



## Religions and Development Research Programme

### Rethinking madrasa reform in Pakistan

Since September 11 2001, madrasas in Pakistan have been the focus of international attention because of their alleged links with militancy. Even when not linked with radicalization, many in the state and civil society in Pakistan argue for their reform because, it is alleged, they indoctrinate children with conservative Islamic values and foster sectarian conflict. In addition, the religious education they provide is said to make the children who are educated in them unemployable in the mainstream economy. A reform programme that aims to introduce secular subjects into the madrasa curriculum was launched, with US support, by the Government of Pakistan in 2002. It seeks to increase the employability of madrasa students and to prevent their indoctrination with specific Islamist ideology. However, it has failed to win support from most madrasas. By 2008, fewer than 300 of the 16,000 registered madrasas were estimated to have joined the reform programme.

This brief summarizes the findings of a study of the state-led madrasa reform programme and makes a number of recommendations for more appropriate policy and effective implementation (see *below*).

#### The madrasa system in Pakistan

The madrasa system in Pakistan has a three-tier structure that parallels the secular education system: Abtadia/Amma (primary), Thatani/Khasa (secondary),

Wustani/Aliya (bachelors degree), and Fooqani/Almiya (masters degree). It is organized by five wafaqs (education boards), which represent the five main Islamic school of thought in Pakistan. These umbrella organizations have evolved gradually:

- Wafaq-ul-Madaris al-Salafia (Ahl-e-Hadith) in 1955
- Wafaq-ul-Madaris Al-Arabia (Deobandi) in 1959
- Wafaq-ul-Madaris Al-Shia (Shia) in 1959
- Tanzeem-ul-Madaris Ahle-Sunnat-wal-Jamaat (Barelvi) in 1960
- Rabita-ul-Madaris Al-Islamia (Jamaat-i-Islami) in 1983

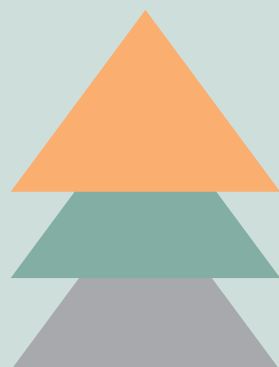
All the madrasas that choose to register with a wafaq constitute the General Body, while a selected body of ulama (scholars) from the senior madrasas form an executive council.

In 2006, government data showed that there were 11,346 registered madrasas, 9,415 for males and 1,931 for females (see Fig. 1), although estimates of the number of madrasas and students enrolled vary. In particular, there are no reliable estimates of the number of unregistered madrasas – it is thought that there may be 30,000. Including mukhtabs, which focus on reading and memorization of the Quran, there are thought to be 100,000. Children may attend madrasas part-time for religious education while being enrolled in secular schools. Of the approximately 1.4 million students, only 17 per cent were girls and young women (see Fig.

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*To achieve effective reform:*

1. *the state must win the trust of the religious community*
2. *increased state financial and bureaucratic commitment to reform is required*
3. *given the high demand for religious education in Pakistan and the demand for trained religious scholars and leaders, there is a need to invest in theological training*
4. *gaps in knowledge about madrasas and the reform programme must be addressed*
5. *there is a role for international development agencies.*

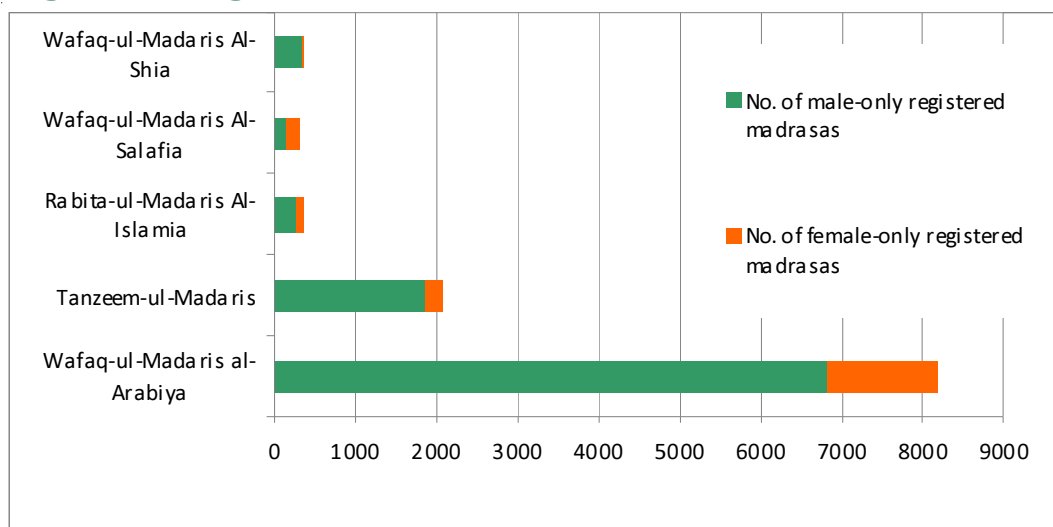


2). Nearly three quarters of the madrasas and nearly 90 per cent of all students come under the auspices of the Wafaq-ul-Madaris Al-Arabia, which is part of the Sunni Deobandi tradition.

The wafaqs' most important function is to develop a standardized curriculum, hold annual examinations for bachelors and masters level degrees and issue degree certifications, but they also register all madrasas in a given school of thought and coordinate their activities. They maintain monthly and quarterly newsletters and are thus important channels for information dissemination between madrasas within their sect. In addition, they defend the collective interests of the madrasa community vis-à-vis the government, for

A study of this state-led madrasa reform programme was carried out in late 2007 and early 2008. It aimed to understand the working of the programme and to assess the level of acceptance the reforms have won within the madrasa education community, based on national data, interviews with key actors at national level and in Punjab, North West Frontier and Balochistan Provinces, and case studies of madrasas in Rawalpindi. In order to identify the implications for policy and implementation, a workshop that brought together representatives from relevant government agencies, senior representatives of all five madrasa education boards, academics and others was held in Islamabad on 9<sup>th</sup> October, 2008.

**Figure 1: Registered madrasas in Pakistan, 2006**



(Source: Government of Pakistan)

example negotiating recognition of the certificates they issue or concessions from the government, including grants. In the 1980s, the government authorized five jamias (madrasas teaching to postgraduate level) to award masters' degrees in Islamiyat and Arabic Studies, giving them a similar status to the wafaqs. The wafaqs thus operate as semi-autonomous institutions: they can set the curriculum and direct other activities within madrasas but are also subject to government scrutiny. The Ministries of Education and Religious Affairs are responsible for coordinating wafaq activities.

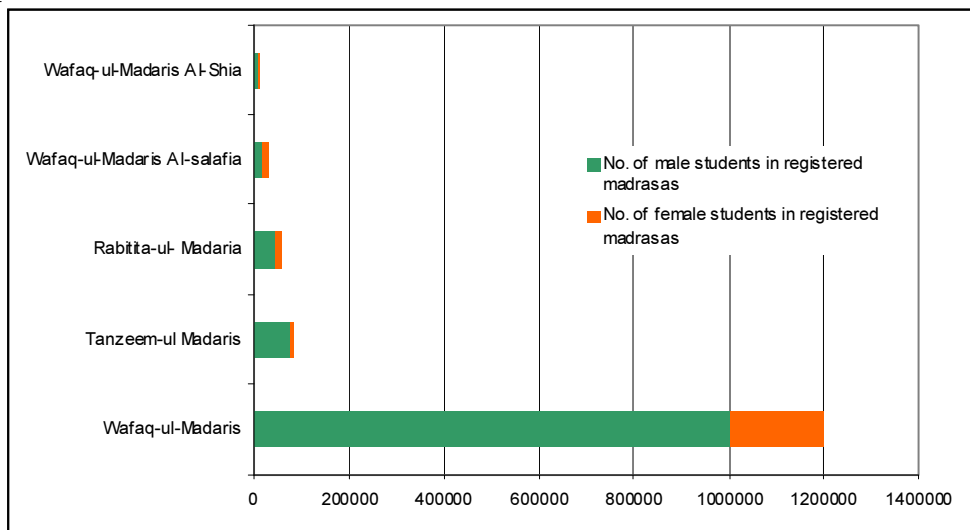
### Slow progress with reform

The Ministry of Education trialled madrasa reform in the early 1980s. However, a formal programme was launched only in 2001, with the support of a US\$225 million aid package from the USA under the banner of the 'war on terror'. The reform programme requires that madrasas are vetted for eligibility, and receive funding for a limited period in return for introducing specified secular subjects into their curriculum at primary and intermediate levels.

The reforms have not won support from the religious elite. Six years on, the programme had failed to record noticeable success: by 2007, only 250 out of the approximately 16,000 registered madrasas had accepted the reform programme. The main reasons for this slow progress include:

- Secular leaders have consistently used Islam to rally the masses and legitimize their rule, weakening their ability to push through reform.
- The ulema's distrust of the Musharraf government's close contacts with the USA meant that they saw the reform programme as a Western attempt to control Islam.
- The madrasas enjoy strong patronage from a population that is 97 per cent Muslim and also benefit from their close relations with Middle Eastern countries.
- The five existing wafaqs function as strong lobby groups on behalf of the madrasas.
- The reform programme suffers from bad design, bureaucratic inefficiency, limited skills and resources in the implementing agencies, and corruption.
- The smaller madrasas, which are most in need of funds provided under the reform programme, find it difficult to access the funding and are also concerned about how the religious hierarchy will perceive them should they join. In practice, the government is more interested in enrolling bigger, better-funded madrasas, in the hope that this will encourage the rest to follow.

**Figure 2: Number of students enrolled in registered madrasas, 2006**



(Source: Government of Pakistan)

Key lessons include:

- The state and madrasas have alternative visions of knowledge and coming to an understanding over what constitutes worthy knowledge is essential.
- A lack of political will and weak administrative capacity limit progress with reforms.
- State-madrasa relationships are not fixed; some state representatives are less inclined to push reform than others.
- Collective platforms such as the wafaqs function like trade unions, negotiating effectively with the state.
- A madrasa's position in the religious hierarchy matters to it and may determine how it responds to pressure for reform.
- Governments led by religious parties, for example in the states of North West Frontier Province and Balochistan, can at times negotiate better with madrasas.

## Recommendations

To achieve effective reform, the research and the policy workshop showed that it is necessary to:

### 1. Build trust between the state and those responsible for madrasa education

The main reason for madrasas' reluctance to accept the reform programme is the lack of trust between the state and those responsible for madrasa education. The most critical policy recommendation is that the state needs to win the trust of the religious community. Current reform efforts are seen by those involved in madrasa education as aimed at secularization rather than improving the quality of education. To bridge the current gap in trust, the following measures were identified by workshop participants:

- The state needs to be clear about the activities of madrasas before setting out to reform them. Although most madrasas require their students to study secular subjects and undertake matriculation examinations, the current reform programme does not recognize existing practice.
- Those appointed to design the reform programme should be familiar with Islamic education, rather than general bureaucrats.
- The reform committee should include senior ulama amongst its members if the reforms are to be accepted by the ulama.
- The state should see its engagement with madrasa education as 'support' rather than 'reform', since the latter approach invokes resistance.
- The state needs to be more vigilant in identifying madrasas that are involved in militancy, but should make appropriate targeted interventions rather than waging media campaigns that accuse madrasas in general of militancy.
- Madrasa reforms should be funded from the government's general education budget, because reliance on Western donors for programme-specific funds is distrusted by the ulama.

### 2. Increase state commitment to achieve effective reform

The current reform programme is poorly designed, has only been partially implemented and has not achieved its aims. The state is failing to implement reforms even in madrasas that are willing to accept them, due to its failure to commit sufficient resources and devise appropriate measures. If the reforms are to be effective the following are critical:

- The programme requires adequate finance and staffing.
- The reforms should be more realistic and adequate incentives provided to madrasas to secure their participation. Currently, support is only offered for the salaries of teachers of secular subjects (at below the salaries paid in government primary and secondary schools) for a period of three years. If the reform programme is to win support, it should pay adequate salaries and provide salaries for the ulama (as in Bangladesh), to encourage their participation. To ensure continuity and ongoing commitment, long term



support is needed, implying that the programme must be funded from the regular education budget.

- The programme should be more carefully designed and detailed guidance issued e.g. for the appointment of teachers.

### 3. State investment in the training of ulama

If the state is keen on developing more progressive interpretations of Islam than are forthcoming through the madrasa platform, it is as important to encourage the introduction of alternative texts in the religious curriculum as to introduce more secular subjects. At present there is a high demand for madrasa education, even amongst the educated upper income groups, because only madrasa-trained ulama have the authority to interpret and teach the religious texts, enabling them to control the public interpretation of Islam. Improvements to religious education require the establishment of high quality schools of theology, as in other Muslim countries such as Turkey and Syria. In these countries, the state has reformed the traditional madrasa hierarchy by supporting state-sponsored schools to train the religious clergy who fill mosque positions and Departments of Islamic Theology at leading universities.

### 4. Address gaps in knowledge

While there is a growing understanding of why parents choose to send their children to madrasas, little is known about the employability of madrasa graduates compared with graduates of secular schools and universities. The introduction of more secular subjects into the madrasa curriculum is based on an assumption that a higher proportion of madrasa graduates are unemployed than those from secular education institutions, although this is contested by the ulama. There is also disagreement over the learning achievement of students in madrasas compared to those in secular education institutions. More systematic information is needed as a basis for the design of appropriate reforms.

### 5. The donor community should consider alternative ways of supporting madrasa reform

If the state improves the reform programme and wins support from the ulama, there is scope for donor assistance:

- Donors can fund research on the relative quality of the education provided in different types of institution, the employability of their graduates, and the design and outcomes of madrasa reform programmes in other countries.
- Donors should initiate a dialogue with the religious community and build networks with key organizations within it, in order to identify appropriate support for madrasas, including teacher training, equipment and teaching materials.
- If the government and wafaqs develop a mutually acceptable reform programme, donors should consider directly funding the wafaqs.



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### Further information

This policy brief is based on Masooda Bano (2007) *Contesting Ideologies and Struggle for Authority: State-Madrasa Engagement in Pakistan*, Birmingham: Religions and Development Research Programme WP 14: [www.rad.bham.ac.uk/index.php?section=26](http://www.rad.bham.ac.uk/index.php?section=26)

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