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**The common thread**

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A survey of the objectives of education policies of countries around the world yields very similar and overlapping sets of goals. Turkey’s education policy, like many countries’, is forward looking and aims to ‘prepare students to actively participate in 21st century society.’

Germany’s primary education objective is the ‘development of essential understanding, skills, abilities and key competences amongst pupils.’

Singapore’s education policy has two goals; ‘First, expanding opportunities in education for all through a range of educational programs; second, moving the system towards developing core national values and skills to achieve broader educational outcomes.’

The objective of Finland’s education policy, ‘in addition to equity, is to achieve as high a level of education and competence as possible for the whole population.’

In Brazil, ‘the aim of education is defined as the full development of a person, qualification for work, and participation as a citizen.’

I could keep going like this, but the goals and objectives of most countries’ education policies can be summarized as human development, allowing citizens to reach their maximum potential and preparing them for the economy of the future.

The objectives of the current National Education Policy (NEP) 2009, developed during the last tenure of the PPP, does a good job by clearly identifying access to, equity of and quality of education for all as priorities, but does not envision a higher purpose. The Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training (MoFEPT) is currently developing a new National Education Policy 2021 that will supersede the NEP 2009 currently in effect.

There also was the NEP 2017, developed in the waning years of the PML-N’s last tenure, but that never came into effect after the PTI took over in 2018. According to one document, its list of goals and objectives is a laundry list of 36 items. This messiness of ideas might explain why I can never get a straight and matching answer when I ask people in government what our education policy’s goals are.

Principals articulate their desired policy goals, and leave the job of developing policy documents to bureaucrats and professionals who coat them with a layer of varnish for a palatable, neutral presentation. For an unvarnished look at the government’s priorities, it helps to listen to what political leaders, the prime minister and ministers say in their speeches and the programs they launch. Since the PTI government came into power in 2018, it has unveiled three major changes to education in the center and provinces it controls.

The first and most far reaching is the introduction of the Single National Curriculum (SNC) at the center, which has since been adopted by AJK and Punjab and is expected to be adopted by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa soon. Since the beginning, the purpose of the SNC was described as ‘erasing class differences’ in society (which is reiterated at every opportunity) and setting a minimum standard of education. In time, the goal is to replace international high school qualifications like Cambridge IGCSE, O/A-levels and the International Baccalaureate.

A dissection of the SNC for primary school years shows large growth in the volume of contents of Islamiyat. Since the SNC will be applicable to public schools and madressahs and (after yet another U-turn) to private schools as well, this should be understood as the price for bringing madressahs on board the SNC and registering them. Never mind that, according to a recent news report, the government has so far succeeded in registering only one percent of the 30,000 madressahs in the country.

The second change (in summer 2020) was the mandate for teaching and testing of recitation of the Quran to university students as a necessary precondition for graduation in Punjab. This initiative was introduced on the whim of the Governor of Punjab, Chaudhry Mohammad Sarwar. The rationale given for it is that “only by following the teachings of the Quran can the world be improved. It is vital for Muslim students to understand religion and protect themselves from extremism and bigotry.”

The third change came just last week. The Senate passed a private bill presented by PML-N senator Javed Abbasi, with support from the PTI, JI, and even some PPP senators that makes teaching of Arabic mandatory for grades 1 through 12 in all schools in the capital. Even in a political environment where government and opposition parties flip-flop on everything and agree on nothing, bulking up the contents of Islamiyat and granting an extension are the last two issues on which multi-partisan agreement can be found, and I am not sure about the latter.

Politicians publicly defending this bill are citing a wide array of different reasons, ranging from ‘teaching children Arabic for 12 years will give them a leg up in finding (labor?) jobs in the Middle East’, to ‘it is our religious duty’, to (and I am not kidding) ‘why not?’ Going by these arguments, the children of Pakistan should not aspire to anything greater than life in a labor camp in the Middle East and preparing for the afterlife. India and the Philippines are among the top sources of workers to the Middle East. Workers from both countries take crash courses in spoken Arabic before reporting to their new employers that suffice for their purpose.

When I attempt to find the common thread in these three major changes to the education system, I can come up with only a single theme: a further increase in the amount of religious education in public and private schools and universities.

The Economist Intelligence Unit’s latest issued Democracy Index classifies Pakistan’s current government as a ‘hybrid regime’, a step below ‘flawed democracy’ but one step above ‘authoritarian regime.’ Actions taken by the (federal) government do not happen without the will of the prime minister and should be taken as an accurate reflection of his priorities.

Our elected representatives live the prime of their lives exercising all the freedoms available to them. Yet, when it comes to the rest of us, they have a religious moment. If they wish to live a more religiously observant lifestyle because they feel it is the right thing to do, they should do so by all means. My issue is when they forcibly take all 230 million of us along on that ride. Let everyone, young and old, figure out for themselves how to be their own best version.

The government claims to know what kind of school children should attend better than their own parents. In particular, the way the SNC is being rolled out looks set to squeeze all children in a country of 230 million into a one-size straightjacket, that whittles down educational choices even further.

This renewed emphasis on religious studies in school is coloring education policy decisions. Policies are being formulated on a whim, without regard to evidence if they will achieve their intended goals. All political parties are guilty of playing and tinkering with education policies for easy political wins and without fear of personal repercussions or consequences if a policy fails or backfires – those will be suffered by the children of powerless commoners and peasant folk. Publicity stunts like this are all we can expect when the ‘people’s representatives’ are disconnected from their constituents, have no stake themselves and cannot be bothered to consult with parents and schools what their educational priorities for their children are.

For more than 30 years, the school curriculum has included Islamiat for grades 1 to 12, and for four years in university bachelors programs as well. That has not helped our country’s ranking on the corruption, democracy, human development and governance indices. Income taxes are evaded, traffic rules are treated as optional suggestions, and laws are broken with impunity. A shortage of religious training is not the problem here.

Never mind that for the last 10 years more than 50 percent of teacher positions in schools in the capital have remained vacant, some operating with no science teachers at all! Never mind that public schools across the land are suffering from a shortage of science and math teachers and basic facilities – for example, bathrooms and running water. Despair not, we are told, for the new SNC model textbooks will cure all ills.