The Administration of Religion in Pakistan

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Abstract
Since its independence, Pakistan's religious landscape has been shaped by complex historical, political, and sectarian dynamics, particularly involving the Deobandi and Barelvi schools of thought. Politically, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), representing the Deobandi school, and the Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan (JUP), representing the Barelvi school, have sought to influence Pakistan's Islamic identity. This article examines the establishment of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA) in 1974, which was a response to the country's political and religious dynamics. It explores the reasons behind the MRA's failure to achieve its intended objectives, focusing on its politicization, inconsistent priorities, and limited scope. This lack of clear focus reflects broader challenges in Pakistan's religious governance, further exacerbated by the fragmented nature of Sunni Islam in the country. Additionally, the absence of a centralized, professionalized religious bureaucracy has resulted in insufficient training for religious leaders (imams), whose appointments are often driven by communal politics rather than merit or qualifications. The paper argues that the lack of a coherent and centralized religious administration undermines efforts to promote sectarian harmony, cohesion, and quality of religious education. It concludes that a revitalized, independent MRA, free from political influence, could create a more effective system for managing religious affairs and addressing these systemic issues.

Keywords: *MRA (Ministry of Religious Affairs), Pakistan, Imam, Deobandi, Barelvi.*

Article 25 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan emphasizes the role of the mosque as a center of learning, highlighting its importance in the country's social and cultural fabric. This article places Islam at the very heart of the Islamic Republic, underscoring the mosque's integral function not only as a place of worship but also as an educational institution. It suggests that mosques are fundamental to the promotion of Islamic values and the dissemination of knowledge, reinforcing the centrality of Islam in Pakistan's national identity and governance. Concerning the advancement of the principles of Islam in the republic the statement goes that both individually and socially the citizens of Pakistan should direct their existence towards the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Moreover, the development of this type of life should help enable both the teaching and practice of the principles of Islam, i.e. to ensure the apt organization of social institutions such as mosques.[1]

It appears that since the Societies Registration Act of 1860 during the British Raj (pre-Pakistan), all mosques have been required to be disclosed to the appropriate state apparatus. This indicates that there is some level of regulation of mosques even today in Pakistan. However, in practice, mosques are often built and managed according to the will and wishes of local communities or individuals making donations, regardless of the number of mosques already in the area. Consequently, the

establishment of mosques typically requires local approval. As a result, the current state has limited control over the appointment of imams and the governance of mosques. It should be noted, however, that there are some prominent state-run Jamia mosques in Pakistan's metropolitan centers. The federal government usually appoints imams for these major mosques and provides funding for their salaries and operational costs. This centralized approach ensures consistent management and financial support for these key religious institutions, yet, in Islamabad's Federal Capital Territory, the government oversees only 89 out of 957 mosques, leaving the remaining 868 mosques beyond its regulatory reach.[2]

Concerning the history of the mosque in the state of Pakistan, the origins of the Deobandi and Barelvi schools (1866–1921) are very significant. These schools of thought can be traced to a decade after the violence of 1857 in the Indian subcontinent, which is considered the first war of Indian independence, though the British referred to it as the Sepoy Mutiny. The Deobandi school emerged in Deoband of India[3] and in contrast, Barelvism began in Bareilly in western Uttar Pradesh, located about one hundred fifty miles east of Delhi.[4] With the establishment of the new nation of Pakistan, the religio-political rivalry between Deobandis and Barelvis, which had been intense in the previous century, shifted its focus to the newly formed Muslim state.[5] Differences of opinion on various *fiqh* and even *aqidah* issues, despite both groups adhering to the Hanafi *fiqh*, led to the establishment of private madrasas.[6]

Thus, Deobandis are part of the predominant Sunni branch of Islam, adhering to the Hanafi legal school and emphasizing strict adherence to Islamic legal scriptures and norms. The Deobandi reform movement originated with the establishment of the first Deobandi madrasa in 1867. The Deobandi movement sees itself as a leading example of advocating a return to what was perceived as the "true" Islam, grounded in authoritative religious texts. After independence in 1947, the Deobandi movement continued to thrive, with Deobandi seminaries growing steadily across the Indian subcontinent. The 1979–1988 Afghan-Soviet War played a significant role in this expansion. Deobandi madrasas in Pakistan grew rapidly, fueled in part by Saudi Arabian support for the establishment of madrasas to accommodate Afghan refugees. Saudi patronage also aligned with efforts to bolster Sunni Islam in Pakistan and counter the influence of Shia Islam, particularly in light of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran.

During the 1990s, Deobandi madrasas experienced significant growth, with their numbers tripling between 1988 and 2000. Although these seminaries now rely mainly on domestic funding, some still receive financial support from Saudi Arabia.[7] The Barelvi movement, like the Deobandis, follows the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence. However, it differs in its strong emphasis on honoring saints and revered figures, a practice the Deobandis largely reject.[8]

Pakistan emerged as an independent nation on August 14, 1947, rooted in the two-nation theory, which argued that Muslims and Hindus were distinct in their religious and cultural identities, warranting separate homelands. This belief fueled the demand for a Muslim-majority state, leading to the creation of Pakistan. Islam had long been interwoven with the Indian subcontinent's history, and its influence was central to Pakistan's formation. The newly established country was predominantly Sunni Muslim, with many believing that the new state would preserve their religious identity and foster an ideal Islamic society.

At the time of Pakistan's creation, its political leadership, though instrumental in forming a state based on religious identity, was not deeply religious itself. Educated under British colonial rule, these leaders largely followed administrative models inherited from the British, which kept religious matters separate from governance. As a result, for the first 27 years of Pakistan's existence, no Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA) was established. It was only in 1974 that such a ministry was formally introduced, reflecting both shifting political dynamics and growing religious influences in the country.

One of the primary reasons for this delay was the legacy of colonial rule. Under British governance, religion was largely managed by local religious leaders rather than

state institutions. Unlike the structured religious administration seen in earlier Muslim empires in India, British policies avoided direct involvement in religious affairs. This meant that by the time Pakistan was founded, no centralized religious authority had existed for over two centuries, and religious leadership had become decentralized across various sects.

Another significant factor was the political background of Pakistan's founding figures. Many of them had served under British rule and adopted its governance style, which treated religion as a personal matter rather than a state concern. Introducing an MRA early on could have been seen as an unnecessary shift in policy or even a challenge to the existing religious order. Furthermore, Pakistan's leadership may have been hesitant to disrupt the influence of powerful sectarian groups that had long controlled religious affairs. A centralized religious ministry could have been perceived as a threat to their authority, potentially leading to resistance from religious leaders and their followers.

The reluctance to establish an MRA may also have stemmed from concerns among Pakistan's landowning elite. These powerful feudal lords had historically maintained control over rural populations, not only through economic dominance but also by exerting influence over religious leadership. A formal ministry overseeing religious institutions could have led to the centralization of mosques and madrasas, improved financial support for religious scholars, and the standardization of religious education. This, in turn, might have reduced the feudal class's control over religious leaders and, by extension, the local populations they influenced.

Ultimately, the decision to create an MRA in 1974 marked a turning point in Pakistan's governance, reflecting changing political priorities and the increasing role of religion in the state. However, its delayed establishment highlights the complex relationship between political power, religious authority, and historical governance structures in Pakistan's early years.[9]

Moreover, with the creation of Pakistan in 1947, the Deobandi-Barelvi rivalry took on a new political dimension, as both sects began vying for official recognition and the power that came with it. The political landscape shifted not only in terms of geography but also in goals, with both the Deobandi and Barelvi factions aiming to secure a place within the state apparatus. This development gave rise to distinct political factions, with the Deobandis forming the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) and the Barelvis establishing the Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan (JUP). Both groups actively sought governmental influence, engaging in a continuous struggle for political recognition and state support, which played a significant role in shaping Pakistan's early political dynamics.[10]

In the early years of Pakistan's independence, the Deobandi Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), guided by Shabbir Ahmad Usmani, operated within the structure of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML However, as ideological differences emerged, tensions with the PML grew, eventually leading to the JUI's gradual separation from the party. In the immediate aftermath of Pakistan's formation, the JUI wielded significant influence over the government, but its priorities began to shift. In December 1947, the party reorganized and established its new headquarters at the residence of prominent Deobandi scholar Ihtisham al-Haq Thanawi in Karachi. This reorganization marked a pivotal moment in the JUI's post-Partition strategy, as it began to advocate for an explicitly Islamic government where Deobandi religious leadership could play a central role. Over time, the JUI evolved into a distinct political entity, distancing itself from its initial position as a religious faction within the Pakistan Muslim League, and charting its own course as a political force advocating for an Islamic state. At the same time, the newly organized Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan (JUP), a Barelvi party that emerged from the defunct All-India Sunni Conference, pursued a strategy similar to that of the JUI. The JUP sought to gain influence within mainstream political parties in order to establish an Islamic government where they could assert their rightful power as representatives of

the Sunni majority. The Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan (JUP), like its Deobandi counterpart, aimed to secure a significant position in Pakistan's political sphere, working to ensure that Barelvi leaders had a pivotal influence on the country's Islamic identity and policymaking.[11]

The third key player in this context was Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), founded by Abul Ala Maududi, a scholar trained in the Deobandi tradition. Maududi's vision for an Islamic state, rooted in a comprehensive program of Islamic revivalism, drew heavily on his Deobandi upbringing but diverged in significant ways by emphasizing the need for a political and institutional framework for Islam, rather than simply a return to traditional religious practices. Through its commitment to Islamic revivalism and its strategic involvement in political activism, the JI emerged as a minor rival to the other two religious parties, the Deobandis and Barelvis, each of whom also sought to shape Pakistan's Islamic identity according to their respective interpretations.[12]

Historians have highlighted an early attempt to create a politically influential Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA) in Pakistan. In January 1948, the religious organization Jamiat-ul-Ulama-i-Islam is said to have passed an unpublished resolution urging the government to appoint a Sheikh-ul-Islam, a religious scholar who would hold authority over the nation's judges. However, for reasons that remain unclear, this proposal was never acted upon. In 1950, more than thirty leading religious scholars supported the Twenty-Two Point Constitution of Pakistan, but it made no mention of establishing an MRA. Despite the evident desire for such an institution, no significant action was taken for over twenty years. The closest move toward formalizing religious affairs in government was the creation of the Pilgrimage Executive Committee in the early 1950s, which was responsible for overseeing the country's pilgrimage arrangements to Mecca and Medina.

History cites Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, a highly modernistic and Westernized leader, to have established Pakistan's first-ever MRA at the height of his political power in 1974. Many historians have suggested that Bhutto's decision to establish the Ministry of Religious Affairs was driven by a desire to strengthen his political position amid rising sectarian tensions. This move was seen as a way to solidify his authority during a time of growing religious divisions and the creation of the Ministry was motivated by the need to consolidate his political gains. The establishment of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA) in 1974 was largely prompted by the anti-Qadiani riots of that summer, which served as a trigger for the government to address what was perceived as a religious crisis. The Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA), established with a broad mandate, had limited impact and failed to meet expectations. Despite overseeing religious outreach, it did not address key issues such as organizing mosques, improving imam training, or advancing religious education for the public, leaving its role ineffective in addressing the country's core religious needs.

Towards the end of the 1970s, the MRA was assimilated into the Ministry of Minority Affairs and Overseas Pakistanis, which did nothing for its weakened authority and effectiveness. Despite the limited reforms, the Ministry remained ineffective for nearly two decades, unable to make significant progress in managing the main religious affairs.[13] In October 1991, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Minority Affairs was divided into two separate ministries: the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA) and the Ministry of Minority Affairs. Perhaps this restructuring reflected an attempt to give more focus to each area since both had grown in complexity in the last two decades. Yet, in essence, the split of the Ministry in 1991 was a move towards more specialized management but did little to address the long-standing issues of inefficacy and lack of progress in the Ministry's broader goals. In a perplexing turn of events, the two ministries—Religious Affairs and Minority Affairs—were merged once again by 1999, but this time with the addition of a third ministry, that of Culture and Sports. This merger effectively diluted the Ministry's focus, making it unrecognizable as a body dedicated to religious affairs.[14]

It could be argued that by leaving religious affairs in the hands of various religious groups or *jama'ats*, Pakistan has allowed its mosques, madrasas, and other religious institutions to become fragmented. This has led to a situation where different sectarian communities within Sunni Islam promote conflicting beliefs and practices, resulting in a lack of cohesion. Events like the COVID-19 pandemic, along with routine religious observances such as the timing of Eid, have underscored the challenges the state faces in implementing unified policies on religious matters. The presence of multiple competing voices in public discourse makes it difficult for the government to take decisive, collective action on religious issues.

As noted by scholar Martin van Bruinessen, Pakistan's Ministry of Religious Affairs seems to be primarily concerned with logistical tasks such as organizing the Hajj pilgrimage, rather than addressing broader religious and sectarian issues that could foster unity or streamline religious practice within the country. This limited scope highlights the ongoing challenges Pakistan faces in centralizing religious authority and fostering a unified approach to Islam within its diverse and fragmented religious landscape.[15] A 2014 report highlighted the fragmented nature of Sunni religious authority in Pakistan, where individuals who lack formal religious accreditation often hold influence. Despite this, these figures can still amass large followings and exert considerable influence over significant portions of the population. This unregulated and decentralized religious authority fuels sectarian divisions within Pakistani society, as competing religious leaders promote varying—and at times radically different—interpretations of Islam. As a result, the absence of a unified, state-supported religious institution hampers efforts to foster sectarian harmony and establish cohesive religious governance across the country.[16] The Ministry was for reasons unknown established nearly 27 years after the country's creation in 1974, raising questions about the delayed attention to religious matters when other countries like Turkey had done this decades earlier. As stated earlier, by 1976, the scope of its duties expanded to include religious minorities and overseas Pakistanis. This shift in focus effectively diluted the ministry's original mandate, making its role less focused on managing religious institutions and practices within the country. The inclusion of minority affairs in the Ministry's mandate only added complexity, making it harder for the Ministry to effectively manage the diverse religious needs of Pakistan's population in a structured and unified way. This expansion of responsibilities diverted attention from its core function, leaving the Ministry struggling to fulfill its original purpose of regulating and overseeing the country's Muslim setting.[17]

Moreover, In 1981, another significant shift occurred when the Auqaf Ministry, which had been established in 1976, was incorporated into the Ministry of Religious Affairs. This move further broadened the Ministry's scope, adding additional responsibilities to an already overburdened institution. In the late 1970s, the Ministry of Religious Affairs seemed to experience a surge in influence, especially when it was given the responsibility of drafting a national program for the Islamization of Pakistan. Under General Zia ul-Haq's military regime, the Ministry became a key player in the Islamization agenda, closely working with the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) to align Pakistan's laws with Islamic principles. However, what happened after this brief period of prominence? Despite its central role, the Islamization program was short-lived and left little lasting impact. Why did the Ministry, which was at that time so influential supposedly, fail to create meaningful reforms that would reshape Pakistan's religious landscape? In fact, over time, the Ministry of Religious Affairs seemed to fade into a largely symbolic position within the state apparatus, often co-opted for political purposes rather than fulfilling its original mandate.

This oscillation between periods of minor influence and political manipulation has indeed characterized the history of Pakistan's Ministry of Religious Affairs, highlighting its persistent failure to evolve into a truly effective and independent institution capable of managing religious affairs in the country. Instead, it often

functioned as a politically charged body, caught in the web of partisan struggles, and struggled to maintain a clear and coherent role within Pakistan's highly fragmented religious and political landscape.[18] At the grassroots level, however, the Ministry's influence has remained minimal. Despite its minimal responsibilities over religious institutions, such as mosques, madrasas, and religious education, there has been little tangible impact on the ground. Efforts to engage with local religious communities and foster a more unified national religious discourse have faltered. The initiatives that were taken in the past have generally been short-lived, with no enduring policies emerging to sustain and develop the Ministry's role in religious life. Consequently, the Ministry has never been able to achieve the same level of institutional development and respect as religious authorities in other countries.

Some analyses have questioned whether the ministry has truly fulfilled its intended role or if it has primarily functioned as a tool for political elites seeking to further their own agendas. Instead of acting as an autonomous body to oversee and manage religious affairs, the MRA has often been subsumed into political strategies. This raises an important question: why did the Ministry's responsibilities become so limited instead of growing over time? Given Pakistan's status as home to one of the world's largest Muslim populations, the MRA's minimal involvement in broader religious governance is striking. The Ministry's history suggests it has often been treated more as a ceremonial institution—something to be used for political advantage—rather than an entity genuinely addressing the religious needs of the country. The failure of the MRA to evolve into an effective and influential body can be attributed to both Pakistan's political history, which relegated the Ministry to marginal tasks, and its inability to connect with local, communal Muslim life. Although it had the potential to make a meaningful impact on Islamic education, imam training, mosque administration, and the regulation of religious matters, the MRA failed to create any consistent and lasting structure to address these crucial issues.

Even with the Ministry's reorganization in 2013, when it was amalgamated one more time to join Muslim religiosity with Interfaith, its core limitations remained largely unaddressed. While this restructuring aimed to broaden its scope, it seems unlikely that simply rebranding or expanding the ministry's areas of responsibility could remedy the fundamental issues it faces. The question remains: can these efforts truly lead to meaningful progress in managing Pakistan's religious landscape, or are they again merely surface-level adjustments that fail to tackle the deeper structural problems? The ministry's historical struggles suggest that without a more profound overhaul or a shift in priorities, its capacity to regulate religious affairs and promote genuine interfaith dialogue will remain limited. However, despite these responsibilities, the Ministry's effectiveness remains uncertain, especially when compared to similar institutions in countries like Turkey, where religious governance is more centralized and effectively integrated into the state apparatus. The Ministry's continued focus on issues like Hajj and Zakat, while important, indicates its narrow scope and limited capacity to address the broader and more pressing issues related to religious education, sectarian tensions, and mosque management. Moreover, its focus on Interfaith Harmony—while an essential aspect in a religiously diverse society—suggests a further dilution of its potential role in shaping a coherent religious policy that addresses the needs of Pakistan's predominantly Muslim population. Thus. the MRA's failure to become a genuinely impactful institution reflects the complex interplay of political dynamics, sectarian divisions, and the absence of a unified vision for religious governance in Pakistan. Despite its institutional presence, the MRA's role in shaping the religious life of the nation remains minimal, and its capacity to address the diverse needs of Pakistan's Muslim communities continues to be compromised by political and sectarian interests.[19]

Pakistan faces numerous challenges in establishing a robust and effective Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA). A major barrier to creating a unified system for

managing religious affairs in Pakistan is the absence of a collective national vision regarding the role of religion in shaping a balanced and cohesive society. As highlighted in this discussion, both the government and the various religious groups have failed to position Islam as a central, unifying force within the country. The Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA), rather than fostering a vision of societal unity, has struggled to emphasize the importance of aligning different sectors around shared objectives. This lack of a coordinated approach to religion and its role in societal development has left Pakistan's religious landscape fragmented and the MRA's efforts largely ineffective. The key point here is to prioritize grassroots engagement. To truly benefit the general Muslim population, its efforts should be focused on addressing local needs and structuring a centralized bureaucracy tasked with the administration of Islam in Pakistan. Such a transformation would allow the Ministry to play a vital role in managing religious institutions, providing clear guidance on religious practices, and promoting a balanced and inclusive understanding of Islam that serves the nation.

Another significant challenge Pakistan faces in this context is the deep divide between the political elite and various religious groups. Throughout Pakistan's history, this has contributed to a fragmented and contentious relationship. This ongoing tension has had negative consequences for society, fueling sectarianism among Sunni Muslims, fostering broader religious intolerance, and promoting narrow, and rigid interpretations of Islam. The inability of various religious factions, or *jamaats*, to come together around a unified vision has further complicated the creation of a centralized religious model.[20] A further significant barrier to the effectiveness of the ministry lies in the economic constraints that hamper its operations. This is because Pakistan relies on private donations to fund its madrassas and other religious bodies. This lack of state funding leaves religious institutions in Pakistan vulnerable to external influence, and the MRA struggles to maintain any substantial oversight. Pakistan faces a stark deficit in this area, hindering the MRA's capacity to regulate and uplift religious institutions in a meaningful way.[21]

The financial dependence of mosques on local communities in Pakistan represents a fundamental flaw in the system, placing undue strain on those who contribute. This arrangement allows wealthy or influential donors to exert disproportionate control over mosque operations, shaping both the mosque's priorities and the imam's role. Instead of prioritizing religious education and leadership, mosque committees are often more concerned with social status, ideological loyalties, and financial power. This emphasis on personal or sectarian agendas over professional qualifications means that many imams are poorly trained, with some even selected based on family ties rather than merit. In some instances, imams are appointed through hereditary connections, further undermining the value of education and competency. The lack of a national framework for regulating imam appointments is glaring, and it is clear that only a centralized Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA), in partnership with educational institutions, could institute standards that prioritize merit and remove sectarian politics from the selection process. Without this intervention, Pakistan's religious landscape will continue to be defined by fragmented and politicized practices, rather than by the quality of religious leadership.

Is the declining social and economic status of imams in rural Pakistan a symptom of a larger systemic failure? It seems that many imams, despite their influence in these communities, are unable to improve their material conditions. Is this a result of the lack of a structured, state-backed framework for religious leadership? The question arises: What would happen if Pakistan were to adopt a model similar to other Muslim countries where religious institutions are both financially and administratively supported by the state? Could this system offer not only educational and financial growth for imams but also create a more robust religious framework that better serves the public? The crux of the matter seems to be the necessity of the administrative function of religion in the social sphere. If the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA)

were positioned as an independent, non-political body focused solely on organizing and managing religious services, could it elevate the social, educational, and financial standing of imams while ensuring greater religious cohesion within Pakistan?

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