State-madrasas engagement: experiences from Pakistan and Bangladesh

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The study of FBOs is critical to understanding how religion in practice operates in a given society and supports or hinders achievement of development outcomes. As part of the Religion and Development programme, research was undertaken in Pakistan and Bangladesh, to examine if the different level of success of the state-led madrasa reforms programmes in the two countries enhances our understanding of the working of FBOs and religion in general.

The political elite in Pakistan and Bangladesh expressed commitment to modernizing the madrasa education soon after the inception of the country. However, while in Bangladesh there is today a fully developed Madrasah Education Board working under the Ministry of Education— which manages 9,000 Aliya (reformed madrasas) as compared to 10,000 Qomi (orthodox) madrasas— in Pakistan, despite the state identifying the need for madrasa reforms from as early as 1960s, it was only after 2001 that a reform programme was rolled out. Even then, seven years later, of 16000 registered madrasas only 300 have agreed to accept the reform programme. The two country studies show that trust in the reformer, the strength of financial incentives, and the specific characteristics of the population play an important role in determining the success of the reform programme.

The studies also show that, though there are alternative interpretations of religious texts, the ones that attract mass following are those advanced by religious scholars who demonstrate a true commitment to religious learning. Despite the relative success of the Bangladesh madrasa reform programmes, the programmes in neither country have had the effect of displacing the orthodox religious elite. Despite the rise of the Aliya madrasas in Bangladesh, the authority to reinterpret the religious texts remains in the hands of the ulama of the elite Qomi madrasas. This is because the Bangladesh government has focused on matching Islamic with secular education in the Aliya madrasas rather than to use them to produce more qualified ulama.