

Comprehensive review of NAP

Registration of madrassas and NAP

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Since the National Action Plan (NAP) was put in place, the progress on one of its points, about registration and regulation of madrassas, seems to be far from satisfactory.

A deadlock has set in between the government and madrassa authorities; both have failed to sort out the procedure for stepping ahead. Although some action has been taken against the suspected seminaries in Sindh and Punjab provinces, the government is facing resistance from the country's biggest network of seminaries, Wafaqul Madaaris Al-Arabia.

Certainly, registering and regulating madrassas are key planks of countering militancy. Religious seminaries are accused of promoting sectarianism and extremism in society, and some are even involved in violence in the country. Registering them now will help distinct between those serving the cause of religion and those abetting and siding with terrorists.

The government and concerned authorities should handle the matter amicably and sensibly by keeping the religious scholars and madrassa authorities on board.

Ground reality

Madrassas play an important role in Pakistan, a Muslim-majority state, by providing religious education, producing religious scholars, and

guiding on religious matters. The major concern on them is about their alleged role in spreading extremism and sectarianism; some are accused of supporting and/or being involved in militancy in the country.

The National Action Plan formulated to combat militancy and extremism also proposed registering and regulating madrassas, so as to crack down on those madrassas which are suspected of supporting or promoting militancy. Moreover, sectarian culture in the madrassas will be eliminated by gradually bringing them into the mainstream education sector.

Madrassas in Pakistan generally affiliate with one of the five *wafaqs* – private religious educational boards governed by religious elite – reflecting their school of thought. In addition, they are supposed to register with the government. Yet, not all madrassas associate with the board (*wafaq*) are registered with the government and there are a number of others madrassas which are neither registered with these five board nor the government.

Ever since NAP has been launched, religious seminaries have come under greater surveillance. Intelligence and law enforcement agencies are investigating unregistered seminaries and their links with terrorist activities, across the country.

Sindh government has identified at least 48 madrassas in the province having links with banned organizations; half of these seminaries operate in Karachi. In a meeting of the apex committee, Inspector General Sindh Police informed that there are as many as 9,590 seminaries reported in the province, that 6,503 of them are registered and 3,087 un-registered, and that 167 have been sealed for violating law.¹

When it comes to Punjab, according to a list submitted by the Punjab government to the Supreme Court, there are 13,782 madrassas in Punjab; of these, 6,479 are unregistered while 7,303 are registered.² Other reports revealed the presence of 147 foreign-funded seminaries in Punjab.³

As of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, official sources in the ministries of interior and religious affairs revealed to the media that the most unregistered madrassas are in KP, at 4,135.⁴ Another report mentioned the

presence of about 145 “highly-sensitive” seminaries in KP.⁵

The total number of unregistered madrassas in Balochistan is 266.⁶

The revealed facts and figures clearly demonstrate the significance of registration of seminaries, but the government seems confused on what they want to achieve through the NAP’s relevant clause.

Few steps towards the initiative

The apex committees, or the bodies which monitor the implementation of NAP at provincial level, are silent about the progress on registration and regulation of madrassas.⁷ Only few steps have been taken so far, which include one-time preparation of registration form for madrassas, a few search operations in seminaries, and random identifications of unregistered madrassas.

¹ “CM House meeting: 50 madrassas in Sindh linked with banned outfits,” *Express Tribune*, August 6, 2015.

² “Number crunching: Nearly half of Punjab’s seminaries are unregistered,” *Express Tribune*, August 3, 2015.

³ Irfan Haider, “IGP report reveals 147 foreign-funded seminaries in Punjab,” *Dawn*, March 4, 2015.

⁴ Zahid Gishkori, “Uniform standards: Most unregistered Madaris in K-P, says officials,” *Express Tribune*, January 18, 2015.

⁵ Ali Akbar, “145 KP seminaries classified 'highly sensitive' in govt reports,” *Dawn*, March 2, 2015.

⁶ Zahid Gishkori, “Uniform standards: Most unregistered Madaris in K-P, says officials,”

⁷ The apex committees consisting of both military and political leadership have been formed in all provinces to coordinate the security matters and to implement the National Action Plan.

On madrasa registration, the meetings between government and madrasa authorities failed in the very beginning, when madrasa authorities rejected the new registration form. Still, the religious affairs department continues to be in contact with madrasa authorities to work out a middle path.

Minister for religious affairs said that his ministry was focused on reforming the religious sector, streamlining madrasa registration and facilitating the seminaries.⁸ In the first step, the federal ministry for religious affairs and the new management of the Pakistan Madrasa Education Board (PMEB), formed in 2001 by the Musharraf government to modernize traditional seminaries and root out extremism, are making efforts to affiliate madrasas with the board, after a gap of several years.

Across the country, there are about 8,000 to 10,000 independent seminaries not linked with any of board (*wifaq*). The PMEB plans to get these seminaries affiliated with the state-run board, thereby helping them to use the government syllabus as well as taking their examinations and seeking vocational training.⁹ Chairman PMEB said that

the authorities are only aiming to approach those madrasas which are not associated with any board. This way, they will register with the government automatically.

Meanwhile, the federal government is also planning to constitute an Islamic Education Commission (IEC) to regulate religious seminaries. According to the plan, the IEC will help government regulate the educational structure in all these seminaries.¹⁰

Furthermore, the provincial governments are taking steps for registering madrasas, but it is difficult until the proper mechanism is launched at central level.

For example, Sindh government decided to coordinate with the religious scholars of all schools of thought to get all madrasas registered under the amended laws in the province, according to which no new seminary will be established without obtaining a No Objection Certificate (NOC) from the concerned deputy commissioner and home department as well as Sindh Building Control Authority (SBCA). In a recent apex committee meeting, it was decided to ensure the gathering of comprehensive details

⁸ Ashraf Malkham, "Madrasa reform continues to be ignored," *The News*, May 5, 2015.

⁹Zai Ur Rehman, "Fresh efforts being made to affiliate madrasas with PMEB," *The News*, June 26, 2015.

¹⁰ Noor Aftab, "Commission to regulate religious seminaries soon," *The News*, June 22, 2015.

about the madrassas in the province in accordance with the queries highlighted in recently prepared Performa by the Sindh government.

According to an official of Sindh government, provincial authorities have sought the guidelines from the federal government for registration of madrassas and even recommended some amendments to the process of registration of madrassas, but they are still waiting for the response.

The Punjab government claims it is successfully implementing the provisions of the action plan regarding the registration of madrassas and their foreign students in the province. The Punjab government shared the figure of registered and unregistered madrassas with the apex court and declared that the provincial authorities have completed geo-tagging of all registered and unregistered seminaries in the province.¹¹

According to Punjab government, there are 13,782 madrassas in the province and the provincial government now plans to start collecting the geographical data of seminaries. According to data collected by the government, there are around 480 foreign students

enrolled with the seminaries in the province whose visas have expired. The number of foreign students with valid visas and who are enrolled with seminaries in the province is said to be in excess of 400.¹²

Following NAP, the Sindh government has initiated the search operations in the seminaries that spread extremism. Police and Rangers raided several unregistered seminaries in Sukkur, seizing documents and phones and taking four clerics in custody for further questioning.¹³ According to media reports, the authorities have identified over 46 seminaries in Sindh with alleged links to terror groups. Of the 46 seminaries, 24 were located in Karachi, 12 in Hyderabad, four in Larkana and six in Sukkur.

Similarly, in Punjab province, police has recently arrested 14 suspects from madrassas in search operations in Lahore. The arrested people belonged to FATA, Quetta and southern Punjab who are living their without identification. Search operations were also conducted in several religious madrassas of different sects in Multan and Okara districts, and 16 suspects were arrested, besides recovering computers and other material.

¹¹ "Number crunching: Nearly half of Punjab's seminaries are unregistered," *Express Tribune*, August 3, 2015.

¹² Nasir Jamal, "Footprints: Madressahs: Still a class apart," *Dawn*, July 24, 2015.

¹³ "Seminaries raided, equipment, records seized," *Dawn*, June 15, 2015.

Success and failure

So little progress on the subject articulates the failure of government, which hasn't yet adopted any implementation mechanism to register and regulate the seminaries.

When it comes to madrassas, there are a number of issues, which can be neatly addressed by their registration and regulation.¹⁴

The government has rather made the entire issue controversial and complex. The matter should be kept simple by focusing only on the registration of madrassas, possible in consultation with madrasa authorities.

Alongside the registration process, other issues may resolve out gradually. The identification of suspected seminaries will also precede further actions.

The following reasons were behind the failure of government to achieve the NAP points on regulating and registering madrassas:

One, bureaucratic system continues to use delay techniques. Based on media reports, the madrasa registration issue is seen by a committee of bureaucrats coming from different departments like education, interior and religious

affairs departments. This divides the whole issue.

Two, the process of registering seminaries couldn't get complete, because of strong resistance from madrasa authorities.

Madrasa authorities cast doubts over government's unilateral process. The Ittehad Tanzeemat-e-Madaaris (ITM), the central body of religious educational institutions, strongly condemned the move as "against madrassas and religion". The government, on its part, failed to take madrasa authorities into confidence, who otherwise are willing to implement the registration process, provided they are informed about it.

Similarly, madrasa authorities are reluctant in allowing law-enforcement agencies to enter any seminary for search operation. Wafaqul Madaaris Al-Arabia announced protests countrywide against recent search operations, calling to stop them immediately.¹⁵

An official of the Wafaq from south Punjab complained that government's action against the seminaries reeks of discrimination against one particular sect, warning that such actions could pave way for fanaticism and sectarianism. He accused some administrators of

¹⁴ Mujtaba Rathore, "Madrasa reforms: the debate," *Conflict and Peace Studies* (PIPS)7(1): 25-42.

¹⁵ "Discontent as raids on seminaries continue," *Dawn*, August 8, 2015.

promoting sectarianism by including “peaceful and non-sectarian personalities” in the fourth schedule, which restricts their movement.

Three, in addition to fearing backlash from seminaries, the government also seems confused on how to deal with seminaries at all.

Besides the provincial governments, three federal departments are working on madrassa reforms. These are religious affairs ministry, provincial governments, and interior ministry. They lack coordination among each other, and seriousness too. They are functioning without any coordination on madrassa reforms program. Moreover, a committee tasked to curb religious persecution failed, too. Resultantly, the various departments are unable to reach any practical result on madrassas.

Four, lack of political will coupled with differences within the government over how to go about madrassas, have resulted into achieving the desired result merely a pipedream. The government’s efforts of reforming seminaries, this time, are no different from the past measures. Its dialogue with madrassa authorities is going nowhere. Madrassa authorities, on the other hand, think the government has no clear policy on madrassa reforms.

Conclusion

In the religious society of Pakistan where clergy are deeply-respected, it is difficult for any government to easily overcome their resistance. These days, they are opposed to the initiative of registering and regulating seminaries.

However, a sustained and results-oriented dialogue with them will ultimately find a way out towards that initiative, which will help mainstream the seminaries. All political and religious groups ought to make that way.

Instead of ignoring the seminary boards, which exercise power among its affiliates, the government may well implement the previous agreement signed between the religious affairs ministry and religious scholars.

Strong political will is also required to deal with the notorious elements in madrassas. Moreover, the sources of finances to madrassas should be identified, they should be regulated, and their curricula reorganized for promoting harmony.

In addition, actions against the madrassas involved in terrorism should be taken along a proper strategy prepared in consultation with religious authorities, thereby retaining their dignity.

As of the seminaries which are not linked with any terrorist or extremist

group, they could well be made part of counter-narrative against what terrorists and the extremists stand for.