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ISLAM IN ASIA: PEOPLE, PRACTICES, TRADITIONS

Ethan Casey, Journalist and South Asia M.A. Student,
UW Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies

WEEK 2

Education in Pakistan

Pakistan is in the news constantly these days, but for only one thing: its importance as an ally or obstacle — it's often hard to tell which — in the U.S. government's post-9/11 project of combating Islamist terrorism. Relations between the U.S. and Pakistani governments are increasingly tense over the future conduct of the war in Afghanistan, and controversial cross-border attacks inside Pakistan by unmanned American aircraft called drones — which Pakistanis claim kill more civilians than terrorists do — have left the Pakistani government feeling vulnerable and distracted. In addition, the killing of al-Qaeda mastermind Osama bin Laden, found hiding in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad, dealt a severe blow to any sympathy many Americans otherwise might have felt toward Pakistan.

In such circumstances, it's extremely difficult for Pakistan's weak civilian government to meet its basic obligations to its fast-growing and increasingly young population. With more than 170 million inhabitants, Pakistan is the sixth-most populous country in the world, and more than 40 percent of its population is said to be under the age of 15. Even in peacetime, feeding, educating and employing so many young citizens would be an enormous challenge. Tragically, Pakistan's role as a frontline state in the U.S.-led War on Terror makes meeting its basic obligations nearly impossible.

The choice of all of Pakistan's governments — both civilian and military — since its 1947 independence from Great Britain to prioritize defense, as well as its long history of enmity with India, has left education and other human needs chronically underfunded and neglected. Add to this the country's failure ever to implement effective land reform, and Pakistan remains a highly inequitable and unstable society. Its largest city, Karachi, has burgeoned to nearly 20 million people with an influx of refugees from violent war-torn border areas. In many rural areas still controlled by wealthy land-owning "feudals," literacy rates are as low as 5 percent.

With the government either unable or unwilling to prioritize education, a wide range of nongovernmental

organizations have stepped in to meet the need. With little central direction or leadership from the state, the impact of these NGOs is uneven and minimal, and religious and more secular-minded groups have competing agendas. Still, much excellent work is being done, particularly by concerned members of Pakistan's educated and resourceful elite classes and expatriate communities living in the United States and elsewhere overseas.

Most Americans are aware of education issues in Pakistan because of "madrassas" — Islamic religious schools. Many of these are legitimate and peaceful, but others foster hatred and violence against the "infidel" West. However, many private groups, both religious and secular, are working systematically and effectively to improve primary and secondary education in Pakistan and to make it more widely available.

For example, The Citizens Foundation, an NGO founded by Karachi businessmen in the mid-1990s, now runs nearly 1,000 purpose-built primary and secondary schools throughout Pakistan, in both urban and rural areas, with an emphasis on high-quality schooling to prepare poor children for higher education and professional careers. The Human Development Foundation, founded by Pakistani-American physicians and with U.S. headquarters near Chicago, provides community health care as well as primary education. Other well-run organizations founded or supported by Pakistani expatriates living in the United States include California-based Developments in Literacy and pop star Shehzad Roy's Zindagi Trust, whose innovative "I Am Paid to Learn" program pays children to attend school so they won't have to beg on the streets to support their families. Several of these NGOs are also working with the Pakistani government to improve state schools.

The challenge of primary education in Pakistan is daunting, especially given the severe distractions and competing priorities facing Pakistani society. And it can be counterproductive for private nonprofits — or for-profit companies — to take over work such as education and health care that should be the state's responsibility. But the alternative to doing something imperfect and incomplete is

to do nothing at all. Concerned and resourceful Pakistanis, both in Pakistan and overseas, as well as American friends of Pakistan, are seeing to it that as many as possible of the country's huge younger generation grow up with education and the ability to make positive contributions to their country's future.



Next Week:

Islam in Central Asia

Aerial views of the city of Lahore, Pakistan. Photo by Maham Tariq (flickr.com/photos/watercolor121/4964276146) [CC-BY-2.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.