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Abstract Only – Work in Progress

“Muslims, Markets, and the Meaning of ‘A Good Education’ in Pakistan”

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For several years, international donor agencies with an interest in education - for example, UNICEF and USAID - have worked with local governments in Pakistan to broaden the scope of neo-liberal economic reforms, believing that an effort to promote “school choice” would generate competitive pressures for stronger secular schools. Nearly 700 interviews with local parents conducted in various parts of Pakistan between July 2004 and January 2005, however, have led me to question the assumptions that lie behind this idea. In particular, I found that efforts to promote “school choice” rarely privilege conventional notions of secularism. Rather, for reasons related to the influence of local religious elites (and extremely low levels of religious literacy on the part of ordinary citizens), these efforts have a tendency to shift community resources away from secularism toward sectarianism. Today, children routinely find themselves drawn into sectarian rivalries reinforced by local *mullahs*, rivalries in which the terms of religious conformity, or unity, are used to draw distinctions between pious “insiders” and dissenting (even heretical) “outsiders.” Unfortunately, after reading the Qur’an in Arabic, few children proceed to read the Qur’an in a language they can actually understand. The terms of religious “conformity,” therefore, are never permitted to interact with the possibility of interpretive “difference.” Many have argued that the solution to this dilemma lies in suggesting that local parents would be better off without religious education, insisting, for example, that “demand-driven reforms” should exclude “demands in favor of religion.” This paper disagrees with this approach and shows how the challenge seems to be in realizing that, even within existing approaches to religious education, several avenues are open to constructive forms of engagement. Qur’anic recitation “in translation” is just one among many different examples.