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Foreign, Political and Financial Influences on Religious Extremism: A Study of Madrassas in Punjab, Pakistan

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This paper examines multiple factors related to foreign, political and financial influences on madrassa education in Pakistan and the extent of religious extremism in these madrassas. It is based on surveys carried out in nine districts of the Punjab province among madrassa students, their parents and teachers. The study found that some madrassas were propagating extremism, and were subjected to foreign and political influences.[1]

Introduction

In Pakistan, government and legislators believe some of the madrassas have close ties with radical, sectarian, militant, and political groups in and outside the country. These links encourage the students and administration of these madrassas to play an active political role. The madrassas are also financially vulnerable, leading them to accept funds from international and domestic political groups allegedly in return for pursuing policies, which may not necessarily be in the interest of the country.

This paper studies the relationship of the madrassas in Pakistan with various political groups, their local and foreign funding sources, and the impact of poverty on student enrollment. The study has relied on internationally published reports and quantitative data collected from over one hundred madrassas in nine districts of Punjab through questionnaires.

Divided into five sections, the first two sections of this paper examine the nature of the problem, and the radicalisation of madrassas in recent history. The third section reviews the literature on madrassa education in Pakistan and the factors influencing the extremist behavior of some madrassa students. The fourth and final section discusses the madrassa education system and major findings of a survey conducted in Punjab, Pakistan's most populous state with over 110 million people.

Nature of the Problem

Religious extremism in Pakistan started off as non-violent puritanism before gradually becoming 'distinctively violent extremism':

> "The long history and evolution of sectarianism and religious extremism in Pakistan has been well documented and analysed, especially the process of politicisation and militarisation of religious groups."

Pakistani government and critics of the madrassa system claim that the madrassas affiliated with militant outfits invite militant commanders to visit madrassas and approach students for recruitment. Further, it is alleged that leaders of sectarian outfits instigate students against other sects through provocative speeches and distribution of hate literature.

Similarly, anti-western political views can also provoke madrassa students to join global militant organisations or start agitation against their own governments. This leads us to explore the political and monetary-based influences on these madrassas which have

[1] [1] This is an abridged version of a longer draft of over 12,100 words. Only relevant parts of the survey carried out in Punjab are reflected. Moreover, the finding findings and views expressed in this article are the outcome of author's own research and do not reflect the position of the International Centre for Political and Terrorism Research (ICPVR).

damaged the socio-cultural fabric of the country.

Historical Context

In Pakistan, the madrassas offer affordable religious education to the poor sections of society who cannot afford mainstream education. Historically, the madrassas were centers of excellence for Islamic learning, producing many great figures and personalities. It can be argued that today they are having a conservative impact upon the society. Some go further to allege that madrassas are producing a religious class of violent extremists in Pakistan and abroad. A review of developments in the last few decades would shed light on the radicalisation of segments of society in Pakistan.

Russian Intervention in Afghanistan

With the Russian intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, Afghanistan emerged as the final battleground of the Cold War between the United States and Russia. With the help of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, the US promoted jihadist proxies (the so-called Afghan Mujahideen) to defeat the Russian forces in Afghanistan. Following the defeat and withdrawal of Russia from Afghanistan in 1989, the militant groups, drawn primarily from the Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith schools of thought, took to 'cleansing' the country of 'infidel Shias' in Pakistan. The Afghan 'Jihad' gave a new dimension to the Sunni-Shia conflict in Pakistan with the injection of violence into it.[2]

Islamic Revolution of Iran (1979)

Sunni-Shia rivalry entered a new phase following the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran which recognised the Shia faith as the official state religion. Fears that Iran would export Shi'ism to other countries led to renewed rivalry to seek greater influence in the Middle East and beyond.[3] The eight year Iran-Iraq war that ensued became the basis for Saudi-Iran competition along sectarian lines.

Pakistan— A Battle Field for Sectarian Proxy-war

Following the Russian retreat from Afghanistan, civil war broke out. The negative spillover of the Afghan war adversely affected religious harmony in Pakistan by sowing seeds of hatred and violence.[4]

General Zia-ul-Haq, President from 1978 to 1988, politicised the Pakistani madrassas along sectarian lines and used them for fighting the Afghan jihad (Tariq, 2011).[5] This development left madrassas vulnerable to external exploitation for political and other purposes.

For a long time, various Pakistani governments have made efforts to reform the madrassa system in Pakistan without much avail due to weak political will, and poor policy planning and execution (Shabir *et. al* 2012).[6]

Arguably, in the absence of basic social and welfare services to the masses by various Pakistani governments, madrassas and militant religious groups emerged as the alternative suppliers of these services. This enabled these groups to gain a devout political following as well as coercive power.[7]

Review of Literature on Madrassas

Most authors focused on one or two issues relating to madrassa enrolment, political affiliations and foreign funding. In Pakistan, it

[2] Murphy, Eamon and Malik, A. "Pakistan Jihad: The Making Of Religious Terrorism," *Islamabad Policy Research Institute Journal* 9(2) (2009): 23.

[3] Department of State, Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, *2005 Report on International Religious Freedom,* 2005, Washington, DC.

[4] Naseem Razi, "Theological Extremism and its Effects: Pakistan Perspective," *Journal of Social Science for Policy Implications* 2, no. 4(2014):59-72

[5] Malik, Mohammad Tariq, "The Rise And Impact Of Islamic Fundamentalism In Pakistan After The Soviet Invasion In Afghanistan With Special Reference To KPK And Baluchistan," *Baluchistan Review* 24, no.1 (2011): 1–13

[6] Ghulam Shabir, Muhammad Usman and Amant Khan, "Reforming the Madrassah System." *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences 32, no.*1 (2012): 147–156.

[7] Andreas Freytag, Jens Kruger, Daniel Meierrieks and Friedrich Schneider, "The Origins Of Terrorism: Cross-Country Estimates Of Socio-Economic Determinants Of Terrorism," *European Journal of Political* Economy 27, no 1 (2011): 5–16.

is perceived that a good number of students are enrolled in madrassas due to the unaffordability of modern education and for religious reasons. Madrassas are known to offer free education, food and lodging.

The madrassas are also related to some religious-political parties and their leadership in one form or the other. A survey study by Pak Institute for Peace Studies, a private think-tank, conducted in 2008, indicated that most madrassas in Pakistan have some form of political affiliation. The study showed that the Deobandi and Jamat-e-Islami (JI) madrassas were more inclined towards politics than others. Though most madrassa boards discourage madrassas' association with politics, some madrassas defy this rule and openly affiliate themselves with religious-political parties.[8]

On the issue of funding, a report of the Special Branch of Police notes that the government's funding for madrassas is negligible in contrast to private funds. According to Pakistan's Interior Ministry, 147 madrassas in Punjab received funds from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, UAE, Kuwait, and Iraq. Most of these madrassas belong to Deobandi and the Ahl-e-Hadith schools of thought. Iran in turn financed the Shi'ites madrassas in Pakistan.[9] In return for foreign funding, these madrassas promote the ideology of the financing country along sectarian lines.

Stan Crock, the Business Week commentator criticized the foreign interventions in Pakistan in these words:

> "Politics played a major role in financing these schools. And nowhere has the growth of madrassas been more of an issue than in Pakistan. Saudi Arabia and Gulf States with majority Sunni populations wanted Pakistan to serve as a buffer against the *Shiites* who had come to power in Iran in the late 1970s. So, they bankrolled madrassas in Pakistan. The Saudis exported Wahhabism, a particularly rigid expression of the Islamic faith that relies on strict interpretation of the Koran. But while religion plays an important role in the schools, jihadism by and large doesn't"[10].

Pakistan's Madrassa Education

The number of madrassas has increased sharply since Pakistan's creation in 1947. The number has risen from 245 madrassas to 13,405 as at 2013-2014. According to Pakistan educational statistics, 393 (3%) madrassas were in the public sector while 13,012 (97%) were in the private sector. The total enrolment in madrassas was 1.83 million -- 0.05 million (3%) in the public sector and 1.78 million (97%) in the private sector. 1.14 million (62%) of the students were males and 0.69 million (38%) females. The number of teachers were 58,600, of which 1,800 (3%) were in the public sector and 56,800 (97%) in the private sector. Around 45,000 (77%) of the teachers were male while 13,000 (23%) were female.

Not all madrassas in Pakistan are government-registered. Most of them are affiliated with their respective Islamic madrassa boards (Wafaq) in accordance with the different school of thoughts viz. Deobandi, Deobandi (Jamat-i-Islami), Ahl-e-Sunnat (Barelvi), Ahl-e-Hadith and Shiites.[11]

Madrassa Curriculum

The duration of the religious course called the *'Dars e Nizami"* taught in the madrassas spans over seven years, where students are taught Islamic foundational subjects and advanced courses as well as Arabic language courses. Madrassa education has attracted criticism for adopting outdated educational techniques (rote memorization), and having a distinct curriculum that produces individuals

[8] Mohammad Amir Rana, "Mapping The Madrassa Mindset: Political Attitudes Of Pakistani Madaris." *Conflict and Peace Studies 2, no*.1 (2009): 1–13

[9] Raoof Kalasra (15-12-2015), Khaber se khaber tak. *News program*. Punjab, Pakistan: ARY

[10] Stan Crock, "Korans, Not Kalashnikovs at Madrassas," *Bloomberg,* October 27, 2004, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2004-10-26/korans-not-kalashnikovs-at-madrassas

[11] "EFA Global Monitoring Report: Reaching The Marginalized." *UNESCO*, 2010. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001866/186606e.pdf (accessed on July 27, 2013.)

who are neither skillful nor equipped for the modern workforce.[12]

Some researchers claim that, beyond instructions in basic religious beliefs, only a small group of radicalised madrassas are presenting a radical form of Islam, specifically those situated on the Pak-Afghan border.

Worldview and Career opportunities

The attitudes of madrassa graduates differ from those coming from universities and colleges. Madrassa graduates have their own specific approaches to different issues as compared to graduates of mainstream education.[13] A literature review indicates that students from Shi'ites and Ahl-e-Sunnat (Barelvi) madrassas are relatively less motivated towards extremist ideologies than that of Ahl-e-Hadith, Deobandi School and Jamat-e-Islami madrassas.[14]

The restricted nature of religious education limit the employment prospects of madrassa students to the religious sectors where they could be employed as "Imam Masjid (prayer-leader)", "Naib Imam (deputy prayer leader)", "Moa'zan (Mosque Attendant)" and preachers.[15] The lack of a career-oriented education and the stiff competition for limited employment opportunities render them vulnerable to exploitation. Various religious-political parties provide free transportation and food to madrassa students to participate in anti-government and anti-Western rallies.[16]

Survey Findings and Discussion

To find out more about the state of madrassa education and issues concerning foreign funding and influence and political affiliations and involvement, a survey of madrassas was conducted in Punjab, the second largest province by area that is also the most populous in Pakistan. A total of 1094 returns were received from 415 students, 389 guardians, and 290 administrators/teachers of madrassas. 509 (46.5 percent) of the respondents belonged to the Deobandi school of thought, 237 (21.6 percent) to Ahl-e-Sunnat (Barelvi), 233 (21.3 percent) to Ahl-e-Hadith and 100 (9.1 percent) to Shiites; 15 (1.3 percent) respondents did not indicate their school of thought.

Madrassa Education

Critics argue that the madrassa education system is inadequate for contemporary needs. They maintain that madrassa graduates are more vulnerable to unemployment than graduates of universities and colleges and this makes them vulnerable for recruitment by militant and political organisations.

To explore the veracity of such criticisms, respondents were asked questions on the importance of modern education, science subjects and vocational training, the effectiveness of madrassa education, and job prospects of madrassa graduates. Some of their significant responses are documented below.

The study revealed that the vast majority (95 percent) of the 415 student respondents surveyed considered modern education important. Similarly, 53 percent of the students strongly agreed that vocational education was useful in increasing job opportunities for madrassa students. 86 percent of the students opined that the madrassa system was effective in training students to become better participants of modern social life. However, 52 percent of students from Deobandi madrassas did not think so.

In response to whether the students would be able to meet their living expenses fully after completing their madrassa education, 63 percent were confident of doing so. 26 percent of the students did not express their opinion on this statement. On the issue of whether

[12] Febe Armanios. "The Islamic Traditions Of Wahhabism And Salafiyya." *Congressional Information Service, Library of Congress* (2003).
[13] Mohammad Asadullah and Nazmul Chaudhury. "Religious Schools, Social Values, and Economic Attitudes: Evidence from Bangladesh." *World Development 38, no.* 2 (2010): 205–217
[14] Muhammad Arslan. "A Comparative Study Of The Attitudes Of Students Attending Urdu Medium, English Medium And Seminary Schools In Pakistan." (Ph.D Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2015)
[15] Febe Armanios. "The Islamic Traditions Of Wahhabism And Salafiyya." *Congressional Information Service, Library of Congress* (2003).

madrassa graduates could compete with graduates of modern education system, around 55 percent were confident of doing so while 17 percent were less sanguine; 27 percent (mostly Barelvis) did not respond on this statement.

The findings showed that madrassa students are generally aware of the need for modern education and vocational training. The madrassa graduates in Pakistan struggle economically because the jobs offered to them (such as mosque Imams and assistant Imams) are lowly paid. To meet their economic needs, they often become home tutors or get involved in other activities.

Poverty and Financial Support

Sometimes parents compel their children to go to madrassas because of their own religiosity and/or their inability to afford the expenses of modern education. Because madrassas provide almost free education, boarding, food, and clothing, parents find it economical to send their children to madrassas. The following are some significant responses to these issues.

80 percent of the students denied they were compelled to enroll in madrassas while 20 percent claimed they were. 59 percent of the students received food and clothing from their madrassas; the rest (41 percent) were either day scholars or chose not to accept food and clothing. 20 percent of the students surveyed received financial assistance from their madrassas.

In response to whether the students paid any fee or not, 31 percent answered that they did pay a fee while 69 percent said they did not pay any fee. Among parents, 88 percent of them said they would send their children for modern education if they could afford to do so. The survey showed that two factors were responsible for madrassa enrolment: the parents' religiosity and unaffordability of modern education, with poverty being a major determinant for students being enrolled in madrassas.

Foreign Influence on Madrassas

The report about madrassas presented in the National Assembly of Pakistan confirmed that many madrassas receive financial aid from different countries and that many foreign faculty were teaching in the madrassas.

On the issue of receiving overseas scholarships, 38 (9 percent) students confirmed it while the rest (91 percent) replied in the negative. A majority (29) of the 38 (76 percent) who received overseas scholarships belonged to Deobandi madrassas. Responding to the question on foreign faculty members, 25 (6 percent) students reported that foreign teachers taught in their madrassas. On the question of foreign aid, 129 (33 percent) madrassa teachers and management agreed that madrassas received foreign aid. 84 teachers (22 percent) also confirmed that their madrassas had affiliations with other Muslim countries. About overseas scholarships for madrassa students, 17 percent of the madrassa teachers confirmed this.

The study confirms there is foreign influence on a few madrassas in Punjab, mainly through scholarships, funding and foreign teachers; a majority of these madrassas are Deobandis.

The survey was unable to provide the names of countries funding some madrassas but a report presented in Pakistan's National Assembly had disclosed the names of madrassas in Punjab which continuously received funding from foreign countries. Saudi Arabia tops the donor list by funding 103 madrassas in Punjab, followed by Qatar which is funding 24 madrassas. The other two top financiers of madrassas in Punjab are Iran and the UAE, providing financial assistance to 20 and 15 madrassas respectively.

Political Influence and Participation

Various madrassas in Punjab allegedly have links with different religious-political parties that result in political influence on these madrassas and their participation in politics. The following are some of the significant responses on these issues.

45 percent of the 415 students agreed that madrassas took part in political activities; 43% disagreed and 12 percent did not give any response. 37 percent of the students said madrassas should not take part in political activities. On the other hand, 32 percent were

in favor and 31 percent did not give any response. Deobandi madrassa students strongly favoured (66 percent) participation of madrassas in politics, while only 5 percent Barelvi students were in favour. Among the Ahl-e-Hadith, 19 percent viewed madrassas' participation in political activities positively. 55 percent of the students said they never took part in any political activity, whereas 35 percent partook in some form of political activity. The largest percentage of students who took part in political activity were Deobandis (46 percent) and Barelvis (36 percent). Regarding membership of political parties, 13 percent of the students said they were members of some political parties, while 87 percent said they had no political affiliation. 15 percent of Ahl-e-Hadith madrassa teachers said madrassas were affiliated with a political party; 71 percent however disagreed. Among Deobandi teachers, 15 percent said madrassas had some affiliation with a political party while 85 percent disagreed.

The survey results confirm that madrassa students participate in political rallies and activities. 50 percent of them participated in political rallies as per the wishes of the madrassa administrators. However, only a handful of madrassas are under strong political influence; most of them and their students concentrate on religious learning and teaching.

Extremist Behavior

The respondents were asked about the involvement of madrassas in extremist and terrorist activities.

A significant 42 percent of the students believed madrassas were involved in extremist activities, whereas 43 percent thought otherwise. A majority of the students (71 percent) were against participation in extremist activities. 13 percent however were not opposed to such participation while 16% of the students did not give any response. Most of the students (47 percent) who participated in extremist activities were from Deobandi madrassas whereas 21 percent came from Ahl-e-Hadith, 11 percent came from Shi'ites and 9 percent came from Barelvi.

Among the madrassa teachers and management, 38 percent from the Deobandi school said their madrassas took part in extremist activities; 28 percent of Ahl-e-Hadith, 36 percent of Shi'ites and 16 percent of Barelvi teachers responded likewise. On whether madrassa education created extremist behavior in society, 50 percent of the Ahl-e-Hadith madrassa teachers affirmed so. The responses of the teachers indicate that madrassas and their education system in some way are involved in promoting extremist activities. However, only a small number of madrassas and their students are involved in extremist activities.

Conclusion

Pakistan's madrassa education system faces many challenges and controversies. Several madrassas in Punjab are found to be propagating extremism and some of them have links with local and foreign militant organisations.

The affiliation of madrassas with political parties and 'jihadi' groups, to some extent, remains intact. The sectarian linkage of the madrassas is also deep rooted because of sectarian divisions among them. Foreign funding and interference in madrassas of Punjab is another reason for sectarian violence; the influence of international and domestic non-state actors also play a major role in the radicalisation of madrassas.

Divisive religious and political views, sectarianism, 'jihadi' ideas, poverty and unemployment are being used to indoctrinate extremist ideas among madrassa students in Punjab.

Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas are found to be more inclined towards political struggle or so-called 'jihad' whereas Ahl-e-Sunnat (Barelvi) and Shi'ite madrassas are found to be less interested.

The de-politicisation and de-radicalisation of madrassas in Punjab require concrete actions from the government and all stake holders. Among the steps that could be taken include reforms in the curriculum and identification and removal of any extremist ideas in the syllabi; economic development of under-developed areas to eliminate factors contributing to extremism and terrorism; provision of quality education and health services; review of funding sources to madrassas; close monitoring of foreign influence on madrassas; banning political affiliations of madrasahs; prohibiting fatwas

declaring other Muslims as infidels; banning publications that promote extremism, sectarianism and terrorism; prohibiting extremist organisations and political parties; and setting up a Reconciliatory Committee to settle disputes and issues between different schools of thought.

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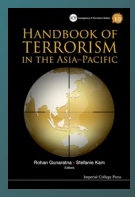

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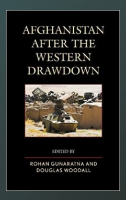

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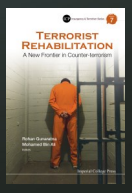

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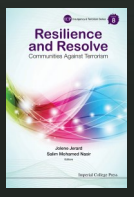

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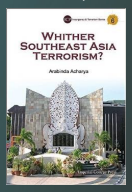

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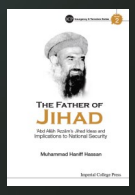

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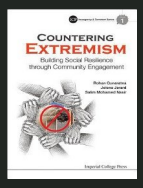

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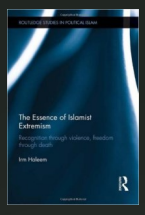

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