



Policy Forum Report: Pakistan at the Crossroads
February 23, 2012

Background

On February 23, 2012, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) and American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) convened a Policy Forum for key Congressional and Executive Branch staff and selected representatives of the American Muslim community to discuss current challenges in Pakistan. The following is a summary of the insights that emerged from the discussion.

Current Situation

Pakistan is the foremost U.S. national security challenge in the world today in terms of the potential linkage of religious extremism to nuclear weapons. The second most populous Muslim country in the world, Pakistan has a challenging history and a political and social system that is heavily influenced by patronage and family networks. However, it seems unlikely that an “Arab Spring” revolutionary-style movement will develop in Pakistan because of the country’s democratic leanings and its judiciary whose independence is growing over time. A recent poll found that 59% of the population feels that voting gives them a chance to influence decision-making. Despite its democratic trappings, though, Pakistan remains largely feudal in nature. Those on the top are basically uninterested in empowering those on the bottom— a possible legacy of the country’s Indian roots. Of even greater concern is the fact that moderates are being increasingly marginalized by the extremists, as made evident by the recent assassinations of the Governor of Punjab (January 2011) and Pakistan’s Federal Minister for Minorities Affairs (March 2011). Ongoing tensions between the political leadership, the military, and the judiciary only add further fuel to the fire. Beyond Pakistan’s internal problems, Kashmir remains an ongoing point of contention with India.

Role of Education

Both the public schools and the madrasas (private religious schools) contribute to shaping societal development in Pakistan. While madrasas account for a small percentage of the total student population, they have an impact disproportionate to their numbers owing to the fact that many madrasa leaders also serve as imams, who reach thousands through their Friday sermons in the mosques. Moreover, the madrasa network is one of the few functional institutions in Pakistan, aside from the mosques, with which large numbers of Pakistanis interact. Most other institutions are a part of either the local or national government. The potential of madrasas to influence perspectives extends beyond simply providing an education; they also provide guidance and rulings on how one should behave to be considered a good Muslim.

While madrasas directly connected to militant activity are in the minority, radical teachings in a number of others help create an atmosphere conducive to extremism. There have been multiple calls for madrasa reform; but within most policy-making circles, it is often framed as an issue of promoting secularization, as opposed to educational improvement. This perspective hinders the development of reform efforts consistent with the religious purposes of the madrasas and the wishes of many Pakistanis. One USG participant noted that ICRD’s own madrasa enhancement effort, which has been conducted in partnership with the madrasa leaders (and that to date has provided educational training to 2700 madrasa teachers from more than 1600 madrasas), has been enthusiastically embraced by Muslim clerics.

The public school system and the content of its textbooks were also discussed. Although many agreed that textbook content doesn’t necessarily lead directly to violence, (especially between Sunnis and Shias), it does shape popular views with respect to minorities more generally. The Pakistani government has made some efforts to reform textbook content, but more remains to be done. The US Commission on

International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recently published a report on how religious minorities are negatively depicted in the Pakistani educational system (both public schools and madrasas) and provided a number of recommendations for reform.

Blasphemy Laws and Religious Tolerance

Pakistan's blasphemy laws are an ongoing source of controversy within the country. Debate about them is complicated by the fact that many Pakistanis are illiterate and have not read them; nor are they familiar with the Qur'anic passages on which these laws are supposedly based. Further, they have been unevenly applied against non-Muslims, which was not the original legislative intent. When originally drafted, these laws were meant to protect all religions, not just Islam.

Increasingly, a small minority of people willing to use violence have sought to control discussions on accepted interpretations of what it means to be a good Muslim. The introduction of violence into such discourse has made candid and open discussions on issues like the blasphemy laws dangerous, difficult, and increasingly rare.

Economy

Pakistan is a young country with a struggling economy. Two-thirds of the population is under the age of 30, and employment opportunities are quite limited. This coupled with the difficulties of accessing quality education clearly contribute to the radicalization. Despite such problems, the fact that Karachi and Lahore are bustling is evidence of the general resilience and ingenuity of the people.

US-Pakistan Relations

The US-Pakistan relationship faces numerous challenges, ranging from terrorism and the war in Afghanistan on the one hand to economic hardship and looming energy and water shortages on the other. Because of differing strategic priorities, there is widespread mistrust between the two countries. This misalignment of strategic interests is reflected in Pakistan's reluctance to crack down on the Haqqani network, which is clearly a threat to U.S. interests but less so to those of Pakistan. Having lost more than 30,000 lives in the war on terror, Pakistan gives understandable priority to those challenges that threaten them most directly.

Beneath the surface, the conflicts in Afghanistan and Kashmir fuel Pakistani support for the Afghan Taliban because of Pakistan's ongoing perceived need for a tight bond with Afghanistan in order to provide strategic depth for any future confrontation with India. Included among the other contributors to current US-Pakistani tensions are a proposed (though not widely supported)¹ US Congressional resolution calling for self-determination for the Pakistani province of Balochistan and America's civil-nuclear pact with India (not to mention the Bin Laden attack, and the deaths of 25 Pakistani soldiers in a NATO airstrike last November).

US funding to Pakistan has provoked heated debate within the United States. Approximately \$22 billion in aid has been given to Pakistan, but inadequate transparency has led to significant concerns about financial accountability and no small degree of frustration among US policymakers. Distrust of Pakistan more generally and the fact that indigenous organizations typically have little capacity to administer aid properly have delayed and complicated the continued extension of US aid. There is general agreement that more money should be invested in education and infrastructure versus the military; however, the much-needed Kerry-Lugar funding to assist Pakistan in building schools, roads, clinics and other civil society projects has been held up by the Senate Appropriations Committee as it debates how these funds can be allocated more effectively. These same concerns do not apply to disaster relief as the United States has provided major humanitarian assistance in response to the major earthquake of several years ago and the more recent devastating floods.

Regional partnerships to deliver U.S. aid, whether with other Muslim countries or international organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), were suggested as a way to address existing limitations on US development work in Pakistan (including the stigma that often results from accepting American funds).

Most Americans and Pakistanis have little exposure to one another beyond the often inflammatory stories in the media, and the resulting Anti-Americanism in Pakistan and American distrust of Pakistani intentions collectively contribute to mutual mistrust. Negative perceptions between populations, in turn, make it difficult for American and Pakistani government officials to engage constructively with one another. People-to-people initiatives could help bridge this gap, with exchange visits suggested as the leading antidote.ⁱⁱ

The International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) is a Washington-based NGO which addresses identity-based conflicts that escape the grasp of traditional diplomacy by incorporating religion as part of the solution. American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) is an informal group of Muslim community leaders and scholars that seeks to foster a constructive partnership between the American Muslim community and the US Government for the purpose of advancing the national interest. The views expressed in this brief may not necessarily represent the views of ICRD or AMCE.

ⁱ The resolution was sponsored by three Republicans. The American Embassy in Islamabad has issued a counter statement insisting that the United States respects Pakistan's sovereignty and does not support independence for Balochistan.

ⁱⁱ Visits of madrasa leaders to the United States under the auspices of ICRD have led to changed perceptions of the United States which delegates have later shared with their communities. They have also facilitated new efforts by madrasa leaders to implement educational reforms. Along these same lines, ICRD and Intersections International Inc. are creating a US-Pakistani Interreligious Consortium that will bring American and Pakistani interfaith leaders together to address issues of mutual concern and to develop capacity-building action plans for the future