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Author: Malik, Jamal

Title: "Traditional Islamic Learning and Reform in Pakistan"

Published in: ISIM newsletter / International Institute for the Study of Islam in  
the Modern World.

Leiden: ISIM

Volume: 10

Year: 2002

Pages: 20 – 21

ISSN: 1871-4374

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South Asia

JAMAL MALIK

**Considerable criticism has been directed towards traditional Islamic educational institutions, the madrasas, as breeding grounds of militant Islam and training camps for jihad. The powerful perception of the supposedly unilateral inter-relatedness between these religious schools and jihad, between mullahs and violence, produced and perpetuated fear in the public mind in the West. As a result, the relationship between state power and civil rights has been subjected to very severe restrictions in countries like Pakistan – and without major reactions from the public. This has enabled governments to push through restrictive policies in an unprecedented way.**

Efforts in Pakistan and other Muslim countries to streamline madrasas into the national educational systems are not new, but they are now seen as a part of the global war on terrorism. Also in secular India, the approximately 100,000 madrasas have become subject to scrutiny and suspicion. It is evident that the majority of Muslims do not regard the madrasa as a terrorist institution. They believe it fulfils the needs of religious education. It is therefore unsatisfactory and indeed too simplistic to equate madrasas with terrorism, as becomes evident in General Musharraf's historic speech of 12 January 2002 in which he indulges in a rather sweeping 'othering' of the ulama, reminiscent of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century topos of the mad mullah. Even if the General appreciates religious schools as excellent welfare and educational organizations, better even than services offered by NGOs, he clearly revealed that he is influenced by the notion that religious scholars are narrow-minded and propagate hatred. The country's future, he postulated, was to be not a theocratic state but an Islamic welfare state, not marginalization but modernization, not traditionalism but reform.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century – in the wake of colonial penetration – with the introduction of new systems of education, the madrasa lost its function as a general training institute and turned into an institution exclusively for religious learning. While some groups made use of Islamic symbolism to mobilize against colonial power, other Indian Muslims tried to change, reform or conserve it, as a means to counter colonialism. Various Sunnite schools of thought emerged, such as the Deobandis, the Barelwis, and the Ahle Hadith. They appealed to specific social groups and were tied to particular regions, and thereby added to the religious and societal complexity of South Asia. Yet another movement, the modernist Aligarh school, tried to Anglicize the Muslim educational system, but this was contested by the Council of Religious Scholars (Nadwa al-Ulama), which aimed at an integration of religious and secular education.

These various reforms, however different they may have been, were thought to be achievable only through 'modernization'. It was in this context, that modernity came to be regarded as the opposite of tradition and thus determined the fate of Muslim education. Religious institutions that did not subscribe to this development were marginalized politically and culturally but continued to provide knowledge to the majority of Muslims. This led to a dramatic societal split. It was only the recent wave of Islamization that has given the madrasa new life. While after 1947, in India, these schools were left more or less untouched by the secular state, in Pakistan, as in many other Muslim countries, the situation was quite different: political leaders have always been interested in bringing the madrasas into the mainstream national system of education in order to try to curb autonomy.

State encroachments in Pakistan became prominent fairly early, with Ayyub Khan's nationalization of religious endowments and schools during the 1960s. A first survey of religious schools was undertaken, discussing their histories, affiliations and locations and the numbers of religious students and teachers in what was then West Pakistan. Their institutional affiliation to state machinery was to be paralleled by curricular reforms which, however, aroused opposition among the representatives of religion. They therefore established umbrella organizations for religious schools – just prior to the proclamation of the 'West Pakistan Waqf Property Ordinance 1961'. The main tasks of these umbrella organizations were to reform and to standardize their educational system, and of course, to counter state power collectively.

During Z.A. Bhutto's time Islamic scholars were able to negotiate some concessions, but it was with the advent of so-called Islamization in the late 1970s, that state activities touching on traditional institutions in general and centres of Islamic learning in particular took increasing effect, although most of them had been pushed to the margins of the political process before the advent of Zia al-Haq's Islamization policy, when they regained significance partly as an alternative educational system.

The Islamization policy in Pakistan has resulted in a new dimension of curricular reform and has ushered in a new phase of institutionalization. For the first time the degrees of religious schools were put on a par with those of the formal education system and recognized by the University Grants Commission. This recognition was based on certain conditions: the students were now supposed to be taught a modernized syllabus lasting sixteen years, which meant that the religious scholars would have to follow the suggestions of the National Committee on Religious Schools established in 1979.<sup>1</sup> The report of the Committee suggested making

*concrete and feasible measures for improving and developing Deeni-Madrassahs along sound lines, in terms of physical facilities, curricula and syllabi, staff and equipment [...] so as to bring education and training at such Madrassahs in consonance with the requirements of modern age and the basic tenets of Islam [...] to expand higher education and employment opportunities for the students of the Madrassahs [...] integrating them with the overall educational system in the country.* (my emphasis)

The idea of this reformed Islam stood in contrast to the concepts of most of the ulama, however. These suggestions provoked considerable reaction, but with the insistent pressure of the government and its support – i.e. through zakat money, as we shall see – and with the equating of their degrees with those of national universities in 1981/82, the ulama became more and more convinced of the potentially positive consequences of this policy for them. They did adapt the curriculum by merely adding subjects from the formal primary education system to their own syllabus, and Arabic instead of English was used on the certificates.

The ulama showed their ability to gain official recognition by effecting minor changes, and they were gradually able to exercise more influence on the government. Theoretically, these degrees, once recognized, were to open up economic mobility and possibilities of promotion for the graduates. However, there was no consideration of how and where the now officially examined armies of mullahs would be integrated into the job market. This short-sighted planning soon resulted in considerable problems.

### Stemming the tide

Parallel to these administrative and curricular reform measures, the economic situation of religious schools was changed and, indeed, improved by means of money disbursed through the central and provincial zakat funds set up by the government in 1980: ten per cent of the alms collected from current accounts through zakat-deducting agencies go to religious education if curricular reform and political loyalty are observed. These additional financial resources enhanced the budgets of religious schools considerably, comprising up to one-third of their annual income, and were exclusively at the disposal of the rectors of the schools, e.g. the ulama. This certainly created new expectations and new patterns of consumption.

As a result of these changes, a new dimension of mobility of these scholars and their centres of learning can be discerned. One is tempted to speak of an expanding indigenous infrastructure which in the early 1990s already had far-reaching consequences: firstly, the prospect of zakat grants resulted in a mushrooming of madrasas, mostly in rural areas. In response, the government has introduced various measures to try to stem the tide, but this has only resulted in new problems. Secondly, the number of the graduates of higher religious schools – not to speak of students in religious schools in general – is constantly on the rise, as these institutions now also offer formal primary education with officially recognized degrees. Thirdly, the Islamization policy brought in a new phase of institutionalization among umbrella organizations, so that the number of affiliated schools has increased tremendously. Fourthly, the data available on religious schools also shed light on their spatial distribution and the social and regional background of their students: Deobandis in the North Western Frontier Province and Baluchistan, where tribal society prevails, as well as parts of Punjab and Sindh; Barelwis in rural areas of Sindh and Punjab, where the cult of holy men is most popular; Shi'ites in Northern Areas and in some districts of the Punjab dominated by folk religion; Ahle Hadith in commercial centres and important internal markets; and Jama'at-e Islami primarily in urban and politically sensitive areas that seemed to have attracted a number of radical groups from various regions outside Pakistan. Thus, each school of thought has its own reserved area, be it tribal, rural, urban, trade oriented or even strategic.

In the wake of the formalization and reform of religious schools, an increasing trans-provincial north-south migration from rural to urban areas can be observed, a sign

of the degree of spatial mobility of the young religious scholars. Students from specific regions then look for schools and teachers that comply with their cultural perceptions and ethnic affiliations and the search for corresponding institutions that create identity-giving sub-structures in an urban environment which may otherwise be perceived as alien and even hostile. The migrant scholars-to-be gather in the metropolis and potentially contribute to conflicts that are often religiously and ethnically motivated. The fact that the number of religious schools and their students has grown spectacularly in urban, and even more in rural areas also suggests that not only cities have become locations of increasing conflict: the hinterland has also been increasingly drawn into the sphere of religiously legitimized battles. Thus, the Islamization policy has promoted the institutionalization of different groups, but has fostered their politicization and even radicalization. And since contemporary regimes are not able or willing to integrate ulama in a productive way, their increasing marginalization is the result.

The increasing number of young theologians, with degrees equivalent to an M.A. in Arabic/Islam Studies, are faced with government reform measures that lack plans for dealing with the labour market. The promised Islamization and improved literacy of the country has not translated into jobs for the ulama; on the contrary, the lack of proper measures comprises a potential source of conflict. The American advisor on religious education made the following criticism: 'Reservations were voiced by various officials of the provincial Departments of Education about recruiting "Maulanas" for the schools on the suspicion that they would divide the students on the basis of their own preferences for a particular "Maktab-i-Fikr".' He hastened to add that 'these suspicions, however, were proved in the field to be ill-founded. Such suspicions should never be allowed to affect the making of educational policy at any level.'<sup>2</sup>

It is only as teachers of Arabic, having been promoted since 1979, that some young scholars have found jobs. These courses, however, targeted Pakistanis going to work in the Middle East, and so were motivated primarily by pragmatic financial considerations. On a different front, the military, against the background of the cold war, has been encouraging the recruitment of religious scholars since 1983 – with foreign aid. In the medium term, this has led to new values and structures in the army, especially at junior levels of command.

### Danger of expectations

With the official support of religious scholars in the 1980s and even in the 1990s, the political strength of representatives of this section of Islamic traditionalism has increased unmistakably. Thus, the Islamization policy – or better the politics of de-traditionalization – has ultimately forced the politically dominant sector to rethink its own position. The centre may be pushed onto the political defensive, a position from which it could extricate itself only by violence, and with increasing alienation from the rest of the society. This danger exists

# Learning in Pakistan

**Pakistani students study English at a Peshawar madrasa.**

especially when indigenous social and educational structures, such as endowments, alms and religious schools, still existent and mostly functioning, cannot be adequately replaced and thousands of unemployed mullahs who have access to the masses are not successfully integrated.

The raised expectations have pushed many graduates of religious schools into the hands of different players: their role in the cold war in Afghanistan, when they were exploited by certain groups and governments; their role in post cold-war Afghanistan, when once again, they were caught up in power politics supported by different secret services; and now in the post-Taliban era, when some of them have taken sides with terrorist groups.

The rhetoric of Islamic symbolism and jihad has shown that it can be effectively used as a means of self-defence against foreign encroachments, and there has been constantly increasing pressure on the state by religious elements. The Council of Islamic Ideology set up in the 1960s, and the Pakistani Federal Ministry of Religious Affairs, should not therefore be blamed for issuing outrageous Islamic proposals. Similarly, the failure to reform either the Blasphemy Law in 1994 and 2001, or the madrasas in 1995 is simply a reflection of the aggressive mood of the clergy and Islamists, based on what has been called 'paranoid Islam'. In May 2000, Islamic parties were powerful enough to demand several Islamic provisions, some of them met instantly by the government. But in order to increase control over the clergy, the current regime came up with yet another madrasa reform proposal in August 2001.

General Musharraf called for a peaceful 'Sunnatization' of life-worlds, referring to Islamic mysticism and prohibiting madrasa students from going for divine force. The reconstruction of tradition ought to serve to raise the madrasa and bring it to a level with the mainstream. The major task seems to be to open up the job market for the graduates. Similarly, mosques should be reformed in order to guarantee a secular and modernized society, otherwise Pakistan will be marginalized – and radicalized. This policy clearly aims at controlling some 20,000 madrasas with approximately 3 million students, and more than 50,000 mosques – a solid power-structure.

The control of the clergy seems to be even more important since there has traditionally been a movement across the borders of Pakistan with Afghanistan, India and Kashmir. This is especially true of ethnic groups such as Pashtuns in Pakistan, who outnumber their fellow Pashtuns in Afghanistan, and are linked by family networks, commercial connections, and religio-political solidarity. Hence, despite the Pakistan government's recent strict policy against foreign students, Afghan students of religious schools have vowed to continue their education in Pakistan.

## Effects of the reforms

The reforms envisaged by the state have produced an imbalance that has resulted in a variety of problems, some of which were temporarily alleviated through jihad in Afghanistan. In the wake of these developments, several different branches of Islamic learning and madrasas have emerged. We need to distinguish: firstly, students of reli-

gious schools in general; secondly, mujahidin or freedom fighters; thirdly, Taliban; and fourthly, *jihadi* groups.

As far as the first category is concerned, they have been subjected to several reforms from within and from without, but have played a quietist role. Because of traditional ties with Afghanistan and other neighbouring countries and as a result of the use of jihad rhetoric, some of them were used as foot-soldiers in the cold war. This is the second group – the mujahidin. In order to keep this group under control and to maintain a

Pakistan Day and the propagation of jihad in textbooks even in formal schools<sup>3</sup> and daily on television for the cause of Kashmir are cases in point.

This state-promoted violence and hatred from childhood onwards might be part of the painful nation-building process and search for ideology, but it certainly fails to instil tolerance and acceptance of plurality in the students. The alarming increase in kidnapping for ransom in the cities as well as in rural areas, the killing of whole families by senior family members because of lack of material resources are causes of major concern.

## Concluding remarks

In this scenario religious schools provide at least space for some kind of education and survival, and what is more important, they use the variety of religious repertoires to make sense of the predicaments people are facing in a highly fragmented society. The growing presence and visibility of religious power in the public sphere shows this struggle between neo-colonial élites – mostly the military that has been ruling in Muslim countries – and religious scholars who have been exploited in different quarters but have constantly been denied their share, very dramatically. In the face of these developments the making of an epitomizing prophet is easy: the 'ladinist' saviour, who would lead the campaign against suppression. It should be noted that the basis of this Islamically tuned radicalism still has a very secular basis: social conflict, poverty, suppression. The basis is not the Qur'an, but social reality, which is put into an Islamic symbolism. Formerly, violence and terror were legitimized in nationalistic terms; today use is made of the Islamic repertoire, not because this violence is or has become Islamic or religious, but because the political discourse has shifted.

The latest crack-down policy can hardly diminish the significance and power of these groups, because they reflect systemic problems. Unless these problems (e.g. material conditions of the common people and regional conflicts) are tackled, these groups will start operating under different names, change their modus operandi or move their operations elsewhere, making use of trans-Islamic networks. As a popular diviner has opined, a reaction was brewing: 'This government is paving the way for Islamic revolution by creating hurdles for the Islamic parties.' He hastened to add that '[t]here may not be instant reaction but they will respond once the dust is settled [...]. We are just watching the situation but the silence will not last for long. [...] The timing of this announcement by the president [e.g. crack-down, J.M.] has raised suspicion in the minds of religious people. It is being done under U.S. pressure.' And he asked: 'If they were terrorist groups, then why were they allowed to operate for such a long time?'<sup>4</sup>

The criminalization of the ulama therefore seems not to be an option. In a country that is heavily under their socio-cultural and religious influence, a dialogue of bullets is a dead end. Instead, it is more important to integrate these sections of society properly in order to prevent a cold war before it gets too hot and becomes a war that no one can handle.

## Notes

1. See Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Religious Affairs, *Riport qaumi kamiti bara-ye dini madaris Pakistan* (Islamabad, 1979).
2. Yusuf Talal Ali, draft chapter on 'Islamic Education for Inclusion in the Report of the President's Task Force on Education' (Islamabad, 1982, mimeo), 6.
3. 'Textbooks and the Jihadi Mindset', *DAWN*, 12 February 2002.
4. *The News*, 15 January 2002, 11.

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