



Religions and Development Research Programme

Islamic education, religious elites and the state in Kano, Nigeria

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Madrasas (Islamic schools and seminaries) have been the focus of reform in most Muslim majority countries during recent decades. Post-September 11, concern has heightened in some countries. Reasons for state intervention vary but the usual explanation points to the modernizing ambitions of the secular elite in post-colonial Muslim states who, led by a vision of modernization and nation-building, have aimed to reform religious schools to bring them in line with the demands of modernity. In particular, the reforms have typically sought to introduce secular subjects into the curriculum to enable graduates to compete for jobs in government and the wider economy, pay and train some or all teachers, improve buildings and teaching materials, and, through curriculum reform, create a religious leadership that will propagate a more liberal interpretation of Islam.

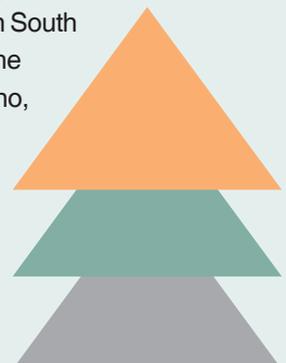
For example, the South Asian states of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have made active but generally not very effective attempts to reform madrasas. In contrast, the State government's engagement with Islamic schools in Kano, one of the most populous Muslim states of northern Nigeria, has been essentially tolerant. Drawing on interviews with key informants from the State government, Muslim leaders and informed observers, this study examines the aim and content of attempts to reform various types of Muslim and government primary and secondary education, by encouraging the adoption of curricula containing both secular and religious subjects and providing other types of support. Unlike elsewhere, in Kano, the State government has not intervened in the higher levels of Islamic education.

In Kano, the study shows that

- The population is mainly Muslim, traditional and most government leaders are Muslim, and the State government has recently adopted Sharia law
- Demand for Islamic education continues to be strong
- Demand for a curriculum containing secular as well as religious subjects comes from both religious teachers and parents
- State support for Islamic schools, in the form of curriculum development, training and pay for some teachers, improved teaching materials and some financial support is generally welcomed
- Higher religious education has been left in the hands of religious scholars.

Comparison of the Kano State situation with the South Asian countries enables us to identify the attributes of states and religious elites that make states seek to increase their control over religious authority:

- The modernization agenda of post-colonial states is a critical factor shaping reform, but the exact nature of state intervention is determined by the political character of the religious elite. In Kano, Sufi groups, leaders of which avoid direct engagement with politics unless Islam itself is perceived to be under threat, are dominant. In contrast, in South Asia, revivalist Islamic movements that actively advocate capturing state power are dominant, leading to relationships between the state and religious leaders that are more often antagonistic.
- The formalization of religious education in South Asia since colonial times, compared to the informal nature of religious schools in Kano, made state intervention more feasible in the former.





These findings push the boundaries of existing debates to show that states' relationships with religious leaders and schools are interactive and responsive, countering the current tendency to explain reform attempts solely in terms of the modernizing ambitions of post-colonial governments.

The research shows that development planners who are currently attempting to encourage state-led madrasa reforms in many countries can design more realistic policies by

- improving their awareness of the historical and institutional factors shaping state relationships with religious groups in Muslim countries
- making more realistic assessments of the nature of reforms a state is likely to initiate and the likely responses to these reforms from the religious elite.

Bano, M. (2009) *Engaged yet Disengaged: Islamic Schools and the State in Kano, Nigeria*, Birmingham: Religions and Development Working Paper 29
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