. They were associated with the emergence of new types of sectarianism, distinguished from the old sectarianism by occasional outbreaks of violence and the emergence of sectarian political parties, as well as changes in the composition of local society and the boundaries between communities. Because the central state adopted an essentially passive role, external powers (Saudi Arabia and Iran) were able to exploit divisions between Muslim sects to fight what he termed a 'war by proxy'. Violence came to be seen as the only way of eliminating rival leaders and ensuring electoral support. A protracted period of attacks against individuals encouraged a process of mental and physical ghettoization, in which people's identity increasingly came to be defined in sectarian terms and the links between those with different sectarian allegiances weakened. Despite the uneasy calm of the last few years, he argued, the underlying roots of the violence remain. For them to be tackled, more determined efforts are required to challenge identities based on sectarian allegiance, reduce discrimination and increase wellbeing, and tackle the Taliban both locally and internationally.

In his presentation, **Khalid Ahmed**, journalist, editor of the *Friday Times* and member of the RaD Pakistan advisory group, outlined the Shia logic that sees all the violence in Pakistan as directly or indirectly funded by the United States, even when it is committed by the Pakistani state or the

Taliban. In his view southern Punjab, where there is increased segregation, Al Qaeda control and killings of Shias, is becoming increasingly unstable, with potential for a peasants' revolt in alliance with Islamic fundamentalists. The one ray of light, he believes, is that Shias in Gilgit and Balochistan have voted for secular parties in recent years, rather than yielding to pressure from religious leaders who hold the (Iran-inspired) view that the U.S. is the enemy.

Religion and law

Muhammed Khalid Masud, Chair of the Council of Islamic Ideology, and member of the RaD programme's country advisory group, considered human rights from the perspectives of religion and law. He stressed the important contributions of both the legal and religious traditions to ideas of human dignity, justice, individual accountability, protection of basic rights, the rule of law etc. However, because international human rights agreements permit countries to add reservations to their ratifications, he argued, international human rights lawyers have come to regard religious and local laws as an obstacle to implementing universal agreements on rights and are therefore putting pressure on countries such as Pakistan to withdraw their reservations and even change their constitutions, lest they threaten their adherence to the remainder of the relevant treaties. The problem with this is that it raises questions about the nature and extent of national sovereignty, which is particularly complex for Muslim states. The debate revolves around whether sovereignty belongs to 'the people', collectively expressed through the state, or to God. The 1973 constitution of Pakistan suggested a theological synthesis between the sovereignty of people and the sovereignty of God, but disagreements between religious scholars and constitutional lawyers continue to occur, with continued pressure for further Islamicization of the constitution. In his view, the incompatibility between universal human rights and Shari'a that is perceived by some Muslim scholars is based on a false approach to Shari'a that identifies it with Fiqh (an early body of doctrines that religious scholars claim exclusive authority to interpret) rather than Ijtihad (reinterpretation of Shari'a in the light of social, political and economic changes, which gives authority to legislators and a judiciary independent of the state). In Pakistan, attempts by the government-established Council of Islamic Ideology to demonstrate that there are far more areas of Pakistani law that are compatible with international human rights agreements than are incompatible are opposed by religious scholars and the weakly democratic government is often unable to withstand the pressure they exert, with the result that the process of reforming the original constitution and laws remains unfinished.

Ali Qazilbash, law lecturer at LUMS, also discussed the relationships between law and religion in the history of Pakistan, with particular reference to the constitution.

Religion and value systems

Freedom of religion in Pakistan was considered by **Asma Jahangir**, lawyer, advocate of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Chair of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. She concentrated on the right of individuals to change their religion, blasphemy (or defamation of religion) and incitement to hatred. She noted that it is particularly difficult to legislate on freedom of religion, because most adherents believe that their own religion is right/best and some religions encourage active attempts to convert others as a result. In some places, annoyance at proselytization has given rise to the introduction of anti-conversion laws. However, she noted that forcible conversion is very rare, all religions have 'lures' to encourage voluntary conversion, and anti-conversion laws fuel tension. She stressed that Pakistan's constitution provides individuals with the right to choose and practise their religion. However, she also noted that many Muslims believe that, having adopted Islam as an adult, it is impermissible for a Muslim to change. In addition, she stressed the importance of the government actively safeguarding religious freedom, for example, by taking action in cases of incitement to hatred. Finally, she noted that religious freedom, even though enshrined in law, has done little to promote

the rights of women and children because of the prevalence of particular interpretations of religion, interwoven with custom, and failure to fully implement the positive laws that are in place.

Rubina Saigol presented further findings from her research, examining the influence of religious values and beliefs on people's understanding of and attitudes to an oft-promoted tool for reducing poverty, micro-credit.

Finally, **Faiza Mushtaq**, LUMS, presented a detailed analysis of the discourse used by Al-Huda in their materials and classes. She noted that these classes do not, like madrasas, aim to produce religious specialists. Instead they provide 1-2 year courses for women with a certain level of secular education. The courses are based on a belief that acquiring religious knowledge is virtuous. They aim to increase women's awareness and understanding of the Qur'an and Hadith by studying the texts in Arabic, with the objective of reconciling traditional interpretations of Islam with modern life. In practice, the materials they use condense scholarly interpretations of the texts into a list of rules, specifying their relevance to everyday life in order to instil practices of reflection and self-examination and build character. She noted that Al-Huda has a vision not only of personal piety and self-reform, including adherence to good religious practices, but also wider social reform in the sense of a more moral society. The organization is, she suggested, part of a long tradition of reform movements in Islam that believe in a single Sunni interpretation of the religious texts and are socially conservative. It is attractive to educated women because the classes provide an intellectual stimulus, link religious learning with their everyday (modern) lives and form bonds between women outside the home. The classes build networks amongst (elite) women, which might one day be seen as posing a challenge to male-dominated religious institutions.

Religion, politics and development

Muhammad Waseem identified two approaches to the analysis of religion and politics in Pakistan: a predominant instrumentalist approach that characterizes the political regime as a mullah-garrison alliance in which the military have used religion to increase their legitimacy by appealing to divine over constitutional sources, and a structural interpretation that points to deeper explanations of the current relationships between religion and politics. The anti-India, anti-secularist and anti-communist views of the *ulema* are, he suggested, crucial in understanding the military-ulema alliance, which has a common interest in keeping at bay a political elite ostensibly committed to democracy and Presidentialism. In Pakistan, he asserted, the independence generation of politicians were modernists who did not believe that politics and religion should be conflated. In contrast, today Islam defines the state. He examined the implications of this trend with an extreme example: the period of government by an alliance of religious political parties (the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal) in the North West Frontier Province between 2002 and 2007. Research undertaken as part of the RaD programme on how the MMA performed while in government revealed that the province's extreme dependence on donor and federal government funding limited the ability of the MMA to implement radical and autonomous policies, as did their lack of government experience. In practice, nothing tangible was achieved by their efforts to reduce poverty, there was little reduction in systemic problems such as corruption and women's position was worse in 2007 than in 2002. The electorate responded by voting the traditional elite back into government, reversing the trend towards a conflation of religion and the state.

Ayesha Jalal examined a 1908 lecture by Iqbal with the development theories of Amartya Sen, finding parallels in their conceptions of human freedom and equality. These, she suggested, can be attributed to their similar ethical views. Iqbal concluded that in principle Islam offered the best basis for human progress but noted that, at the time he was writing, the reality was far from the ideal. Sen has also, she suggested, drawn on a non-European intellectual history in forming his ideas about freedom and justice, although he attributes the gap between ideals and reality to the failure of public reasoning.

Finally, **Masooda Bano**, University of Oxford, reported on research on the welfare work of religious political parties undertaken as part of the RaD programme. Comparing Jama-at-i-Islami in Pakistan and Bangladesh, research based on extensive interviews with party activists and others, she noted that they are involved in a wide range of charitable, welfare and service provision activities, including health care and training, education, emergency relief, water supply and orphan support. They charge a basic (below market rate) fee for the services they provide (except to those who cannot afford to pay), which users are prepared to pay because of the perceived good quality. However, the Jama-at is organized in very different ways in the two countries, for historical, political and practical reasons: in Pakistan the Jama'at has established its own network of specialized or multi-sectoral welfare and service delivery organizations, whereas in Bangladesh (where the Jama'at has periodically been restricted or banned) Jama'at members play key roles in the management of apparently independent organizations. In both cases, services are delivered through networks of voluntary organizations, which rely on managers who are party members and volunteers, rather than paid professionals. The parties' engagement in welfare activities, she concluded, demonstrates their commitment to their religious ideology, and requires a well-organized party structure and substantial income from their members' donations and other religious sources. None of the other Islamic parties in these countries are as large as the Jama'at and their welfare networks are less extensive. The religious political parties' engagement in welfare programmes is, she concluded, critical to their identity as parties and for mobilizing party members; the possibility that welfare provision might win votes is a less important motivation.