

The Madrasa Reform Programme in Pakistan: report of a policy workshop 9th October, 2008

A seminar on research on the state madrasa reform programme carried out as part of the Religions and Development research programme was held in Islamabad on 9 October 2008. The participants included senior representatives of all five *wafaqs* (Madrasa Education Boards): Wafaq-ul-Madaris Al-Salfia, Ahl-e-Hadith, Wafaq-ul-Madaris Al-Arabia (Deobandi), Wafaq-ul-Madaris Shia (Shia), Tanzeem ul Madaris Ahle-Sunnat-wal-Jamaat (Barelvi) and Rabta-ul-Madaris Al-Islamia). There were an equal number of representatives from the government, specifically officials involved in the state madrasa reform programme, and also participants from academic institutions, civil society organisations and the media. The fifty invited participants were selected for their knowledge of the working of madrasas and their involvement with the madrasa reform programme.

The main purpose of the workshop was to bring secular and religious elements together on the same platform to initiate a dialogue on the nature of and challenges faced by madrasa reforms, given that such interaction between the two sides is very rare in Pakistan.

The workshop, which was chaired by **Prof Mohammad Waseem**, the country coordinator for the Religions and Development Research Programme in Pakistan, started with two formal presentations. **Prof Tariq Rehman** from Quaid-i-Azam University, who is known for studies of the curriculum and student performance in madrasas, briefed the audience about his findings. He is of the view that madrasas do not have any direct link with militancy. He argued that the more or less the same curriculum has been taught in the madrasas for many centuries, so that the issue of militancy has more to do with the context in which present day madrasas are operating in Pakistan. He did, however, note that the religious curriculum in the madrasas has very different priorities from those reflected in the curriculum of secular schools, which can potentially contribute to the establishment of two parallel world views in the same society.

Dr Masooda Bano, University of Oxford, the author of the report entitled ***Contesting Ideologies and Struggle for Authority: State-Madrasa Engagement in Pakistan***, the research for which was produced as part of the Religions and Development Research Programme, then presented the core findings of the report and juxtaposed the Pakistani experience with that of Bangladesh and India, where similar studies have been undertaken. She noted that the madrasa reform programme has failed to win acceptance within the religious community, with the result that fewer than 300 of the 16,000 registered madrasas had accepted the reform package by 2008. She also noted numerous bureaucratic hurdles reflective of a lack of state commitment to the reform process.

The presentations were followed by a focused discussion to explore the policy implications of the findings and identify specific recommendations for more effective reform. First representatives from civil society were asked to raise their concerns about madrasas. After that, representatives of the madrasas were given time to respond and raise their concerns about the state reform programme. This led to a very vibrant discussion, which resulted in the seminar being extended for one and a half hours beyond its original three hour programme. The main thrust of the debate was that the ulama feel that they cannot trust the state, as it aims to secularize the madrasas rather than strengthening education facilities within them. Further, they felt

that there was a lot of misinformation about madrasas, which is resulting in the state devising irrelevant programmes and flawed policy interventions.

A policy brief based on the report and workshop is in preparation. The full report of the research may be downloaded from http://rad.bham.ac.uk/files/resourcesmodule/@random454f80f60b3f4/1211531042_working_paper_14_for_web.pdf