

CRS Report for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

Education Reform in Pakistan

K. Alan Kronstadt
Analyst in Asian Affairs
Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division

Summary

Pakistan's primary education system ranks among the world's least effective. The Bush Administration, Congress, and the 9/11 Commission each have identified this issue as relevant to U.S. interests in South Asia. Legislation passed by the 108th Congress called for U.S. support to "improve and expand access to education for all [Pakistani] citizens" and required the Secretary of State to report on Pakistan's education reform strategy and the U.S. strategy to provide relevant assistance. This report reviews education reform efforts in Pakistan and U.S. assistance, and includes discussion of current policy. This report will be updated.

Problem Overview

U.S. policymakers have identified the poor quality of Pakistan's education system as relevant to both immediate and longer-term U.S. interests in South Asia.¹ The Bush Administration states that the top U.S. policy goal in South Asia is "combating terror and the conditions that breed terror in the frontline states of Afghanistan and Pakistan." It also contends that, "Education is absolutely crucial to Pakistan's development as a moderate, democratic nation." *The 9/11 Commission Report* recommends a long-term U.S. commitment to provide comprehensive support for Pakistan, including in the area of improving education. In passing the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 (P.L. 108-498), Congress endorsed this recommendation and included its own call for U.S. support to "improve and expand access to education for all [Pakistani] citizens." In addition, Sec. 5108 of the Foreign Operations FY2005 Appropriations bill

¹ Pakistan is one of only 12 world countries that spends less than 2% of its GNP on education. The World Bank reports that the average Pakistani boy receives only five years of schooling; the average girl just 2.5 years. The U.S. Agency for International Development claims that only two-thirds of Pakistani children aged 5-9 are ever enrolled in school and only one-third will complete the fifth grade. Pakistan's adult literacy rate is about 40% and is much lower among females. The U.N. Development Programme's 2004 Human Development Report assigns Pakistan the lowest "education index" of any country outside Africa. (See World Bank Group, "Pakistan Country Report," September 2004; USAID Grant Agreement No. 391-004-01; UNDP Human Development Report 2004 at [<http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2004/>].)

(P.L. 108-447) requires the Secretary of State to report to Congress on Pakistan's education reform strategy and the U.S. strategy to assist Islamabad in this effort.²

Both the United States and Pakistan are seen to have an interest in the strengthening of a Pakistani education system that will better prepare young citizens for gainful employment in an increasingly knowledge-based economy, as well as in curtailing or halting the teaching of militant/extremist values that are implicated in breeding terrorism.³ To some degree, and often through overt means, such values can be widely transmitted in "mainstream" (non-religious) schools through historical narratives that provide false or inaccurate accounts portraying Muslims and/or Pakistanis as victims of foreign aggression and repression.⁴ However, for many observers, it is the curriculum taught in some Pakistani religious schools (madrassas) that represents the most daunting sociocultural obstacle to President Musharraf's stated goal of "enlightened moderation." The number of madrassas in Pakistan increased more than ten-fold from 1947 to 1988, in apparent correspondence with the deterioration of Pakistan's public education system. The Taliban movement itself began among students attending Pakistani religious schools. Among the more than 10,000 madrassas training up to two million children in Pakistan are a small percentage that have been implicated in teaching militant anti-Western, anti-American, anti-Hindu, and even anti-Shia values. Press reports, citing Pakistani government estimates, claim that about 10% of all Pakistani school children attend madrassas and that 10% of madrassas have links to militant groups. Secretary of State Powell identified these madrassas as offering "programs that do nothing but prepare youngsters to be fundamentalists and to be terrorists." Even the Pakistani President concedes, "There are many [madrassas] which are involved in militancy and extremism."⁵ A sizable portion of these madrassas are financed and operated by Pakistani Islamist political parties such as Jamaat-e-Ulema Islam (JUI, closely linked to the Taliban), as well

² "State's Rocca Outlines Assistance Plans for South Asia," U.S. Department of State Washington File, March 2, 2004; "Statement on the Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Report," U.S. Department of State, August 19, 2004; Sections 12.1 and 12.2 of *The 9/11 Commission Report* at [<http://www.gpoaccess.gov/911/>]. In P.L. 108-447, Congress defined the term "education reform" in this context to include "efforts to expand and improve the secular education system in Pakistan, and to develop and utilize a moderate curriculum for private religious schools in Pakistan."

³ Pakistan's struggle with militant Sunni Islamic extremism appears for some to have become a matter of survival for that country (see CRS Report RL32259, *Terrorism in South Asia*).

⁴ The International Crisis Group reports that "There appear to be few differences between public school and madrassa syllabi with regard to the levels of intolerance that are assuming dangerous proportions" ("Pakistan: Reforming the Education Sector," ICG Report 84, October 7, 2004, p. 30). See also K.K. Aziz, *Murder of History: A Critique of History Books Used in Pakistan* (Lahore: Vanguard, 1993); A.H. Nayyar and Ahmed Salim, *The Subtle Subversion: The State of Curricula and Text Books in Pakistan* (Islamabad: Sustainable Development Policy Institute, 2004). See also CRS Report RS21654, *Islamic Religious Schools, Madrasas: Background*, by Christopher Blanchard.

⁵ Pervez Musharraf, "A Plea for Enlightened Moderation," *Washington Post*, June 1, 2004; C. Kraul, "Dollars to Help Pupils in Pakistan," *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 2003; O. Tohid, "Pakistan, U.S. Take On the Madrassas," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 24, 2004; Testimony of Colin Powell, "House Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Programs Holds Hearing on FY2005 Appropriations," FDCH Transcripts, March 10, 2004; "Transcript: Interview With Pervez Musharraf," CNN Late Edition, December 5, 2004.

as by Pakistani expatriates and other unknown foreign entities, many in Saudi Arabia.⁶ Up to two-thirds of Pakistan's seminaries are run by the Deobandi sect, known for its traditionally anti-Shia sentiment and in some instances linked to the Sipah-e-Sahaba, a Sunni terrorist group. Some senior members of the JUI reportedly have been linked to several U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations.⁷ The JUI chief, Fazlur Rehman, was in May 2004 named as Leader of the Opposition in Pakistan's Parliament.

Pakistani Policy

A state obligation to provide free and compulsory secondary education was included in Pakistan's 1973 Constitution. The Pakistan government's National Plan of Action for education is projected to cost about \$7.2 billion over the period 2001-2015. In December 2001, the government launched an Education Sector Reform (ESR) with seven main goals, among them significantly increasing the national literacy rate; providing universal education with increased completion rates and reduced gender disparity; and improving education quality through curriculum reform, teacher training, and assessment reform. An "Education for All" project, which Islamabad calls a special focus of ESR, was launched in 2001 and funded with about \$20 million in 2003. Beginning in 2005, English language classes are to be compulsory in all of Pakistan's public schools.⁸

Also among the stated ESR goals is bringing madrassa curriculum into the mainstream of Pakistan's general education system through the inclusion of "secular" subjects such as science. In August 2001, the Islamabad government created a Pakistan Madrassa Education Board to establish a network of "model madrassas" and regulate others. In January 2002, President Musharraf vowed to begin regulating Pakistan's religious schools, and his government launched a five-year, \$113 million plan to bring the teaching of "formal" (secular) subjects to 8,000 "willing" madrassas. However, no concrete action was taken until June of that year, when 115 madrassas were denied access to government assistance due to their alleged links to militancy, and Musharraf set a December 31, 2002, deadline for such schools to register with the government or face closure. In November 2003, the government decided to allocate about \$50 million annually to provide assistance to registered seminaries, especially by paying the salaries of teachers hired to teach non-religious subjects. In July 2004, Pakistan's then-education minister announced government agreements with private companies to provide computer education at all of the country's public schools. She later declared Islamabad's intention to provide financial grants to madrassas that seek to "impart modern-day education."⁹

⁶ See testimony of Co-Director of the Independent Task Force on Terrorism Financing Lee Wolosky Before the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee, "An Assessment of Current Efforts to Combat Terrorism Financing," June 15, 2004.

⁷ Khaled Ahmed, "Our Madrassas and Our World View," *Friday Times* (Lahore), March 7, 2003; Praveen Swami, "A Peacemaker From Pakistan," *Frontline* (Madras), August 15, 2003.

⁸ See Pakistan Ministry of Education, Education Division, at [<http://www.pakistan.gov.pk/education-division/index.jsp>]; "Education Minister Announces That English Will Be a Compulsory Subject," *Daily Jang* (Karachi, in Urdu), October 6, 2004.

⁹ Munir Ahmad, "Pakistan Blocks Aid to 115 Islamic Schools," Associated Press Newswires, June 3, 2002; Susannah Price, "Pakistan Religious Schools Deadline," BBC News, June 19,

U.S. Assistance

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is implementing a five-year, \$100 million bilateral agreement (signed in August 2002) to increase access to quality education throughout Pakistan, with an emphasis on the Baluchistan and Sindh provinces. Current USAID education-related projects in Pakistan include efforts to improve early education, engender democratic ideals, improve the quality of assessment and testing, provide training to educators, and construct or refurbish schools in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. Yet the most notable project is Education Sector Reform Assistance (ESRA), which accounts for more than three-quarters of the USAID-reported \$77.7 million budgeted to date. In this project, USAID contracted with the North Carolina-based Research Triangle Institute to 1) strengthen education policies and planning; 2) increase the capacity of teachers and education administrators; 3) improve youth and adult literacy; 4) expand public-private partnerships to improve access to and delivery of education services; and 5) establish teaching methods that instill democratic attitudes and behaviors among children and educators and draw families into the life of the school community. Former U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Nancy Powell has reported progress in these areas.¹⁰ USAID reports that FY2005 funding for its Primary Education and Literacy program in Pakistan will grow to nearly \$67 million, almost tripling the FY2004 outlay of \$24 million. There are concerns that U.S. funding to assist Pakistan's education reform efforts has thus far been too small to have significant effect.¹¹

Policy Discussion

In the longer-term interest of promoting moderation and democratic values in Pakistan, and in improving the socioeconomic status of its people, sector-wide reform of the education system appears vital. Some analysts suggest that donors such as the United States may do best to direct their resources at reform of Pakistan's public education sector, as they see in this the most effective and least controversial means of reversing the influence of Islamic extremists and their threat to Pakistani stability. Many observers find the root of problems with Pakistan's education system in *poverty* and inadequate public

⁹ (...continued)

2002; Syed Ifran Raza, "Registered Madrassas to Get Rs3 Billion," *Dawn* (Karachi), November 10, 2003; "Computer Education for All: Zubaida," *Dawn* (Karachi), July 20, 2004; "Madrassa Incentives Scheme to Be Expanded," *Dawn* (Karachi), July 27, 2004.

¹⁰ See U.S. Agency for International Development, "Pakistan Education Programs," at [http://www.usaid.gov/pk/program_sectors/education/program_summary.shtml]. "Just within the last year, we have trained 2,500 Pakistani teachers both here and in the United States; introduced early childhood education programs in more than 200 schools; provided classroom materials and playground equipment; refurbished 1,200 schools; and established 100 literacy centers for out of school youth and adults. We are helping District Education Officers in Sindh and Baluchistan improve planning, budgeting, and management. We are also rebuilding and furnishing 130 schools in FATA" (Ambassador Nancy Powell, "U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Pakistan," U.S. Department of State, August 20, 2004).

¹¹ In August 2004, 9/11 Commission Vice Chairman Lee Hamilton told a House panel that the current USAID program for Pakistan education reform was a "drop in the bucket" ("House International Relations Committee Holds Hearing on September 11 Commission Report," FDCH Transcripts, August 24, 2004).

financing. While wealthy citizens are able to send their children to private, English-medium schools, the vast majority of Pakistanis must choose between a deteriorated public system that can be physically difficult to access and religious schools that will feed, clothe, and oftentimes house their children for free.¹² Some analysts are critical of Pakistan's government for what they view as excessive spending on the military in a country where abject poverty is rife. Although expenditures on education have risen considerably over the past decade, Islamabad is set to spend nearly \$16 on defense for every \$1 spent on education this year. Corruption and economic demands also are factors. In many locales, schools and textbooks are available, and teachers are paid, but never report for work. USAID Administrator Natsios has called the existence of these "ghost schools" a "terrible problem" for Pakistan. Moreover, the use of child labor remains widespread in Pakistan and international human rights groups have identified "extensive" use of bonded child labor there, especially in agriculture and textile industries.¹³

Pakistani officials insist that President Musharraf is serious in his aims to bring madrassa curriculum closer in substance to that provided in non-religious schools, with the long-term goal being a curriculum that is nearly identical. In Pakistan, the issue of government and/or foreign interference in the operations of madrassas is an extremely sensitive one, in part due to a perception that the Pakistani government, at the alleged direction of the U.S. government, is seeking to "interfere with religion."¹⁴ U.S. (and Pakistani) officials emphasize that U.S. assistance efforts are district-wide and are not targeted at any individual schools or types of schools. Likewise, the United States claims to be putting no pressure on Pakistan's internal education policies. Some Western nongovernmental organizations, working with private donations, have teamed with local Islamic groups to reform madrassa curricula.¹⁵

Despite President Musharraf's repeated pledges to crack down on the more extremist madrassas in his country, there is little concrete evidence that he has done so. According to two observers, "most madrassas remain unregistered, their finances unregulated, and the government has yet to remove the jihadist and sectarian content of their curricula."¹⁶ Many speculate that Musharraf's reluctance to enforce reform efforts is rooted in his desire to remain on good terms with Pakistan's Islamist political parties, which are seen to be an

¹² "A Dead End for Afghan Children Adrift in Pakistan," *New York Times*, March 7, 2003.

¹³ Pakistan Ministry of Finance, "Budget at a Glance," at [<http://www.finance.gov.pk>]; "House Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Programs Holds Hearing on FY2005 Appropriations," FDCH Transcripts, May 13, 2004; U.S. Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2003 (released February 25, 2004); Human Rights Watch, "Contemporary Forms of Slavery in Pakistan," July 1995.

¹⁴ Author interview with Haroona Jatoi, Joint Educational Advisor, Curriculum Wing, Pakistan Ministry of Education, Islamabad, January 22, 2004. This official emphasized an assessment that Pakistan's semi-feudal landlord system — especially prevalent in Sindh — represents a much more serious obstacle to reform efforts than does Islamist resistance.

¹⁵ Author interviews with USAID officials.

¹⁶ Samina Ahmed and John Norton, "A 'Moderation' of Freedom," *Washington Post*, June 15, 2004. Author interviews with Pakistani government officials and scholars in Islamabad in January 2004 tended to confirm that movement on madrassa reform was slow, at best.

important part of his political base.¹⁷ More than three years after its creation, the Pakistan Madrassa Education Board appears to have had little success in fulfilling its mandate. Only three “model madrassas” have been established, and only a small fraction of Pakistan’s religious schools have registered (the Board has no ability to compel cooperation).¹⁸ Resistance to reform efforts is not limited to Islamist groups, but can also be seen in the statements of Pakistan’s top political leaders. An example is the April 2004 uproar over changes made to ninth- and tenth-grade syllabi, a clamor that caused the prime minister, education minister, and religious affairs minister to reaffirm their commitments to Islam and backpedal on planned curricula changes. The September 2004 replacement of Education Minister Zobaida Jalal with former intelligence chief Lt. Gen. Javed Ashraf Qazi was seen by some analysts as a setback to reform efforts, as Pakistan’s intelligence agency has long been viewed as a traditional ally of the country’s religious conservatives. Yet other observers see the move as potentially shielding the government from criticism by conservatives as it goes ahead with reform efforts.¹⁹

It appears that, even setting aside the question of President Musharraf’s sincerity and full commitment on this issue, resistance to the reform of Pakistan’s madrassas is fierce, and the schools identified as the most immediately threatening to Pakistani society and U.S. interests — though small in number — may be immune to governmental pressure due to their access to external funding sources and their close connections to powerful Islamist politicians. One nongovernmental report identifies centralized and “deeply politicized” control of Pakistan’s public education system — perhaps most especially of curriculum and textbooks — and an over-emphasis on Urdu-medium instruction to be important causes and exacerbators of the country’s ongoing ethnic and sectarian divisions. The report also criticizes centralized curricular decision-making as bringing about a rise in the Islamization of public syllabi, an outcome that may be the intent of national leaders seeking to manipulate religious fervor in pursuit of foreign policy goals in Kashmir and Afghanistan.²⁰ Given this view, combined with extreme Pakistani sensitivity to perceived interference in religious teaching, it may be that a focus on public sector reform currently is the best choice for donors. A years- or even decades-long effort to improve the quality of Pakistan’s education system and reduce the spread of religious-based militancy appears to be the course that both Pakistani and U.S. leaders have chosen. Attaining set objectives likely will require greater determination and a genuinely long-term commitment.

¹⁷ John Lancaster and Kamran Khan, “At an Islamic School, Hints of Extremist Ties,” *Washington Post*, June 13, 2004.

¹⁸ In November 2003, Pakistan’s education minister reportedly said that 1,200 madrassas had registered with the government (“U.S. Fears Seminaries Still Breeding ‘Extremists,’” *Dawn* (Karachi), November 8, 2003).

¹⁹ Even the “mainstream” opposition Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz joined a six-party Islamist alliance in vowing to resist the “secularization” of Pakistani society (“Syllabus Must Adhere to Islamic Spirit, Says Jamali” *Dawn* (Karachi), April 4, 2004; “We Won’t Change School Curricula, Says Zubaida,” *Daily Times* (Lahore), April 4, 2004; “No Plan to Change Madrassa Curriculum: Ejaz,” *Dawn* (Karachi), April 12, 2004; “PML-N Joins MMA Protest Over Issue of Curriculum,” *Dawn* (Karachi), April 8, 2004; B. Muralidhar Reddy, “Education in Pakistan,” *Hindu* (Madras), September 22, 2004; “Thinking of the Toxic Textbooks Again,” *Daily Times* (Lahore), December 8, 2004.

²⁰ “Pakistan: Reforming the Education Sector,” International Crisis Group Report 84, October 7, 2004.