

Pakistan struggles with how to regulate religious schools

by [Naveed Ahmad](#) in the [January 21, 2015](#) issue

The killing of 134 children in a Peshawar school renewed concerns about Pakistan's unfinished agenda of uprooting militancy and intolerance.

On December 21 authorities arrested several suspects, but the identities of the seven Taliban terrorists involved is not yet clear. They are assumed to be graduates of some of the country's many *madaris* (plural of *madrassa* in Arabic) who wanted revenge for the Pakistani army's ongoing military operations in Waziristan. The Peshawar school served the children of army officers.

Leaders of Wafaq ul Madaris Al- Arabia—an umbrella body of seminaries—condemned the terrorist act. Yet these clerics now fear the government will crack down on the seminary system.

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, religious seminaries proliferated in Pakistan with the aim of preparing foot soldiers, or mujahideen, to fight the communists. With assistance from the United States, the growth of these religious schools went unchecked as Pakistanis and youth from other Muslim countries enrolled alongside the Afghans.

But there was no governmental oversight on the seminaries' curricula and funding sources, and in 1996, prime minister Benazir Bhutto discontinued a requirement that new schools register with the state. The decision led to the mushrooming of unregistered seminaries with a narrow Islamist bent.

Pakistani law defines religious seminaries as institutions providing boarding and lodging.

Two attempts have been made since September 11, 2001, to bring the autonomous seminaries into the mainstream. Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's president from 2002 to 2008, briefly reinstated the registration process and required seminaries to submit audited financial statements along with a list of donors. But the military dictator lost interest in reform when it faced political challenges.

Through a memorandum of understanding with another umbrella organization of seminaries—Ittehad-e-Tanzeemate-Madaris—the schools consented to include science as part of the matriculation requirements. But the memorandum never became law because the government failed to produce legislation.

Each year, some 200,000 youth graduate from more than 26,000 religious schools, according to the ministry of religious affairs.

“Mostly the *madaris* graduates are either jobless or employed for less than \$100 monthly to work as prayer leaders,” said Wakeel Ahmad Khan, a former secretary of religious affairs and an expert on seminary reforms. “They are creating jobless young people who have no career.”

Analysts agree that such hopeless youth become easy prey to hard-line militants.

With the rise of the Islamic State, some hard-line seminaries are bracing to play a central role in a sectarian proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

“The growth of IS could result in a greater emphasis on anti-Shi‘ite terrorism,” said Arif Rafiq, an adjunct scholar at the Middle East Institute in Washington, D.C., who studies sectarian violence in Pakistan. “And, as a reaction to this, we may see a further radicalization of the Shi‘ite.”

But Rafiq said not all seminaries produce terrorists. And, indeed, many seminaries have opted to provide science, math, computers, and English-language lessons alongside religious instruction.

The Idara Uloom-e-Islami, or the Institute of Islamic Sciences, in Islamabad is an example of a seminary that blends religious education with secular studies. It competes with Islamabad’s elite schools. Its tenth and 12th grade students score on a par with students at state-run schools.

Sprawling over a nine-acre campus that is devoid of heating and curtains in the winter, the school has 581 students from across the country, housed in a four-level residential block.

“Only 17 percent of students can afford to pay our modest fee,” said Faiz-ur-Rehman Usmani, founding president of the institute. “We have to raise money for the teachers’ salaries and everyday expenses.”

The biggest challenge for the administrators has been high turnover of the teaching staff due to low salaries and lack of facilities or subsidies.

“Training of religious teachers is as important as introduction of modern sciences, literature, and arts in the curricula,” said Abdul Ahad, an activist who grew up attending a *madrassa* and now advocates for reforming the system. “Extremism and intolerance is embedded in the culture and the curricula of the religious institutions, which must be replaced immediately.”

Ahad advocates a more stringent supervision of seminaries.

“The government must have a greater role in determining their curricula, quality of teachers, and standard of examination by bringing them into the mainstream,” he said. “The problem, however, has been incompetence in governance and lack of political will.”

While the public mood in Pakistan is ripe for introspection and course correction at the state level, the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has yet to address the long-standing issue of soaring religious intolerance.

“Sectarianism is a long-term challenge in Pakistan,” said Rafiq, who researches policy making in Pakistan and writes a column for Pakistan’s *Express Tribune*, an English-language daily. “It’s resolvable, but it requires the country’s political leaders to stand up for intersectorian unity and isolate agitators and terrorists who seek to deepen sectarian enmity.” —Religion News Service

*This article was edited on January 5, 2014.*