

Islam and Politics

Renewal and Resistance in the Muslim World

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Editors

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Role of Religion in Afghan Politics: Evolution and Key Trends

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Afghanistan faces a serious crisis of political stability, threatening its modest development gains, the survival of its government, and the interests of the West and the international community. In order to meet these challenges, the country will need broad social unity and should therefore avoid alienating important bodies of opinion wherever possible. Integrating religious leadership into the political mainstream is essential to the viability and stability of the country's continued transition into a free and democratic political order. Equally important is to give religious practice an outlet in other aspects of public life, such as education.

Interviews with locals in six different provinces including Kabul, indicate a growing frustration with the government's lack of effort in integrating religious leaders into the political process.^[1] Showing respect for Islam can play a key role in building political legitimacy in a country whose population is overwhelmingly Muslim. *Madrassas*, or religious schools, are also a contentious issue. There is a concern in Afghanistan and among its Western supporters, that *madrassas* could be fostering antidemocratic or even terrorist ideologies. However, several nationwide surveys conducted during the last three years reveal the importance that the populace accords to education^[2] and the accepted prevalence of religion in education.

The international community, in showing its support to Afghanistan's government and the country's developmental process, must recognize the importance of Islam for the Afghan population and encourage its inclusion in the political process and in the formal educational system. However, it must also be careful not to be seen as interfering in religious matters, as this risks inflaming public sentiment. This paper examines recent trends in the role of religion in Afghan statecraft and in the context of broader political developments in the country. The paper also attempts to explain the historical evolution of the relationship between the state and religion.

Background

The last nationwide population census in Afghanistan was done in 1979, but current unofficial estimates put the Sunni population at around 80 percent of the total, with Shi'as

making up the rest (including a small minority of Ismailis comprising a few thousand people in the northeastern provinces). There are only tiny numbers of Sikhs, Hindus, and Zoroastrians living in the country. Afghan society is religiously conservative, and rulers have traditionally maintained close relations with the clergy. Rulers who instituted reforms that were seen as un-Islamic by the clerics and society often lost their popular support. Thus, the current administration of President Hamid Karzai has been wary of putting a secular face to the government. It has especially taken care to appear sensitive about protection of *madrassas* and shrines.

Some efforts were made early in the current peace process to include religious voices in politics. In 2001, the role of the religious establishment was formally recognized by its inclusion in the Bonn meeting that articulated the plan for governing the country following the ousting of the Taliban by the United States. In 2002, President Karzai reorganized the Shura-e Ulama (a council of religious scholars that advises on *sharia* law and other matters) and asked it to issue a religious edict that invalidated the Taliban's call for holy war against international coalition forces and the Afghan government. Since then, the engagement of religious figures in elections (2004) and constitutional arrangements (2005) has continued.

When he came to power in 2002, President Karzai inherited the *madrassas* that were built during the pre-Soviet and Taliban periods. In addition to these, the new government established a few *madrassas* as “an essential counterweight to the privately run *madrassas*,” in spite of intense pressure from the international community to refrain from doing so.^[3]

The role played by the Iranian and Pakistani *madrassas* in the Afghan resistance against the Soviet Union shaped the state policy in Afghanistan toward religion and its role in politics. The government was concerned that private *madrassas* in Afghanistan would proliferate through funds and charities in the country, as well as from individuals and groups abroad. Certain segments of the Karzai administration also believed that Afghan religious scholars were radicalized in *madrassas* in neighboring countries, especially in Pakistan and Iran. These segments of the administration felt the best way to stem the prospect of militant tendencies was to establish peaceful religious institutions domestically, thus minimizing the need for Afghans to go abroad for religious education.^[4]

Key Trends in Politics

Historically, several broad trends can be described. Several of them reflect the political and social realities of various periods during the last century, with the influence of religion in Afghanistan's politics declining steadily until the Soviet invasion, resurging during the *jihad* against the Soviets, and receding after the ouster of the Taliban.

The Changing Role of Ulama in Society

During most of the 20th century, there was a gradual erosion of the influence of the *Ulama* (legal scholars of Islam and the *sharia*). However, this trend has been reversed during the last three decades, largely because of ongoing conflicts.^[5] Historically, the central governments in Kabul have kept both the tribal leaders and the religious figures at arm's length and tried to limit or undermine their influence. The role of religious scholars and their influence, however, increased exponentially with the *jihad* against the Soviets and the subsequent civil war among the *mujahideen* factions and the Taliban regime. During each of these phases, religious preachers provided legitimacy to actions that often sanctioned violence in the name of Islam. During the last six years, however, because of the dependence of the government on the support from the international community, and Western nations in particular, the role of religious figures has declined. The current administration has done little, if anything, to seriously integrate the religious leaders into the political process. This is largely because of the Western world's apprehension of the link—both perceived and demonstrated—between religious education and violent extremism.

Historically, most local disputes in Afghanistan have been resolved by local elders, other influential figures, and religious leaders. The parties who played a role in this process, however, changed over the last 30 years, as the roles for commanders, warlords, and drug lords expanded, and the role of religious leaders declined during the last few years. During the period of Taliban rule and the enforcement of *sharia* law, the role and influence of religious leaders in resolving disputes expanded, followed by a decline since 2002.

The recent secularization of the legal system and establishment of a professional organization to administer law has also sometimes deprived the independent *Ulama* of their legal responsibilities.^[6] While the formal (Western style) justice system is in its infancy in Afghanistan, and several provinces do not yet have any formal legal presence outside of the provincial capitals, the government remains committed to making the system more secular. In many districts, people still prefer to resolve their disputes through tribal or informal means that include approaching the *Ulama*. Thus, change has been more at the policy level and largely in the cities, where there is a viable formal judicial system.

Rift between Religious Figures and the Government

The active role that *mullahs* (Islamic clerics) played in the Taliban government led the Karzai administration and the international community to view them with concern. The *mullahs* are seen as pro-Taliban, or “extremists” whose views are incompatible with the ideals of democracy, freedom, and the integration of Afghanistan into the international community. Thus, they are often sidelined in major political developments, and this greatly frustrates them.^[7]

The continuous rise in violence in Afghanistan has also decreased the space for those religious leaders who take moderate positions on issues. Over the last three years, several *mullahs* have been killed in Afghanistan and Pakistan, on the pretext that they were pro-government and anti-Taliban. At the same time, the government has also allegedly taken measures against *mullahs* who were antigovernment. The marginalization of the religious leaders, along with the government's inability to offer them protection, contributes to the widening gulf between religious actors and the government. In addition, conservative religious leaders believe the clergy should be independent of the government, and view any government support of the clergy as a strategy of co-optation to gain legitimacy.^[8]

Muslims, Infidels, Invaders, and Occupiers

Historically, leaders in Afghanistan have garnered popular support for their agendas by appealing to Muslim solidarity. Rulers have often presented themselves as the defenders of Islam and have made it seem as if their wars of conquest were carried out for religious motives. The international forces working in Afghanistan today also recognize the importance of religion in creating perceptions. In their public information campaigns, they have highlighted the fact that most casualties of Taliban attacks are Muslims, and that “true Muslims” do not kill innocent, unarmed Muslims. President Karzai has also repeatedly condemned Taliban attacks and the killing of innocent civilians as the acts of those who are “not good Muslims.”

The Taliban, for its part, issues its decrees with reference to the goal of fighting non-Muslims and liberating Afghanistan from the “infidels.” The Taliban website presents the Taliban as the savior of the Afghan population, its liberator from the clutches of Western occupiers. While largely a local movement with roots and support in Pakistan, the Taliban has increasingly made references to the global *jihad*, and to the conflicts in Chechnya, Kashmir, and Palestine, as instances of the oppression of Muslims by infidels. It uses religion with a goal of uniting Muslims around the world: its website posts its messages in local languages as well as in Arabic, English, and Urdu.

Tensions among the Government, Tribal Leaders, and Religious Scholars

The role of religion in society has varied in intensity throughout Afghanistan's history. Religious scholars and tribal elders have historically been the two most influential groups outside the formal government. During the *jihad* against the Soviet Union, religious scholars swiftly replaced tribal elders as the preeminent leaders. The emphasis on holy war against infidels gained momentum, and local authorities lost the capacity to influence events. Instead, Pan-Islamic solidarity and alliances among Afghans, Arabs, Chechens, Pakistanis, and others^[9] became the key to victory. Religion became the unifying element among disparate Afghan communities and between Afghans and their foreign allies. Even with the

advent of Afghanistan's democratically elected and Western-backed government in 2001, the tribal leaders, to a large extent, have not been able to reverse this trend. Although the populace is beginning to realize the importance of tribal structures and the leaders representing them, they have yet to be officially recognized by the government and integrated into the political process.

The relationship between government and religious actors in Afghanistan has always been complex. Governments in Kabul at times have sought approval for their actions, and even existence, from religious authorities. In return, the religious actors have expected the governments to follow their advice.^[10] At other times, however, governments in Kabul have tried to exert their independent influence on the populace and curb the power of the religious scholars. During the two British invasions in the 19th century, religion was used to rally the populace against foreign occupation, while the period between the two world wars was one of religious lassitude.^[11]

Although religious leaders have played a crucial role in the fortunes of Afghanistan during the last three decades of the 20th century, over the past few years they have been largely sidelined from mainstream politics. Their loss of position since the fall of the Taliban has been the result of changes in Afghan society wrought by refugees outside their influence returning from Pakistan and Iran, Western influences on the government, cultural influences resulting from foreign aid and from the presence of non-Afghans and returning Afghan expatriates, and the continuation of violent conflicts and the political instability and insecurity that accompany these.

Key Trends in Education

The Role of Secular Education in Nation Building and the Marginalization of Religious Education

Education has been slipping from the control of the *mawlawi* (clerics who run the *madrassas*) as the country becomes more market driven and internationally integrated. Competition from government and privately run schools is threatening the survival of small *madrassas*. Schools in Afghanistan are divided into those that follow the centralized state curriculum, which is predominantly secular, and those that are focused on the primacy of religious education. Tensions between these two education systems have played a significant role in the way the country has developed.^[12] On one side is the Islamic education system with *madrassas* preaching religion, while on the other is the secular education system of primary and secondary schools, and colleges and universities that graduate students as part of the internationally accepted formal education system.^[13] Secular schools are supported and funded by the Afghan government, and assisted by India, the United Kingdom, the United States, and members of the International Security Assistance Force. Afghanistan's two

groups of students—the religious and the secular—hold clashing views on the direction and progress of the country. With its international supporters investing in and encouraging secular education, the government is unable to prevent the marginalization of Islamic education. This could widen the rift between the religiously educated and the government.

Given the number of international actors shaping the forces of Afghanistan's development and democratic governance, it is not surprising that secular education has gained significant ground in recent years. Over 5 million children have attended school since 2002, and large segments of the population understand the proven link between education and higher standards of living. Secular educational resources and schools are available to the youth in urban areas, and they are eager to pursue these opportunities.

In the villages, however, the youth generally go for religious education because secular schools are unavailable, and because the endemic security challenges encourage people to seek refuge in tradition. This widens the gap between city and rural populations. Increasing emphasis on secular education and educators at the cost of neglecting the religious scholars has also bred discontent among the *mullahs*. A significant number cite their frustration with the government for not consulting them, or ignoring their advice when they do consult them.

Madrassas

Religious schools, or *madrassas*, which were present in Afghanistan since the early years of Islam's presence there, evolved under different rulers and in different environments throughout the 20th century. While traditionally seen as an indispensable part of Afghan society, religious education in Afghanistan has sometimes faced hostility or indifference from other countries. The people of Afghanistan consider these institutions and religious scholars to be an integral part of their history and identity, but the West generally views *madrassas* as a breeding ground for extremism.

There is little support in foreign governments for investing in religious education because of limited understanding of Afghanistan, and the perception of links between *madrassas* and extremism. There is also concern that international involvement in building *madrassas* would fuel popular perceptions in Afghanistan that non-Muslims are trying to meddle with the Islamic faith. Negative attitudes already exist toward Muslim countries that are actively funding Afghan *madrassas* and influencing the curriculum, such as Egypt, Iran, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. The Karzai administration has few nondonor resources of its own to invest, and is wary of *madrassas* that are funded from Iran and Pakistan. Afghans studying in *madrassas* abroad, and allegedly being indoctrinated by extremist ideologies, are also a cause of concern. Iran has been investing heavily in curriculum development in the schools in western Afghanistan, especially in the provinces on the border between Iran and

Afghanistan, with a goal to shape the curriculum to present a more pro-Iranian view of history. With Pakistan being the center of negative attention and defamation in Afghanistan, owing to its use as a base of insurgency against Kabul, Iran has apparently chosen a soft-power approach in the hopes of influencing the course of events in Afghanistan.

The potential role of *madrassas* in providing greater legitimacy to the state must be carefully considered. *Madrassas* are currently marginalized, often confined to rural areas, are underfunded, and lack the accountability standards found in a secular education system. Thus, they seem far less able to produce graduates who could provide the kind of political leadership needed to address current national challenges. Afghanistan's leadership needs to strike a balance between promoting higher quality religious education and opening up society to progressive thought and democratic ideals. It is important that the government establish state-owned and state-run *madrassas* to counter the private *madrassas* established through individual charities. This will enable the government to model a curriculum based on Islamic values balanced with a practical secular content.

Historical and Current Evolution of Education in Afghanistan

Seeking knowledge is an integral part of the Islamic tradition. *Madrassas* were first established in Afghanistan during the last years of the Umayyad caliphate in the eighth century, during the time when Islam was new to the region.^[14] These *madrassas* continued to grow in number and proliferated during the reign of the Temur Gorgani dynasty of Herat.^[15]

Following the creation of the modern Afghan kingdom by Ahmad Shah Abdali in 1747, and particularly in the face of subsequent British pressure, government interest in *madrassas* declined. As a result, few new schools, if any, were established. The thrust of government policy focused on the creation of a system of schools more amenable to the purposes of the monarchy, and religious subjects were introduced into that system. Thus, predominantly religious education continued largely through individual scholarly efforts.^[16]

An increase in the number of *madrassas* took place during the middle years of the 20th century and continued until the Soviet invasion in 1978. Along with these *madrassas*, centers for *Tahfeez-e-Qur'an* (memorizing the Holy Qur'an) also sprang up.^[17]

After the Soviet invasion, the number of *madrassas* grew exponentially in areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan controlled by the anti-Soviet Afghan *mujahideen*, especially during the military regime of Zia ul Haq in Pakistan. The new *madrassas* were funded by various external sources, including the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), foreign governments, and nongovernmental Muslim welfare organizations. These organizations also funded *madrassas* for Afghan refugees and others outside of Afghanistan. For example, large theological seminaries were established along the Afghan-Pakistan border to create

a religiously motivated cadre to fight the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Students in these seminaries were Afghans, Arabs, Chechens, Egyptians, Pakistanis, and Saudis who were taught to fight the “Godless” Russians and “ensure that Afghanistan was liberated so it could be established as a good religious state.” The atmosphere was such that, according to a recent study, “Students learned basic mathematics by counting dead Russians and hand grenades.”^[18]

Between 1994 and 1996, the Taliban gradually expanded its influence in Afghanistan, starting in the Pashtun heartland of Kandahar and moving north and west. As a movement that originated in *madrassas* in Pakistan, the Taliban paid special attention to the establishment and regularization of *madrassas* in Afghanistan. It established six major *madrassas* in Kabul, Kandahar, Jalalabad, Herat, Ghazni, and Mazar-e-Sharif, respectively. It also established hundreds of smaller institutions, and registered them with the Religious Education Department of the Ministry of Education.^[19]

Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the Karzai administration has viewed *madrassas* as a possible source of the Taliban resurgence. Many *madrassas* subsequently closed down, not by government decree, but because of lack of funding from the government. In addition, the leading backers of the Karzai administration among Western governments do not appreciate the role and significance of *madrassas* in Afghanistan. Today there is a large number of remaining *madrassas* that struggle financially to support themselves and do not have the resources to accommodate all students desiring such religious education. This has created a gap between the demand for religious education and the ability of the state to provide it.

Conclusion

Afghanistan needs political leadership that is both democratic and progressive during its current transition. Broad participation requires that the political elite include those who reflect the religious values of the society. There is a need for openness and dialogue among the religious and nonreligious actors to find common ground for collaboration toward nation building. The religious actors need to respect the contributions of the international community in Afghanistan and recognize their presence as constructive to the rebuilding process. They also need to understand Afghanistan’s current thrust toward democratic reforms and accept it in light of the international backing for same. The nonreligious actors—the international community, NGOs, and most of all secular and progressive Afghans—need to understand the importance of religion in society and accord it the recognition it deserves. They also need to realize the historical role of religion as a uniting force, and work toward helping Afghanistan’s government integrate religious leaders into the political mainstream.

Religious leaders in Afghanistan currently lack resources and have lost credibility with the general population, and are thus easy prey for the antigovernment elements and the Taliban, who manipulate them against national interest. Empowering religious leaders in districts and provinces and providing them with the necessary resources to carry out their religious activities could be a concrete way to decrease their alienation and integrate them formally into the nation-building process. The integration into the government of Mullah Mutawakkil, former foreign minister under the Taliban regime, is a positive sign, yet more needs to be done to bring back other religious leaders who have been sidelined.

In order for Afghanistan to make the transition into an economically and politically stable country, a serious commitment to investing resources in education is necessary. Many Afghans, while embracing Western democratic values, do not countenance foreign interference in religious matters. While they appreciate the importance of secular education, they do not wish to embrace it at the cost of abandoning religious values. Any thrust toward secularization in education should therefore be complemented by serious commitment to and investment in religious education. The private *madrassas*, for now, do not seem interested in registering themselves with the government, as they see it as an intrusion in their right to impart education independently. They should be encouraged to continue their religious-based education, but an oversight body should be created to prevent them from teaching violent interpretations of Islam. Finding ways to increase the interface between religious and secular education would be a positive step forward.

Religious authorities need to be provided with ample recognition and resources to be able to practically exercise the ideological influence they have in the communities. The international community and the Afghan government also need to recognize the role of religious figures as partners in the country's nation building. Religious actors carry tremendous potential either to stabilize or destabilize the country through their influence. Whether or not their role contributes constructively to nation building depends on how well they are integrated into the political process. That is the challenge the Afghan government faces: balancing the religious nature of the society with the progressive needs of the nation.

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