

Education: Responsibilities and Challenges - Abbas Rashid, August 22.

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The new education policy is scheduled to be approved by the cabinet in the very near future. The review process that has preceded the policy, deemed to be in its final shape now, has already taken approximately three years. However, we can only hope that the policy is subjected to further deliberation before approval. Let us consider the most recent change in the document which is the addition of Chapter 4 titled Islamic Education.

Apart from a level of detail more appropriate to a syllabus or curriculum, the change suggests that the previous draft of the policy was somehow lacking in its adherence to Islamic principles and values.

In that context, consider the following excerpts from that draft taken from Chapter 2 titled National Education Policy: Overarching Challenges and Responses. According to Para 47: "Cultural values of the majority of Pakistanis are derived from Islam. An education system reflects and strengthens social, cultural and moral values. Pakistan's educational interventions have to be based on the core values of the faith."

Nothing ambiguous about this, it seems. For further clarity let us look at Para 48: "The National Education Policy recognises the importance of Islamic values and adheres to the agreed principles in this regard. All policy interventions shall fall within the parameters identified in the Principles of Policy as laid down in articles 29, 30, 33, 36, 37 and 40 of Constitution of Pakistan 1973. These include the need for Muslim children to be provided instructions in Islamiyat to enable them to develop themselves as

good Muslims. Similarly, minorities should be provided with facilities to get education of their own religion.”

Surely there is consensus on an education system that produces good Muslims and good human beings. But how that objective is to be achieved remains open for discussion. It is, of course, an unfortunate part of our history typified by General Zia-ul Haq that many of those who wanted to project themselves as champions of religion and faith were often motivated by personal ambition. In part at least it is their legacy that accounts for divisions, sectarianism and the violence in the name of religion which confronts society today.

On the other hand there are those such as the well-known and widely respected religious scholar, Allama Javed Ghamdi, who have argued that all children should be taught ethics (akhlaqiyat) in the initial stages of education for they have to become good human beings before they can become good Muslims. In other words the former is a necessary condition for achieving the latter, more exalted objective. In such a context religion becomes spiritual and meaningful rather than being reduced to empty ritual.

Another related aspect of the chapter that does not appear to have been seriously debated has to do with madrassas. The last para of the document states that a Madrassa Education Authority shall be established by the Ministry of Interior that among other things will ‘provide further training to enhance skills of teachers’.

Obviously a question that comes to mind right away is since when is this ministry equipped to provide teacher training? Or are we seeking some other objective through this arrangement? Madrassas should be regulated as part of the regime, yet to take effective form, for regulating private sector education providers. Clearly, what is taught in the madrassas needs to be much more closely regulated in order to guard against children falling prey to

sectarianism and hate literature. Beyond that it is the parents' right to send their child to a madrassa for religious education, if they so desire. And certainly a madrassa should be treated just as any other institution if found violating the law by inciting students to violence or training them to that end.

The late Mufti Sarfraz Naeemi, secretary-general of the Ittehad Tanzeematul Madaris-e-Deeniya, who himself became a tragic victim of violence in the name of religion had observed not too long ago that madrassas are not training grounds for terrorists and that if there are exceptions to the general rule then it is the obligation of the government to find them and take appropriate action against the offenders. Possibly, this is where the Interior Ministry can help.

However, apart from effectively regulating the private sector, including madrassas, an equally if not more important task for the government is that of improving the delivery of education in the public sector. And, as of now, the news on that front is far from encouraging. As we learned last month, only 28 percent passed the BA/BSc exams this year. The failure rate in public sector institutions was higher.

These dismal figures have to be factored in when we come across the optimistic assertion in the policy document to the effect that '...significant achievements have been recorded with an enhancement in access to higher education rising from 2.2% of the 18 to 23 year age cohort in 2002 to over 4.7% in 2008.' And we are not here looking at the issue of guide books, guess papers and other methods that do not necessarily reflect learning or competency among many of those who do pass the exams.

How is this situation to be addressed? Under the rubric of public-private partnership, the government is increasingly looking to the private sector to make up for the deficiencies of the public sector. Consider the following in Para 71: 'Over the last few years the

private sector has been attempting to bridge the gaps and ills of education system like inequitable access, poor quality, high dropouts, etc...The question arises of where the private sector can assist...Practically in every possible education input...The private sector can assist in all areas of educational inputs.'

Sadly for the government, the private sector can only do so much and no more. Particularly, when it comes to the quality aspect for it has major quality constraints itself. Yes, there is more than one study that shows student outcomes by way of test scores being better for private sector students as compared to those in the public sector. But it is equally clear that most students in both sectors rely on rote learning and are performing below their grade level.

Sooner rather than later the government will have to shoulder the primary responsibility for improving education in the public sector. The private sector and others concerned or interested can help but theirs, will always be a supplementary role. The sooner we understand that the better.

Abbas Rashid lives in Lahore and can be contacted at abbasrh@gmail.com

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