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Political Survival through Religious Instrumentalism: Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam Fazlur Rehman’s Resistance to Madrassah Reforms in Pakistan¹

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Abstract

Pakistan has strived though unsuccessfully to introduce reforms into thousands of religious seminaries. Among the different sects of seminaries, Deobandi madaris which are mostly led by Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam Fazlur Rehman (JUI-F) have posed the greatest challenge. This paper seeks to analyze why and how JUI-F obstructs the state’s attempts of convincing madaris for reforms. Based on the findings of elite group interviews and constructs of “elite instrumentalism” and “political survival theory,” this study argues that JUI-F has political interests, both strategic-cum-existential and tactical, at stake in resisting these reforms. This study of Fazlur Rehman’s behavior vis-à-vis state’s madrassah reform initiatives allows one to bring home the theoretical premises set by “political survival theory” and “elite instrumentalism.” Accordingly, JUI-F opposes madrassah reforms because the instrumental use of religion (madaris) has long been vital for retaining its political power which in turn has ensured party’s political survival.

Keywords: religion; madrassah; politics; Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam Fazlur Rehman (JUI-F); political survival

Introduction

Madrassah (Arabic: مدرسة) or seminary which means “the place of study or learning” has been a tradition of Muslim societies for centuries. Historically, madrassah performed the cardinal function of teaching including, among other subjects, Islamic sciences of law and jurisprudence so as to train and produce elite jurists (Malik 2008) and government functionaries for running the day-to-day state affairs. However, in colonial Indian subcontinent the British rulers largely secularized the

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role of madrassah as religion guiding the public or state affairs, by making “a distinction between the religious and the nonreligious—the ‘personal’ and the ‘public’ domains respectively” (Zaman 2002; Reetz 2008). Like other Muslim countries, Pakistan is home to thousands of *madaris* (plural), ranging from 30,000 to 60,000 (Dawn 2021a). These belong to five different sectarian schools, i.e., Deobandi, Bareilvi, Shia, Ahle Hadith, and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI). In the post-9/11 overly securitized milieu, Pakistani *madaris* have been increasingly regarded as informally schooling some of the terrorists (National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA)). Phrases such as “incubators for violent extremism” (The 9/11 Commission Report 2004), “weapons of mass instructions,” and “factories for global jihad” (Delavande and Zafar 2011) and “terror” (Mallet 2015) have been used for *madaris*.

The government as part of its agenda of education reforms, governance considerations (since early 1960s), and above all due to national and international security concerns (since 2001) has strived to introduce reforms pertaining to registration, curriculum revision, enhanced supervision, and better state regulation of the *madaris*. Although *madaris*, by providing free education, boarding, and food to the underprivileged sections of society make up for the failures of state (Tavernise 2009; Rahman 2008; Winthrop and Graff 2010), there is a broader consensus that reforms of some sorts in *madaris* are ineluctable. The latest push for such reforms is primarily driven by security concerns of the state and international community and is highly securitized (Bashir and Haq 2019; Yusuf 2019)—as embodied in the National Internal Security Polic[ies] of 2014–18 and 2018–23 and the National Action Plan of 2014. With all the efforts of successive governments to reach agreement with Ittehad-e-Tanzeemat-ul-Madaris Pakistan (ITMP—federation of all five boards of seminaries),¹ *madaris* have effectively resisted reforms.

Of all the seminaries, Deobandi *madaris* have been the greatest subject of enquiry because of their disproportionately higher numbers and contentious nexus with jihad, extremism, and Islamic militancy. Deobandi *madaris* have also most stridently opposed the reforms making their acquiescence evidently a key to success of government’s reforms initiatives. Deobandi *madaris* are largely dominated and led by the largest and most influential Islamist political party of Pakistan: Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam-Fazal-ur-Rehman group (JUI-F).² From these *madaris*, JUI-F recruited thousands of fighters for jihad in Afghanistan and Kashmir during 1980s and 1990s (Hussain 2007; Masood and Gall 2011; Abbas 2018; Dawn 2021b). Hence JUI-F wields an outsized influence over *madaris* and is conspicuously positioned to effectively hamper government-led reforms. In spite of the well-argued significance of reforms for all stakeholders involved, well established in discourse, JUI-F’s leader, Maulana Fazlur Rehman has indeed strenuously opposed and successfully derailed government’s moves to streamline seminaries. With all the realization that reforms have become imperative for *madaris*, why would Fazlur Rehman not let the reforms to succeed is a question which needs to be explored for making government reforms efforts effective.

The agency of Fazal as an interface between *madrassahs*, (power) politics and reforms therefore, bears great significance as a case study instructive of link between religion, i.e., *madrassah*, and politics. Akin to the researches that study political role

played by religious symbols/institutions such as: church in political mobilization (Smith 2013), mosque in political engagement (Westfall 2018), Friday prayers in street protests (Butt 2016), and head-covering and religiosity in political participation (Ayers and Hofstetter 2008; Westfall et al. 2017), the current study while ascertaining the political use of madrassah counts as an addition to the larger religion and politics research pool. This probe into subject of madrassahs from JUI-F angle bears one other key merit. The extant literature fundamentally deals with topic either in terms of madrassahs as an *agency*, i.e., role of madrassah in society and militancy, or madrassah as an *object* of proposed policy actions, i.e., the need and reasons for failure of reforms. In the process, the internal nuances of political dynamics and key actors related to madaris, like JUI-F have largely been omitted. The current study seeks to contribute to this aspect of the debate.

Based on in-depth elite interviews with key JUI-F officials and functionaries, this paper explores the reasons for JUI-F's resistance to state attempts of convincing madaris for reforms, and second, the factors that help Maulana Fazlur Rehman to so effectively challenge the state's outreach to madaris. Elite interviews not only helped access the perspective of the agency insiders, but also aided the triangulation of important information gleaned from available literature and speeches of Maulana Fazlur Rehman.

This research argues that it is the pursuit of political interests that makes Fazlur Rehman oppose the reform of madaris. These interests belong to two categories (though not wholly exclusive): first are existential-cum-strategic interests—linked to the very existence of Fazlur Rehman/JUI-F as a political entity and their long-term sustenance. Second are tactical in nature—catering the requirements of imminent political scenarios. Securing these interests is vital for gaining and retaining political power that feeds into Fazlur Rehman's political survival ultimately. This entire phenomenon thus amounts to elite putting religion to instrumental use, which has been interpreted through the theoretical constructs of “elite instrumentalism” and “political survival theory.” Elite instrumentalism is when political elites employ religious symbols, values, and institutions for achieving their personal political ends. Whereas, the political survival theory as propounded by de Mesquita et al. (2003) and Maoz and Henderson (2020) posits that whatever policies the elites adopt or obstruct is to ensure either ascendance to, or retention of the power, for the ultimate end of political survival.

Second, with regard to how Fazlur Rehman does what he aims, it is through propagating divisive narrative (propounding an “us versus them” contestation) that Maulana Fazlur Rehman succeeds in dissuading madaris from acquiescing to government-led reforms. By denying the state its legitimate authority over madaris and mobilizing the seminary platform, Fazlur Rehman, on the one hand offsets state's moves for increased control over madaris, and on the other, tries to craft a better space for himself in national politics at times of his rapidly depleting political fortunes. Finally, comprehending the underlying nuances of sustained resistance to reforms is relevant for policy-makers alike since the government has yet to achieve a bare minimum in implementing its reform agenda.

Having said that, certain points are worth noting with respect to this study. This research doesn't depict JUI-F or Fazlur Rehman as the sole reason for the failure of

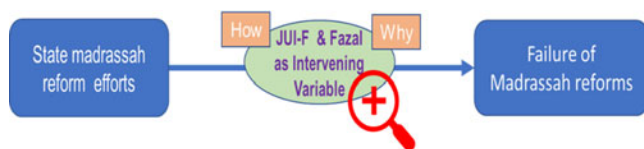


Figure 1. Research puzzle.

government reform efforts. Instead, it aims to study in detail the obstructive influence of JUI-F as one of the critical intervening variables effecting the outcome of reforms. The terms JUI-F and Maulana Fazlur Rehman have been used interchangeably throughout this study for the reason—and a fact well-substantiated by “elite interviews”—that Fazlur Rehman exerts almost absolute control over the entire policy and decision-making process of the party. Finally, this study is only focused on the link of Deobandi madaris with the question of madrassah reforms in Pakistan. However, the findings and analytical frame of this specific case may be utilized to uncover a similar linkage in comparable contexts—as madrassahs/religious schools are common to Muslim societies in all regions of the world.

The remainder of the paper is divided into following parts. The proceeding section concisely reviews the existing literature and highlights its limitations, thus making the case for significance of the current study. The third section explains research design and methods employed for this research. The next section situates the importance of Deobandi madaris in the national context linking it to the state’s reforms agenda. It explicates the main facets of and motives behind reform agenda. The fifth section unpacks how through generating divisive narratives of “us versus them” and internal politicking, JUI-F acts as the spoiler element that dissuades madaris from aligning with the state reforms agenda so as to sustain its (JUI-F’s) sway over the madaris. The next (sixth) section explores the reasons for JUI-F’s opposition to reforms and hence highlights the instrumental importance of madaris for JUI-F. This debate is premised on the conceptual frames of “elite instrumentalism” and “political survival theory.” Finally, the conclusion brings to an end the entire debate by recapping the key facets and findings of this paper. [Figure 1](#) spreads out the puzzle clearly.

Literature review

The existing literature and research related to madrassah can be classified into two broader categories. First category is the literature which deals with the priori (of reforms), i.e., the subject of madrassa itself, from three aspects. The first strand of literature takes on the question (of role) of madrassah in a rather polemical vein. On the one hand are the authors and analysts who explore the causal link between madaris and extremism and terrorism (Singer 2001; ICG Report 2002, 2007, 2011; Riaz 2005; Khokhar 2007; Abbas 2018; Hanif, Ali and Shaheen 2019). Contrarily, other scholars argue that this connection between madaris and terrorism is either fallacious or debatable (Bergen and Pandey 2006; Kevin 2009; Winthrop and Graff 2010; Zaidi 2013; Fair 2015; Moosa 2015). The second strand of literature combines varied outlooks analyzing madrassa from different angles such as history, enrolment patterns,

funding sources, political inclinations, etc. (Rahman 2004; Rana 2009; Andrabi et al. 2010; Abbas 2018; Vestenskov 2018).

The third strand of literature on madaris is more academic and scholarly and perhaps the most pertinent in terms of conceptual setting of the current study. These scholars somehow locate the role of madrassah in the currents of broader socio-political structure(s) and actors of the country. However, this link is generally explored at the marginal level and within the context of other main questions, e.g., religious parties, political Islam, and militancy and jihad, etc. (Malik 2008; Waseem and Mufti 2009; Mufti 2012; Ullah 2015; Zaman 2018) thus missing most of the granulated details.

The second category extends the discussion on madaris to crucial question of reforms. This strand of literature is also pertinent to current study as it probes different dynamics behind (resistance to) madrassah reforms. Accordingly, different scholars and analysts identify three types of broad factors in that regard. The first group relates this intrinsic aversion to reforms to ideational and identity factors. Since the ulama (religious scholars of Islam) think that madaris are aimed exclusively for mastering religious, i.e., Islamic studies, the notion of teaching worldly sciences as outlined by reforms agenda compromises the role as well as the identity of these last “bastions of Islam” and ulama (ICG Report 2002; Zaman 2002; Johnston et al. 2006; Bano 2007; Malik 2008; Reetz 2008; Moosa 2015; Abbas 2018; Zaman 2018; Chacko 2020). The second group covers the concern of madaris that reforms will entail loss of autonomy and bring greater intervention from the state in the internal affairs, such as financing, funding, syllabi, registration, etc., of seminaries (Malik 1997; ICG Report 2004; Bano 2007; Khokhar 2007; Fair 2008; Malik 2008; Bashir and Haq 2019; Chacko 2020). Lastly, some analysts link the flawed approach and policies of the government with madaris’ skepticism toward the reform efforts and their ultimate failure (Johnston et al. 2006; Bano 2007; Candland 2008; Fair 2008; Park and Niyozov 2008; Waseem and Mufti 2009; Rathore 2015; Bashir and Haq 2019; Yusuf 2019).

Thus, the extant literature fundamentally deals with madrassah either as an agency for bringing change (of various kinds) or as an object of intended reforms. The internal nuances of political dynamics and key actors related to madaris like JUI-F have largely been missed out in the existing academic discussions.

By looking at madrassa reforms from JUI-F perspective, the current study contributes to the discourse in three respects. First, the critical analysis of the JUI-F’s control and dependence over madrassa shines light on the political role of madrassah in a more detailed and nuanced manner; the case study unravels the link between religion (madrassah) and politics in Pakistan’s socio-political setting. The study provides a frame of analysis for evaluation of religion–politics nexus beyond Deobandi madaris and JUI-F: increasing use of religious card by Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) to galvanize the followers and madaris of Barelvi sect for pressurizing the government is a case in point. Second, the current research—unlike the extant literature which locates the failure of reforms in factors of ideological considerations, autonomy factor, and flawed approach—grounds the impetus of resistance to madrassa reforms on political rationale. Finally, the dynamics of obstructionist politics offers important

insight into policy-makers/government to better understand the intricacies that complicate the reform process.

Methods

This research employs the method of “elite interviews.” This method allowed the researchers to access first-hand information from people directly related to the political processes under study (Dexter 1970). After designing the instrument for interviews, the initial set of interviews indicated a sampling problem (Bryman 2004). Here, a mixed set of non-elite JUI-F workers and grass-roots mobilizers were interviewed. These responses were, however, mostly grounded in dogmas and unable to address or unveil the intricate details of behind-the-scene rationale and policies of the party around which this entire research idea is themed. Hence, the first round of interviews was abandoned after realizing the need for accessing the relevant elites, not only to better understand the internal viewpoint of the agency, but also to triangulate the information extracted from existing sources.

Elite interviewing is a well-established qualitative research technique (Berry 2002) though with its own known set of problems. A systematically developed elite interview research design starts with identification of the concept/constructs of interest and a valid instrument with observable responses to tap into them; determining a valid sample; conducting interviews and collecting data; and finally, data analysis (Beamer 2002). The question “who counts as elite” is crucial because the status of elite is much more contextual and relational and has socio-political markers (Harvey 2015). This research follows Christopher Lamont’s broader definition of “elite” (2015) “as anyone who occupies a position of influence or importance within a particular organisation that is under study.”

In the given case the question was to answer the “how” and “why” of JUI-F’s and Fazlur Rehman’s resistance to madrassah reform. The elite sample identified is stratified into two groups as stratification is a common way of checking sample biasness (though at the cost of generalization) (Dexter 1970). The two groups interviewed for this research are the political elite and the academic elite; of the 14 interviewees, none were grassroots mobilizers. The first group includes (11) people who are closely associated with both madaris and JUI-F; either heading, administering, or running madaris closely linked to Fazlur Rehman and his politics, or those holding key party functionary positions. Given their first-hand knowledge of the internal dynamics and strategic considerations of the top party leadership, this group has got the best possible insight into the party’s political decision-making process, and can (as was in the case of this research) also be more forthcoming or candid if/when approached through influential and trusted sources.

The second stratum, including three sources, was identified as people having a deeper understanding of Deobandi madrassahs given their extensive research and education experience on the subject. Moreover, snowballing process also helped identify elites in each stratum, as the entire listings of the two groups did not pre-exist. Apart from these two groups of interviewees, the authors also visited Directorate General of Religious Education (DGRE) which is currently the focal body dealing with madrassah reforms.

To gain the abstract political facts by interviewing elites, an instrument of semi-structured interview was designed, having specific rather than general questions. The instrument of interview was kept simple while considering the varied educational backgrounds of respondents (Judd, Smith and Kidder 1991). The questions were not jargonized and the target dimension was subtly embedded in questions to solicit desired responses while conversing. The interviews were conducted at varied times between Fall 2020 and Summer 2021. While interpreting the responses, source criticism was employed to check the biasness or partiality of interviewees' viewpoint and observations. The information was found relatively impartial and dispassionate as the sources (except one) belonged to Fazlur Rehman's close circle. If responses from the protagonist's closest aides, followers, and relatives are conforming the basic idea being studied, the dual issues of source criticism and validity of data (Carmines and Zeller 1979), both get addressed.

In addition to elite interviews, Fazlur Rehman's speeches (available online) were studied at length for the content of his views and narrative on madaris and reforms. For collecting information about the number of registered madaris, DGRE's online database was consulted. Data collection and recording was then followed by analysis across the defined themes as discussed in the proceeding sections.

Deobandi madaris and state's reforms agenda

The genesis of Deoband *maslak* (sect) goes back to foundation of seminary named Darul Uloom Deoband (Deoband, Uttar Pradesh) in 1867 by Muhammad Qasim Nanautvi, Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, and Muhammad Abid Husayn (Moosa 2015). The seminary served as an influential reformist movement seeking to purify Islam of syncretic rituals of Hindu origin on the one hand (Fair 2008) and, to counter the Western rule of British colonizers on the other (Ullah 2015). Deobandis themselves are Hanafi sunnites with a level of orientation toward Wahabi version of Islam (Hussain 2007, 78–94). In 1919, some Deobandi *ulama* (religious scholars) founded Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind (JUH) in order to run a nonviolent political movement in support of the Ottoman caliphate against Britain and likewise, free India from the British colonizers. The political and ideological struggle against Britishers profoundly impacted the discourse and curriculum of Deoband by reinforcing the fault line of “*deeni*” (religious, perceived as Islamic and taught in madaris) and “*dunyawi*” (worldly, materialistic in nature and promoted by the Westerners) sciences.

Pakistan has witnessed an incomparable growth of madaris and people associated with this institute (Zaman 2018). As mentioned above, there are five sects of madaris in Pakistan with each led by its own central board called as “*wifaq*” (see Table 1). It is estimated that about 4.1 million students are enrolled in more than 30,000 madaris across Pakistan (Rehman 2019a). Although the more influential and advanced chapters of Deobandi madaris are mostly located in Karachi and Lahore, the greater number of sect's seminaries are scattered across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, erstwhile tribal areas, Balochistan, and some parts of Sindh. Deobandi madaris dominate the political discourse for certain striking reasons.

First, a disproportionately high number of madaris and their students belong to Deobandi *maslak*. The 2.8 million students being educated in 21,565 madaris

Table 1. Five boards of *madaris/wifaqs* in Pakistan

Name	Sect	Established	Madaris registered with board ^a
Wifaq-ul-Madaris al Arabia Pakistan	Sunni Deobandi	1957	21,565
Tanzeem-ul-Madaris	Sunni Barelvi/Ahl e Sunnah wal Jamaah	1960	9,616
Wafaq-ul-Madaris-al-Salafia	Sunni Ahl-e-Hadith	1955	1,400
Wafaq-ul-Madaris-Shia	Shia	1959	550
Rabita-ul-Madaris-al Islamiya	Jamaat-i-Islami	1983	1,300

^aRehman (2021a, 2021b).

affiliated with Wifaq-ul-Madaris of Deoband sect (Rehman 2021a) roughly account for two-third of students and more than 70% of seminaries in the entire country (interviews with Zia ur Rehman on January 29, 2021 and Israr Madani on February 9, 2021). Second, Deobandi *madaris*, scholars, and political leaders have historically been pivotal to country's Islamization process and parliamentary politics at the domestic level, and to state's Afghan and Kashmir policies with respect to jihad, Taliban, and other militant outfits at the external level (Hussain 2007). Lastly, the link of Deobandi *madaris* to militant and jihadi outfits and terrorism has become an acute security challenge especially in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks and the ensuing war on terrorism. All these factors make Deobandi *madaris* and their board "Wifaq-ul-Madaris" the most essential plank of state's desired reforms agenda.

The reforms agenda of state (and other Western countries) has always been motivated by educational, social, governance, and security concerns vis-à-vis the function and output of *madaris*. Since *madaris* draw a clear distinction between religious and worldly sciences and focus solely on the former, their graduates find it hard to assimilate into modern society and state which are basically run according to ethos of worldly and modern sciences and disciplines. This disconnect between *madrassa* education and real world pushes *madrassa* graduates to social irrelevance except for very few roles like becoming *peshe-i-imam* (congregation leader), teaching Islamic subjects or Arabic and opening a *madrassa* of own. In that sense *madrassa* graduates are generally considered to be no more than "a social liability" (interviews on January 6, 2021, January 31, 2021, and November 23, 2020; International Crisis Group Report (ICG) 2002).

Security and governance concerns related to *madaris*, however, transcend all other questions since the 9/11 attacks. *Madaris* affairs in Pakistan including their registration, curriculum, enrolment, teachers, students, and funding have always been beyond the supervision—let alone control—of the state. In fact, the state under Zia-ul-Haq regime (1977–88) not only championed the growth of *madaris* in the country (by providing massive financial assistance which came mostly from the Gulf countries) but also turned these institutions into militancy training centers for jihad in Afghanistan (Haqqani 2005; Hussain 2007; Abbas 2018). As a result of "war on terrorism" when Pakistan came to deal with local, trans-border, and international

extremists and terrorist elements, (some of) madaris were unfortunately found to be part of the problem (Ministry of Interior 2014).

The catalysts for latest phase of reforms in madaris have been the international pressure (in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks and 2005 London bombings) and domestic urgency to tackle the militancy after the horrific attack on Army Public School (APS) Peshawar in 2014. As a matter of fact, state officials have repeatedly voiced explicit concerns (U.S. House of Representatives 2007; Ali 2015; AFP 2020) about the “destabilizing effect” of madaris (Vestenskov 2018). State’s madrassah quandaries are further complicated by the staunch resistance of madaris to even minimal of reforms while simultaneously maintaining close ties with some (religious) political parties (ICG Report 2004; Rana 2009; Salahuddin et al. 2016).

Reforms efforts are actually aimed at streamlining madaris at the national level through better regulation and certain educational reforms. Unlike the previous attempts, the latest reforms effort has led to signing of an MoU between Ministry of Federal Education & Professional Training (M/o FE&PT) and ITMP on August 29, 2019, which is a combination of both “carrots and sticks.” Currently, the major components of madrassah reforms are as follows (DGRE 2020):

- (a) *Registration*: Although registration had long been on government’s agenda, in the aftermath of terrorist attack on APS Peshawar and subsequent passage of NAP in December 2014, the government intensified its efforts to first “geotag” all madaris across the country and now, to get them registered with M/o FE&PT through any of the 16 regional offices of DGRE of M/o FE&PT. If madaris fail to register with MoE, the government “has the authority to shut them down.” Similarly, the government is “the sole authority in the country to collect the facts/figures and other relevant information” such as funding, students, activities, and ties of madaris. The current reform exercise is aimed to be implemented step-wise (interview with DGRE officials on August 5, 2021). In general, this stage is meant to not only register madaris, but also to regulate them somehow.
- (b) *“Contemporary education”/changes in curriculum*: Changes in madrassa curriculum by introducing modern sciences and subjects such as English, Sciences, Mathematics, Computer Science, Geography, vocational training, etc. have been the oldest proposition in that respect. It dates back to 1962 “Report of the Committee set up by the Governor of West Pakistan for Recommending Improved Syllabus for the various Darul Uloom and Arabic Madrasas in West Pakistan.” Under the MoU of August 2019, Madaris agreed to “gradually introduce contemporary subjects in Deeni [religious] Madaris through their curriculum committees under a formal plan, up to Matric and intermediate level in next five (05) years.” Accordingly, madaris will affiliate students with any of the different federal boards of examination in the country. The government is also planning to provide and fund two teachers to each of registered madrassahs for teaching of contemporary subjects (interview with DGRE officials on August 5, 2021).

With all the efforts, talks and deals between state and madaris over the last two decades, the outcomes are incorrigibly the same: Deobandi madaris at large have

Table 2. Madaris registered with DGRE/MoE (DGRE)

Sect	Madaris registered with DGRE
Deoband	305
Barelvi/Ahl e Sunnah wal Jamaah	624
Ahl-e-Hadith	5,244
Shia	39

resisted registration so far. According to the data of DGRE (see [Table 2](#)), number of all registered madaris is 3,598 (DGRE).³ Out of these, only 305 are Deobandi madaris. Another indicator of failure of the latest push at streamlining madaris is that since the August 2019 MoU, only 295 seminaries have applied for registration (Ali [2021](#)). Among other major reasons for lack of willingness to register on the part of Deobandi madaris is the Fazlur Rehman factor (interviews with Zia ur Rehman on January 29, 2021; Israr Madani on February 9, 2021; interview on November 21, 2020; Dawn [2021a](#); Rehman [2021a](#)).

JUI-F as a crucial political actor: obstructing reforms through narrative-building and politicking against the state

JUI-F traces its origin to Jamiat Ulama-i-Islam (JUI) which was established by Shabbir Ahmad Usmani and other pro-partition Deobandi scholars in 1945. These Deobandi ulama differed with their JUH peers who were close to All India National Congress and favored the idea of a united India. Fazlur Rehman’s father Mufti Mahmood, a Deobandi scholar who even got enrolled in Deoband madrassah for education in 1936 (Akbari [2010](#)), assumed the leadership of JUI in 1962 and played active role in Wifaq-ul-Madaris, and Islamization process and parliamentary politics of the country. Moreover, Mufti Mahmood was the first religious scholar to issue *fatwa* (religious decree) of jihad against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 (Akbari [2010](#)). Fazal took the charge of JUI after the death of his father in 1980 but after some years parted ways with JUI to form his own faction JUI-F.⁴

Under Fazlur Rehman’s command, JUI-F entrenched itself further into national politics and structural apparatus by supporting state’s jihadist agenda in Afghanistan and Kashmir (during 1980s and 1990s) through thousands of Deobandi seminaries which were opened with state’s blessing. Due to Fazlur Rehman’s central role in recruitment of and close ties with Afghan Taliban, he is called as “a father of the Taliban” (Masood and Gall [2011](#)) while his party is considered “a political front for numerous jihadi organizations” (Schmidle [2009](#)). During 1980s and 1990s, the party emerged as one of the key political actors which first participated in the movement for restoration of democracy and later actively joined the parliamentary politics of the country.

JUI-F has behaved more like “a conventional Pakistani political party” (Chacko [2020](#)) in parliamentary politics by adopting more pragmatic, interest-oriented and even if contradictory approach (Dawn [2013a](#), [2013b](#); Ullah [2015](#)). As a result,

JUI-F has not shied away from joining any government whether democratic or dictatorship, in return for few key positions and ministries in central government or formation of provincial government. Such moderation displayed by religiously oriented parties can be called a common trait guaranteeing their electoral success (Yildirim and Lancaster 2015), as has been found in cases of Mauritania (Cavatorta and Garcia 2017), Indonesia and Malaysia (Freedman 2009), and Turkey and Israel (Tepe 2012). The JUI-F, however, has never been a major electoral party. Instead, its formula to power includes an odd combination of factors: few seats in Parliament; Fazlur Rehman's Janus-faced policy of "convenient alliances" and politics of expediency even if at the cost of ideological principles; and "religious card," i.e., using Deobandi madaris as a pressure group (Waseem and Mufti 2009; ICG Report 2011; Dawn 2019; Rehman 2019b). JUI-F has thus become an integral part and a key player—though often with outsized role—of the country's political matrix.⁵

As for the source of party's members, leaders, and audience are concerned, madrassah sits at the heart of entire ideological and political project since the day first. JUI-F's constituency mainly comprises students, teachers, administrators, and graduates of thousands of Deobandi madaris (and imams of mosques) in KP, erstwhile tribal areas, Balochistan, and parts of Sindh. Fazlur Rehman's popularity among and influence over these madaris is virtually unparalleled (interviews on November 21, 2020; November 23, 2020; January 5, 2021; interview with Zia-ur-Rehman on November 19, 2021⁶). It was from these madaris that JUI-F recruited militants for jihad in Afghanistan and Kashmir during 1980s and 1990s.

On political front, madaris provide ideological support and vital manpower for JUI-F's political rallies and electoral functions such as running election campaigns, representing party at election centers, and casting votes (interviews on November 21, 2020; November 23, 2020; Rehman 2012; Dawn 2013a, 2013b). More importantly, Fazlur Rehman also mobilizes madrassah students for "marches" and "sit-ins" as a political movement either to pressurize or topple the incumbent government time after time. He proudly claims the JUI-F to be the only political party to have held 15 "million-march" across the country (Daily Times 2019). This testifies the Islamists' potential to demonstrate street power in Pakistan that Ahsan Butt (2016) talks of. The government in return has blamed the JUI-F leader of (mis)using madrassa students for these marches and sit-ins only to pursue Fazlur Rehman's own "political survival" (The News International 2019) and "political mileage" (Khan and Ali 2021). In a nut-shell, madaris are the bloodline of JUI-F.

Maulana Fazlur Rehman has fiercely opposed government's efforts to streamline madaris (interview with Maulana Fazlur Rehman on May 1, 2021, Islamabad). To that effect, he has on the one hand targeted the government and its reforms agenda by building his own narrative (ICG 2011; interviews with Zia ur Rehman and Israr Madni on January 29, and February 9, 2021; interviews on January 26, 2021; January 20, 2021; January 6, 2021; November 21, 2020; November 23, 2020) and on the other, strived—through politicking—to dissuade Wifaq-ul-Madaris and ITMP from holding talks with the government (interviews with Zia ur Rehman on January 29, 2021, and Israr Madani on February 9, 2021; interviews a and b on November 21, 2020, Ghilzai 2019). According to Maulana Fazlur Rehman, the initiative of reform is actually "conspiracy" and "agenda" of the "US" against madaris

which is put into effect by the government under the pressure of West and in return for some financial assistance (Ghilzai 2019). In Fazlur Rehman's view, madaris are the "bastion of Islam" and therefore "[T]hey will be protected at all costs from rulers who are trying to close their gates by portraying students as terrorists" (The Express Tribune 2015). Indeed, Fazlur Rehman's challenge to reforms agenda is holistic in scope since it targets both the components, i.e., registration and changes in curriculum of madaris:

About madaris, a lot of things have been said. There is one very fallacious thing that the religious seminaries have been brought under the supervision of Education Ministry. There has been neither any discussion like that nor any such decision made in talks between the government and madaris [...] But you [i.e. the government] say that madaris will be brought under the control of Education Ministry and its testament is your assertion that you will decide the syllabus of madaris. Who are you to decide the syllabus of religious madaris? You don't have even your own syllabus, you teach the American books here in our course till the date, you teach European books, you teach foreign books [...] This is (in fact) an effort to grab the madaris and their independence (Media Talk 2019).

This narrative built by Fazlur Rehman is premised on "us versus them" notion wherein the reforms agenda of the government and policies of the state institutions related to madaris are conflated with a Western conspiracy while madrassah is depicted as a victim.⁷ Fazal pins the blame for sowing division between religious and worldly education in the form of separate curricula for madrassah and college on the British colonialists and the post-independence state of Pakistan for carrying on with that colonial legacy (interview with Maulana Fazal on May 1, 2021, Islamabad). Such use of religious narratives and ideology as a political tool, and a vote-gathering strategy for seizing political power has been observed elsewhere too (Widian et al. 2022). Above all, in this ideological battle, Fazlur Rehman characterizes himself as the ultimate savior and preeminent ideological authority on the question of Islam and madrassah; his political struggle against the government as "jihad" (Khan 2021) and any challenge to his position as a threat to Islam (Dawn 2013a, 2013b). Islamist agitation is a powerful tool for rendering secular leaders as illegitimate (Butt 2016) as is evident from the excerpt below:

Even today there is a global establishment which—after 9/11—has spread a new perception. Either that [old] perception that maulvi [i.e. religious scholar] is worthless, he has no value in society, he has a low status, he survives on alms and our pieces of bread. And today the perception is that maulvi is very dangerous, terrorist, thug [and] scary. And now this new image [about madrassa people] is given to the world. They attacked [the image of] madrassahs on the basis of some events which took place in the world. And believe me, over the last 20 years, we [denoting himself] have gone through extremely painful stages so as how to protect the madaris. But the pressure against madaris still exists there, the mindset of global establishment against madaris has not changed and in order to implement the agenda of global establishment, our local Pakistani establishment is ready to serve, as the secret of latter's loyalty to

international establishment hinges on how they [i.e. local Pakistani establishment] can weaken and then knock down religion, religious class and religious institutions (JUI-P 2020).

At the institutional level of Wifaq-ul-Madaris, Fazlur Rehman has resorted to politicking to assert greater control over the prime decision-making body and simultaneously countervail the state's inroads into affairs of Deobandi madaris. According to a very senior JUI-F leader (interview on January 20, 2021), the party is not happy with the existing governing leadership of the Wifaq which has been generally open to influence of and developing [at least] understanding with the military establishment on key political and security issues. The party and Fazlur Rehman have therefore, incessantly lobbied to get former nominated and elected for a top position at the governing body of Wifaq-ul-Madaris (Rehman 2021b; interviews with Zia ur Rehman on January 29, 2021 and Israr Madani on February 9, 2021; interview on November 21, 2021).⁸ Likewise, Fazlur Rehman has openly dissuaded madaris from registering with MoE and the newly established wifaqs (Table 3) of Deobandi madaris.

This strident opposition to reforms becomes all the more striking and “paradoxical” if juxtaposed with party's role of auxiliary to state and a key component of political system on the one hand (interviews on November 21, 2020, November 23, 2020, January 6, 2021, January 20, 2021, and a and b November 21, 2020; interview with Zia ur Rehman on January 29, 2021) and on the other, JUI-F's avowed embrace of rule of law, politics of vote and constitutionalism (as against the use of force and violence), and distancing itself from Afghan Taliban in late 2000s. For example, around the parliamentary elections of 2008, Fazlur Rehman took “an almost 180 degrees turn” as he distanced himself from Taliban, criticized violence and suicide attacks, moderated his anti-American narrative, and according to Wikileaks, even overreached to U.S. ambassador in Islamabad for political support for the position of premiership (Dawn 2013a, 2013b). He has ever since asserted that his party follows the peaceful path of change (i.e., imposition of Islamic Shariah) through elections within the ambit of constitution of the country (Geo News 2017).

Moderation or partnering with state is meant to improve electoral performance (Yildirim and Lancaster 2015), to avoid unwanted tussles and enjoy greater resources and authority (Finke et al. 2017). Baylouny (2004) and Brown (2012) have found Islamists strategically adapting a progressive personality for integrating into societies,

Table 3. Newly established wifaqs

Wifaq	Sect
Ittehadul Madaris Al-Arabia	Deobandi
Nizamul Madaris Pakistan and Wafaqul Madaris Al-Islamia Al-Rizvia	Barelvi
Ittehadul Madaris Al-Islamia	Ahl-e-Hadith
Majmaul Madaris Taleemul Kitab Wal Hikmat	Shia
Majma-ul-Uloomul Islamia	Deobandi
Wahdatul Madaris	Panjpiri

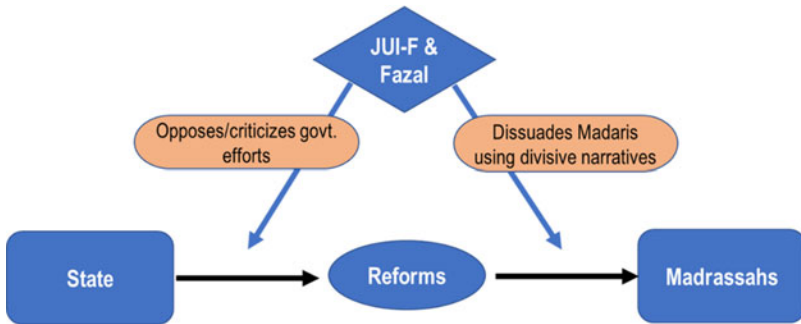


Figure 2. How JUI-F/Fazal manages to obstruct the Madrassah reforms?

that allows their parties and ideologies to survive. Just as religious groups in Malaysia and Indonesia have adopted moderation and coalition-building with secular groups for winning political power and influence (Freedman 2009), JUI-F can be currently seen as presiding over an alliance of varied political parties “Pakistan Democratic Movement” for similar ends. Despite all this political transformation and ideological moderation, JUI-F’s position on reforms in madaris has not changed much, manifesting that politics based on “sacred” usually runs counterproductive to promoting of democratic values (Tepe 2008; Ozzano and Cavatorta 2013). Maulana Fazlur Rehman’s role as a crucial but spoiler element is depicted in Figure 2.

Why Fazlur Rehman resists reforms? Elite’s instrumental use of madrassah for seeking political survival

The issue problematized here is the sustained tussle between two different political actors (the state and the JUI-F) when it comes to the reforms of madrassah. This manifests the interface of religion with politics and vice versa. Religion, being a world-maintaining, and a world-shaking force (Berger 1967; Durkheim 1968; Geertz 1973), has long impacted politics at domestic and international levels (Huntington 1993). From Plato’s time to date, connection between religion and politics has been recognized by scholars (Bailey 2008; Ettensperger and Schleutker 2022). Despite growing scholarship arguing for ascendant irrelevance (or isolation) of religion with politics (especially in developed, secular, and modernizing societies) (Clements 2015) the continued centrality of religion in shaping belief systems and perceptions of actors cannot be denied (McCormick 1986; Billings and Scott 1994; Djupe and Grant 2001). In fact, religion has been found to impact the political processes and policies at both domestic (Ozzano 2013) and international levels (Munir 2020).

In the current study, the answer to why JUI-F has been consistent in its opposition to state-led reforms also lies in the nexus of religion and politics. The systematic use of religion by political actors for either legitimizing or challenging the power and privilege (status-quo) has been reinforced by a multitude of researches (Beckford 1983; Sölle 1984). This religion–politics equation is not a given, or equally vital for all societies (Deneulin et al. 2009), and when it exists, it varies with contexts

(Wuthnow 1991; Omelichevaa and Ahmed 2018). Tepe has found that even within democracies the moderation of religious parties varies as it is determined by a mix of variables including ideological considerations, strategic bargaining vis-à-vis external actors and opportunity structures (Tepe 2012; Tepe 2016). However, once into the political domain, political power is sought by all—who do not have enough and those who have it but want to retain their leadership positions. Maoz and Henderson have identified three factors determining the degree to which religion is integrated with politics in any society. First is a society's religious structure, second the relations between its religious and political institutions, and third, the need, ability, and willingness of the political elite to use religion for pursuing political ends (Maoz and Henderson 2020).

In case of Pakistan, religion embodies the state and state uses it as an instrument to affect control function (Alam 2002). Since Pakistan's inception, religion has remained intertwined with politics (Esposito 1998), as evident from the existence and electoral success of religious parties in the political mainstream. Moreover, religion has been a force guiding public life especially in places where governance shortfalls leave people under-privileged (Mumtaz and Whiteford 2021). The religious political parties and institutions, in addition to representing people in legislature, perform other societal roles across societies (Cavatorta and Amghar 2020). It holds true for JUI-F as well, which not only represents people in legislature but has important socio-political standing even when outside the government (Mufti et al. 2020), mainly due to the collective social identity that a common religion constructs (Ayers and Hofstetter 2008). Using this socio-political influence, they act as pressure groups in national politics exploiting popular sentiments to the best of their political advantage (Waseem and Mufti 2009; Ullah 2015; Mufti et al. 2020). For these reasons Noah Feldman (2008) sees power sharing between temporal elite and religious authorities as a key feature of traditional Islamic states (Fabbri 2013).

This study argues that Fazlur Rehman's resistance to reforms is basically motivated by his political interests associated with madrassah. Whatever the nature of sought-after political ends be, when religion is employed by the political elite to pursue their personal political goals, it amounts to an instrumental use of religion, referred to in discourse as "elite instrumentalism" (Maoz and Henderson 2020). The political elite's ease and experience with instrumental use of religious values and institutions is a cultural thing that varies across societies and contexts (Townshend 2020). Instrumental use of religion is a function of the elites' desire for political power which consequently feeds into their political survival (Maoz and Henderson 2020) if and when facilitated by political opportunity structures⁹ that vary across states (Tepe 2012; Grover 2021). In this case, the centrality of madrassah as a religious institution in Pakistani society (Ara 2004), that sees Fazlur Rehman as their legitimate and long-standing caretaker and protector allows Fazlur Rehman's political agency to put madrassah to instrumental use without losing his legitimacy as a religious leader (Siddikoglu 2018).

Fazlur Rehman's use of madrassah as a tool for seeking political ends closely follows the assertions of "political survival theory" that elaborates upon the instrumental use of religious symbols, values, and institutions for political gains (de Mesquita et al. 2003). Political elites either desire to ascend to office, or to retain enough power to

pursue their political interests—in both cases having in hand a “winning coalition” (a population who backs them) is vital. Such winning coalitions provide both space and resources to the political elite, to fend off opponents and to fare better in domestic competition (de Mesquita et al. 2003). Maulana Fazlur Rehman’s reliance on madrasah to cater his political interests then can be categorized into two streams, and have been detailed as such: first, the existential-cum-strategic interests, and second, tactical interests.

First, madaris are an asset for Fazlur Rehman which provides the existential and strategic motivation for hindering reform. Fazal’s profile as a mainstream religious elite is based on historically deep-rooted connection to madrasah. The high regard that madrasah people have for Fazlur Rehman and his political agenda and narrative, allows Fazlur Rehman the privilege to mobilize madaris against the government with relative ease.¹⁰

They [madaris] believe Fazal is serving a sacred cause at national as well as international level by raising his voice for madaris and Islam. It means his influence over [Deobandi] madaris is undeniable (interview on January 5, 2021).

The great role/use of religion in social or political mobilization is already widely known and debated in discourse (Borer 1996; Moreno 2007; Deneulin et al. 2009; Birnir and Overos 2019). Mobilization requires a realization of common interests at stake, and solidarity. By granting a common identity, religion acts as a great organizational force to assure higher mobilization potential. The perceptions of divinity greatly serve the cause of political protests (Schiffbeck 2021); Aghazadeh and Mahmoudoghli (2017) have found a similar impact of religiosity upon political behavior in Iran too.

Fazlur Rehman at times adventures into such political mobilization even against the directions of Wifaq ul Madaris (Khan and Ali 2021) and other prominent Deobandi ulama (The Express Tribune 2019). Identity function of religion enables him do that. de Mesquita Et Al. (2003) have also endorsed the role of religion as a social mobilization tool, employed to gain or retain political power which then feeds into the political survival. This gets reinforced when McAdam (1982) says that, “The places of worship provide potentially mobilisable body of participants.” When competing in the domain of electoral politics, Islamists’ religious rhetoric clearly blends in political overtones, especially when such topics are thought to act as a more effective mobilizer toward the set political ends (Butt 2016). For example, Fazlur Rehman, while facing a stiff electoral competition from PTI in KP, in 2013 invoked a *fatwa* (an edict) that casting vote for Pakistan Tehrik-i-Insaf (PTI) was haram (un-Islamic) (Dawn 2013b) and has ever-since blamed the PTI chief Imran Khan to be the supporter of and working on the agenda of Jews and Zionism. He has also casted his political movement to oust the current government as “jihad” (holy war) (Khan 2021). In the recent most episode, Fazal has joined in a motion to submit a vote of no-confidence for deseating Prime Minister Imran Khan; such issue-based coalitions where Islamists do not mind allying with the more seculars (Tepe 2013) are not very uncommon. As the authorities moved to disperse Fazal’s supporters, he called upon his followers to wage nation-wide protests against

government's high-handedness (Azeem 2022). Fazlur Rehman's obstructive strategy is actually aimed at stopping what he sees as the state's encroachment upon his political domain.

The second aspect of strategic-cum-existential considerations is the micro-dimension of Fazlur Rehman's wariness toward the very idea of madrassah reform, i.e., the reformative impact of the reforms itself. Despite all the caveats to desired impact of reforms efforts, the potential of reforms to promote the modern trends cannot be underestimated. According to an influential madrassah administrator and key JUI-F figure (interview on November 21, 2020):

Over the course of 25 years, I have observed this phenomenon very closely that when we also familiarise [some] madrassah students with modern education by teaching them syllabus of matriculation, F.A. and B.A. and help them appear in and pass privately those exams, their approach to life changes dramatically as compared to those madrassah students who do not hold any such degree. With a degree of contemporary education in hand, the students become more rational, realistic and concerned about job and future rather than looking at life from a strictly parochial religious perspective.

Reforms may likely—on the face value/hypothetically speaking—alter what Fazlur Rehman wants to keep constant: orthodox belief-systems, primitive pedagogical styles, and outdated curricula which all end up producing masses that are guided by dogmas, disconnected from the real world, socio-economically irrelevant, ideologically amenable, and thus politically exploitable. All these listed attributes make madrassah graduates receptive to Fazlur Rehman's conspiratorial and confrontational narratives where he self-portrays as a "savior of Islam and madaris" by "othering" the state and government and draws the audiences toward JUI-F's political movement and electoral campaigns (interview on January 5, 2021; interview on January 6, 2021; interview on January 20, 2021; interview a and b November 21, 2020; interview on November 21, 2020; interview on November 23, 2020). Maulana Fazlur Rehman thinks that if the government reforms can make the madrassah masses enlightened and rational, his "us versus them" rhetoric will be undermined, weakening the patronizing link between JUI-F and madaris which may put his overall political power at a risk (interview on January 5, 2021; interview on January 6, 2021; interview on January 6, 2021; interview on January 20, 2021; interview b on November 21, 2020; interview on November 21, 2020).

Reforms [in madaris if undertaken in genuine sense] will cease Fazal's [political] army. He wants [a] free army that can participate in his rallies, raise a *dhandā* (stick) for him and observe strike for him (interview a on November 21, 2020).

At the second level, JUI-F's policy and Fazlur Rehman's insecurities are guided by tactical considerations relating to his relatively diminished political stature under the current regime. He lost his seat in National Assembly during 2018 elections (only for the first time since 1997 defeat); has refuted the election results ever since, accusing the military establishment for his defeat; and has persistently strived to unseat the sitting government. For decades Fazlur Rehman has somehow managed to engineer for himself and his party the

position of a key political actor in national politics (despite minimal performance in elections) through forming alliances, brokering deals, joining opposition, representing religious class/seminaries, and even by offering to bring Taliban to negotiation table.

The fear of losing his overarching stature in the madrassahs keeps Fazlur Rehman from supporting government-led reforms. He perceives reforms in a strictly “zero-sum” perspective, i.e., reform would increase the control of state over madaris and would consequently decrease JUI-F’s influence (interview with Zia ur Rehman on January 29, 2021; interview on January 5, 2021; interview on January 6, 2021; interview on January 26, 2021). Given his influence over Deobandi madaris, Fazlur Rehman has largely succeeded in dissuading majority of Deobandi Madaris from registering with MoE. Therefore, during the current phase of reforms (post-APS attack) the government/establishment had to follow a “divide and rule” strategy and keep Fazlur Rehman out of negotiations. The government has somewhat succeeded in convincing ITMP and Wifaq-ul-Madaris-al-Arabia for registration with MoE and introduction of contemporary subjects to syllabus. In the process, not only was Fazal deliberately sidelined from the talks, but the state also convinced some of the prominent (Deobandi and non-Deobandi) madaris to establish new wafaqs (see Table 3) so as to dilute the influence of ITMP, Wifaq-ul-Madaris, and above all Maulana Fazlur Rehman (interview with Israr Madani on February 9, 2021; interview with Zia ur Rehman on January 29, 2021; Rehman 2021a, 2021b).

Fazlur Rehman’s obstruction to madrassah reform has intensified given the dual challenges he faces currently. One, his political power has been compromised as he sits out of the government, and second, he perceives his political influence as being thrashed by systematically sidelining and cornering him from the successive talks between the government and madaris (interview with Zia ur Rehman on January 29, 2021; interview on November 21, 2020). By opposing reforms openly and playing the card of religion, Fazal has, therefore, carved out a position of an important stake-holder for himself. The motive is to give a message to the government (especially establishment) that when it comes to madaris, he is still crucially relevant figure and important arbiter which can hardly be excluded from the process (interview on January 5, 2021; interview on January 6, 2021; interview with Zia ur Rehman on January 29, 2021; interview with Israr Madani on February 9, 2021; interview on November 21, 2020). Just like the institutional capture and transformation of “Mukhtars” by populist parties in Turkey via discursive practices (Tepe 2021), Fazal’s

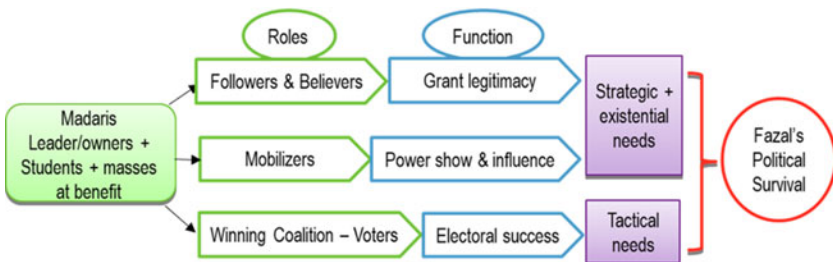


Figure 3. Why Fazal resists the reform of Madaris?

domination/capture over madaris is a case of deep institutional transformation (Ocaklı 2017) that turns madrassahs into a clearly partisan institution. Thus, Fazlur Rehman's political use of religion (madrassah) has been reinforced in the current phase. Figure 3 provides a simple overview of reason(s) "why Maulana Fazlur Rehman resists reform in madaris."

Conclusion

Reforms of madaris in Pakistan have long been on government's agenda but these efforts attained new urgency in the hyper-securitized context of post-9/11 era. The adoption of NAP and NISP in particular reinvigorated this campaign but unfortunately desirable outcomes have not been achieved so far. One of the significant hurdles to state madrassah reforms initiatives has been the reluctance on the part of madaris from Deobandi school which comprise the largest proportion of madrassahs in Pakistan (interview with DGRE officials on August 5, 2021). This fact makes Deobandi madaris pivotal to the entire exercise of reforms. The patronage that JUI-F and its main protagonist, Maulana Fazlur Rehman provides to madrassahs in Pakistan is commonly known, with his resistance to state's reform agenda being one of the most important factors for the skepticism of madaris toward reforms. What incentivizes Maulana Fazlur Rehman to stand in the way of reforming madaris, and how he does that lacked a detailed enquiry and that is where this paper contributes exactly are areas whose details and nuances had not been particularly explored. This paper has specifically delved into these two questions, i.e., why Fazal resists the reform of madrassah by the state, and how he manages to have that effect?

Based on extractions from discourse and findings of the elite interviews, it has been argued that JUI-F and Maulana Fazal's opposition to madrassah reforms is understandable through the lens of elite's instrumental use of religious institutions (madaris in this case) for dominating a realm that ultimately feeds into their political survival. Madaris have been JUI-F's political mainstay since the party's inception (Bano 2007) and the two sides identify with each other as believers and followers of the same sect. Owing to his high standing among madrassah masses, Fazlur Rehman has increasingly inclined on madaris as an instrument of his political survival, keeping madrassah masses galvanized over well-crafted political rhetoric that makes Fazal appear as their savior and state as the destroyer (of their autonomy and freedom). But madaris have existed long before JUI-F or Fazlur Rehman; hence Fazlur Rehman needs madrassah more than vice versa.

Realizing madrassah as the party's bedrock, Fazal knows that reforming this entity will make him lose control over it, which would mean losing the edge at mass mobilization against the opponents and above-all, a lack of electoral constituency thus undermining his political survival in the long run. Therefore, for ensuring his political status and worth, Fazlur Rehman believes the status-quo in madaris must prevail. Support from the Deobandi madaris not only bestows legitimacy upon Fazlur Rehman as a political actor (numbers game), the same masses constitute his political and electoral assets. Reform of madrassahs would likely limit if not end Fazlur Rehman's influence in this domain, and so would his political power be curtailed. Hence, JUI-F's vehement resistance to madrassah reforms in the best defense of

Fazlur Rehman's long-term political survival (this qualifies as elite's instrumental use of madrassah).

The challenges facing the reform of madrassahs in Pakistan have been previously researched too, and connections to the agency of JUI-F or Fazlur Rehman have also been alluded to by others. This study extends the existing research program by providing a deeper understanding of the nuances related to Fazlur Rehman's obstruction of the madrassah reforms and the discrete political interests at stake which make him do so. Moreover, for answering the why and how of Fazlur Rehman's resistance to government-led reform efforts, rich primary data have been relied on, accessed by interviewing the most significant elite (functionally important for both JUI-F and its madaris), thereby adding credibility to the research findings. Additionally, what Fazlur Rehman does in the domain of madrassah has been found to be closely manifesting what Mesquita's "political survival theory," and the construct of "elite instrumentalism" propounded, and so has been theoretically grounded within these (something missing in the existing literature). This finding, that JUI-F's successful obstruction to state's reforms agenda presents a case of elite's instrumental use of religion for ensuring political survival, is important both for its policy relevance and its theoretical significance, as discussed below.

The policy relevance, understandably, is for the immediate context where building on these may positively contribute to the entire enterprise of madrassah reforms in Pakistan. First, madrassah is more than a largely disconnected institution of religious education. Deobandi madaris have got crucial political value and role to play, whose reform would require a highly sophisticated and selective but persistent approach to crack a deal. Second, the case study exhibits how, despite the general understanding that state is the master of all (in Pakistan) and has co-opted the religion to its instrumental use (Haqqani 2005; Hussain 2007; Abbas 2018) religion is still a domain above and beyond the statist jurisdiction. This brings us to the third important policy finding: if madrassah reforms are the first step to bring the religiously oriented masses in line with the state, the precursor to successful reforms hinges upon the consensus among the state and the elite representing madrassahs. For years Maulana Fazlur Rehman has acted as the chief patron of Deobandi madaris. So, simply sidelining or over-powering the agency of Fazlur Rehman may—hypothetically speaking—help push the reforms in madaris but, if the reforms fail to bring a marked difference in the lives of those who benefit from madrassah even without its reform, the essence of reform won't be guaranteed.

The theoretical insights of this case study are important for two reasons. First, the findings have great relevance for explaining similar cases in the immediate context of Pakistan, i.e., instances where elite (other than Fazlur Rehman) are using religion/religious symbols for political ends (though with variations). For example, the use of Sufi Islam for political purposes has been established through research. It entails how Sufi shrines and shrine-elites, called as "*pirs and sajjada nasheen*" have a control function regarding development and political economy (Malik and Mirza 2021); and how the involuntary obedience of the devotees "*mureeds*" is instrumentally used for retaining political power in state-organs and bureaucracy (Malik and Malik 2017).

Even in madrassah domain, leaders from different sects at the ITMP level enjoy greater political leverage vis-à-vis the government—a link termed by the government

as “blackmailing” (Rehman 2021a). A case in point is Mufti Muneeb-ur-Rehman, a central and venerated figure of Barelvi sect (Husain 2021)¹¹ heading Barelvi Tanzeem-ul-Madaris. Not only has Mufti Muneeb (like Fazlur Rehman) been opposing madrassah reforms (Gishkori 2015), but he has fully supported the violent right-wing Barelvi movement TLP, even negotiating with the government as its representative. The TLP (more like JUI-F) has evolved as a political movement relying upon street protests over the last few years (Basit 2020). Similarly, just like JUI-F’s use of Deobandi madaris, TLP and Mufti Muneeb have increasingly put Barelvi madaris to use (interview with Zia-ur-Rehman on December 4, 2021) for pressurizing and bringing the government to negotiating table on a certain issues.

Second, this theoretical/analytical frame explaining the instrumental use of madaris by elite for political ends might be helpful in explaining comparable cases in other societies where institutions of religious learning or religious parties/groups (though with variations) are common (Benoliel 2003). Of these, the Muslim societies where such religious entities/groups exist and are capable of affecting political outcomes (Bangladesh (Sheikh 2020), Indonesia, Malaysia, Uzbekistan, Yemen, Algeria, Tunisia, and Turkey) may serve as future testing ground for our findings. Validity or relevance of the analytical model might vary as elite’s instrumental use of religious symbols may evolve differently in varied contexts.

Findings of this research can be equally useful for non-Muslim states where religion is a significant political force. For instance, those studying the role of religious symbols such as African-American churches, Muslim mosques, Friday prayers, and headscarves in American polity (Westfal 2018); or explaining the conservatives’ stringent opposition to Obamacare; or researching the shifts in Muslim Americans’ partisan identification toward parties after 9/11 (Barreto and Bozonelos 2009)—must uncover the religion–politics nexus to start with. So is the case if the impact of Christian interest groups on Britain’s public policy has to be understood (Bruce 2012; Grover 2021). These findings might be replicated when questioning how the religious parties or specific individuals are central to polarizing Israeli politics (Tepe 2013), and same starting point can be taken if the religious overtones that precipitated the identity fault-lines toward the intensification of the Irish conflict are to be understood (O’Connell 1991). Notwithstanding the variations, for the three reasons stated, the theoretical findings and analytical frame of this research (despite being case-specific) might become a generalizable strand in the larger religion and politics research program, if tested and validated for (few) comparable cases.

Conflict of interest. The authors declare none.

Notes

1 After the London bombings in 2006, a federation of all five madaris boards was formulated in the form of ITMP for the purpose of talks between government and madaris.

2 The official name of JUI-F as registered with Election Commission of Pakistan is JUI-Pakistan (JUI-P).

3 According to DGRE officials, with addition of newly registered seminaries, the aggregate of registered madaris will be around 6,500 in the near future.

4 The other faction which was led by Maulana Sami-ul-Haq was named as JUI-S.

5 Maulana Fazal has been elected five times to Parliament as member of National Assembly (NA): 1988, 1993, 2002, 2008, and 2013. He is currently the chief of Pakistan Democratic Movement, an alliance of all

11 major opposition parties against the incumbent government of PTI. He has also held key positions like the head of NA's Standing Committee for Foreign Affairs (1993–1996), leader of the opposition (2004–2007), and twice the head of NA's Special Committee on Kashmir (2008 and 2013). He was also a candidate for premiership (potentially) in 2002 and presidency in 2018.

6 According to Zia-ur-Rehman, Fazal ur Rehman's influence over Deobandi madaris is so profound and deep-rooted that Jamia Banauriat-ul-Aalamia and Jamiat-ul-Rashid which formed their own wifaq "Majma-ul-Uloomul Islamia" on government's insistence and were therefore expelled—on the insistence of Fazlur Rehman and others—from central Deobandi board of Wifaq-ul-Madaris-al-Arbia have been seeking restoration of their membership with Wifaq-ul-Madaris. Failure Rehman had categorically and vehemently opposed the move of formation and membership of new madrassa boards. He played key role in offsetting the government's strategy of "divide and rule" vis-à-vis Deobandi madaris and scholars. In a related and major development, Wifaq-ul-Madaris, in order to counter government's pressure, announced Fazlur Rehman and certain other ulama as body's "patrons-in-chief" in October 2021.

7 After an extensive analysis of the content of Fazal's speeches available online, the authors found this discourse of "us versus them" to be an essentially recurrent theme of Fazal's speeches, especially but not exclusively, which are delivered at a madrassa platform. Moreover, Fazal narrated more or less the same viewpoint in talk with one of the authors on May 1, 2021 at Islamabad.

8 Maulana Fazal is believed to be vying over the last some years for a senior position of President or General Secretary of Wifaq. Fazal's efforts culminated in controversy earlier this year when some of the top Deobandi leaders openly opposed his name for Presidency that also led to cancellation of elections which (planned on January 16–17, 2021).

9 These refer to specific combinations or unique mix of internal (resources, historical patterns, institutional arrangements) and external (constraints or enablers) factors, that determine the behavior of the political actors or interest-groups (social movements, religious parties, etc.) when pursuing their political interests. The activism and enthusiasm of such groups usually waxes and wanes as the opportunity structures vary, across different societies and within the same society at different times. Islamists would mobilize easily when opportunity structure is move favorable, and their vigor may die down when these structures have a more constraining effect.

10 During the course of interviews, the authors were told at length about the particular "pattern" of how JUI-F recruits madrassa students for its rallies and marches. Accordingly, the upper cedar (even Fazal himself or his brothers if the madrassa and place are of higher significance) or local leader(s) of the party would approach all the influential madaris in their respective constituencies with JUI-F leanings to send in a number of students and teachers (at maximum) to upcoming rally or march of the party. In some cases, the party even arranges vehicles for transportation of students from madrassa to place of event. Likewise, the JUI-F leaders and workers arrange temporary boarding at local mosques and madaris for participants of JUI-F rallies and events.

11 Mufti Muneeb-ur-Rehman held the coveted position of chairman of Ruit-i-Hilal Committee (Moon-sighting Committee) for 22 years until he was removed from position in December 2020. Interestingly, just 1 day after his removal from chairmanship, he launched a campaign named "Tehreek Tahaffuz-i-Masajid-o-Madaris" (Movement for the Protection of Mosques and Seminaries) against the government.

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