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**Surrendering space to the right**

The Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board (PCTB) is back in the news. This time it is because the Muttahida Ulema Board (MUB), which it has given a role in the review and approval of textbooks, is demanding that clothing be added to anatomical diagrams in biology textbooks depicting internal organs and guts of the human body, so as not to compound societal immorality. I cannot imagine what a diagram of a dissected human torso with clothes would even look like.

The comedy does not end here. The same ulema also found fault with mathematics textbooks. They are demanding the removal of the words ‘interest’ and ‘markup’ from them. Never mind the fact that every local bank uses these terms (or oblique variations like ‘rate’) to describe the interest it pays out or collects on their investment, deposit, credit cards and loan products. The government reminds us almost daily that it is paying interest on foreign loans. Contrary to the MUB members’ wishful thinking, that is the world we live in.

It seems like the members of the MUB have some sort of compulsion that makes them find fault, even when there is none, just to remind everyone of their existence and establish their nuisance value. Why are ulema reviewing science and mathematics textbooks in the first place? To understand how we ended up at this point it is worth understanding the slow slide over the years by which politicians and bureaucracy have gradually ceded space to the religious far-right.

I looked at legislation governing the functioning of the Board, beginning with the Punjab Textbook Board Ordinance of 1962, to the establishment of the Punjab Curriculum Authority in 2012, to the introduction of the Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board Ordinance in 2014, an amendment in 2015 and a subsequent amendment through the Punjab Curriculum and TextBook Board (Amendment) Bill 2020, which the Punjab Assembly passed unanimously in June last year.

The MUB made its first appearance in the amendment of 2020 under the section on prohibition in para 2(a): ‘Any textbook or curriculum on religion with contents or matter related to Islam including Islamiyat, History, Pakistan Studies, Urdu, Literature or any other subject material related to religion shall not be published before taking prior approval from the Muttahida Ulema Board, Punjab and the Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board shall be bound to take such approval from Muttahida Ulema Board, Punjab.’

It is worth noting that the PCTB amendment bill of 2020 was presented as a private member bill by MPA Khadija Umar (PML-Q). Historically, private member bills have been vehicles for grandstanding by individual MPAs. They create headlines and put the sponsoring member’s name in the papers for a few days, let him / her gather up votes in his / her constituency but usually end up going nowhere. On other occasions, parties have used private member bills to enact legislation they foresee becoming an albatross around their neck and which they wish to disavow later down the road.

So, one MPA’s desire to burnish her credentials with conservative voters has thrown a spanner into the PCTB’s review process for textbooks. Not only was this amendment adopted but, after members of the PPP walked out, adopted unanimously. No one party holds a monopoly on using private member bills as instruments for point scoring. For example, take the recent bill introduced in the Sindh Assembly by an MMA MPA mandating marriage before the age of 18. Earlier this year, the Senate passed the ‘Compulsory Teaching of Arabic Language Bill 2020’ which had been introduced as a private member’s bill by Senator Javed Abbasi of the PML-N in August last year.

How is it acceptable for MPAs with no qualification or knowledge of curriculum development, pedagogy or education in general to bring about a bill that so radically changes the landscape of school education? We would not allow someone with a BA and a diploma in interior design to perform surgery on someone, would we?

However poorly thought through and ill-advised, once a bill pushing society further towards the far-right is approved and becomes law, it is almost impossible to unring the bell. We remember the 2012 banning of YouTube by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA). Instead of doing what so many other countries of the Islamic world did – let people register their protest and ignore the provocation by the attention seeker – our then-government’s thoughtless knee-jerk reaction was to cut off its nose to spite its face. Once enacted, pressure from the far-right made it difficult to reverse the ban, which remained in effect until December 6, 2015.

In Punjab, in particular, the province that saw its governor assassinated for speaking up about the abuse of the blasphemy laws only a few years ago, few are willing to stick their necks out to speak against the slide to the far-right. Yet, the tale of how the PCTB got itself into the headlines for all the wrong reasons begins with the development of the Single National Curriculum (SNC) by the National Curriculum Council (NCC) in Islamabad. For a government that had made social development and education an important pillar of its manifesto in the 2013 and 2018 elections, the SNC was an opportunity to hit the reset button for (public) education.

When I talk to decision-makers in the education sector in government about what kinds of citizens the public school system endeavors to produce, I can never get an answer that shows that everyone is working from the same playbook. While key considerations for the SNC include items such as international trends in teaching, learning & assessment, outcomes-based learning, focus on values, life skills & inclusion, respect & appreciation for different cultures & religions in local and global context, the top considerations remain religion, the vision of Quaid and Iqbal, and the constitutional framework.

These are the priorities and considerations that guided the work of those ‘400 experts’ that developed the primary school SNC. Judging by their work product, at no point did anyone advise them to adhere to Article 22(1) that safeguards citizens right that “No person attending any educational institution shall be required to receive religious instruction, or take part in any religious ceremony, or attend religious worship, if such instruction, ceremony or worship relates to a religion other than his own.”

As a result, as in years past, a significant amount of religious content was included in textbooks of subjects other than Islamiat. None of these issues was identified in the review of textbooks either. The PCTB adopted the Center’s SNC and its model textbooks without an iota of change and put its seal of approval on them. Private school textbooks are jumping through the hoops that are the PCTB’s three-phase review process in which the PCTB Amendment act of 2020 hands the MUB a role, thus giving the far-right a foot in the door to all schools.

In response to a public interest appeal made in December 2020 (Altamash Saeed versus The Government of Punjab), the chairman of the PCTB and Secretary (School Education, Punjab) ordered that all public and private school books and supplementary materials require review and approval, to avoid inclusion of any indecent material from the next academic year (2021-22 and onwards). It was an easy out for the bureaucracy without thinking through the consequences. So, where the amendment act of 2020 gave the MUB a role in the review of Islamiat textbooks, the department’s response to this court appeal made matters worse and expanded its role to review all teaching materials of all subjects.

This is how the politicians and the bureaucracy in Punjab ceded space to the MUB – space that, once surrendered, will be difficult to reverse and reclaim. Instead of departments and officials doing their jobs and arresting this slide to the far-right early in the process, the dangerous and politically costly legal fights to right these wrongs are left to the most vulnerable communities and civil society activists.

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