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Militancy and Madrasahs in Pakistan: An Overstated Connection?

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MADRASAHS or religious schools in Pakistan have been on the receiving end of much bad publicity recently. Often labeled as “terror incubators” since September 11, these Pakistani madrasahs are of more than mere academic interest to Southeast Asia. After all, in September 2003 Pakistani intelligence announced that they had discovered a 19-man Jemaah Islamiyah sleeper cell in Abu Bakar University in Karachi. With lightning speed Gun Gun Rusman Gunawan, the younger brother of Hambali, JI’s chief of operations, was detained at that university. There were raids and arrests at four other madrasahs including the neighbouring Jamia-tul Darasatul Islamiya run by Jamatul Dawa, the political wing of the now-defunct Lashkar Taiba, a militant organisation active in Azad Kashmir. In total the authorities detained thirteen Malaysian students, two Indonesians and two from Myanmar.

Not all madrasahs are jihadi-oriented

These arrests put the spotlight once more on madrasahs and their alleged links with Islamist militancy, causing concern amongst those in the madrasah community. During a visit to Pakistan, one madrasah headmaster told me that the biggest stigma facing the madrasahs was to be blamed for indoctrinating students in jihadist teachings. This is a pity as the majority of madrasahs in Pakistan are struggling to educate and not indoctrinate.

Contemporary madrasahs with militant links have their roots in the Afghan war against the Soviets in the 1980s. During that time financial aid from the United States and Saudi Arabia flowed through Pakistan to support the resistance in Afghanistan. Religious activists and teachers were encouraged to help free their Afghan brothers from atheist Soviet rule and were apportioned part of the incoming funds to this end. This contributed to the rapid mushrooming of jihadi-oriented madrasahs in the Pashtun belt of Pakistan, especially along the North Western Frontier Province bordering Afghanistan. The legacy of this Cold War Afghan conflict endures today in the form of madrasahs that are affiliated to jihadi organisations engaged in militant activism.

Militant-linked madrasahs established by jihadist groups form an extremely small minority, however. According to Pakistani jihadi researcher Amir Rana, out of eleven organisations within the puritanical Wahhabi-oriented Ahli Hadees sect - the tiniest Islamist sect in Pakistan - only three can be considered to be genuine jihadi groups. Significantly, both Abu Bakar University and Jamia-tul Darasatul Islamiya belong to this sect. Together with the bigger and better known Deobandi sect, the Ahli Hadees is often blamed for cooperating with

militant jihadists. Nevertheless, senior clerics within these sects frown upon militant jihad and consider the tabligh jihad – jihad of the inner self - more important.

Madrasahs in Pakistan: A Clearer Picture

There are several key characteristics of the madrasahs in Pakistan. A typical madrasah is organised along one of these four sectarian divisions: Sunni-Hanafi Deobandi, Sunni-Hanafi Barelvis, Sunni Ahli Hadees and Shia. In addition, each madrasah is usually part of, or at least backed by, a powerful political group or a sectarian or missionary organisation. All madrasahs are privately financed and run by a religious scholar and his sons. Donations from the public tend to be sufficient to fund these establishments. Education within a madrasah ranges from primary to university levels. Most of the larger madrasahs offer undergraduate, masters and even doctoral programmes.

Madrasahs are fairly large, boasting student figures ranging from 500 to 3000, such as Jamia Binori in Karachi and Jamia Haqqania near Peshawar. Teachers are mostly local former graduates of the madrasah they teach at. Excluding Shiite teachers who tend to have received graduate training in Iran, very few teachers are trained outside Pakistan, as the standards of theological training available locally for Sunni Muslims are fairly high.

The curriculum in madrasahs comprises both *al-ulum an-naqliya* (the transmitted sciences) and *al-ulumul-aqliya* (the rational sciences), or in lay terms religious and secular sciences respectively. Curricula are standardised and supervised by five madrasah boards representing the different sects. The religious-secular balance in the curriculum varies across madrasahs. Within Shia madrasahs both components are given equal priority, with secular subjects including computer studies, English language, philosophy, literature, Persian and history all being taught. Deobandi and Barelvi madrasahs devote more time to religious studies, which, in their eyes, deserve more attention than secular subjects. In contrast, Ahlee Hadees madrasahs offer “Matric” education -- the state-approved secular curriculum -- to their primary school students. Matric education is compulsory in Ahli Hadees madrasahs but not so amongst the other sects.

Contrary to popular belief, the Ahli Hadees, known amongst locals as Wahabbis, are not anti-establishment. During my visit to Pakistan, several of my preconceptions of these Wahhabi schools were demolished in one insightful interview. True, I was told before the visit that photography; music and smoking were banned in the madrasah. What I realised eventually however is that while these Wahhabi madrasahs are most rigid in observing “halal” and “haram” – that is what is permissible and what is not in Islam -- they are equally progressive about the need for development in the Muslim world. A teacher told me that education is the best means to eradicate poverty in Pakistan and that Muslims should be concerned at providing to students an education par excellence.

I was surprised at this madrasah’s pro-establishment stance, particularly on madrasah reforms initiated by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf’s government. The aforementioned teacher said that his madrasah would like to work with the government and had attempted a few times to register his school with the state. The madrasah had also given in to some of the demands of the government and received several computers in return. Still, it must be acknowledged that madrasahs of other sects which I visited displayed a certain adversarial stance toward the government. Some refused to give in to government madrasah reforms, because it means giving up the autonomy which they have long enjoyed and jealously guard.

Also, they felt the reforms were meant to belittle their contributions to the education sector.

A Fair Deal for the Madrasahs

According to Ministry of Religious Affairs there were 8731 madrasahs in 2000, of which 6761 were Deobandi, 1363 Bareilvis, 310 Ahli Hadees and 271 Shia. Out of 6761 Deobandi madrasahs, some 200 (2%) were suspected to have links to jihadi organisations. While the Wafaqul Madaris Al Arabia, the board supervising Deobandi madrasahs, has outlawed jihadi activism in its madrasahs, some students are known to secretly participate in jihadi training offered by militant organisations during school vacations.

However, for the majority of Pakistani madrasahs, the issue of militancy in the classroom does not arise. They have no plans to overturn the government through a militant revolution; their mission is to provide religious education. The Jamiat ul-Islam faction headed by Maulana Samiul Haq, who is also the headmaster of Jamia Haqqania, has some 500 madrasahs under its wings. Although his madrasah has been labeled a Taliban school by the foreign press, Haq and his fellow politicians believe that the political process is the best form of activism compared to militant jihadism. They have succeeded in promoting reform and made moves to stop sectarian violence.

The madrasahs are well-known institutions respected and trusted by the public. Yet their staff feel marginalised by education reforms and not recognised for their contribution to Pakistani society. For reforms to be effective, the madrasah community should at least be actively involved in designing them. And they deserve due recognition for their contributions.

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