

To defang Taliban, some look to private schools

By NAHAL TOOSI (AP) – Nov 7, 2009

QUTBAL, Pakistan — The schoolhouse is so tiny that dozens of pupils have to sit outdoors. They're lucky if their teachers have more than a basic education. And the chanting of math equations and Quranic verses gets so loud that the children have a hard time hearing themselves.

Yet the pupils love the Islamia Model School, one of thousands of private schools popping up in Pakistan. Unlike at area public schools, Islamia's seven teachers show up regularly to work. Unlike at religious schools, its curriculum extends well beyond Islam.

Plus, it has desks and chairs — no small thing to the many poor families who enroll their children here.

Pakistan is seeing a surge in private schools, a trend some find hopeful in a country where the government education system is decrepit and the other alternative is religious schools, known here as madrasas, which offer little education beyond memorizing the Quran and are seen as one source of Islamic militancy.

The U.S., for one, says it plans to invest in private schools as part of a multibillion-dollar aid package designed to erode extremism in the nuclear-armed country battered by Taliban attacks.

"The quality of education in the public sector is deteriorating day by day," said T.M. Qureshi, a Ministry of Education official. "When there's a vacuum of quality, someone will fill it."

According to UNESCO figures, Pakistan spends 2.9 percent of its gross domestic product on education, slightly less than India's 3.2 percent and well below the U.S.'s 5.2 percent.

One reason education has historically been a low priority for Pakistani governments, experts say, is that the governing elite can afford to send their children to the best private schools or to academies abroad. Another, the experts say, is the feudal structures in the rural areas that give landowners an incentive to keep farm workers uneducated and submissive.

Only around half of Pakistani adults can read, schools often lack basic amenities like water, teachers get away with absences, and the bureaucracy is cumbersome.

But since the mid-1990s, small, inexpensive private schools, once an urban phenomenon, have been sprouting in earnest in the poorer countryside, offering relatively affordable tuition, according to a 2008 World Bank report.

Between 2000 and 2005, their number grew from 32,000 to 47,000, the report said. More recent Pakistani government statistics put the figure at more than 58,000. Around one-third of Pakistan's 33 million students attend a range of private schools, far more than the 1.6 million in the 12,000 madrasas.

The private schools tend to outperform their government peers academically, though generally speaking, standards are low across the board, said Tahir Andrabi, an economics professor at Pomona College in California who has studied the trend.

In the big picture, proponents of private schools echo the argument for charter schools in the U.S. — that they can make schools better and children more educated, and in Pakistan's case dent poverty and the appeal of extremism.

Still, analysts say they are no cure-all, cautioning that insurgent movements emerge for reasons well beyond a glut of youth with little secular education.

"It's better to have private schools than madrasas," said Pervez Hoodbhoy, an academic and outspoken critic of Pakistan's education policies. "On the other hand, a lot of these private schools teach a very high amount of religious content. It's not a full solution."

The Islamia Model School in Qutbal, a town of 5,000 about 40 kilometers (25 miles) outside the capital, Islamabad, opened its doors in 2004, and now teaches 98 children to fifth grade, said owner and headmaster Mohammad Yaqoob Khan, a 52-year-old retired government teacher. Around half the pupils are girls.

Students pay an average of \$1.50 a month in tuition.

The subjects include Islamic studies, but also math, reading and writing, and English, the lingua franca from British colonial times that is still the key to career advancement.

One recent day, children in one of the three indoor classrooms took turns leading the others in learning new English words.

"F is for flag!" a girl yelled as she swept a wooden pointer along the sentence on the blackboard.

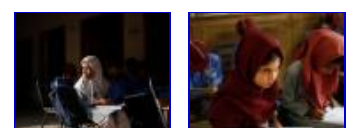
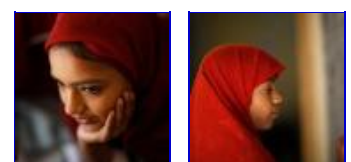
Like many schools in South Asia, the teaching appeared to be through memorization, not critical thinking. One teacher smacked a boy in the face for misunderstanding a math question. The

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In this photo taken on Tuesday, Oct. 13, 2009, children leave their school after classes in Qutbal, Pakistan. Pakistan is seeing a surge in private schools, a trend some find hopeful in a country where the government education system is decrepit and the other alternative is the madrasas, religious schools which offer little education beyond memorizing the Quran and are seen as one source of Islamic militancy. (AP Photo/Alexandre Meneghini)



pupils seemed content, nonetheless.

"We have furniture here," said Rimsha Mehmood, an almond-eyed 10-year-old girl who used to attend a government school.

Islamia doesn't have enough room to add more grades, so older students eventually have to turn to the higher-level government schools or find other private schools, Khan said. He said the government system is frustrating because there is little accountability and parents feel they have no voice in their children's education.

"We feel that we have influence in private schools," he said. "The parents visit here and ask about their children."

It was a similar story across the town at the Pakistan Public School, which is actually a private school with more than 300 boys and girls and charges nearly twice as much on average as Islamia. But mothers collecting their children after working for hours in the fields said the private option was worth it.

"The government schools' standards are quite poor," said Tanveer Bibi, who has two children in the school.

The resources and quality of the various private schools in Pakistan vary widely, even within a town.

At the Pakistan Public School teachers can earn more than \$25 a month, owner Mushtaq Ahmad Khan said. Islamia pays its teachers less than \$10 a month. ("It's pocket change," one Islamia teacher sighed.)

A sliver of Washington's planned aid package will go into private schools, said an official with the U.S. Agency for International Development, speaking on condition of anonymity due to diplomatic protocol. The official declined to elaborate, saying the planning was still in the works.

Qureshi, the Education Ministry official, said he feared that outside donors could end up investing in a sector that has little oversight and often uneven results. Plus, it could spur the already lackadaisical government to do even less.

"The private schools are not doing service in the true sense — they are commercial," he said. "If they are strengthened, the public sector will grow more weak."

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