



Religions and Development Research Programme

Religion, Politics and Governance in Pakistan

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Can religion play the role of a driver for change in terms of pro-poor policy and practice? To answer this question, a sound understanding of the relationships between Muslim organizations and government is vital.

In Pakistan politics and governance is heavily influenced by the nature and direction of the latent force and dynamism of the Islamic establishment, especially in its organizational setting, both in government and in opposition. The state has typically used Islam as a source of legitimacy in the absence of, or in combination with, a mass mandate. In so doing, it has played on the turf of Islamic groups by seeking to control the production and spread of the religious message, co-opting the *ulema* and managing religious affairs, including levying Islamic taxes, managing shrines, attempting to reform *madradas* and playing a role in sectarian conflict. However, beyond this instrumental use of Islam, it is a constant, pervasive and intense force that includes, but at the same time transcends, the manipulations of the ruling elite.

The genesis of Pakistan lay in the partition of India on the basis of religion, which as a result assumed a role in the new state that has no parallel in recent history, with the exception of Israel. This, however, needs to be put into perspective in view of two countervailing forces: a secular constitutional state based on the Westminster model and the cosmopolitan, Westernized, liberal and secular character of the elite both in and outside the state. On the one hand, the state has all along struggled to define religion as part of its political discourse. On the other hand, the *ulema* have relied on the supreme legitimizing potential of religion to hold the state to its promise to establish Sharia. Islam can therefore be seen as an oppositional force that has consistently been engaged in carving out a niche for itself, shaping the political discourse in the process.

What role does religion play in day-to-day governance? In particular, what is its influence on development policy formulation and public administration? Given the strong emphasis of religious teachings on the obligation to care for the poor and the importance of adhering to moral principles, does religious influence in governance result in pro-poor development policy and practice?

In North West Frontier Province, where an alliance of religious political parties, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), was in power between 2002 and 2007, a study conducted in 2008 (including case studies of three districts) showed that the State government

- Adjusted to the prevalent legal-institutional framework of authority in order to survive in office
- Established working relationships with the central government and donors, on whom it depended for resources, and with provincial government bureaucrats, on whom it depended to implement its policies
- Adopted a cautious stance on several issues on which its pre-election position was hardline e.g. US bases
- Introduced Sharia law but was unable to thoroughly implement its provisions
- Was unable to deliver on its promised Islamic agenda or provide wide benefits to the electorate because of its lack of experience, limited financial autonomy and reluctance to accommodate NGOs, especially NGOs concerned with women's issues
- Achieved only modest improvements in infrastructure and provision of education and healthcare
- Adopted a contradictory attitude towards women, improving girls' access to education and attempting to improve healthcare while restricting women's roles especially in the public sphere (work and politics)
- Soon became associated with nepotism, corruption and favouritism in the allocation of funds to the districts in which senior ministers' electoral support was based.





Overall, despite its Islamic ideology, the government's agenda with respect to poverty, gender, security and justice was far from promising and its ability to translate its ideological objectives into development outcomes was limited.

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