Reforming the Madrassah System

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Abstract:
The changing face of Madrassah and the proliferation of these schools in Pakistan can be directly traced to the Zia–Ul-Haq rule when the students of these seminaries were indoctrinated with a Jihadi ideology and sent to Afghanistan to fight against Soviet occupiers. With official state patronage, the number of these institutions today has multiplied and today there are close to 50,000 of such institutions/schools in Pakistan as compared to only 245 at the time of independence. It is commonly thought that the pedagogical patterns are such that critical thinking, analytical skills and creative faculties of the students of Madrassah’s are suppressed and strained to the extent that sectarian tendencies are encouraged. The critics are of the view that some schools are involved to provide safe haven for the militants and extremists working at training camps for militancy. The aim of this paper is to know about the reform, its results and points of view, and the reaction of the Islamic seminaries towards these Madrassah reforms.

Key words: Musharraf regime; educational structure; US support; religious schools; Reaction of Islamic organizations

I. Introduction
The Madrassah’s have been in existence for centuries in the Islamic world including Pakistan. But recently they have been associated with the Taliban rulers of Afghanistan some of whom were students of these institutions. They have also been much in the news for sectarian killings and supporting militancy in Kashmir. They are considered the breeding ground of the Jihadi culture--a term used for Islamic militancy in the English-language press of Pakistan.

There was not much writing on the madrassas before the events of Nine Eleven in Pakistan. J.D. Kraan writing for the Christian Study Centre had provided a brief introduction. Later, A.H. Nayyar, an academic, had updated this introduction arguing that sectarian violence was traceable to madrassa education. Both had used only secondary
sources. Later, the present writer wrote on language-teaching in the madrassas (Rahman 2002). The book also contained a survey of the opinions of madrassa students on Kashmir, the implementation of the Sharia, equal rights for religious minorities and women, freedom of the media, democracy etc. The seminal work on the ulema, and also the madrassas in which they are trained, is by Qasim Zaman. This is an excellent study of how the traditional ulema can be differentiated from the Islamists who react to modernity by attempting to go back to fundamentalist and essentially political, interpretations of Islam.

The ulema or the Islamists in Pakistan have been writing, generally in Urdu, in defence of the madrassas which the state sought to modernize and secularize. Two recent books, a survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (patronized by the revivalist, Islamist, Jamaat-i-Islami) of the madrassas and a longer book by Saleem Mansur Khalid are useful because they contain much recent data. Otherwise the Pakistani ulema's work is polemical and tendentious. They feel themselves besieged increasingly by Western and Pakistani secular critics and feel that they should defend their position from the inside rather than wait for sympathetic outsiders to do it for them.

II. Type and Number of Madrassas

There is hardly any credible information on the unregistered madrassas. However, those, which are registered, are controlled by their own central organizations or boards. They determine the syllabi; collect a registration fee and an examination fee. They send examination papers, in Urdu and Arabic, to the madrassas where pupils sit for examinations and declare results. The names of the boards are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sub-Sect</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Date Established</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wafaq ul Madaris</td>
<td>Deobandi</td>
<td>Multan</td>
<td>1959</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanzim ul Madaris</td>
<td>Barelvi</td>
<td>Lahore</td>
<td>1960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wafaq ul Madans (Shia) Pakistan</td>
<td>Shia</td>
<td>Lahore</td>
<td>1959</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabta-tul-Madaris-al-Islamia</td>
<td>Jamaat-i-Islami</td>
<td>Lahore</td>
<td>1983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wafq-ul-Madaris-al-Salafia</td>
<td>Ahl-i-Hadith</td>
<td>Faisalabad</td>
<td>1955</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Offices of the respective Boards.

III. Registration of Madrassahs

Madrassahs were registered under Societies ACT 1860. Prior to 1994, thousands of Madrassahs have been registered under the said ACT, but in 1994 Banazir Government imposed a ban on the registration of Madrassahs. When President Musharaf came into power, he issued “Modal Deeni Madrassah Ordinance” on 10 August, 2001, but the Itihadi Madaris Denia rejected this ordinance. After one year on June 19, 2002, Government issued another “Madrash Regulatory Ordinance”; finally, Interior Ministry lifted ban on the registration of Madrassahs under Notification No # 40/30/99/P11-20.

IV. Reforms in Madrassahs

Soon after 9/11, the Pakistan Government announced a plan to monitor Madrassahs and revamp their administrative, financial and educational structures. In fact, the plans to regulate Madrassahs had been there for long; 9/11 just created the need for their early implementation. In August 2001, the Government created a Pakistan Madrassah Education Board with a purpose to establish a network of model Madrassahs.
and regulate others. In January 2002, President Musharraf launched a five year plan worth $113 million to introduce formal and “secular” subjects of willing Madrassahs. However, no concrete action was taken until June of that year, when 115 Madrassahs were denied Government assistance due to their alleged links to militancy, and Musharraf set a December 31, 2002 deadline for Madrassahs to register with the Government or face closure.

In November 2003, the Government decided to allocate about $50 million annually for providing assistance to registered seminaries, especially by paying the salaries of teachers hired to teach non-religious subjects. In July 2004, then education Minister announced Government agreement with private companies for imparting computer education at all of the country’s public schools and registered Madrassahs.

The proposed reform plan also had the backing of bodies like the US Agency for International Development (USAID) that signed a $100 million bilateral agreement, spanning over a 5 year period with Pakistan in August 2005 to increase access to quality education throughout the country.

Initially, it seemed that a large number of Madrassahs would rush to get them registered and get easy money to run their affairs, but three years down the road, the results achieved by the Government are far from satisfactory. The failure has been attributed to a variety of reasons, lack of the resolve to enforce them, the reluctance of Madrassahs and their non-dependence on funds provided by state and the tussle that went on for long among federal education, interior and religious affairs ministries on who will lead the reforms process.

The International Crisis Group (ICG) conducted a special study in this respect and came out with a report titled “Unfulfilled Promises.” The report stated that the failure to curb rising extremism in Pakistan stems directly from the military government’s unwillingness to act against its political allies among the religious groups.

Right now the Government has approved leading role for the Federal Education Ministry, headed by former ISI Chief Lt. Gen (Retd) Javed Ashraf Qazi, in implementing reforms. This is something that is totally unacceptable to Madrassahs who have unified under the umbrella of Ittehad-e-Tanzimat-e-Madrassahs –e-Diniya (ITMD): “we will not accept the Madrassahs Reforms Board under Javed Ashraf Qazi’s Chairmanship”.

V. Madrassahs Reforms Board

Government has formed the Madrassahs Reforms Board under the leadership of Education Minister. The government is making amendments in the Societies Act 1860 to incorporate changes needed to regularize and register the seminaries. Under the Madrassahs reforms program, the government would help the Madrassahs in setting up laboratories, computer centers, train teachers and also pay three year salaries of formal subjects’ teachers. The Reforms Board stressed that Madrassahs would have to bring in changes in their syllabus and introduce new subjects otherwise the students passing out from these institutions would be limited to the mosques.

Higher Education Commission (HEC) had accepted Madrassahs graduates and post graduate degrees conditionally for teaching purposes only and the degree holders
were required to pass two formal subjects to get their degrees equivalent to recognized degrees.

There are some 20,000 Madrassahs in Pakistan. The government with the help of US has embarked on several initiatives to combat zealotry by broadening educational offering. A little over 300 Madrassahs have introduced elementary subjects like English, Mathematics, Science and Computer, and US fund have revitalized some Government schools. It is a difficult task but we are very optimistic as changes have started happening “says Pakistan Education Minister Zubaida Jalal”; the message is that we are not touching religious education but your child needs to be educated in modern subjects to see the other side of the world as well. The reforms include:

1) A five year $ 1 billion plan introduced in 2003 aimed at putting secular subjects on syllabus and bringing Madrassahs under the purview of Education Ministry.
2) A $ 100 million commitment to rehabilitate public schools signed in 2002 by the US Agency for International Development (USAID).
3) A 2002 law requiring Madrassahs to audit their funding in dollars and foreign students to register with the government. The number of foreign religious students has since dropped from thousands to hundreds as the government issued and renewed few visas to religious students.

VI. US support for reforms

The US is helping bankroll the government’s Madrassahs reforms behind the scenes. While providing visible support to Pakistan’s Public Schools through USAID, the group aims to train 45,000 school teachers to improve literacy. They have already opened 200 literacy centers through partnerships with the private sector, and they have rehabilitated 256 schools out of a total of 1,200 in the under developed provinces of Sindh and Balochistan.

Through a new $ 25 million reform package, Pakistani government is trying to do something that has never been done before. Wrest control of the country’s 8,000 religious schools from the Mullahs.

Under the project, the government says it will train 28,000 teachers to improve their knowledge of modern subjects and teaching methods. It hopes the plan will integrate Madrassahs students into the social mainstream and improve their prospects for employment. The government has increased allocation of funds in the 2003-2004 budgets under the provisions of the 2001 Madrassahs Education Board Ordinance as three model Madrassahs were established in Karachi, Sukkur and Islamabad last year.

The Islamabad was designed exclusively for girls. These schools are following the new curricula devised to achieve the proposed integration of the Madrassahs and regular schools systems.

Pakistan’s religious schools and Musharraf’s government launched a five year plan to bring the teaching of formal or secular subjects to 8,000 willing Madrassahs; no concrete action was taken until June of that year, when 115 Madrassahs were denied access to government assistance due to their alleged links to militancy. Despite Musharraf’s repeated pledge to crack down on the more extremist Madrassahs in his
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country, there is little concrete evidence that he has done so. The changing face of the
Madrassahs and the proliferation of these schools in Pakistan can be directly traced to
Zia-ul-Haq’s rule when the students of the seminaries were indoctrinated with a Jihadi
ideology and sent to Afghanistan to fight the Soviet occupiers. The same war hardened
zealots were also used by Zia’s military establishment in Indian to occupy Kashmir. With
state patronage, the numbers of these institutions multiplied and today there are
reportedly close to 50,000 of such schools within Pakistan, as compared to only 245 at
the time of independence in 1947.

Since President Musharraf’s reform plan was first announced, the federal
government has been providing financial assistance to religious schools with the
purported purposes of modernizing textbooks, including secular subjects in the curricula
and introducing computers in the classroom. In 2001-2002, a total of 1,654,000 rupees
was distributed among Madrassahs, as all the students in all the seminaries were assisted.
A promise was made by the federal government that an additional aid of 30.5 million
rupees would be made available for providing computers and changing the syllabi in
2003-2004, which would amount to 28.6 rupees per student if all Madrassahs are availed
of the funding. However, since many seminaries do not accept financial aid from the
government, the money allocated will not be distributed to the students in the proportion
stipulated in the disbursement formula.

The campaign to reform the country’s Deeni Madrassahs was launched by
Musharraf in a bid to fight extremism in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terror
attacks on the United States. Musharraf brought Madrassahs into the mainstream by
introducing secular subjects in the curriculum taught at these schools. This ordinance,
called the “Pakistan Madrassahs Education (Establishment and Affiliation of Model
Deeni Madaris) Board Ordinance 2001, was promulgated on August 18, 2001.

According to the Education Sector Reforms, three model institutions were
subsequently established: one each at Karachi, Sukkhur and Islamabad. Their curriculum
includes English, Mathematics, Computer Science, Economics, Political Science, Law
and Pakistan Studies; however these institutions were not welcomed by the Ulema. Later,
another law was introduced to control the entry of foreigners into the Madrassahs and to
keep a close check on them. This law, the voluntary Registration and Regulation
Ordinance 2002, has also been rejected by most of the Madrassahs who want state
interference in their affairs.

The Musharraf Administration announced a number of measures to make deeni
Madrassahs participate in the modernization programme. These reforms included a five-
year, one billion dollar Education Sector Reform Assistance (ESRA) plan to ensure the
inclusion of secular subjects in the syllabi of religious seminaries and a 100-million
dollar bilateral agreement to rehabilitate hundreds of public schools by the United States
Agency for International Development (USAID).

General Parvez Musharraf gave a deadline to religious seminaries or Madrassahs
across Pakistan to get them registered with the Wafaqul Madaris or face the music.
General Musharraf said nothing new in his July 25 televised address to the nation. He
reiterated his government’s resolve to confront head-on the menaces of terrorism and
extremism, and outlined a number of steps he intends to take. However, most of these
measures have been announced before, and by none other than the General himself in his historic January 2002 Speech.

The Musharraf government actually launched its Madrassahs reform project in 2002 with a total allocation of 5.7 billion rupees for the project. However, three years down the road, only a small amount of 514.5 million rupees has been spent towards this end. Now the implementation of the December 2005 deadline for the registration of Madrassahs will be a test of Musharraf’s resolve.

It was a difficult undertaking since the concerned authorities would have to register an average of 133 schools per day to ensure completion of the process in time of the approximately 40,000 religious seminaries currently operating in Pakistan; only about 10,000 are registered with the government, whereas the remaining 30,000 are non-registered. The Madrassahs are registered under two different Acts in Pakistan: The Societies Act 1925 with the Registrar Societies that is headed by the Directorate of Industries, and The Trust Act, 1982.

The registered Madrassahs are regulated by five central boards representing different sects/sub-sects including Bareli, Deobandi, Ahle-Hadith, Shia and the Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan. However not a single Madrassah has been registered after Musharraf’s July 21st speech because of an undue delay in amending the outdated Societies Act-1925. As the Act is being revised by the Government, the Religious Affairs Ministry has barred the Auqaf Department from registering any of the seminaries. The Religious Affairs Ministry headed by Federal Religious Affairs Minister Ejazul Haq maintains that under the Societies Act 1925, the registration of Madrassahs was a provincial subject and without amending the Act, a centralized mechanism of Madrassahs reforms cannot be established.

Therefore, the relevant departments have been directed not to register any Madrassahs unless the Societies Act 1925 is amended. Resultantly the relevant departments are not entertaining the applications for registration of Madrassahs. But the Religious Affairs Ministry insists that amending the Societies Act 1925 is necessary since the existing Act does not cover the regulation of seminaries, audit of funds they receive and teaching of modern science, computer education and technical subjects. “Under the existing Act, we can only register Markaz (centers), but it does not provide any mechanism to regulate Madrassahs “says Wakil Ahmad Khan - Secretary Religious Affairs Ministry”. However, most of the religious leaders and Islamist organizations have rejected outright all the government legislation requiring religious seminaries to register and broaden their curriculum beyond the role of Quranic learning under the reform programmed, drafted on the advice of the Bush administration and financed by matters and policies of Deeni Madrassahs in the country.

In January 2004, the International Crisis Group (ICG) report titled, “Unfulfilled Promises: Pakistan’s Failure to Tackle Extremism” further heightened American fears. The report stated “The failure to curb rising extremism in Pakistan stems directly from the military government’s own unwillingness to act against its political allies among the religious groups. Having co-opted the religious parties to gain constitutional cover for his military rule, Musharraf is highly reliant on the religious right for his regime’s survival”.

The ICG report observed that Pakistan’s failure to close down Madrassahs and to crack down on Jihadi networks has resulted in a resurgence of domestic extremism and sectarian violence. “The Government inaction continues to pose a serious threat to domestic, regional and international security”. Less than a year later, in December 2004, a report produced by the Congressional Research Service (CRS) presented to the American Congress pointed out: “As General Musharraf vowed to begin regulating it, several Madrassahs have already been registered, and the government is offering incentives including the payment of salaries for teachers of newly introduced subjects and financial assistance for the establishment of science and computer laboratories to encourage other schools to do the same. To ensure proper administration of the programme, the Government is also introducing a monitoring and evaluation system.

VII. Madrassah Ordinance

The Registration of Madaris will help bring the religious seminaries into mainstream and enable them to continuously play their positive role in religious and general education. After welcoming the recently promulgated amended society’s registration ordinance by Ulema and religious scholars, the process is likely to be completed in a short span of time. According to official sources, more than 6000 out of 12,000 Madaris have already been registered across the country.

VIII. Reaction of Islamic Seminaries

Ittahad-e-Tanzeemat-e-Mdaris-e-Denia is the union of Islamic seminaries which includes five boards (wefaqs) of Islamic seminaries of the major Masliks in Pakistan. There are some reservations, doubts and suspicions about these reforms. Ittahad-e-Tanzeemat-e-Mdaris-e-Denia has responded to the government reforms programme in a not so helping way.

The point of view of the opponents of this reform system is that it is the desire of the government that all the religious seminaries should add English, Maths, General Science, Computer and Pakistan Studies, etc., to their syllabus. These subjects have been added in the syllabus at matriculation level. The opponents of reforms believe that today they are going through a stage where government is trying to gain confidence of its eternal enemy, India, through composite dialogue and confidence building measures. So they also have the right to explain their point of view and the government should also try to create confidence between them. Presently, the core problem identified against government is the legalization of their degrees at all five levels and the legal steps that can be taken in this regard. These problems are subsequently explained:

1) A separate examining university charter should be given. A simple way of doing this is that when the National Assembly is not in session the president should pass this ordinance. Later it should be ratified, as in the past 15 years, the president and other provincial government have issued many of such ordinances in favor of private sector universities which are given approval of the Assembly later on; a standard which has been fined by Higher Education Commission (HEC) as none of these universities qualify to that standard. Some of them are operating in bungalows and some have their campus in apartments. The Higher Education Commission’s standard is that they must have 60 acre land or 20 Rs. Crore cash, however these universities do not fulfill this requirement and still they have the approval of the government; so in our country these discretionary powers are only for the people who are not liked by the Higher authorities. The
Examining University which do all the affiliations, select the syllabus for all levels arranging examinations, awarding certificates and degrees, does not come under this category.

The degree issued by any university is not a guarantee that all degree holders must have jobs; neither can they force the government to provide job to these people. Everyone has to prove himself through competition in open market. The government does not agree with our demands due to some uncertain reasons. So they should give approval to our five groups in the private sector under sovereign boards like Pakistan Madrassah Education Board, as it will have the same function as examining University. When the government agrees to our demands literally, we will prepare a model draft/ordinance within a week. It will include all the functionaries, members, boards of studies, examination system, financial management; all the matters will be clear and to the point.

2) During the process of the approval of the above demands, the Higher Education Commission should issue an order or notification to all the universities of the country that our degree of Shahadat-ul-Alimia-fil-uloom-ul-Arabia Wal-Islamia will be considered equal to the degrees of M.A. Islamyat and Arabic. And the restriction of aquiline certificate has been taken off and that as all the degrees of other universities has a reputation, our degrees will be considered the same and the degree of Shahadatul-Alia will be considered equal to the degree of B.A.

In the same way, the Inter Boards Chairman Committee should be given instructions in a formal meeting in which our members will also be in attendance. Our Sanwia Aamna (Matric) and Sanwia – Khasa (Matric) and Sanwia-Khasa (Intermediate) certificate should be accepted and notified.

3) The government, in an Official Gazette should announce that no religious seminaries will be taken in government custody and there will be no interference in the matters of the Madrassahs from government.

4) If the government has any doubts about the activities of any member of any such organization, then there should be investigation held under Islamic, national and international legal standards. And in the absence of proof, the charge should be taken back. As common, citizen defamation is a crime and government should also respect that, and if the person is proved guilty then should be dealt according to legal requirements. It will be better if the government take Ittehad-e-Tanzeeem Al-e-Madaris-e-Dinia Pakistan in confidence in such matters. Anyway it should be taken into consideration that an individual and an institution (Madrassah/Darul-Ulum/Jamia) are both different and as the penalty punishment of one person cannot be given to the other, in the same way in the penance of an individual the whole institution cannot be punished.

5) Though President Pervez Musharraf has announced many times at national level in his addresses and in many conferences that the government confesses the positive character of the religious seminaries (feeding one million people and providing education to them to contribute to literacy rate), the establishment through different Acts tries to create misunderstanding between the governments and religious seminaries in the following ways: (i) the notification of the chief Administrator Auqaf Punjab to take
Madrassah Ghans-ul-Qayum-Jamia-Rahimia New Saman Abad Lahore in Government; (ii) Jamia–Tajweed-ul-Quran has been taken into control by Naval Officials in Karsaz Karachi; (iii) the attack on Jamia Faridia Islamabad at midnight, etc.

6) In the Aiwane-Sadar (Presidency), the then President Musharraf had promised the Madrassas that there will be no such ambiguous and generalized terrorist charges on religious seminaries in future. However, in spite of everything that took place, the Federal Education Minister and Information Minister’s interviews revealed that not all but “some” seminaries are involved in terrorism; so, the word “some” comes again under ambiguity and generalization.

IX. Conclusion

Although the Government has been making tremendous efforts to streamline these Islamic schools, its efforts are not still enough; there are some administrative flaws such as biased and partial investigation or research about these institutions, unrealistic and inapplicable legislation regarding Madrassas and its imposition that impedes and further devastate the situation and reforms process in Pakistan. The other cause of ineffective reform policy is that government is reluctant to take in confidence the Islamic seminaries and hesitate to employ mutual strategy to enhance and update this system of education. The Madrassas have some reservations and doubts about government reforms policy; first, these instances should be removed.

Inside the Madrassas, there are also some negative elements that brain wash the Madrassas authorities to oppose the reforms and react negatively, which mar the prestigious status and position of the Madrassas.

It is high time that government and Islamic seminaries employ a mutual strategy to cope with the situation, and there should be a close liaison between them. As the current friction cannot be left like this for long.

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