

Past madrassah reform: a history



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The 1962 Reforms

Since its inception, Pakistan has tried three times to undertake major renovations in the *madrassah* school system. The first reforms occurred in 1962 under General Ayub Khan. In 1961, a committee was formed to analyze the current curriculum and make recommendations concerning how best to reform the system so that graduates would be more employable. The resulting report was released in 1962. Notable alterations included: introducing courses like mathematics into the curriculum, instructing in Urdu at the primary levels and Arabic and/or English at the higher levels of study, and testing graduates in five exams including Euclidean mathematics. ²⁷The second part of the reform strategy was to control the level of funding *madrassahs* received. Khan sought to strengthen the role of state institutions at the expense of traditional community leaders like the *ulama*, who he thought opposed his regime and thus limited his power. One way he limited religious scholars' influence was to restrict who could fund *madrassahs*. ²⁸The funding portion of reform was moderately successful, but the recommended changes to the curriculum exposed a core conflict that would derail the 1962 reforms and all the reforms that followed. To alter the *madrassah* curriculum meant, in a way, reforming the nation's practice of Islam, which is sacred to the vast majority of Pakistanis. Since *madrassahs* produce the next generation of religious scholars, government changes to the schools that contradicted what the *ulamas* viewed as instrumental in training their successors had social implications far beyond making modifications to a curriculum. Many disagreed with the government's

interpretation of Islam, and, as a result, rejected the proposals of the 1962 report. 29

The 1979 Reforms

The second round of attempted reforms occurred in 1979 under the regime of General Zia-ul Huq, and were far more extensive than the 1962 reforms. As previously noted, Zia was responsible for the Islamization of Pakistan. Under his regime, the nation became far more sectarian and Islam infiltrated more aspects of life than it had under past rulers. Unsurprisingly, Zia was very interested in the country's *madrassahs*. The reason for the 1979 reform was almost identical to the one in 1962: the *madrassahs* were failing to provide adequately employment opportunities outside of the religious sect, and thus it was decided the system should undergo modernization. The recommendations were very similar, as well-again reinforcing the necessity of introducing more modern subjects into the curriculum, including:

. . . Urdu, arithmetic, and general science at the primary level; English, general mathematics, and Pakistan studies at the secondary levels; political science, political economy, and English as optional subjects at the baccalaureate and master's level; and comparative religious sciences as a mandatory subject at the master's level. The committee proposed an autonomous National Institute of Madrassahs to compile and revise madrassah curricula, supervise these institutions, administer standardized tests, and award diplomas to the students. The proposed national institute, the committee recommended, was to have an equal number of members

from all four subsects within the madrasah education system, and representatives from the government . 30

The Report of 1979 sought to create a curriculum that all the different sects of Islam would accept. That being said, the boards ultimately saw the compromise of their beliefs as a loss, because their students would no longer be ideal representatives of their branch after being taught a hybrid faith. 31

Though the results of the 1962 and 1979 reports were similar, there was a significant difference in the composition of the 1979 committee that authored the later report. This committee included numerous *ulamas* , who worked alongside government officials in constructing the proposed reform. The 1962 committee, however, did not include *ulamas* nor did it consult with them about which reforms they would support. As a result, the *ulamas* were originally more open to the 1979 report, as they felt they had significant input in the process. However, while they were invited to participate in the committee, they were not a majority voice on the committee and the committee was led by a government official, so some *ulamas* still resented the government's authority in dictating the final report. 32It didn't take long after the release of the report for many *ulamas* to issue reservations about the proposed reforms; others boycotted it completely. The 1979 reforms occurred at the same time as the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The fact that Iran's mullahs were successful in overthrowing the Iranian shah, and thus inserting religious figures in powerful political roles in a nearby country, convinced many Pakistani *madrassahs* that their schools did not need to modernize to be influential in the region. 33Many completely disregarded implementing the reforms, convinced, more than

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ever, that religious education was more important to Pakistan than the curriculum endorsed in the 1979 reforms. Such tumultuous regional events had a profound impact on Pakistan, and complicated the *madrassah* reform process greatly. In fact, these events led to the expansion of a more extreme curriculum in *madrassah*, making the schools more threatening to development just as the state sought to reform them. During this time Pakistan became the battleground for an international Sunni versus Shia war. Iran was helping the country's Shias generate support, while countries like Saudi Arabia were funding Sunni militant groups, often through *madrassahs*. In competition for the funding being offered by Saudi Arabia, some schools attempted to increase their focus on Wahhabism to ensure they would receive more funding than other *madrassahs*.³⁴ Slowly, schools evolved from being primarily intellectual and religious institutions to political ones, as more students became involved in the religious revolutions occurring outside their borders. The Iranian Revolution served as a huge inspiration to Pakistan's minority Shia population, who, seeing the successful Shia revolution in Iran, grew emboldened in their aspiration for political power. The number of Shias in the country began to increase, as many moderates in the country shifted their allegiance to Shia due to its opposition to Zia's aggressive Islamization campaign.³⁵ Zia, a Sunni, saw the rise in Shia activism as a threat to his regime, especially following the 5 July 1980 demonstration in Islamabad where 25,000 Shias violently protested the *zakat*³⁶ law put in place as part of Zia's Islamization campaign.³⁷

The *zakat* funds allowed the government to increase funding to schools like *madrassahs* since they often cater to the underprivileged. In 1984 alone over

nine percent of the *zakat* fund was distributed to 2, 273 madrassahs. 38Zia's hope was that through these donations the *madrassahs* would become dependent on the state for their finances and, upon graduation, employment. While some *madrassahs* eagerly accepted the contributions to their struggling schools, other resented the government oversight and the obligations to the Zia regime that accompanied the *zakat* funds. They no longer wanted to be dependent on the government for what they viewed as bribes to expand government oversight of religious schools. The reliance on *zakat* funds, others believed, had caused voluntary contributions to *madrassahs* to sharply decline, resulting in an overall loss of income for schools. 39The Shias decided to actively reject the *zakat* funds, which they believed were contradictory to their faith. Despite wanting to limit the Shia's influence, Zia had to relent to the 1980 protests of the Shia, as they effectively shut down Pakistan's capital city. The victory of being exempt from paying *zakat* to the government inspired many independents in the country to declare themselves Shias. In retribution, Zia funneled more *zakat* funds into the nation's Sunni-controlled *madrassahs*. The *madrassahs* became a venue in which Zia could resist the Shia influence, and thus these *madrassahs* became increasingly anti-Shia. Since Zia actively encouraged this behavior in order to resist the rise in Shias, it is no wonder that the school system became a place in which students grew intolerant of Shias, which led to a more sectarian and aggressive society. For the short-term goal of limiting Shia influence, Zia created a school system that, even today, remains entrenched in perpetuating an exclusionary worldview, rather than an accepting and tolerant environment for students. As previously reported, Zia, in an attempt to recruit the support of the nation's *ulamas*, decided

some *madrassah* degrees would be considered equal to degrees from government schools. This movement correlated to the 1979 reforms, for though Zia wanted to increase employability for *madrassah* graduates, he wanted to make sure that as professionals the graduates had skills useful in the workplace. Under the assumption they could study Islam and still graduate qualified to work in the government, the number of *madrassah* graduates skyrocketed. Between 1960 and 1980, over 5, 000 *ulamas* had been trained; following the equivalency certificates in 1981-1985, over 6, 000 *ulamas* graduated-that's 1, 000 more graduates in a quarter of the time. 40

Though this initiative was intended to provide *madrassah* graduates with more authority, many new *ulama* graduates became less interested in the traditional study of Islam, and more concentrated on religious ideology as a means to influence the government. As such, some opened their own *madrassahs* so that they could funnel more graduates into the government or increasingly powerful political parties. 41

In the late 1980s, the country began its “decade of democracy.” However, rather than economic prosperity and social equality, the decade produced poorer economic conditions and economic stagnation. The recession reduced employment opportunities, and many *madrassah* graduates who assumed they would secure a job within the government went unemployed. The curriculum many of the new *madrassahs* implemented left their students unqualified to beat out top students from government or private schools for the few positions available in the government, and it also left them unqualified for traditional *ulama* positions, which they theoretically could

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have secured if they had followed traditional *madrassah* curricula. Rather than making students qualified for both religious and government work, the 1979 reforms had made students unqualified for either.

With no opportunities in government or in religious posts, many new *madrassah* graduates focused their efforts on pursuing their political agendas. 42They abandoned established political parties to form more extreme, militant ones. They also opened their own, more ideologically-minded *madrassahs* at an accelerated rate, thanks in part to the increase in *zakat* funds given to some *madrassahs*. While the more established *madrassahs* largely maintained their traditional curriculums, the *madrassahs* that were built during this time-especially those close to Afghanistan-were overseen by low ranking *ulama* who replaced traditional curricula with those that endorsed militarization. The goal of these *madrassahs* was to train students to become political activists, which they saw as more influential than a traditional *ulama*. Post September 11th, it is clear how this radical momentum leading into the 1990s produced in Pakistan an environment similar to that in Afghanistan which provided Osama bin Laden protection and opportunity in planning the September 11th attacks.