MADRASSA GOVERNANCE IN KP: IDENTIFYING POLICY CHALLENGES AND CHANTING A COURSE FOR REFORM

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Abstract:

The term "madrassa" refers to an institution providing Islamic education and operates independently with its own system, primarily through the Dars-i-Nizami syllabus. In Pakistan, madrassas have historically played a critical role in the development and character-building of Muslim society, offering accessible education. However, post-9/11 scrutiny has led to numerous studies focusing on their education system, administration, and management. The governance of madrassas, particularly in the KP province, faces criticism for its resistance to change and lack of inclusivity in reform efforts. This paper explores the current governance structure, the challenges faced, and policy recommendations for a more inclusive reform strategy. Effective reform must involve the madrassa leadership to address issues such as curriculum modernization, teacher training, and transparent funding. The goal is to integrate madrassas into mainstream education while respecting their religious significance, ultimately enhancing educational outcomes and social development in Pakistan.

Key words:

Madrassa, Islamic education, Governance reform, Curriculum modernization, Religious education

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Introduction

The word "madrassa" originates from an Arabic term, indicating an institution that imparts Islamic education. It is an independent entity with its own education system. Madrassas provide free education to the Muslim community according to their syllabus called Dars-i-Nizami. It is evident that madrassas have significantly contributed to the development of Muslim society and play a crucial role in character-building (Sodhar, Rasool, & Humanities, 2013). In a society like Pakistan, madrassas are among the most feasible and easily accessible means of education for many people (S. J. G. E. M. Bhattacharya, 2014). Madaris and their education system came under the limelight and attracted international attention after the catastrophic incident of 9/11. A series of research studies have been conducted regarding their education system, administration, and management (S. Bhattacharya, 2002).

The madrassa education system in Pakistan is divided into three main parts: Ibtida'i, Vustani, and Fauqani. At the Ibtida'i level, madrassas provide primary-level education, which includes memorization and teaching of the Holy Quran. Additionally, students are taught Shahadat-ul-Aa'am and Shahadat-ul-Kha'sa, which are equivalent to matriculation and intermediate-level education at the Vustani stage. In the third stage, madrassas teach Shahadat-ul-Aa'lia, equivalent to a bachelor's degree, and Shahadat-ul-Aalamia, equivalent to a master's degree. In Pakistan, a large number of madaris are registered under different boards based on sects. These madrassa boards operate independently and have framed policies for the registration, regulation, management, administration, and examination of their affiliated madaris (Hakim Ali, 2015).

The current governance structure of madaris is under extreme criticism and faces numerous challenges. It is commonly observed that madaris are reluctant to change their governance structure and resist reforms. It is also perceived that the top management of madaris was ignored by the government when framing the reform agenda (Sajjad, 2013). Change is essential for sustainable development in any system, and the entire world is embracing rapid changes in governance structures. Madaris are very slow in adapting to changes in their governance structure, which directly affects their education system. The religious education system has remained unchanged and outdated for a long time. Therefore, madrassa management needs to modify and upgrade their education system in line with the demands and needs of the modern world (Zain Ul Abdin Sodhar).

Problem Statement

It is perceived that madrassas are the main root of extremism and a source of threat to global security and peace. After the catastrophic events of 9/11, madrassa reforms have become a core subject of discussion at both national

and international levels. New developments at the international level have increased the importance of madrassa reforms. Madrassas play a crucial role in the social structure and are considered a central part of the country's education system. To address a wide range of issues related to madrassa governance, various steps have already been taken to bring them into the mainstream. However, due to a trust deficit between the government and madrassa management, the reform strategy has failed. Furthermore, to address the main concerns and issues of madrassa governance, registration, regulation, and curricula, the government has formulated a new reform strategy under the National Action Plan (NAP). Currently, the entire religious community and madrassa management are not satisfied with the steps taken under the new reform strategy, as there is a lack of trust among all stakeholders. There is a dire need to frame a viable and sustainable framework to identify policy challenges and suggest practical courses of action for madrassa reform.

Scope of Study

Reforming madrassas (plural: Madaris) is a highly debatable issue in the country. This research paper explores the government's efforts to reform the madrassa system, highlighting steps taken to mainstream madrassa education. The study identifies the main hurdles in policy implementation and examines the effects of policy-based interventions since 2013. Additionally, it provides an in-depth analysis of the challenges faced during the reform process. The paper also suggests steps for further improvement in the reform strategy, aiming to create a more effective and sustainable framework for integrating Madaris into the broader education system.

Literature Review

The current education system in Pakistan, encompassing public, private, and religious sectors, is ill-equipped to address multi-dimensional challenges and rapid changes. Globalization has highlighted the importance of good governance and education for swift development. Modern technology has greatly influenced education, yet both contemporary and religious education systems in the country struggle to adapt. Following independence, the role of Islamic education expanded due to the Islamization policy, positioning madrassa education as an alternative system in the country. However, after the catastrophic 9/11 attacks, a madrassa reform strategy was implemented without the religious community's consent. This move was widely perceived as part of a foreign agenda to control Madaris, resulting in a significant trust deficit between the government and the religious community, particularly during Musharraf's era (Zaidi, 2013).

Madrassas are well-structured institutions providing foundational Islamic education to a large segment of society. Despite their extensive reach, research indicates that Madaris are unable to keep pace with global changes and fail to align with the principles of good governance. Furthermore, madrassa education does not meet modern educational standards (Hakim Ali, 2015). Since 9/11, the madrassa system has faced continuous scrutiny, leading to controversy among stakeholders. The government's reform strategies and policy decisions have been criticized, exacerbating challenges for Pakistani society. The perception that the reform agenda is foreign-imposed has deepened the trust deficit between the government and religious institutions (Ghani, 2021).

Research methodology

This policy paper employs a desk research approach, relying entirely on the analysis of existing literature, data, and records to derive its findings and recommendations. This method was chosen to thoroughly evaluate the findings of related studies and to examine the outcomes of reform strategies implemented by the provincial government over the past decade. The desk research approach enables a comprehensive review of existing policies and their impacts, allowing for the identification of key bottlenecks in the current reform strategy.

The research involved a systematic collection and analysis of secondary data from various sources, including government reports, academic studies, policy papers, and other relevant documents. The gathered data was meticulously organized to trace the progression of reform efforts, identify recurrent challenges, and understand the broader context of madrassa reforms in Pakistan. By synthesizing this information, the paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the efficacy of past and current reform initiatives.

Furthermore, the methodology includes a critical assessment of the reform strategies' alignment with contemporary educational standards and governance principles. This assessment is crucial for highlighting gaps and suggesting practical measures for successful implementation. The desk research approach not only allows for a detailed examination of historical and current data but also ensures that the recommendations are grounded in evidence and best practices from related fields.

Results and Discussion

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is founded on Islamic ideology, which relies on the Quran and Sunnah. Madaris are key pillars for learning the Quran and Sunnah, thus reinforcing the Islamic ideology of Pakistan. Unfortunately, after 9/11, Pakistani Madaris were targeted and depicted in international

media as epicenters of terrorism and extremism. Therefore, there is a strong need to change this perception and reform the Madaris of KP to align with contemporary life for Muslims worldwide. Here, we present the key hurdles faced by the Madaris of KP and suggest reforms in the following key areas:

Need for Reforms in Madaris of KP, Pakistan

Based on several critical issues, reforms in KP Madaris are necessary. Some of the most influential problems are listed below:

Lack of Modern Education

The madrassa curriculum and teaching methods are extremely antiquated and rigid due to the lack of access to modern education. Madrassa teachers face issues such as stagnant curricula, a lack of community trust, and financial crises daily. The administration of madrassas often refuses to support contemporary education and lacks adequate teaching facilities, seeking funding from national or international sources only (Iqbal, Yousaf, Shaheen, & Nisa, 2023). Madrassa teachers have not received the necessary training to handle and maintain experimental and ICT equipment, making them wary of new technologies. Due to a lack of funding and resources, madrassas cannot engage qualified modern education subject teachers or provide appropriate lab equipment and ICT facilities to students.

Extremism and Militancy

Under Zia's rule, extremism and militancy in madrasas increased, fostering a violent and extremist mentality. This shift was detrimental, transforming Madaris from renowned centers for study and research into hubs of extremism. They were used as camps for the Afghan Jihad by Pakistani and US secret services and eventually became centers of sectarian hatred. Harvard University scholar Jessica Stern highlights the close connection between religious indoctrination and Madaris in her research (Stern, 2000). The administration has attempted to combat religious fanaticism, but efforts have been hindered by a lack of trust between the government and seminary leaders, flaws in Pakistan's legal system, the attitudes of state and religious leaders toward religious minorities, and the failure to fully implement the National Action Plan (Malik, Khan, & Fatima, 2021).

Lack of Consistency in Policy

There is a lack of uniform policies in Madrassa education. Proper registration under specific acts and with the Education Department, but not under the Societies Act, is missing. Similarly, no incentives are given to Madaris that decide to cooperate. A separate organization dealing with madrasas at the KP provincial level should be created (Muslihuddin, 1988). There is also a need

to improve rather than eliminate; the approach should be 'Motivate and Change'. The government should focus on improving the Madaris without resorting to confrontation (Dogar, 2010).

Regulatory Authority

Strong regulatory frameworks and efficient monitoring systems are necessary to address the issues in madrasa governance. Insincere attempts will worsen the situation. A powerful board with full government authority should be established to ensure policy implementation. This board should include representatives from the madrasas as well (Nayyar, 1998).

The Main Obstacles to Reforming the Madrassa and Its Education System

Funding

A major concern with madrassa reforms is the availability of sufficient funding. Madaris are essential for the education of underprivileged individuals who would otherwise be unable to afford to send their children to school. Therefore, developing the institutions currently in operation is necessary. The 1973 Pakistani Constitution states that it is the state's responsibility to offer free secondary education to all Pakistanis. Conversely, the vast majority of Madaris receive their support from independent sources.

Political Resistance

Madaris often have strong political and religious affiliations. Powerful religious and political groups may resist any attempts to reform these institutions, viewing them as a challenge to their authority and influence. Deobandi Madaris, led by JUI-F (a major political party in KP), have posed the greatest challenge. The party opposes madrassa reforms because they have been instrumental in using Madaris for political purposes and have become a source of its political survival (Shah, Qazi, & Religion, 2023).

Lack of Registration

There are 8,528 Madaris in KP, out of which 2,517 have been registered so far. The majority objected to the government's financial and infrastructure assistance due to concerns about the government accessing their private information. This reluctance to disclose information to the government also contributed to the 2002 failure of the Madrassa Reform Strategy. Large Madaris were sponsored by wealthy individuals and charitable organizations in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf nations. Consequently, it was difficult for the government to make its financial incentives for madrassa officials attractive due to this external funding (Bashir & Ul-Haq, 2019).

Misrepresentation

In the 1980s, when the Pakistani government began enlisting madrassa students to fight the proxy war in Afghanistan, a militant image of Madaris spread worldwide. Although only a small percentage of madrassa students participated in the conflict, the entire madrassa community was associated with violence. Despite the fact that the Pakistani government was partly responsible for this misrepresentation, it did little to restore the Madaris' reputation when the West condemned them. The decision to subordinate Madaris to the ministry in charge of homeland security, rather than to government organizations responsible for social welfare and education, further perpetuated the stereotype (Bashir & Ul-Haq, 2019).

Social Acceptance

Madaris teachers and students are often perceived as being outside the social mainstream. Only 10% of students enroll in Madaris; the remaining students attend other formal educational programs. Of these 10%, only 1% can understand religious instruction. Additionally, the public views Madaris more as places to deposit zakat and charitable contributions than as centers of learning. People associated with Madaris are typically perceived as outdated and lacking in knowledge of modern technology. Students are seen as outsiders in society and are not considered for official positions. The public views students as an additional segment of society, and parents often prefer to send their weakest child to a madrasa (Habib, Bhatti, Khan, & Akbar, 2021).

Causes of the Reform Agenda Failure

The lack of a well-thought-out plan, coordination issues between different ministries and departments, and insufficient participation among Madaris were the reasons for the previous Madrassa Reform Program's failure. Although the actual targets were the Deobandi and Ahl Hadith schools of thought, this was not disclosed, as most of the Madaris that received support belonged to the Barelvi school of thought. According to forecasts, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has registered considerably more Madaris than actually exist in the nation. The planned incentives and support for Madaris were primarily cosmetic, which made them unappealing, particularly when compared to their sources of funding (which no Madrassa is willing to disclose).

Reforms in Provincial Madrassas: Issues and Opportunities Governments took a while to get started and often believed that the federal government should be in charge of major projects. The government's refusal to include Ulema raised concerns among Madaris pupils. The Madrassa Reform Initiative (MRP) is a prime example of a poorly executed and coordinated initiative, despite sufficient funding being provided for its success. This is

evidenced by extremely low fund utilization as well as failure to develop fund utilization capabilities (Dogar, 2010).

Religious Community Creating Hurdles in the Implementation of the Reform Agenda

The madrassa reforms were fiercely opposed by the religious community. They no longer support the inclusion of need-based studies and have taken a negative stance toward madrassa reforms. They believe that secular education serves a Western agenda and criticize it on these grounds. Consequently, without considering the purpose or methodology of the changes, madrassa reforms are viewed as an attack on religion. These religious groups believe that those with qualifications and religious education are not as good Muslims as they are and could harm Islam while serving Western interests. They argue that there is neither a historical precedent for the modernization of madrassas nor a model for the new methods of madrassa education. Such attitudes and perceptions impede madrassa reforms. Additionally, they believe that since the current madrassa system meets society's religious needs, reform is unnecessary. Compared to its benefits, modernizing madrassas poses significant risks. They often disguise this sentiment by labeling reforms as "anti-Islam" or ineffective (Rabbi & Habib, 2019).

Counter-Terrorism Actions Create a Deficit of Trust Between the Religious Community and the Government

The government's efforts to combat terrorism have sometimes been perceived as targeting religious seminaries and groups, leading to concerns among religious communities. The ulama's commitment to helping Afghanistan and Kashmir, two of their major undertakings, was a driving force behind the focus on madrassas. The ulama directed their efforts toward ensuring that the group they supported would take over in Kabul once the war in Afghanistan ended in 1988. The September 11 events had a significant impact on Pakistan. While the United States had accused Osama bin Laden and the Taliban, Jamate Islami (JI) was eager to attribute the attacks to Jews. In response to this unfounded accusation, the JI launched a major campaign to undermine the Pakistani government by claiming it was a US proxy. Osama bin Laden and the Taliban leadership were close to many of the ulama. The Pakistani government was requested to offer logistical support and secure its western borders when US and NATO military operations in Afghanistan began. The wave of anti-American sentiment caused by Western intervention in Pakistan, particularly in KP and Baluchistan, increased the power of the JI. Riding this wave, the ulama proceeded to organize various religious parties in the nation's response (bin Mohamed Osman, 2009).

Conclusion

The current paper emphasizes the governance system of Madaris in the KP province. It also focuses on policy analysis and outlines steps to make the madrassa reform strategy more inclusive and integrated. The study will examine key dimensions of reform policy to overcome the trust deficit between the government and the religious community. We discuss the best possible ways to successfully implement the reform agenda. The madrassa situation remains as convoluted as ever. There is an inherent distrust when external forces are involved in religion, which may necessitate a more self-aware developmental path. This realization has led Curtis, for example, to advise foreign donors to avoid sweeping reforms of madrasas and to recognize their value for Pakistan's social life as well as education.

The government's, local and international media's, and academia's post-9/11 madrassa reform efforts did not significantly influence Pakistan because the ulama's opinions were not given much weight in the discussions. The topic of madrassa reform following 9/11 is largely left unspoken by the Ulama running the talks. This was the major reason why nothing substantial could be accomplished on the ground despite massive financial outlays, loud rhetoric, and media efforts. Without taking into account the concerns of the Ulama, reforming Pakistan's madrassa curriculum and system is challenging. The Ulama must be included in the reform of madrassa education, their issues must be resolved, and they must be made partners in the fight against religious extremism and militancy in the nation.

Pakistani madrassa education faces many challenges, from religious fanaticism to inadequate instruction. However, Madaris are well-established in Pakistan's socioeconomic environment and often do not require government assistance. Therefore, without addressing the needs of these institutions, no significant regulatory breakthrough in madrassa education can be anticipated. We now understand why many previous attempts have failed.

We conclude this paper with a consideration that goes beyond madrassa education reforms in KP, Pakistan. In Pakistan, Madaris serve as more than just places for religious instruction. For school-age children, they are often the only sources of educational resources. While it is critical to integrate Madaris into mainstream education, it is even more important to expand the reach and efficacy of public education and social services to reduce the socioeconomic reliance of Pakistani society on Madaris. It is crucial to ensure that children enroll in madrassas out of interest in Islamic studies rather than due to a lack of housing, food, or education.

Recommendations

In conclusion, this paper offers recommendations for reforming Madaris in the KP province. These suggestions aim to guide further research into the best approaches for improving the madrassa education system within the framework of existing policy. The subsequent debate provides creative alternatives to extensive madrassa reforms that could yield benefits at significantly lower costs.

Prestigious Madaris as Models:

We advocate for using model madrasas, endorsed by reputable and well-established organizations, as exemplars. Larger, well-known madrasas in cities like Lahore and Karachi can serve as role models for other institutions. They offer opportunities for students of all ages and professions, a diverse and international student body, boarding facilities, comprehensive curricula, reputable teachers, and English-language websites. These technologically advanced madrasas, which also provide computer literacy and part-time programming for non-madrasa students, aim to produce Islamic scholars who understand modern complexities and can work as academics, professionals, and leaders in both religious and secular contexts to advance Islamic society. For madrasa graduates looking to promote madrasa progress, a state-madrasa collaboration inspired by the Cambridge Muslim College, led by prominent scholar Abdal Hakim Murad, could be particularly effective. This institution offers crash courses in diverse fields ranging from politics to health and comparative religions, specifically for graduates of Islamic learning institutions (details available at www.cambridgemuslimcollege.org).

Social Integration of Madrasa Graduates:

If Islam is a social code, madrasa graduates require a well-rounded education based on Islamic values within their communities. These individuals are expected to lead the Muslim community and must understand the complexities and unique issues faced by their communities, which may differ from those in other nations. In KP Pakistan, this approach could foster a productive collaboration between the state and madrasas.

Engage with Religious Scholars and Leaders:

Establish open and constructive dialogues with religious scholars, leaders, and madrasa administrators to build trust and collaboration. Their insights and support are crucial for successful reform.

Curriculum Revisions:

Encourage madrasas to adopt a broader curriculum that integrates religious education with modern subjects such as science, math, and social studies to provide students with a well-rounded education.

Teacher Training and Quality Assurance:

Implement teacher training programs to enhance the pedagogical skills of madrasa teachers. Ensure that teachers are qualified and monitored to maintain high educational standards.

Registration and Accreditation:

Establish a robust system for registering and accrediting KP Madaris. Compliance with specific educational standards should be a requirement for registration.

Transparent Funding Mechanisms:

Ensure transparency in funding sources for Madaris to prevent misuse of funds. Government support can be linked to compliance with reform measures.

Modernization of Facilities:

Encourage the modernization of madrasa infrastructure to provide better facilities for students, including libraries, computer labs, and sports facilities.

Parental Awareness and Involvement:

Promote awareness among parents about the importance of a well-rounded education. Encourage their involvement in their children's education and decision-making.

Monitoring and Evaluation:

Implement a robust system for monitoring and evaluating the progress of madrasa reforms through regular inspections and assessments.

Legal Framework:

Develop or amend legislation to establish a legal framework for madrasa reform and accountability.

Countering Extremism:

Promote curricula that counter extremism, sectarianism, and hate speech. Develop programs that educate students on tolerance, diversity, and coexistence.

Research and Data Collection:

Conduct research to better understand the dynamics of Madaris in KP, their societal impact, and the challenges they face. This data can inform future reform efforts.

International Collaboration:

Seek support and expertise from international organizations, NGOs, and countries with experience in madrasa reform.

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