

Building Trust and Institutions

Religious Institution-Building in Afghanistan: An Exploration

Afghanistan's religious schools – the madrasas – are frequently accused by Afghan and foreign media and policy analysts of providing outdated and poor-quality religious schooling, educating children to unemployment, promoting narrow and intolerant worldviews, and ultimately contributing to radicalization and recruitment to militant groups. In response to criticism that it lacks control over the madrasas and what they teach, the Afghan government has initiated a comprehensive reform programme. This, however, has had limited success so far. Few madrasas have registered with the government, and the new curriculum has been rejected by madrasa representatives. Yet, both the madrasas and the government want change and agree on the need for reform. What, then, can be done to improve collaboration between the government and the madrasa sector? Can new institutions facilitate reform? What shape should such institutions take, and how might the reform process move forward? In this policy brief, we present the outcome of a series of consultations with madrasa representa-

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The Institutional Landscape

There exists not one religious education system in Afghanistan. Instead, the 'madrasa sector' is characterized by a variety of educational institutions that offer religious training at different levels. There is a clear divide between public and private schools, along with substantial differences between various private and public madrasas in terms of size, ideology and resources. The majority of the madrasas, however, are private schools that are not registered with the government or any private body.

The Government's Strategy

In 2006, the government of Afghanistan initiated a process to modernize the curriculum and enhance governmental oversight over the country's religious education institutions. The government's policy has had two main foci: (1) to encourage madrasas to register with the government and (2) to develop a new curriculum for Afghanistan's religious schools.

Registration

The new policy has made it obligatory for all madrasas to register with the Ministry of Education before the end of March 2011. So far, however, few madrasas have complied with the registration requirement. As of March 2011, some 700 government madrasas are registered with the Afghan Ministry of Education. The majority of the country's madrasas, however, are private schools that are not registered with the government or any private body. Figures remain uncertain, but the number of unregistered madrasas is likely to be in the thousands.

A general sentiment among those madrasas that have registered with the government is that they have received little in return for registration. Madrasa representatives are concerned about the ministry's capacity to follow up on the new strategy for religious education, and they question how the ministry will be able to deliver textbooks, services and support to the many private madrasas it has required to register.

Curriculum Reform

Both the content and the quality of religious education are issues of debate and contention in Afghanistan. The core of the madrasa tradi-

tion – education of children and training of religious leaders and clergy in the 'true interpretation of religion' – lies in the curriculum. In 2006, the Ministry of Education established a department tasked with developing a new curriculum for official madrasas. The new curriculum was presented at a conference for madrasa leaders in Jalalabad in March 2009, but was rejected. The scholars' main criticism was that the proposed curriculum was based on Saudi-inspired Salafi doctrine, not on the South Asian Hanafi Deobandi tradition that most private and official madrasas in Afghanistan follow.

Lack of Organizing Body

Currently, the private religious education sector can be described as disorganized, poorly resourced and vulnerable. The sector has no platform for inter-madrasa coordination or for collaboration with the government and other actors outside the madrasa sector. This lack of organizing or coordinating bodies within the Afghan madrasa sector means that there is both a real need and considerable potential for institution-building.

On the basis of consultations with representatives from the government, ulema, madrasa leaderships and teachers, we have identified a number of alternative models for institution-building in the Afghan madrasa sector. In our exploration of alternative models of madrasa coordination and organization, we have considered aspects related to governance (should governing bodies be governmental or private?), centralization (should organizational structures be centralized nationally, decentralized, or some combination of both approaches?) and denomination (should organizational structures be established along denominational or interdenominational lines?).

New Institutions

What is the preferred structure or shape of a madrasa board? When asked whether a governing body for the madrasa sector should be governmental or nongovernmental, about half of our respondents expressed a preference for a nongovernmental body independent of the state. Around one-fifth of those consulted favoured the creation of a governmental institution. The remaining group proposed a range of different options, including the es-

tablishment of a semi-governmental institution with considerable representation from Afghanistan's private madrasas. About one in ten of our respondents did not provide a response to this question.

Independent Body

Many of the respondents preferring a non-governmental body did so because they lacked confidence in the ability of state institutions to support the interests and respect the integrity of the private madrasa sector. Accordingly, they argued that a governing body for Afghanistan's private madrasas ought to be a nongovernmental entity, and one of its main functions would be to act as a forum for contact between the madrasas, the government and other relevant stakeholders

While many of Afghanistan's private madrasas are open to the idea of closer coordination between the madrasas and the government, there are also many that are wary of government interference in what are considered 'internal matters' – issues that they believe should be under the exclusive authority of qualified people within the madrasa sector and the clergy.

Another concern raised by the madrasas related to the Ministry of Education's capacity to implement the new policy. Madrasa representatives complained about lack of government support after registration and believe the ministry is ill-equipped to handle a huge governmental madrasa sector. At present, there also seems to be confusion about what registration with the government actually implies both in terms of what the government expects from the madrasas and in relation to what the government is prepared to deliver in terms of services and support.

Semi-Governmental Body

In the view of many of the respondents who favoured the establishment of a semi-governmental body, no decision on the question of how the madrasa sector should be governed should be made until further consultations had been held with the country's religious community – including ulema, madrasa principals and teachers. This group indicated that they would comply with the result of a nationwide consultation on the matter.

Governmental Body

Other respondents, mainly from the govern-

ment, expressed the view that it is the responsibility of the government to establish an institution to oversee the religious education sector. Many of the respondents who favoured the creation of a government body argued that a nongovernmental body would receive less support from the state. This group also believed that all private madrasas should be registered with the state, with no madrasas being allowed to operate privately and outside the government's control.

Centralized or Decentralized?

The large majority of the individuals consulted in the study recognized the need to establish an institution to manage affairs of common interest to all private and official madrasas in Afghanistan, as well as the benefits that such an approach would offer. But, should such an institution be centralized at the national level? At the subnational level? Or should it be a combination of both? In relation to this issue, a number of different ideas and opinions emerged during the consultations.

A National-Level Body with Provincial-Level Branches

More than four out of ten respondents suggested that a national-level body with branches at the provincial level should be established, equipped with a clear mandate and terms of reference. They believed that the large numbers of private madrasas currently existing in Afghanistan would require an organization with the capacity and staff to reach out to madrasas throughout the country, including its most remote areas. Some proposed a three-tiered structure, including also district-level representation.

One proposed model involved bringing together representatives from all of the madrasas of each province in a provincial-level council and then asking these to appoint representatives for a national-level body.

A National-Level Body

Almost three out of ten respondents believed that a national-level body would be sufficient. They felt that madrasas were able to handle their tasks well at the provincial and district levels and saw the task of a coordinating body as being limited to communication and to resolving challenges and problems in relation to the Afghan government and other national entities. They emphasized that a capacity to

coordinate on the national level was important for securing the future position of madrasas.

Other informants expressed the view that decisions on structure and centralization should be based on nationwide public consultations with religious scholars, ulema, madrasa principals and teachers. Nationwide public consultation was also supported by those who favoured the first two options. It was suggested that a pilot process in one province could be useful. If successful, this could then be expanded to other provinces or implemented at the national level.

Sectarian or Non-Sectarian Bodies?

Afghanistan's Muslim population is divided into Sunni and Shiite groups. The Sunnis constitute the majority, with some 85% of the population. The leading Sunni subject is the Deobandi school of thought, which spread to Afghanistan from the Indian subcontinent. The overall majority of Afghan Sunni Muslims follow the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence, which is also recognized as the official Sunni school in the Afghan Constitution. Other Sunni subjects include the Salafi school of thought, originating in Saudi Arabia, though this is a minority approach.

Asked to express their views on whether Sunni and Shiite Muslims should organize together or in separate madrasa boards, more than four out of ten respondents expressed a preference for a single board uniting Sunni and Shiite madrasas. The main reason for this was to prevent religious sectarian divides from becoming another identity fault-line (linguistic and regional divisions already exist), as is the case in neighbouring Pakistan and elsewhere. A joint madrasa board could have proportionate representation and establish mechanisms for handling issues common to all madrasas as well as those specific to the different sects and subjects.

Around one-fifth of the respondents favoured a 'two-in-one institution' – that is, one entity with two departments, one for Sunni and the other for Shiite Muslims. The main argument for having one organization is that the organizations it will represent all are religious education institutions that are part of a religious community, share many of the same basic principles and ideas, and have common interests, needs and demands *vis à vis* the state. It was argued that particular sectarian issues

could be managed separately. Some suggested that a system involving two separate institutions could be misused for political purposes and involved the risk of reinforcing sectarian divides.

More than a quarter of the respondents preferred that two separate institutions be established, one for Sunni and another for Shiite madrasas. Some of those in favour of such an approach argued that the creation of a joint Sunni–Shiite body would be premature and could result in increased sectarian tension and conflict, and that each side's lack of knowledge of the other hindered the creation of a joint institution, at least for the time being. Some, however, expressed the view that a joint Sunni–Shiite institution could be established at a later stage.

Potential Roles of a Madrasa Board

Informants for the present study identified the following potential roles for a madrasa boards:

Inter-Madrasa Collaboration

Currently there is little coordination, communication and collaboration among Afghanistan's various madrasas. Madrasa boards therefore offer great opportunities for improving the way madrasas work together, to help them to learn from each other's experiences, and to assist them in supporting each other. This can contribute to enhancing the quality of religious education through improvements to the curriculum and teaching methods. Closer collaboration is also necessary if madrasas are to develop standardized curriculum and teaching methods, which will be necessary if the government is to be able to recognize madrasa degrees.

Voice and Advocacy

A madrasa board can function as a representative of the madrasa sector *vis à vis* the state and other actors. It can present and look after the interests of the madrasas sector and advocate for madrasa rights and privileges. Enhanced cooperation and coordination between madrasas can help madrasas to take a common stand in relation to other stakeholders, as well as helping the advocacy work of madrasas on different levels.

A Platform for Collaboration

Until now, cooperation between madrasas and the state has been limited. Interaction has

mainly been informal and based on personal contacts. There exist few formal and organized forums or channels. Creating space for madrasa–state interaction without the involvement of state security agencies could potentially improve cooperation between the two sides and open for dialogue, which could contribute to enhancing knowledge and understanding of the various perspectives and interests involved in madrasa reform. The majority of the respondents agreed that the creation of appropriate governing bodies for the madrasa sector could facilitate communication and coordination between madrasas and the state.

The establishment of a madrasa board would create a new arena for madrasa–state interaction, and could be used as an opportunity for the state to redefine its relationship with the religious sector. It would send a positive message to the madrasas that the government is willing to collaborate with the ulema on new terms. Madrasa representatives believe that organizing madrasas in a madrasa board can help to unite the madrasas, promote positive competition between them and contribute to improving relations between the people and the state.

Potential Challenges

Some respondents were more pessimistic. They suggested that it will be difficult to establish a madrasa board that is representative of all madrasas with their different interests and agendas. However, while it is likely that a new body will face challenges, those respondents that favoured the creation of a madrasa board were positive that if the representatives of private madrasas and the government supported the process, those challenges could be overcome.

Experience from Other Countries

The majority of the people interviewed for this report looked with favour on the idea of drawing on the experience of neighbouring countries, particularly Pakistan. Many of the respondents from the madrasa sector had personal experience of the Pakistani madrasa system, which they believed was valuable for the Afghan context. Pakistan’s madrasa boards have an oversight role: they monitor all private madrasas to ensure the quality of both the management of the madrasas and the education they provide. The boards are in decide the curriculum, responsible for arranging exams in religious subjects and issue degree certificates. Pakistani madrasas are organized into five sectarian boards, which are then represented in an all-madrasa board that has become the focal point for interaction between the madrasas and the government of Pakistan. The Pakistani model can be modified for the Afghan context.

Next Steps

A number of concrete proposals for taking the current reform process further were put forward by the respondents.

Working Group

One way of advancing the reform process might be to establish a working group that with the help of non-state actors could solicit further opinion about reform. Potentially, such a working group could pave the way for the establishment of a formal madrasa board.

National- and Provincial-Level Conferences

The process to build new institutions should be initiated from a respected and well-established institution at the national level. At the provincial level, madrasas should nominate representatives for a national-level conference through a consultative process. The outcome of a national-level conference should

be shared in conferences at the provincial-level. This could prepare the ground for a more permanent representation to a national institution.

Exposure Visits

A national-level conference could appoint working groups or committees to travel to other Islamic countries to learn from their experiences with madrasa management and reform. Of particular relevance would be the experiences of Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, which all belong to the same South Asian madrasa tradition, have sizable madrasas sectors, and have diverse experience with madrasa development, madrasa–state relations and religious educational reform.

Nationwide Survey

It is difficult to assess the quality and level of education offered by Afghanistan’s madrasas without better information about the sector. A nationwide survey could be one way of getting an overview of the status and conditions of existing schools. This would give a better picture of the types of religious education being offered, which would make it possible to differentiate between schools that offer basic religious teachings for children and those that offer higher-level Islamic education and qualify as ‘madrasas’.

Further Consultations

Comprehensive and broad consultations with religious leaders and madrasa administrators from both private and official madrasas from all parts of the country are seen as key if a madrasa reform process is to be successful. Much seems to be in place for taking the madrasa reform process further in Afghanistan. Both the madrasas and the government are open to reform and the establishment of a governing body for the madrasa sector. However, the process is still in its initial stages and will require long-term commitment and a willingness to invest in terms of both time and resources ■

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THE PROJECT

This policy brief forms part of the project ‘Religious Institution-Building in Afghanistan: An Exploration’ and the report by the same name. It also draws on the project ‘The Transnational System of Religious Education in Afghanistan and Pakistan’ and the report ‘Beyond Borders: Diversity and Transnational Links in Afghan Religious Education’. Full versions of these reports may be downloaded at www.prio.no.

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