

The Challenge to Madrassa Reforms in Pakistan

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Abstract

Madrassas have established strong socio-economic linkage with the society of Pakistan, as these institutions perform many social functions such as, providing free religious education to millions of students. However, there are various *madrassas* that have been able to indoctrinate the ideology of religious extremism among people in a manner that they justify their actions as Jihad. Many governments in Pakistan undertook the challenge of reforming the *madrassa* system, however their policies did not achieve the desired goals due to several obstacles. This study explores various impediments in the implementation of *madrassa* reforms. The study has utilized qualitative research methodology and main argument of the study is being developed on collection of secondary data from different articles, books, renowned journals, international and national newspapers, and published research work. The research concludes that *madrassa* reforms have not been implemented in their true sense because the problems lie at the part of both government and *madrassa* authorities. The government and the *madrassa* authorities remained rigid in their stance and refuse to find a common ground for dealing with the problem of religious extremism that has direct linkage with many seminaries. If the government and the religious authorities in Pakistan can overcome their differences, together through mutual efforts they can implement *madrassa* reforms as a measure to counter the rise of religious extremism in the country.

Keywords: *madrassa*, reforms, challenges, Pakistan, militancy, counter-religious extremism, sectarianism, seminaries, ullemas

Introduction

The *Madrassas* in Pakistan are the primary source of religious education, which are also considered by many as the custodians of the Islamic values and culture in the country. The ascendancy of the religious seminaries on the society of Pakistan cannot be denied, as they play an important role in the socio-religious

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activities of the country. The *ullemas* of Pakistan have been actively participating in the politics of the country since the time of independence. For example, *Deoband* teacher at *Dar-ul-Uloom* and leader of *Jamiat-ulama-e-Islami*, Allama Shabbir Ahmad Usmani inaugurated Pakistan's first Legislative Assembly and was the first person to hoist the flag of Pakistan (Ahmed & Rizvi, 2015). Prominent *ullemas* of *Madrassas*, namely Abdul Haq, Shah Ahmad Noorani, Muhammad Zakir, Abdul Hakim, Ghulam Ghos Hazarvi, Mufti Mahmood, Zafar Ahmad Ansari and Abdul Mustafa Azhari were present as guests, when the National Assembly was approving the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan (Muhammad , Butt, Ahmed , & Omer , 2012).

The *ullemas* have enjoyed certain dominance over the affairs of the state and therefore, on ideological grounds they have been able to shape a close relationship between religion and the country (Rana, 2009). Policies such as Islamization, expanded the influence of the *Madrassas*, as they were viewed to be significant tools of implementing Islamic agenda in the country. In the early 1980s, especially due to the external factors, some *Madrassas* radicalized, and the culture of violence was engendered in these seminaries during the Soviet-Afghan War (Ahmed Z. S., 2009). The number of *Madrassas* enormously increased during this time period. In 1980 there were 700 seminaries in Pakistan but few years later in 2000 the number rocketed to 20,000(Looney, 2003). *Madrassas* were established across the country with the primary purpose of training young students to fight in the Afghan War (Ashraf, 2012). A number of unregulated *Madrassas* became the well-springs of fundamentalists believes, who opposed to embrace the moderate means of education. In the years following 2001, these *Madrassas* promoted xenophobic traditions, predominantly for America (Khan & Khan , 2016). It was particularly due to this minority of *Madrassas* that the religious institution which was known for promoting harmony and unity in the society, was seen as the accelerator of sectarianism, violence and hate. Many *Madrassas* have been involved in sowing the seeds of violence, proliferating the extremist belief system, encouraging the growth of violent extremist organizations, and sectarianism. The attendees at these seminaries are prepared for taking violent actions, as they believe their actions will be serving the holy cause of *jihad*. They are socially programmed by either narrow or misinterpretation of ayahs from the Holy Quran.

The successive governments took measures to bring the unregulated *Madrassas* under the proper government channels and to curb the growth of militancy emanating from the radicalized *Madrassas*, various reforms were introduced. However, these reforms were not able to provide a successful

headway in reforming the *Madrassa* system. Reversing the trend of extremism from the society is not an overnight process, it requires in depth insight of the issue by the policy makers and scholars. This study is one such effort in this regard and tries to answer the following question:

What are the challenges that serve as obstacles in the implementation of *Madrassa* reforms in Pakistan?

Challenges in Implementing the *Madrassa* Reforms in Pakistan

There are certain challenges in the implementation of the *Madrassa* reforms in Pakistan, which are discussed as below.

a) Viewing Reformation of *Madrassas* as a Matter of National Security:

The policymakers in Pakistan have been looking at the problem of radicalized *Madrassas* solely with the lens of national security. The perception that in post-9/11 Pakistan, militancy is a consequence of the radicalized *Madrassas*, places the government reforms for *Madrassas* under the umbrella of national security (Yusuf M. , 2019). The problem of growing extremism, the spread of sectarianism and sectarian violence, and militancy has been seen by policymakers first as a challenge to national security and to a second degree a social ill. Although viewing the problem in the context of security issue is not without logic. Pakistan, in alliance with the United States in 1980, encouraged the religious seminaries to support jihad in Afghanistan (Mufti, 2012). The agenda to support the next-door neighbour was in line with the General Zia's program of Islamization, thus funds were directed to these centres of free religious education. Few *Madrassas* became a place for the sanctioned and unsanctioned actors (particularly militants) to thrive in Pakistan. It was not unnatural that a minority of the *Madrassas* got involved in militancy. In the 1990s, these minority *Madrassas* started radiating the signs of internal struggle (Iqbal & Raza, 2015). For instance, the growth of the sectarian hatred in the country. After September 2001, the *Madrassas* were seen as incubators of violence, therefore deeming them as a problem of national security.

When the "War on Terror," (WOT) began, the Western scholars eyed the issue of radicalized *Madrassas* from the counterterrorism standpoint (Vestenskov, 2018). The Musharraf government fixated the similar theme while trying to formulate the policies to address militancy. In the aftermath of the terrorist attack on Army Public School in 2014, the *Madrassa* reforms were included in the National Action Plan and the

National Internal Security Policy (NISP) of 2018 (Interior, 2018). Besides the international pressure on Pakistan to make more efforts on the fronts of counterterrorism (do more), the country also had to satisfy the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). The *Madrassas* that are responsible for militancy usually function on the aid from local and the foreign donors. In the local context, *Madrassas* receive huge sums of money in the form of zakat, charity, sponsorship from faith-based organizations that provide huge grants, rich people donations, whereas the foreign funding is pipelined through Muslims countries, mainly those in Middle East. The foreign funding is always agenda based, that is to promote pro-Saudi or anti-Iran narratives, i.e. a war of sects between Wahabism and Shia's (Looney, 2003).

Due to these factors, the *Madrassa* reforms are only dealt as problem of national security. Nonetheless, this narrative is too fixated as it stops the policymakers to find solutions that are long term and focus on the well-being of the *Madrassa* students. This security centric approach has resultantly marked out the entire sector of *Madrassas* to be promoting religious extremism and producing militants, whereas only a small minority of *Madrassas* is involved in militancy. Such perceptions have resulted in resentment among the religious leadership and the students of the *Madrassas*. The leaders of *Madrassas* in Pakistan have criticised the policies, because they believe that although a certain number of *Madrassas* may be involved in spread of religious extremism, but those *Madrassas* that have been providing the service of free religious education to the poorest children of the country are not given due credit or appreciation. They believe that government perceives *Madrassas* as a threat to national security, due to which they must resist any reformation program. Therefore, the implementation of the policies has not been efficacious to an extent of bringing significant change. The essential role of *Madrassas* in the society and important centres of religious education must not be overlooked by the government.

b) Trust Deficit between the Government and the *Ullemas*:

The second major reason why the reformation measures by the government have not been able to attain noteworthy achievements is the huge trust gap that exists between the clergy and the government. In the post 9/11 era, when Musharraf initiated the program of Enlightened Moderation, the *ullemas* viewed it as a tool of the foreign agents, who wanted to secularise the country (Amin & Lodhi,2015). The *ullemas*

believed that the government is funded by the American lobby that wishes to eradicate the Islamic values from the country. Therefore, the government under the pressure of external actors is enforcing the *Madrassa* reforms (Babakhel, 2015). The *Madrassa* reforms such as registering the seminaries, was seen as mechanism through which the state would gain the control of the *Madrassas* and intervene in their affairs. For example, the former Central General Secretary *Jammat-i-Islami*, Munawar Hassan, in an online interview to Asian times interpreted the Enlightened Moderation, as a mean to rid the country of its Islamic values and give up the Islamic traditions. He further added that Musharraf is attempting to secularise the religion. All this was done to satisfy the demands of the American masters, who are laying grounds for initiating a war between global Islam and global secularism (Shahzad, 2005).

The *Madrassa* Ordinance initiated by Musharraf was seen by the clergy as an attempt to drag Pakistan to transform into a secular country. Mufti Rafi Usmani, a prominent member of the Islamic Ideology Council and President Dar-ul-Uloom Karachi saw the attempts to transform *Madrassas* as a way of creating a “band of official ullemas”, i.e. group of *ullemas* controlled by state. He opposed such reforms, asserting that such measures would not be acceptable at any cost. The Enlightened Moderations was opposed by many other eminent religious scholars in Pakistan, which included Mufti Muneeb-ur-Rehman, Chairman of *Roet-e-Hilal Committee*, Qari Hanfi Jalundari, the Nazim Wifaqul Madaris and many more were a part of this opposition group (Fakhr-ul-Islam, 2009).

Due to the mistrust, the clergy has adopted a passive-aggressive approach towards the *Madrassa* reforms and have questioned the intentions of the state (Yusuf M. , 2019). The *Madrassa* authorities are sceptical of the reforms also because they argue that the government’s stance of *Madrassas* being linked with extremism and terrorism is identical to the Western narrative. Therefore, the reforms face harsh denunciation from the clergy and labelled as Western agenda. If the government and clergy are able to bridge the trust gap, the dominant religious players and institutions can facilitate the government in countering the violent religious extremism by lending the state led reforms credibility, that are otherwise labelled as “secular,” “liberal,” “American,” or “Western”. The efforts taken by the state to reform the *Madrassa* system have not focused on cultivating trust between the two institutions, and a relation based on mutual trust. Instead of building trust, government has adopted at times hard measures, such as banning some *Madrassas* completely. Approaches

like this create impediments and strain the relationship between state and the clergy, hence being counter-productive. A careful and patient approach is necessary for building trust, if the policies led by the state ought to have a long-term effect.

c) Lack of Cooperation:

The lack of cooperation is a challenge present at the end of *Madrassa* authority as well as at the part of government. The difference of narrative and rigid mindset bars the parties to reach a solution that is acceptable and can help achieving the goals of the *Madrassa* reforms. Firstly, the government has refused and has not launched any mechanism that accredits the *Madrassa* education certificates as equivalent to the modern education degrees (Bashir & Haq , 2019). The *Madrassa* education operates are four different levels. Each level spans for two years. The first level is called *ShahadatulSanviaAama*. It is equal to completing ten years of education or matric in a conventional modern school. The second level is termed as *Shahadatul Sanvia Khasa*. It is equal to the two year of conventional college, also known as intermediate or twelfth grade. *Shahadatul Alia* is the third tier of the education at *Madrassa*. This level is equal to the two-year bachelor's degree of college. None of these three levels of education are recognized or certified by the Government of Pakistan. However, the only degree recognized by the government is the fourth level, *Shahadatul Almiya*. This is equivalent as education of 16 years, but the condition of equivalency is only valid when the degree holder is applying to get admission in a graduate school or for securing a work position in an area of religious affairs. Nevertheless, if the holders of the degree *Shahadatul Almiya* want to apply for a profession other than teaching, it is mandatory for them to qualify two elective subjects other than Arabic and Islamic studies, at the bachelor's level (B.A) from a recognized university(Commission, 2019).

The degree of *Madrassa* students not being recognised by the government and education ministry has become a major bone of contention between the state authorities and the clergy. They criticise the duality of the government policies, recognition is given to the students who appear in O/A Levels exam, (British Graduate Certification Exam), but the *Madrassa* students are deprived from the same facility. On this issue, the government holds the stance that the degree of *Madrassa* students will be given recognition when the *Madrassa* curriculum involves the modern subjects such as mathematics, science, social studies, computer science,

physics, etc. This is the point where the *Madrassa* authorities adopt a rigid approach. Mostly *Madrassas* operate on the curriculum called *Dars-i-Nizami*. The name of Pakistan's *Madrassa* curriculum is derived from Indian curriculum expert, Maulana Nazimuddin Muhammad (Zaman,1999). Under this curriculum, 54 subjects are taught to the subjects over the time period of 8 years, which include 16 subjects related to Arabic grammar and literature. Unfortunately, no attention is given to making students proficient in modern languages such as English and Urdu, because Arabic outnumbers all other subjects in the curriculum. At the time, when *Dars-i-Nizami* was introduced, the subjects and course might be suitable according to the time, but in the present era, it is essential that the *Madrassas* incorporate modern subjects for the students. To deal with the issues of quality of education given at *Madrassas*, five independent *Wafaqs* were set up to oversee the working of the *Madrassas*, hold examination and design the curriculum(Vestenskov, 2018). The five boards work in accordance to their school of thought.

Despite these *Madrassa* boards, the curriculum taught in *Madrassa* remains unchanged from decades, and the authorities refuse to incorporate the modern subjects as a part of the syllabus. Different school of thoughts have different or opposing views, which dictates their curriculum, therefore, a standardized syllabus for *Madrassas* is one of the hardest challenges faced by the government. Hence, the lack of cooperation at the part of both parties makes it difficult to implement policies that can address the *Madrassa* challenge of the present age. The *Madrassa* leadership has been resisting the change, especially of incorporating the modern-day subjects, because they believe *Madrassas* to be a centre of religious education solely, and it is not the place to attain progressive education(Shaukat, 2016). The *Madrassa* syllabus is totally religious dominated. It is perceived by the *ullemas* that if the modern subjects are taught at *Madrassas*, it would take away the essence and real identity of this religious educational institution. Moreover, the education quality at *Madrassas* is no different than the government schools, as they also rely on rote memorisation and brush off the need for developing critical thinking skills.

d) The Complex System of *Madrassa* Education:

The *Madrassas* in Pakistan are a fragmented socio-educational institution, which vary in their formal structure, resources, degree programs and the quality of service they provide to the students(Bashir & Haq , 2019). In

Pakistan the *Madrassa's* have been divided on the sectarian lines and most of them belong to Sunni of Islam(Rehman, 2007). Later in 1950's *Wafaq's* i.e. *Madrassa* network association for each sect was established that represented each sect to which the *Madrassas* belong separately. Presently five independent *wafaqs* of *Madrassas* are operating in Pakistan, which are *Ahl-e-Hadith*, *Barelvi*, *Deobandi* and *Jamaat-e-Islami* (all four of these are *Madrassas* that fall under the orientation of Sunni sect), while the last one is in charge of supervising the Shia sect *Madrassas*. *Madrassas* of Pakistan do not only serve the society as institutes of religious education, but the underprivileged and the orphans are given shelter, where they have access to free food, education and lodging(Zia-ur-Rehman, 2019). Such services provided by the *Madrassas* have helped them in expanding their influence in the society. Some students join is for gaining religious education but for others it is the only source of education owing to their financial constraints. Therefore, in Pakistan, *Madrassas* are not only conceived by the society as religious educational centres but place of social welfare.

Brining change or transforming the system of *Madrassas* is thus often seen as a threat that may dismantle the social welfare provided to the poor children in the society or as a threat that the authorities will bring change to the structure of *Madrassas* to inculcate western values instead of Islamic values system. Majority of the population of Pakistan is comprised of Muslims, and they want their children to gain religious education, even if they belong from a liberal segment of the society. The government or private schools provide with the very basic religious education, and do not engender the basic fundamental values of Islam. Considering the values and sentiments of people attached with the religion and seminaries, it will not be surprising that the clergy is able to extend their influence on the society that eventually leads to a growth in the number of *Madrassas*.

e) The Lack of Political Will and Adequate Resources:

Most of the efforts taken by the government to reform the *Madrassas* are half hearted efforts, or the policy makers have not analysed the problems at hand in depth. For the reforms to be long lasting, it is crucial to understand the roots causes and addressing the grievances. The government has generally ignored the reasons why parents send their children to attend the religious seminaries and why the youth is being radicalised. There are many social problems present in the society, mainly

growing poverty, inflation, and unemployment. These factors often dictate the choices of parents, especially those residing in the remote areas. Families that have very little financial resources but do wish for their children to acquire knowledge are the ones that mostly send their children to *Madrassas*, because they have no choice as a *Madrassa* will provide free education, food and lodging services (Andrabi, Das, Khawaja, & Zajonc, 2006). A setup like this reduces the burden of upbringing a child on the family. Nevertheless, on the other hand, such extreme poverty also creates opportunities for the violent extremist organizations to recruit people, especially young boys.

Moreover, due to the lack of awareness among the people and distance from the know-how of the 21st century challenges faced by a country, they are intimidated by the doctrines and teachings of the violent extremist leaders. It is right to say that most of the reforms that the government tries to implement are without understanding the cultural context, and social problems. The decision makers must view the challenge of radicalised *Madrassas* as a matter of educational reform rather than a threat to the nation. Such an outlook towards *Madrassa* students gives them the feeling of being marginalised from the mainstream state structure. For years, the government has only devised new policies and structures for reforming the *Madrassas*. Unfortunately, they have lacked a proper roadmap to achieve their targets. An important reason why government faces this challenge is that although the *Madrassa* leadership is taken on board, but they are not given the independence of choosing a pathway to fight the contemporary challenges.

f) Resisting Change for Vested Interests:

The *ullemas* of the *Madrassas* have been opposing changes due to their own vested interests. The *Madrassas* derive specific power and influence in the society, especially over a special sect, and the sentiments of the people are closely attached to them. They have the power of mass mobilization against the government, and state institutions. *Ullemas*, enjoy significant domination in the socio-political matters of the country. If the *Madrassas* are registered, the seminaries will have to account and document the flow of money. The *Madrassas* fear losing the monopoly if they are registered, because then the control of the government would increase over the religious education sector. Thus, they have been out rightly resisting the government led *Madrassa* reforms (Johnston, McDonnell, Burbridge, & Patton, 2016). The clergy views the

independence of *Madrassa* from the state authority as their most crucial tool that helps them retain their control over the society and therefore, they resist any change or step taken by the government to reform *Madrassas*, be it the initiative towards changing the curriculum or managing the financial matters of seminaries through legal channels. To bring any significant reformation in the *Madrassa* system for the purpose of eradicating the menace of religious extremism it is important that the leaders of *Madrassas* step forward and cooperate instead of forming an alliance against the efforts of government.

Role Played by the Religious Conservative Actors in the Society

From the challenges mentioned above, it is evident that the religious conservative actors in the country can play a very vital role if any change must be brought, be it as actors driving religious extremism in the society or as actors playing their role in eradicating the social evil of violent religious extremism. It is also important to understand for the decision makers in Pakistan that collaboration with the religious conservative actors is a crucial requisite for efficaciously fighting against the religious extremist ideologies in the country. The indispensable reality that has to be understood by the lawmakers and those who wish to incorporate changes to reform the *Madrassas* is the vital role that clergy plays in when accessing the masses, especially those who belong to a vulnerable segment of the society. They have the power to provide legitimacy or credibility to the efforts of the government in regards of reforming the *Madrassa* education system or they can simply discard the initiatives as a liberal Western agenda. Legitimacy to ideas such as these, which involve religion is a precious commodity, and the general population has remained unconvinced of the governments step for “countering religious extremism.” But not all the religious actors have the credibility to influence or shape the mind of population belonging to different sects. For example, Dr Tahir-ul-Qadri, although a well-known religious scholar, does not possess enough legitimacy among the communities that belong to *Ahl-e-Hadith* or *Deobandi* sects. Extremists that are born in the society are usually a part of conservative communities, therefore, it is imperative to recognize those religious actors in the conservative communities that call for the practice of Islamic values, without promoting violence in the society.

Conclusion

These problems do pose a challenge to a peace and stability of the country making it a matter of national security, but to address the root causes of these ills have never been on the agenda of the leaders in charge of the state affairs. To find

an apt solution of such a complex problem, that involves many sensitivities, it is imperative for the decision makers to frame the problem in different dimensions. Unfortunately, while making the policies to reform *Madrassas*, the leaders overlook why a huge number of students attend these religious schools. Most importantly, for a very long time the delayed and lagging process of registration of *Madrassas* in the country has given an unprecedented rise to the number of religious seminaries. Many *Madrassas* have either turned into ghost religious institutions, where a good number of students are gaining education, but at the same time they are also being radicalized. The increasingly rigid sectarian divisions and contradictory ideologies of different sects, that identifies other groups as “infidels” or their sect as the true representation of Islam, has stalled the efforts of government. It is imperative that in such complex environment, with many intricacies at societal as well as political level the government must remain well-intentioned and consistent in the goal of reforming the complex *Madrassa* education system, to eradicate the malice of religious extremism and radicalization.

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