



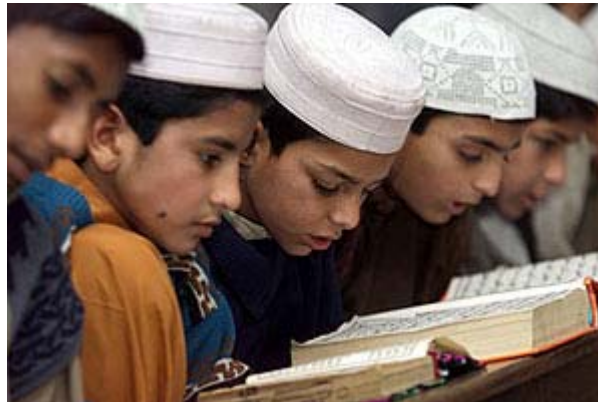
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From The Economist print edition**An alleged boom in Islamic schooling may have been overstated**

Reuters

**Not necessarily extremists**

PERVEZ MUSHARRAF, Pakistan's president, this week let it be known that he would like to stay in power even after his current term expires in 2007. Supporters of the general, who seized power in a bloodless coup in 1999, have long been campaigning for this outcome. They present their man, who preaches a gospel of "enlightened moderation", as a bulwark against Islamic extremism—whose rise, in this traditionally moderate Muslim nation, gives America nightmares.

Opinions differ sharply, however, over how serious a threat extremism really poses to Pakistan. True, a group of Islamist parties did better than ever in elections in 2002. But they still won only 11% of the votes. Similarly, a debate over the growth of *madrassas* (Islamic schools) suggests their popularity may be exaggerated.

The *madrassas* vary widely in their curriculum, aims and doctrine. Most have no links with extremism at all. "It is a figment of the imagination that they are a factory for terrorism," says Khurshid Ahmad, a senator from a leading Islamist party. But many of the Pakistani *jihadis* who fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s and early 1990s against the Soviet army, with the Pakistan-sponsored Taliban and then in Indian-controlled Kashmir, were products of a *madrassa* education.

Their wars seemed to help popularise Islamic education. According to research by the Institute of Policy Studies, a think-tank chaired by Mr Ahmad, the number of *madrassas* increased from 2,861 in 1988 to 6,761 in 2000. It is widely reported that *madrassa* education has boomed since the September 11th attacks on America and the “war against terror” that followed. In November 2003, Pakistan's education minister estimated the number of *madrassas* at between 15,000 and 20,000. One report suggested that one-third of all Pakistani children were enrolled in *madrassas*. That seems to be far from the truth.

Recent research* for America's Harvard University suggests that during the 1990s enrolment in *madrassas* increased by only 16%—less than the increase in overall school enrolment. So the proportion of children in *madrassas* actually fell. The data considered come from three sources: a national census in 1998, household surveys and a special educational census conducted in 2003 in three districts of Punjab province. The authors admit that they might understate *madrassa* enrolment: orphans would be excluded; so may those children who attend a *madrassa* part-time. Even correcting for this, however, *madrassas* account for less than 1% of total enrolment nationwide, and still less than 2% in the areas where they are most prevalent, near the border with Afghanistan.

These numbers imply that the danger of a radical Islamisation of Pakistan is less acute than is often assumed. They do not, however, answer two criticisms of the government: that it has not lived up to its promises to regulate *madrassas* properly, or to close down all of those few that do have proven links to extremist groups.

* “[Religious school enrolment in Pakistan: a look at the data](#)”, by Tahir Andrabi, Jishnu Das, Asim Ijaz Khwaja and Tristan Zajonc, John F. Kennedy School of Government