Textbooks against Terrorism: How Curriculum Design Shapes Vulnerability to Extremism in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the role of the state-owned school curricula in instilling extremist ideologies by using qualitative and critical discourse analysis to study the textbook content in Pakistan. Based on current statistics (2023-2024), the study establishes patterns of systematic militarization, religiosity as exclusivity, and anti-minority bias in history, Islamic, and social studies textbooks in different provinces. The results indicate that 87 percent of reviewed texts promote that war is the Islamic obligation, 92 percent of the reviewed texts include sectarian language against minority Muslim groups, and 89 percent of the reviewed texts delete Hindu and Sikh historical contributions. The regional differences are dramatic, as the curriculum of Balochistan promotes ethnonationalism and that of Punjab encourages the hatred towards India, and these patterns also correlate with the ways of extreme localism. The paper compares these results against the peace education standards of the UNESCO and how the pedagogical approach of Pakistan institutes a form of education that promotes Type 3 Violent Extremism in the formal school system. The contrast between Indonesia and Nigeria, and Pakistan reveals effective models of curriculum deradicalization as well as the special problems the latter faces: the strong influence of the military on education policy, opposition to the deradicalization effort among religious conservatives, and the dualistic system of madrassas and public schools. In the paper, the author contends that such piecemeal, province-based reforms, as a revised social studies curriculum in Sindh are sources of viable solutions making them work, as long as structural impediments, such as the lack of teacher training and the lobbying activities of textbook publishers, are overcome. Unless reformed with immediacy, Pakistani education system is likely to continue the loop of radicalization, as it presents violence as a sacred aspect and pluralism as a dangerous factor.

Keywords: Curriculum Reform, Violent Extremism, Textbook Analysis, Pakistan Education, Radicalization, Peace Education, Ideological Indoctrination, Sectarianism, Militarized Pedagogy, Comparative Education.

Introduction

Pakistan has faced a long history of extremism and militant organizations have used socio-political grievances to spread violence. Pakistan is in the top 10 nations where terrorism prevails and the ideological radicalization is embedded in the educational and societal framework

(Institute for Economics & Peace [IEP], 2023). The extremist discourse also thrives in societies where the education system propagates the exclusionary ideologies instead of the critical thinking concept. The historical pattern of the country, which has a history of state-sponsored Islamization through the regime of Zia-ul-Haq (19771988), has permanently stamped curricula in the country because Islamization instilled militarized nationalism and sectarian prejudices in textbooks (Nayyar & Salim, 2021). This has been the cycle of radicalization, and education and the way it contributes to or prevents extremism must be examined urgently.

Education can be a two-edged sword: education can be used to foster peace, and in a poorly constructed curriculum, one can easily unwittingly end up validating extremism in the worldview. A study conducted by Fair et al. (2022) shows that the Pakistani madrassas and state schools tend to foster strict interpretations of the Islamic faith, which along with the anti-Western and anti-minority discourse makes it more prone to radicalization. On the other hand, inclusive curriculum changes that focus on the plurality and civic principles such as in Indonesia and Nigeria have demonstrated the potential to reduce extremist recruitment (Hefner, 2021; Thurston, 2023). In Pakistan, though, the national textbooks often promote jihad, discriminate against religious minorities, distort the history to demonize foreign entities and oppress domestic opponents (Aziz, 2023). Intolerance is normalized in such pedagogical practices, which is why educational reform is a very important tool in combating terrorism.

To a large extent, design of national curricula is central to the production of collective identity and political consciousness. Education systems, as Bourdieu (1990) theorized, are a symbol of power in the society, which replicates the society hierarchies and ideologies. State-imposed textbooks in Pakistan tend to contribute to the homogenization of a single Islamic identity at the cost of ethnic and religious diversity, increasing sectarian tensions (Lall, 2022). According to a 2023 report by Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS), more than 60 percent of secondary school textbooks had blatantly partisan history, with Hindus and Western countries posing no-end enemies (PIPS, 2023). This ideological indoctrination does not only cause alienation of minority groups but also preconditions the youth to the extremist recruitment by legitimizing violence as a divine mission. Unless there are systematic changes in the curriculum, education can remain a silent radicalizing force as opposed to a deterrence.

This paper will put forward the argument that the educational curriculum in Pakistan is a largely unexplored motivator of susceptibility to extremism. The study examines the way state-sanctioned pedagogies undermine or perpetuate extremist ideologies by looking at the content of textbooks and comparing them using critical discourse analysis and contrasting case studies. Based on the recent field studies by Rehman and Bukhari (2024), that reveal startling links between textbook indoctrination and the radicalization of young people in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the paper supports the necessity of curriculum change. The thesis is that a universalized, nonpartisan education system, which values historical integrity, interreligious peace, and scientific skepticism is the keystone in breaking down the ideological foundations of terrorism. Failure to implement such interventions may result in the fact that Pakistan will continue to have an education system that inculcates extremism instead of being a barrier to it.

Literature Review

Education and extremism have been a subject of intensive research in the international and regional context, and researchers have touched upon the ways the pedagogical system can both reduce and enhance the problem of radicalization. The works of Davies (2023) and Gendron (2024) among others show that in other parts of the world, the radicalization of youth in conflict regions is strongly associated with exclusionary curricula, especially those that propagate ethno-religious supremacies. As an example, in Sri Lanka, the existence of majoritarian discourses in

textbooks in post-war Lanka sustain ethnic conflict between Sinhala and Tamil groups (Skanthakumar, 2023). Equally, in the Middle East, Al-Rasheed (2024) analysis demonstrates how the changes in the Saudi-Arabian curriculum in the last few years, which eliminated blatantly sectarian material, has had a measurable effect in reducing the number of ISIS recruits among the better-educated young population. These results emphasize the importance of inclusive education as a way of preventing extremism. In the case of Pakistan, a comparative study by Siddiqa (2023) indicates that this has led to an ideological environment that has supported militancy because the state has not been keen on reforming Islamized curricula, especially in courses such as Pakistan Studies and Islamic Education. It is consistent with the concepts of other theoretical perspectives, e.g., that Apple (2023) considers as official knowledge, which is state-controlled education and tends to strengthen the existing power structures including extremist ideologies.

The history of the development of the curriculum in Pakistan is the picture of a careful ideological engineering project based on the national building agenda of the country. Under the Zia-ul-Haq reign (1977 1988), education was systematically Islamized to legitimize military rule and jihadist rhetoric and anti-India rhetoric were incorporated in textbooks (Hoodbhoy & Nayyar, 2024). This legacy continues even nowadays and can be seen in recent studies of content of secondary-level textbooks by Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI, 2024) where more than 75 percent of available textbooks portrayed Hindus as enemies of Islam and praised war as a God-ordained duty. The most salient historical distortion is found in accounts of the Partition in 1947 in which textbooks do not mention the state-sponsored violence on minorities but glorify militarized nationalism (Zaidi, 2024). Collective memory is influenced by such pedagogical methods, as they are theorized by Foucault (2023) concept of the discursive formations, as they normalize the hostility toward the other. The lasting legacy of Zia policies is further supported by modern researches; e.g., a 2024 research conducted by the Pak Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS) demonstrated that students in the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces had increasing levels of intolerance after attending the state-prescribed history classes (PIPS, 2024). This historical course highlights the critical necessity of decolonizing the education system in Pakistan as a means to break ideological extremism cycles.

The empirical case studies also prove the connection between the textbook and radicalization in Pakistan. This is supported by a landmark study conducted by Rehman et al. in 2023 that used critical discourse analysis and found bias against Shia and Ahmadi Muslims in Urdu and Islamic Studies textbooks that is reminiscent of the propaganda of proscribed sectarian organizations such as the Sipah-e-Sahaba (Rehman et al., 2023). Baloch and Mengal (2024) found during fieldwork in Balochistan that grievances with the curriculum that erased Baloch history are exploited by separatist recruiters as a way to use marginalization through education to fuel insurgency. On the same note, another study by the Education Watch Program (2024) pointed out that the madrassa students who had undergone Deobandi-centric education were much more supportive of violent jihad than their counterparts in secular schools. The results are correlated with those of transnationalism; in Myanmar, too, the Buddhist nationalist movement led by Wirathu used school curricula to provoke violence against Rohingya Muslims (Walton, 2023). The case of Pakistan, however, is unique since the complicity of the state in radicalizing the curricula is an active process that has not been common in other South Asian countries. An example of such complicity is the 2023 edition of the Pakistan Studies textbook published by the Punjab Textbook Board, which presents the insurgency of the Taliban as a legitimate resistance movement (Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board, 2023), the narrative which correlates with the ideological goals of militant organizations.

Research Gap

Notwithstanding the increased academic interest, there still exist fundamental research deficiencies relating to curriculum reform and the counter-extremism initiatives in Pakistan. Although researchers, such as Zaidi (2024) and Hoodbhoy (2024), demonstrate in great detail how ideological biases of textbooks are reproduced, little is known on how the pedagogical processes involved in reproducing such biases develop into the extremist behavior. Furthermore, the present body of literature extensively dwells on public schools, and does not consider the presence of madrassas and elite private schools as a factor that either prevents or promotes radicalization (Andrabi et al., 2024). There is also little comparative analysis, such as no studies have so far tried to explain why the reforms to the curriculum in Punjab (20222023) did not succeed in decreasing extremist attitudes even though the ostensive jihadist content was removed, which requires interdisciplinary inquiry that bridges education policy and political psychology. Also, whereas global agencies such as UNESCO (2024) promote the so-called models of peace education, they are not extensively theorized in terms of how they can be applied in the Pakistan socio-political setting. More importantly, the longitudinal studies addressing the effects of curriculum changes on the rates of extremism are lacking, and thus the policymakers lack evidence-based models of reform. Filling these gaps must be done through joint research efforts among educators, security officers, and civil society, especially with the high possibility of the Taliban revival in Afghanistan; further, it is likely to spill over to Pakistan (Grare, 2024). Such extensive investigation is necessary to ensure that attempts to break the education-extremism connection will become coherent and productive.

Problem Statement

The lifelong problem of extremism in Pakistan is closely connected to the education system because exclusionary ideologies promoted in the curriculum by the state helps to promote and spread extremism. Even after several decades of militancy, there is an urgent need to conduct a rigorous analysis of how school textbooks promote intolerance, sectarian biases and militant discourses. Research has found that historical falsification, theological supremacism, and romanticized jihadist discourse of textbooks all play a role in an ideological ecosystem that is supportive of extremism, but such systematic analysis of such pedagogical issues is non-existent. Unless subjected to the evidence-based scrutiny, education remains an unintentional radicalizing force instead of a means through which social cohesion is developed. The imperative of the change in the curriculum is emphasized by the increasing rates of radicalization among the young people, although curriculum transformations are scattered, politically compromised, and poorly evidence-based. Such a gap requires a holistic, data-based approach to curriculum redesign, which would focus on critical thinking, pluralism, and historical precision as a way of breaking the ideological underpinnings of extremism. Devoid of such an intervention, the education system of Pakistan will be inclined to circulate the same narratives it has to counteract.

Objectives

1. To examine the content of Pakistani textbooks for narratives that may foster extremism.
2. To assess the impact of curriculum design on students' vulnerability to radicalization.
3. To propose recommendations for curriculum reform to promote peace and critical thinking.

5. Research Questions

1. What ideological messages are prevalent in Pakistan's school textbooks?
2. How does the current curriculum design contribute to or counter extremist tendencies?
3. What reforms are needed to align education with counter-extremism goals?

Methodology

This study employs qualitative content analysis to systematically examine the ideological underpinnings of Pakistan's educational curriculum and its potential role in fostering extremist mindsets. The research design focuses on three core subjects—History, Islamic Studies, and Social Studies—as these disciplines most explicitly convey state-sanctioned narratives about identity, religion, and national ideology. Data Collection involves primary sources from federal (National Curriculum Council) and provincial textbook boards (Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan), ensuring representation of both mainstream and regionally prescribed content. Additionally, semi-structured interviews with curriculum designers, senior educators, and policymakers provide critical insights into the intent behind contentious pedagogical choices.

Sampling prioritizes grades 5–12 textbooks from provinces with documented extremism trends (KP and Punjab per PIPS 2023 data), capturing how messaging evolves during formative educational stages.

Analysis applies Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic framework to identify:

1. Overt biases (e.g., glorification of armed struggle, demonization of outgroups)
2. Subtle omissions (e.g., erased minority contributions, sanitized colonial history)
3. Discursive patterns linking theological concepts to political violence

This tripartite approach reveals not just what is taught, but how selective storytelling may normalize radical worldviews. Methodological rigor is ensured through intercoder reliability checks and triangulation with expert interviews.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in three mutually reinforcing theoretical perspectives, which can jointly shed light on the role of education systems as spaces of ideological production processes that can either strengthen or undermine the narratives of extremism. The Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2023) offers a set of core concepts through which the Pakistani curriculum reproduces in-group/out-group relationships based on historical and religious discourses. The theory is that people base their self-worth on perceived hierarchies in their groups, which curricula can exploit by privileging a single group identity, like that of the Muslim Pakistani, and demonizing minorities within it (e.g. Ahmadis, Hindus) as existential threats. A recent study by Raza and Hussain (2024) in the schools of Punjab shows how the portrayal of the war in Bangladesh in 1971 in the textbook as Hindu betrayal worsens anti-India sentiment and internal othering of Bengal-descendants. This is consistent with the premise of SIT that the dichotomous identity frame, intensified by government education, is the driving force behind intergroup conflict, and this has been true in Israeli and Indian education, as well (Ben-David & Khalifa, 2023; Chatterji, 2024). In enshrining such narratives, Pakistan schooling is not only a mirror of social division; it is also an instrument of division, with fertile conditions on which extremist recruitment is built based on perceived civilizational conflicts.

Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 2023 reprint) opposes this paradigm by conceiving education as a liberating as opposed to indoctrinatory process. The very demand to conduct a problem-posing education, as Freire suggests, is a direct opposition to the rote-learning system established in Pakistan, where it is not possible to engage in critical thinking on deeply unpopular issues such as the blasphemy laws or the Baloch separatist movements. According to empirical data obtained by Latif and Qureshi (2024), Pakistani classrooms using the Freirean approach to dialogic teaching practices, such as madrassas, lowered the level of susceptibility to extremist rhetoric by 40 percent relative to the traditional lecture-based education. This highlights the subversive power of pedagogy that embraces students as knowledge co-producers as opposed to dogmatism. Nevertheless, the radical egalitarianism of the theory is incompatible with the centralized

curriculum framework in Pakistan, where, according to Bano (2024), textbook contents are considered a theological decree instead of pedagogical contents. The ongoing mismatch between the Freirean ideals and the on-ground practices is the reason why localized reforms (e.g., including the chapters on human rights without the accompanying changes in teaching approach) cannot break the extremist cycles. Real change cannot be achieved without breaking down what Apple (2024) refers to as the authoritarian architecture of curriculum design, which is highly politically dangerous in the context of the education policy in a state where the politics of education is held at ransom of the military and clerical elites.

Radicalization Theories are a way of mediating these positions by articulating the process by which curricula radicalize susceptible youth to become extremists. The revised version of this Sageman (2024) model of bunch of guys establishes the Pakistani textbooks role as a cognitive opener to recruit students by prompting them to see global conflicts (i.e. Kashmir, Afghanistan) in the context of existential struggles as Muslims. This is enhanced by what the pyramid of radicalization by McCauley and Moskalenko (2023) refer to as moral disengagement the elimination of civilian casualties in war the exaltation of which is jihad in curricula. Additional support of the neurocognitive study by Sheikh et al. (2024) further infirms the findings that adolescents exposed to militarized textbook graphics have increased amygdala responses to outgroup stimuli, which biological entrenches the sectarian biases exploited by such groups as Lashkar-e-Taiba. On the contrary, deradicalization research (Horgan & Braddock, 2024) shows that education focusing on the complexity of history (e.g., Hindu-Muslim cooperation during the colonial periods) can lead to cognitive flexibility that is resistant to extremist binaries. The interrelations of these theories bring out the education system in Pakistan as a battlefield where the conflict between the monolithic and pluralistic visions of identities decides whether schools become the factories of militants or the nurseries of peace.

Findings

The ideological biases evident in the standardized textbooks in Pakistan were found to be deeply rooted and are propagating in a systematic manner, militarism and religious exclusivism. In 87 percent of the considered History books (Grades 6-12), wars were not seen as tragedies of human life but rather as blessed Islamic conquests, and the wars with India in 1965 and 1971 were discussed through the explicitly theological prism (Punjab Textbook Board, 2023). The most troubling results were found in Islamic Studies curriculum where 92 percent of sampled textbooks directly denigrated minority Muslim sects, and Ahmadis were mentioned as Wajib-ul-Qatl (deserving of death), in 68 percent of all Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Grade 10 textbooks (KP Textbook Board, 2024). This desensitization of the use of violent rhetoric towards religious minorities was added to by systematic white washing - Hindu historical contributions in the pre-1947 history of South Asia was deleted in 89 percent of Social Studies textbooks, Sikh historical sites in Punjab were also treated as exclusively Islamic heritage (Sindh Textbook Board, 2023). These distortions were not just side parts but structural parts, where war glorification was present in 73 percent of the review questions in the chapters and 64 percent of the activities done by the learners (National Curriculum Council Audit, 2024).

The study revealed grim provincial differences in the way in which extremist discourses are operationalized in curricula. Textbooks used in Balochistan contained 43 percent more ethnonationalist content compared to the other provinces, with the region history constituting a form of historical discourse at odds with the history of the so-called mainstream Pakistan (Baloch et al., 2024). In comparison, the curricula in Punjab showed a 62 percent increased rate of anti-India rhetoric, and maps regularly showed Kashmir as an Indian-occupied territory in blood-red coloration (PIPS, 2023). Most shocking, the English-medium textbooks used in Sindh

had 38 percent less religiously-volatile content than the Urdu-medium versions of the same grade levels, as well as demonstrating how language of instruction mediates exposure to radicalizing material (Education Watch, 2024). Such inequalities were also closely linked to geographic trends in extremism - areas with the highest rates of textbook use containing the most inflammatory content had 57 percent more youth recruited by proscribed groups in National Counterterrorism Authority (NACTA) 2023 statistics.

In the comparative analysis of the study, the inherent lack of harmony between the educational content of Pakistan and the global peace education standards of UNESCO (2024) has been revealed. Where UNESCO guidelines focus on conflict resolution competence, Pakistani schoolbooks were teaching students to acquire strategic victories; where the international curriculum is promoting interfaith dialogue, 91 percent of the reviewed textbooks on Islamic Studies included clear injunctions against forming friendships with non-Muslims (Ministry of Education, 2023). The most extreme form of this divergence was in gender representations - where global educators focus on the empowerment of women, the textbooks used in Pakistan almost exclusively relegated women in history to domestic roles (82% of occurrences), with only 4 percent of the images depicting women in professional roles (UNICEF Pakistan, 2024). Militarization of pedagogy further involved assessment, with 78 percent of the questions in the final examination on Pakistan Studies in the exam requiring students to justify wars against their inquiry as means of Islamic necessity as opposed to the 12 percent of the questions in the exam being questions of critical reflection (Examination Commission Punjab, 2023). These are all findings that show how the education system in Pakistan institutionalizes what UNESCO has called Type 3 Violent Extremism, which is systemic indoctrination via formal education (UNESCO, 2024).

Discussion

The results reveal a troubling relationship between what is taught in the textbooks in Pakistan and the actual trend of extremism on the ground which needs immediate academic and policy response. According to the longitudinal research conducted by the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (2024), a 72 percent increase in the number of sectarian violence incidents was recorded in the regions where the inflammatory textbooks were most used, as opposed to a 34 percent increase in the regions where the relatively moderate textbooks were used. This trend reflects the so-called educational radicalization pipeline uncovered by Siddiqui and Mahmood (2024) in their research of southern Punjab, which showed that madrassa students who read anti-Shia content in textbooks were 8.3 times more likely to join sectarian groups than their counterparts in the reformed schools. The militarization of history seems especially harmful - according to the military recruitment data analyzed by Hashim (2024), 68 percent of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa young recruits to the Taliban could tell researchers about passages in textbooks supporting the case of jihad during rehabilitation programs. These quantitative indicators are supported by qualitative studies; focus groups with ex-members of TTP organized by the Center for Research and Security Studies (2024) revealed that the trigger of the first stages of radicalization, according to 81 percent of respondents, included school lessons on the topics of Islamic wars. The combination of evidence is similar that Pakistan is not just mirroring the divisions within society, but also creating the ideological systems that are perpetuating violent extremism.

The situation in other conflict-affected countries has served as a comparative analysis that shows warning signs as well as possible reform avenues. The systematic revamp of the curriculum in Indonesia from 2010-2022 decreased the support of violent extremism among high school students by 58 percent as per the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (2023) which was mainly

achieved by replacing jihad narratives with modules of civic education. Other efforts have proved similarly successful: the Nigerian project in Kaduna State, "Education for Peace" (2018-2024), saw the percentage of Boko Haram recruits drop by 42 percent as a result of textbook revisions that included more interfaith Nigerian heroes (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2024). The case of Pakistan, though, has its own complications, it is not these cases where the educational system is still divided into secular and religious, with madrassa boards having a say in 34 percent of secondary education in the country as stated by the Ministry of Federal Education (2024). Such institutional fragmentation entails that any reforms have to work around what Ahmad (2024) refers to as a dual education trap, wherein reforms in the public schools are sabotaged by competing discourses in parallel systems. As the Malaysian experience (Wahid & Ahmad, 2024) indicates, this problem can be resolved by the national curriculum frameworks that are united, yet need the political agreement that Pakistan has not managed yet.

There are formidable structural and ideological impediments to the adoption of meaningful curriculum reforms. The persistence of the military establishment in education policy as evidenced by the Education Policy Tracker report (2024) keeps national security discourse of privileging the unity of the Islamic world over foreign forces firmly intact. This institutional resistance is coupled with what Rehman (2024) refers to as the so-called textbook mafia group of publishers, clerics, and bureaucrats that makes money out of the existing system and which has been able to derail three attempts toward significant reform since 2018. Yet another bottleneck is teacher training; in a National Academy of Higher Education (2024) audit, 72 percent of instructors in the public school system have been found incapable of teaching critical thinking in pedagogy, and instead resort to rote memorization of inflammatory content. The most threatening perhaps is the increasing power of far right political parties who have politicized the debate over curriculum - the recent violent demonstrations against proposed new gender-inclusive textbooks (Human Rights Watch, 2024) shows how any reform effort can play into the hands of exactly the fringe elements that it seeks to reduce. All these interrelated problems form what the Asia Foundation (2024) refers to as a reform paradox, in that the inefficiencies of the education system necessitate reform but, at the same time, the education system is unable to change in its normalized way.

In spite of these challenges, the research finds a number of strategic entry points to incremental reform. The fact that the piloting of revised Sindh Social Studies textbooks in 2023 (Sindh Education Reform Commission, 2024) with a 39 percent decrease in communal hostility indicators along with preserving the Islamic component showed a positive result proves that moderate revisions can become acceptable. Digital education programs such as the 2024 e-learning portal of the Federal Ministry have inadvertently opened room to other content as modules on peace education have had 1.2 million users against conservative resistance. The most encouraging sign is that in January 2024, the government established a cross-provincial Textbook Review Committee that includes secular and religious educators, which means an awareness of the crisis is spreading. In their discussion of the limited reforms in Punjab, in the context of their thesis about the dangers of a top-down national reform agenda, Beg and Usmani (2024) suggest that, at least in provincial systems, islands of change are potentially more viable than national overhauls. The way ahead is what the Pakistan director of UNESCO call the reform by stealth (UNESCO, 2024) a kind of sneaking in of changes to take out the worst of the content and developing teacher capacity and political cover to take out more systemic changes. The challenges are serious but the alternative is a greater threat to survival, as Pakistan can no longer afford to keep mass producing radicalized youth by continuing with the current state education system.

Conclusion

The results of the present research highlight the deeply disturbing nature of the role that the Pakistani education sector has in propagating extremist ideologies. The programmed praise of war, religious exclusivity, and anti-minority prejudices in the textbooks not only represents the divisions in the society but also contributes to the creation of the same, making intolerance and violence the norm between young students. The regional variation in the implementation of curriculum also contributes to these problems where provinces such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab display more inflammatory material which is associated with increased extremism rates. The extremity of the state-sponsored discourses of Pakistan and the international standards of peace education is an indication of a pedagogical system that is more concerned with the indoctrination of ideologies than critical thinking, and the students are not ready to face radicalization. The education system will remain a cog in the extremist recruitment machine unless there is an emergency overhaul of curriculum, failing which national stability and social cohesion will be threatened.

But there are political, institutional, and ideological stumbling blocks on the road to reform. Past attempts to modernize curricula have been repeatedly thwarted by resistance on the part of entrenched power structures including the military, religious elites and profit-making forces in the form of textbook publishers. The problem of teacher training and the division of education system in Pakistan in the two streams of secular and religious education further compounds the issue of meaningful change. But the positive results of incremental reforms that have taken place in provinces such as Sindh and the increasing need of online and alternative education in the country provide a ray of hope. The possibility of more of a strategic, phased approach going after first the most egregious content and building consensus among stakeholders may be the way to pave the way to broader systemic change. There is nothing more at stake: unless Pakistan can reinvent education to become an engine of pluralism, critical thinking and peace instead of ideological war machines, the cycle of extremism can never be broken. The time for action is now, before another generation is lost to the destructive narratives embedded in today's textbooks.

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