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Religious Identities Provoked: The Gilgit 'Textbook Controversy' and its Conflictual Context¹

Abstract

Textbooks, and the curricula on which they are based, are often used to foster specific identities that might not be the identity of a substantial part of the population. If they meet with pre-existing strife, even textbooks can provoke violent outbreaks, which can only be understood in the context of the underlying conflict. This article will analyse one example, putting it in the context of textbook politics in South Asia.

In Gilgit (Northern Areas of Pakistan), protests against presentations of religious practices in school textbooks resulted in riots and deaths in 2004 as well as in the closure of schools for one year. Even if this specific issue seemed to have been solved in May 2005, tension continued. The population of this region is religiously heterogeneous (despite being Muslim). Developments in the Islamic World elsewhere (Iran, Afghanistan) deepened the divide. The region experienced 'sectarian clashes' for quite some time, the authorities being unable or unwilling to control them.

This regional case is linked to the general (not only educational) policies of Pakistan, especially to the promotion of "the ideology of Pakistan". Despite meeting with some criticism, this concept is not only used to demarcate the Pakistani "self" from the (especially Indian) "other", but also to do away with internal differences. However, the attempt at homogenisation is counterproductive where it can be interpreted as being directed against specific group identities and interests.

On Thursday, June 3, 2004, "one person was killed and several were injured when Shia protestors clashed with security forces in Gilgit city".² As the correspondent wrote, the army had imposed a curfew and "was called out in Gilgit to maintain law and order" in expectation of demonstrations. Nevertheless, they were unable to prevent attacks on police stations, administrative buildings etc.³ In other parts

1 A first version of the paper was presented at the workshop on "Divergent Pasts: History in School Textbooks in South Asia", organised by the South Asian Studies Programme, National University of Singapore, February 15–16, 2007. My thanks go to the organisers and to the participants for discussion. Also, I am grateful to Prof. Martin Sökefeld for his comments on the paper.

2 Ibrahim Shahid, "Curfew imposed as one killed, several hurt in Gilgit riots", *The Daily Times*, 3 June, 2004.

3 The source mentions the police training centre, the deputy commissioner's office, the VIP resthouse and the Northern Areas Legislative Council Hall as well as police stations in other places (Safdar Khan,

of the area, people were likewise on the road. Over the following days, protests continued and the unrest also spread to Baltistan.

The cause of the violent outbreak: school textbooks – or more precisely some representations that Shi’ite inhabitants regarded as discriminatory and directed against their faith. The following article will deal with the cause of the conflict, its course, and will try to outline its contexts on the regional as well as national level, which, however, cannot be understood without reference to its international geopolitical background.

Cause and course

The conflict surrounding textbooks and curricula was not new, but had some history, starting in 2000. As early as July 2003, one year before the outbreak, Mohammad Shehzad described the controversy as “simmering for three years” and “a sectarian time bomb” and listed in an article⁴ the eighteen points that were under criticism. Criticised were statements and images in Islamiyat (Islamic Studies) textbooks, but Urdu, Arabic, History and Social Studies textbooks were affected as well, sixteen books altogether. These books were prescribed to be used in the schools of the Northern Areas. Summarising the points, the Shi’ites received the impression that in the prescribed Islamiyat studies as well as in other books, Islamic practices (such as prayers) were presented in a strictly Sunnite way. That their practices differ was not accepted. Moreover, the approach to Islamic history was a purely Sunnite one. Only sayings of the Prophet (*hadith*) accepted by the Sunna were mentioned. Persons were described and valued according to the Sunnite tradition. Shi’ite personalities were left aside or not referred to in due form.⁵

“Curfew in Gilgit: protester killed”, *Dawn*, 4 June 2004).

- 4 Mohammad Shehzad. “Textbook controversy in Gilgit”, *The Friday Times* (Lahore), 4–10 July, 2003. Under the headline “Gilgit sitting atop a ticking bomb”, the Indian paper *The Daily Excelsior* (Jammu – 8 July 2003) took over the story.
- 5 The list, which also names the sources, runs: “i. The incident of *wahee* (revelation) has been described in a ridiculous manner that shows the Prophet himself was not sure about his prophet-hood. [...] ii. Abraham’s father Azar has been described as worshipper of idols. [...] iii. The Prophet has [*sic*] said to have missed his prayer during the battle of Khandaq. [...] iv. The Prophet’s wife Ayesha has been projected as superior to all other women of the Prophet’s family through fake *ahadiz*. [...] v. The Sunni caliphs have been presented as *Khulfa-e Rashideen* unopposed by Shias. (The Shia do not recognize the first three caliphs as *Khulfa-e Rashideen*). [...] vi. The Caliphs (that are not recognized by Shias) have been eulogized through titles such as Siddique-wa-Amirul Momineen (the first Caliph Hazrat Abu Bakar Siddique) and Farooq-wa-Amirul Momineen (the Second Caliph Hazrat Umar Farooq) Shia claim such titles are only for Hazrat Ali (the Fourth Caliph). [...] vii. The Sunni Caliphs have been glorified through special chapters that pay them a rich tribute. No such tribute has been paid to the Shia Caliphs. [...] viii. It is a fabricated statement that the Prophet asked the First Caliph to lead the prayer when he (the Prophet) was ill. [...] ix. The contribution and sacrifices of Hazrat Ali have been faded out deliberately. x. Yazid has been totally exonerated from Karbala and the entire blame has been shifted to Ibn-e-Ziyad. [...] xi. Khalid bin Walid has been praised more compared to Hazrat Ali. It is untrue that the Prophet had bestowed him (Walid) the title of Saif Ullah. [...] xii. Sunni procedure of ablution has been featured in Islamiyat, [...] xiii. The addition of prayer is better than sleep. [...] xiv. Sunni procedure of prayer is features. [...] xv. A picture that depicts Sunni style of saying prayer. [...] xvi. Such sayings of Prophet have been quoted that have been told by the Sunni historians. xvii. The Islamiyat of the 12th grade promotes the Sunni school of thought. xviii. Prophet’s uncle Hazrat Abu Talib

The authors of the criticised books that were published by the Punjab Textbook Board were said to be Sunnites of the Deobandi school (see below).

The leading figure on the side of the Shi'ites was Agha Ziauddin (Zia ud-Din) Rizvi, the Imam of Gilgit's Imamiya Mosque. He and other representatives of the Shi'a community of the Northern Areas seem to have passed their criticism to the authorities, demanding a redesign of the books. A demand of a separate Islamiyat curriculum for the Shi'ites, however, was controversial even among their community leaders, as it was thought by some of them to create more dissent. For three years, some exchange of positions, talks or even negotiations seem to have taken place with the Ministry of Education and Northern Areas authorities – without any result.⁶ As a report of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (2005:24) mentions, “the issue of reviewing and correcting the Punjab Text Book Board was negotiated continuously for several years with several Federal Ministers and Chief Executives including Mr. Abbas Sarfaraz⁷, Nisar Memon⁸ and Aftab Sherpao⁹, but despite the assurances given by them, they did nothing to resolve this issue.” Thus, positions hardened and the Shi'ites felt compelled to raise the pressure. Students started to boycott classes by staging protest rallies instead. In the attempt to close down an army-run school, the protest became violent and many were injured. When the Shi'ite clerics started to propagate a “full-scale protest”, members of the Northern Areas Legislative Council intervened. The Shi'a leaders were assured “that the issue was under active consideration of the government” and the strike was called off. In the Ministry of Education, a revision of the Islamiyat syllabus seems to have been considered.¹⁰

Time passed without the issue being resolved. On August 15, riots broke out in Skardu (the second town in the region and capital of Baltistan).¹¹ Violent protests shook Skardu a few days later again. Shi'ites (the Shi'ite organisation *Anjuman-e Imamia*) set September 1 as a deadline for the government to meet their demands. The administration closed the schools in Skardu and Gilgit and asked for help from the federal government “to deal with unruly mobs”.¹² Students who had intended

has been described as non-Muslim. [...]” (Mohammad Shehzad, “Textbook controversy in Gilgit”, *The Friday Times* (Lahore) 4–10 July, 2003).

6 In 2001, however, a solution seems to have almost been found. The then Deputy Chief Executive of Gilgit, Muhammad Ali Shehzad, a Shi'ite himself, is said to have permitted Shi'ites to use other books. But this led to violent opposition by extremist Sunnites (Raman 2001), and during the course of the year the office holder was replaced with Haji Fida Muhammad Nashad from the Pakistan Muslim League (PML). Nashad was reelected as a NALC member in October 2004, but his fellow member Mir Ghanzafar, the son of the late Mir of Hunza, was elected as Deputy Chief Executive (“NALC Unofficial Results: PML bags 7, PPP 6, PML-N 2 Seats in Poll”, *Pakistan Times*, 14 October, 2004; “Northern Areas Legislative Council: PML candidates cruise to top posts”, *Daily Times*, 24 November, 2004).

7 Federal Minister for Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas, 1999–2002.

8 Federal Minister for Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas in 2002/2003.

9 Aftab Ahmed Khan Sherpao, Commissioner for the Northern Areas and Minister for Water and Power in the Federal Cabinet. In 2003, he also became responsible for the Ministry for KANA. In September 2004 he became Federal Minister of Interior.

10 Mohammad Shehzad, “Textbook controversy in Gilgit”, *The Friday Times*, 4–10 July, 2003.

11 “Gilgit Shias to resume syllabus reform protest from October 1”, *Daily Times*, 29 September, 2003.

12 “Shias threaten more strikes”, *Daily Times*, 21 August, 2003; “NA admin seeks federal help to maintain order”, *Daily Times* 24 August, 2003.

to strike once schools were reopened, postponed their protests, as negotiations in Islamabad had been envisaged involving even the Prime Minister.¹³

In September 2003, *Dawn* reports a demonstration of Sunni *madaris* students (and teachers) against any change in the existing syllabi 200 km south of Gilgit.¹⁴ Already in June 2001,¹⁵ not only the Shi'ites but also Sunnite groups were mobilised in this matter. We will refer to this issue later.

Two days after this demonstration, the Shi'a leaders decided to resume their protest. "Shia leader Agha Ziauddin Rizvi, after a month-long negotiation with Education Ministry and Kashmir Affairs officials in Islamabad, concluded no headway had been made towards the settlement of the four-year long dispute". Military – Frontier Constabulary – was activated to secure "law and order" in the city.¹⁶

Anti-Shi'a demonstrations in Gilgit and Chilas on October 7, 2003, triggered by the murder of Azam Tariq, an extremist Sunni leader (chief of *Millat-e Islamiya*, former *SSP*), in Islamabad, reveal a glimpse of the wider context of the textbook issue.¹⁷ Later, Shi'ite leaders and inhabitants protested against the arrest of Sajid Naqvi, chief of the banned Shi'ite *Islami Tehrik Pakistan* (*Dawn*, November 24, 2003; *Daily Times*, December 13, 2003). During the later protest, the syllabus question was also raised. Apart from this, the newspapers are quite silent about the development of this issue. The textbook and syllabus question became a topic again when on May 17, 2004, 300 students started a hunger strike. School strikes took place in the district, too (*Dawn*, May 20, 2004). Before, the Shi'ite leaders had set May 15 as a further deadline for the government to change the syllabus or, at least, to exclude the chapters in question (*Daily Times*, May 18, 2004).

The violence mentioned at the beginning of the article was the next step of escalation. Ziauddin Rizvi and seven other senior Shi'ite leaders were taken into custody.¹⁸ Despite the curfew imposed, demonstrations took place and turned violent, especially against governmental institutions. They spread over a large area. Over

13 "NAs (Agitation on syllabi postponed in Gilgit)", *Pakistan Press International*, 31 August, 2003.

14 It is noticeable that this was only one of the points of the students' protest, when they blocked the Karakoram Highway at the Thour Nallah (a southern tributary of the Indus river in the Chilas district). Others were the planned construction of a dam in Bhasha which would put part of the region under water, and the work of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and UNDP in the district that they regarded as *haram* (prohibited) from an Islamic point of view ("Students block Karakoram highway", *Dawn*, 27 Sept., 2003). In March 2007, the Basha dam was planned to be completed by 2016 and a resettlement action plan "available by June 2007" (Khaleeq Kiani, "No consensus on dams: report", *Dawn*, 13 March, 2007).

15 As mentioned above, on June 23, 2001, riots broke out, when first the police then paramilitary forces and the army clashed with activists of the extremist *Sipah Sahaba Pakistan* (SSP, which was proscribed in 2002 and renamed *Millat-e Islamiya Pakistan*) and the *Tanzeem-e Ahl-e Sunnat wa al-Jamat*, the local Sunnite organisation, protesting against "the decision of local administration to introduce different text-books in the schools for the Shias". The KKH and the airfield in Gilgit were blocked by the protesters and government cut off all communications. "Normalcy could be restored only by the first week of July" (Raman 2001).

16 "Gilgit Shias to resume syllabus protest from October 1", *Daily Times*, 29 October, 2003.

17 "Violent protests as Azam Tariq buried", *Daily Times*, 8 October, 2003. Eight months later, one Gilgiti was arrested as a suspected murderer ("Azam Tariq murder suspect held in Gilgit", *Daily Times*, 6 June, 2004).

18 Ibrahim Shahid, "Curfew imposed as one killed, several hurt in Gilgit riots", *Daily Times*, 3 June, 2004.

the next few days, under curfew, many arrests occurred. Three days later, however, the newspapers announced a solution of the conflict: “both parties agreed to sign a formula [...] over the Islamiyat syllabus issue”. This formula, with one change (its implementation required approval by the Northern Areas Chief Executive that was deleted), had already been worked out on May 20 that year, and stated that Shi’ite and Sunnite students would receive a specific Islamiyat education until class 10; in mixed classes, the views of both denominations would be explained. Controversial chapters in the textbooks would be skipped. Rizvi had to ensure that any further protest on this issue would end until a final solution on the federal level could be found.¹⁹ This, however, turned out to be only a short-lived solution to the question.

On January 8, 2005, Agha Ziauddin Rizvi was gunned down together with two bodyguards. He was brought to Islamabad by helicopter, where he (is said to have²⁰) died in a Military Hospital on January 13. He was buried in Gilgit in the evening of the next day. Shortly after the attack, riots broke out in Gilgit that resulted in a high death toll.²¹ A “shoot on sight” curfew²² was imposed that remained in force for one month²³. In Skardu, too, demonstrations took place, and the syllabus issue was named as the reason for the assassination.²⁴ Here, again riots broke out after the death became known, and a curfew was imposed.²⁵ The demonstrations were not restricted to the Northern Areas. Thus, in Lahore, the press club and journalists were attacked.²⁶

The situation remained tense and Shi’ite and Sunnite organisations seem to have treated one another with *fatwas*, “assaulting” statements etc. Local weeklies, which were pressed to publish those statements, suspended their publication in

19 “N. Areas’ syllabus issue resolved”, *Dawn*, 6 June, 2004.

20 There were non-official reports which claimed that Rizvi died during the attack in Gilgit (cf. Shalev, Barukh, “The Peace Tournament”, *Mauitime weekly* 9 (2006) 38, 16 March, 2006) [http://www.mauitime.com/PrintVersion.aspx?story_id=1491].

21 Thus, the Sunnite forest officer was burned to death together with his family when the rioters set his house on fire, and the Sunnite health department chief was killed in his office (“11 killed in Gilgit violence”, *Dawn*, 9 January, 2005).

22 “70 arrested over deadly Gilgit riots”, *The Nation*, 21 January, 2005.

23 Ahsan Wali Khan, “Gilgit’s political rumbling”, *The News*, 24 March, 2005.

24 Another cause was also mentioned in the press: that Rizvi opposed a military camp being established on the Deosai plateau (cf. Khaled Ahmad, “The Sectarian state in Gilgit”, *The Friday Times*, 22 July, 2005). That the textbook issue could be behind the assassination was, however, declined by politicians (see, for example, “Sui, Gilgit incidents condemned”, *Dawn*, 12 January, 2005), who attributed it to (foreign) terrorism. The authorities kept silent on the identities of the assassins, although one of them had been killed in course of the attack. Rumours said that he belonged to a banned militant Sunni group (“70 arrested over deadly Gilgit riots”, *The Nation*, 21 January, 2005). Even if the syllabus and textbook issue did not directly cause the murder: it added to Agha Ziauddin Rizvi’s prominence, which might have turned him into a “valuable” target in the eyes of Sunni extremists.

25 Ibrahim Shahid, “Troops patrol tense Gilgit”, *Daily Times*, 10 January; “2-hour break in Gilgit curfew”, *Daily Times*, 12 January; “Govt sets up tribunal to investigate sectarian riots”, *Daily Times*, 19 January; “Gilgit loosens up curfew”, *Daily Times*, 20 January; “Gilgit allows 10-hour curfew break”, *Daily Times*, 25 January, 2005.

26 “Agha Ziauddin laid to rest in Gilgit: 240 arrested, 24 injured in clashes”, *Daily Times*, 15 January, 2005.

protest.²⁷ Meanwhile, members of the Northern Areas Legislative Council (NALC) started to mediate and were able to make representatives of two important Sunni and Shi'ite organisations sign a “peace deal” or “accord for sectarian harmony”.²⁸ They accepted to stop issuing resolutions against the other side and to feel responsible for the lives of members of the other “sect” living in their majority areas as well as to secure the safety of the forthcoming *ashura* processions. The curriculum issue had become the concern of the NALC curriculum committee, where both sides would be represented by an expert.

Peace and harmony did not come. During the following months, officials were assassinated²⁹ or threatened with death. In the countryside, clashes between Sunni and Shi'ite villagers occurred. In the city, offices remained closed as did the schools.³⁰ The Pakistan Army, Punjab Rangers, Northern Areas Scouts and police started an “anti-arms drive” to sieze weapons in the region armed to the teeth.³¹ A bomb exploded in a village mosque injuring people.³² Shi'ites were attacked after celebrations of the Prophet's birthday. To increase security, “Section 144”³³ was imposed in Gilgit.³⁴ In this situation, the next peace agreement was signed by representatives of different religious groups on April 28. A “peace committee” was formed with three years' tenure to maintain peace and to settle disputes. In the textbook issue, it was agreed that the decisions of the respective federal committee should be abided by.³⁵

By that date, the Northern Areas Syllabus Issue Committee, chaired by “Federal Minister for Education Lt Gen (ret) Javed Ashraf” and attended among others by the Minister for Kashmir and the Northern Areas (KANA), the Chief Secretary Northern Areas and educational secretaries of different levels had already met in Islamabad and come to a decision. The controversial textbooks published by the Punjab Textbook Board would be withdrawn in the Northern Areas and replaced by books of the NWFP Textbook Board and the National Book Foundation that

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- 27 (“Journalists protest threats by radicals”, *Daily Times*, 20 February, 2005). “On 21 March 2005, a bomb was let off in front of the house of Khurshed Ahmad, president of the Gilgit Press Club, to ‘teach him a lesson’” (Khaled Ahmed, “The sectarian state of Gilgit”, *The Friday Times*, 22 July, 2005).
- 28 Ibrahim Shahis, “Sunni and Shia groups sign peace deal in Gilgit”, *Daily Times*, 20 February, 2005; and “Gilgit: Gilgit accord for sectarian harmony”, *Dawn*, 19 February 2005, respectively. The Sunni organisation was the *Tanzim Ahl-e Sunnah wa-l Jama'at*, the Shi'ite one was the Central *Anjuman-e Imamia*, Northern Areas, Rizvis organisation.
- 29 So the former Inspector General of the police, Northern Areas (“Ex-IGP of NAs, four guards killed in ambush”, *The News*, 24 March, 2005) or a senior section officer in the Northern Areas Education Department (“Govt official shot dead in Gilgit”, *Daily Times*, 9 March, 2005). After threatening calls, security for the Minister for Northern Areas and Kashmir Affairs in Islamabad was increased (“Sectarian violence in Gilgit: Govt increases security around Faisal Saleh”, *Daily Times*, 22 February, 2005). All of these victims were Sunnites.
- 30 Most Gilgit schools did not reopen after the violence of June 2004. “Meanwhile, students are egged on by their sects to get involved in the strife” (Ahsan Wali Khan, “Gilgit's political rumbling”, *The News*, 24 March, 2005). (However, this “egging on” started much earlier).
- 31 “Gilgit law enforcers seize arms cache”, *Daily Times*, 11 April, 2005.
- 32 “3 injured in Gilgit mosque blast”, *Daily Times*, 18 April, 2005.
- 33 Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) “bans four or more people from gathering at public places, carrying firearms in public, use of loud speakers, tinted windows on vehicles, wall chalking and graffiti” (“Section 144 extended for a month from 13th”, *Daily Times*, 12 November, 2005).
- 34 “Section 144 in Gilgit after 4 shot”, *Daily Times*, 28 April, 2005.
- 35 “Religious groups agree to stop feuding in Gilgit”, *Daily Times*, 29 April, 2005.

were acceptable to the Shi'ites. In the course of the coming review of the national curriculum, the controversial content would be removed from Islamiyat and Urdu books. The schools, closed for nearly one year, would be reopened.³⁶ One day later, the paper confirmed the reopening.³⁷

This, however, did not stop the agitation. On May 11, students of a public school and college in the cantonment area of Gilgit, accompanied (and incited by?) “outsiders” protested against the use of Islamiyat textbooks that had (should have) been replaced. They were detained, but later released.³⁸ On this occasion or during further protests, Sunni and Shi'ite student groups clashed, causing several injuries.³⁹ Nevertheless, this seems to have been an aftermath. Conflict continued, but the Islamiyat syllabus and the textbooks were not the cause. Killings took place. In October, 2005, the protest by Shi'ite students against the acting of (Punjab) Rangers, who were said to have killed one of them, grew violent⁴⁰; mosques were sealed, clerics arrested; again, schools were closed and a curfew imposed. In November, a “grand Jirga” (assembly), headed by a member of the NALC, approved proposals to overcome the situation.⁴¹ It seems that they managed to calm the tension. Nearly one year later, a “women’s jirga to settle sectarian disputes in NAs” was founded. The participants were members of the NALC and Gilgit District Council, i.e. political representatives of the population, as well as “social workers”.⁴² For the time being, severe incidents seemed to have halted the danger to the status quo in the relations between the two denominations.

During the last six or seven years, the conflict development and its presentation reveals a typical pattern. ‘Simmering’ for some years with few efforts to solve it and hardly being noticed by the public, it was given increasing media coverage, when it escalated. Futile attempts of resolution led to new steps of escalation. The media language indicates this: newspapers describe the protestors as “unruly mobs” etc., thus making a security affair out of a textbook issue. The issue itself, especially in the public perception of the media, narrows in the course of time and focuses especially on the Islamiyat syllabus. At the same time, however, it became intermingled with other issues, the detainment of leaders, behaviour of the

36 “Gilgit schools re-open today after one year”, *The News*, 27 April, 2005.

37 It is interesting that the paper in a later issue attributes this final settlement to “discussion and feedbacks” during the 58th Formation Commander’s Conference, where 150 Generals had discussed “the range of internal and external threats and security concerns” (M. Ismail Khan, “Heading back to normalcy”, *The News*, 2 May, 2005). The civil politicians are criticised as having been “content with playing the role of mere spectators” in that issue.

38 “33 detained students freed in Gilgit”, *Dawn*, 14 May, 2005.

39 “Shia-Sunni clashes continue to rock Gilgit”, 13 May, 2005 [<http://www.pakistan-facts.com/article.php?story=20050513204506485>].

40 The Rangers were removed from Gilgit in March, 2006 (“Rangers being withdrawn from Gilgit and Chilas”, *Daily Times*, 19 March, 2006).

41 Mosques should be unlocked but only for religious purposes. A committee should monitor that they were not used for political propaganda etc. Detained persons should be released. NALC would accord legal status to this recommendations (“Jirga okays peace proposals to end violence”, *Daily Times*, 8 November, 2005).

42 “Sources said that the jirga would mobilise women to prevent violence and educate them about peace. It would also work for protection of women’s rights in the area. It is for the first time in the history of the Northern Areas that women will play a role in negotiating peace deals” (“Women’s jirga to settle sectarian disputes in NAs”, *Daily Times*, 18 October, 2006).

“security forces”, etc. that point to a wider context of the conflict, as does the high grade of violence that seems astonishing in relation with textbooks and syllabi. The murder of Ziauddin Rizvi marked the climax point. Characteristically at the end, the conflict was solved by a solution that could have met the demands of the Shi’ites some years earlier, but the governmental side delayed those possibilities and demonstrated power instead.

However, the continuation of the conflict, after the textbook issue seemed to have been settled, demonstrates that the textbook and syllabus issue was part only of an overlaying conflict that has to be explained in order to understand the fierceness and the course the Islamiyat issue took. Before we try to contextualize this conflict, however, we need to take a more systematic look at the parties involved.

Parties involved in the syllabus and textbook conflict

For a deeper understanding of the issue, the parties involved on different levels in a quite complex setting need closer scrutiny: the highly organised Shi’a community and their representatives, mobilised students, educational authorities of different levels, the regional and especially central and Azad Kashmir government, “law enforcing agencies” (police, military, rangers, NA chief executive), and the “third parties” in the course of the conflict.

Without any attempt to personalize the events, the fact that the textbook and syllabus conflict took this course, and even that it was raised as an issue, might be attributed primarily to the stand of Agha Ziauddin Rizvi, the spokesman of the Shi’ite community and leader of the *Anjuman-e Imamia*. Rizvi, who was forty-five when he was killed, had been Imam of the Imamiya Mosque in Gilgit for the previous fifteen years. He was born in Gilgit, where he also went to school. He received his religious education in Lahore and, later, in Iran; this may have contributed to his rather “rigid” views. During a negotiation mission in Islamabad, he is said to have refused to meet the Minister of Education, Zubaida Jalal, as long as she was unveiled (she covered her head).⁴³ He built up pressure by setting deadlines and threats to increase protest activities and was able to mobilise⁴⁴ and to de-escalate when he regarded it necessary. His stand in the Shi’ite community of Gilgit is, however, attributed to his “role in restoring peace and reconciliation efforts after the sectarian clashes of 1988”⁴⁵ (see below). This does not point to a mere trouble-shooter, but might indicate that he and the community regarded the textbook and syllabus issue as a serious one and a real threat to the position of the Shi’ite community – an assessment that, in the light of the strong opposition by extremist Sunnites to a compromise solution, seems justified. However, for a long time, the educational authorities do not seem to have cared about or even realised the explosive power of the issue.

43 Mohammad Shehzad, “Textbook controversy in Gilgit”, *The Friday Times* (Lahore), 4–10 July, 2003.

44 And to instrumentalise school children.

45 “Agha Syed Ziauddin Rizvi Shaheed. Martyrdom in Quran” [<http://groups.msn.com/SyedShahDaulat-Group/collection.msnw>].

Nevertheless, Rizvi was not a single combatant; the effectiveness might mainly be attributed to the Shi'ite organisation *Anjuman-e Imamiya*,⁴⁶ headed by Rizvi, and the *Imamiya Students' Organisation* (ISO). In the *Anjuman*, *ulema* (clerics), notabilities and “lay” representatives of the community work together, in religious as well as in political matters important to the community.⁴⁷ Even if not a political party, the local and central *Anjuman* (Northern Areas) are involved in local and regional politics.⁴⁸ Highly important during the conflict, however, were the activities of the Shi'ite students' organisation, by which the pupils were mobilised for strikes and rallies.⁴⁹ Thus, most of the activities were organised by these organisations, maybe apart from the riots in Gilgit following Rizvi's assassination directly, which seem to have been spontaneous.⁵⁰

The public authorities were the main actors on the other side. The Northern Areas being not a Pakistani province but a “Federally Administrated Area”, the Federal Minister for Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas (KANA) in Islamabad is the main executive authority. There was a considerable fluctuation among the office holders: from the end of 1999 until today (March 2007), the position was held by six different Ministers, sometimes headed jointly with other Ministries.⁵¹ The Minister appoints a Deputy Chief Executive and Advisors from among the members of the Northern Area Legislative Council.⁵² But the administrative power lies in the hands of a Chief Secretary, with Secretaries as heads of departments who, in addition to the Inspector General of Police, do not usually come from the region (for instance, Raman 2005).⁵³

46 A similar organisation is to be found on the Sunnite side, the *Tanzim ahl-e sunnat-wa al-jamat* (see Sökefeld 1997:202). The *Anjuman-e Imamiya* is not restricted to the Northern Areas. In other Shi'ite communities, in Bangalore (India) for example, the organisation is also active.

47 In the syllabus issue, the religious leaders did not always hold the same position. Thus, Shehzad cites Amin Shaheedi, a Shi'ite scholar, who supported a common Islamiyat syllabus for Sunnites and Shi'ites, whereas Rizvi demanded separate ones (Mohammad Shehzad, “Textbook controversy in Gilgit”, *The Friday Times* (Lahore), 4–10 July, 2003).

48 Thus, beside the Shi'ite party TNFJ (*Tehrik-e nifaz-e Fiqh-e Jafaria*) the *Anjuman* decided about or influenced the candidacies for the council elections (Sökefeld 1997:229).

49 The ISO is not a regional organisation but active in other cities in Pakistan as well (e.g. in Lahore). Behuria (2004) classifies the ISO as a “students' outfit [...] which adopted an extremist position”.

50 The protests in “down-country” were organised, however. The ISO is mentioned in the newspapers in this context. It seems possible, but I cannot prove that in these cases students from the Northern Areas studying in the lowlands were involved.

51 Apart from the minister presently in charge, the ministers remained in office on average fifteen and a half months only. They were Abbas Sarfaraz (Nov. 1999–2002), Nisar Memon (2002 – jointly with the Ministry for Information and Broadcasting), Aftab Ahmad Khan Sherpao (2003– August 2004, jointly with the Ministry for Water and Power), Dr. Gazi Gulab Jamal (August 2004–April 2006), and Major (Retd) Tahir Iqbal (from April 2006).

52 According to the “Legal Framework Order” and the “Rules of Buisiness” of 1994, the leader of the majority party in the NALC is appointed as Deputy Chief Executive. He exercises such powers as assigned to him by the Chief Executive, the Federal Minister for KANA (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan 2005:72, 74, Annex B).

53 Previously, a Political Agent or Resident, from 1979 onwards a Commissioner, headed the executive and Deputy Commissioners the districts (Dani, A.H.: *History of Northern Areas of Pakistan*. Islamabad, 1989, p. 422, 428). In 1994, however, the “Legal Framework Order” was introduced putting the Northern Areas under the Minister of Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas. Background for the administrative changes seem to be decisions of the Azad Kashmir High Court and the Supreme Court

The issue itself was deemed to be the responsibility of the educational authorities. Education being on the Concurrent List, it is a concern for the Federal Government of Pakistan, which is responsible for policy, planning and setting educational standards, as well as for provincial, area and district governments, which are responsible for implementation, but should also contribute to policy formulation.⁵⁴ As the issue could not be regarded as a merely local affair, because federal responsibilities were affected, the different levels became involved. In the Northern Areas, an advisor and a secretary were responsible for educational matters. On the higher level, a secretary of education was also assigned to the Ministry for KANA. On the federal level, apart from the secretaries, the Federal Minister of Education became personally involved.⁵⁵ From within the Departments of the Ministry of Education, however, the Curriculum Wing, responsible for the preparation of curricula and textbook approval,⁵⁶ was mainly concerned in this matter – and was the target of Shi'ite criticism. The critics accused the officials of being “strongly biased against the Shia faith” and the department of having been “hijacked by a powerful lobby that is ultra-Islamist and follows the Wahabi school of thought”.⁵⁷ Thus, from a Shi'ite perspective at least, it can be concluded that those who were actually in charge were not really interested in solving the affair.

Since the conflict was not settled, “security forces” became main actors. These forces consist of the police, the regular Pakistan Army and paramilitary forces. The army, which has a garrison in Gilgit, enlists all over Pakistan but especially in Punjab and NWFP. Locals are rarely present in their ranks. The Northern Light Infantry, which was formed in the 1970s by merging regional Scout units like the Gilgit Scouts, was employed in particular at the line of control (Kashmir, see below). After the Kargil War of 1999, they were made a regular regiment of the Pakistan army. However, in 2004, paramilitary Northern Areas Scouts were re-established by being recruited among the inhabitants of the Northern Areas. They were meant to “guard the borders along the Northern Areas and help keep law and order in the region”.⁵⁸ The Gilgit and Northern Areas Scouts were/are recruited among the regional population, whereas the Northern Light Infantry also included people from (mostly Sunnite) adjoining regions as Chitral and the NWFP. Those forces with a regional background and a considerable percentage of Shi'ite personnel, that is, police and Scouts/NLI, do not seem to be regarded as really trustworthy by the governmental authorities.⁵⁹ Therefore, additional paramilitary forces, Punjab

in 1993 and 1994 respectively on the status of the Northern Areas. But these alterations did not satisfy the Supreme Court in 1999 or the inhabitants either (cf. Sahni/Cherian 2007).

54 See Govt of Pakistan, Ministry of Education [<http://www.moe.gov.pk/currWing.htm>].

55 The officeholders changed during the crises: from Zubaida Jalal to Lt-Gen. Javed Ashraf Qazi, former Inter-Service Intelligence chief and Railway Minister, who took the decision to solve the crisis (Rana Qaisar, “Portfolios assigned to the new cabinet: Sherpao new interior minister”, *Daily Times*, 3 September, 2004; M. Ismail Khan, “Heading back to normalcy”, *The News*, 2 May, 2005).

56 For books produced by Textbook Boards (of the Provinces) and private publishers.

57 Markazee Shia Tulbah Action Committee Gilgit, “Curriculum Conflict” [<http://www.geocities.com/msogilgit/curriculum.htm?200712>] (retrieved 12.02.2007).

58 Pakistani Defence Forum, Jan 2, 2004 [<http://pakistanidefenceforum.com/lofiversion/index.php/t24090.html>].

59 This opinion is frequently expressed. Thus Azad Hussein Shah mentions “Gilgit police, from whose Shia majority lower staff, even the guns were taken away before June 2004 and were only given bat-

Rangers, were brought in from “down-country”. These troops under the Ministry of Interior are employed in matters of internal security. In Gilgit, they were complete outsiders, without any relation to the inhabitants. They did nothing to calm down and resolve the conflict. Instead, their especially harsh behaviour intending to suppress any opposition resulted in escalation.⁶⁰ Thus, the Punjab Rangers in particular were regarded as a “conflict party”, not an instrument of “security” for the inhabitants.

Among the “third parties”, the mediators in the conflict, members of the Northern Areas Legislative Council and Gilgit District Council played a significant role. To be able to judge the position of these mediators, one has to know that the power of the councils is restricted. Although the former Northern Areas Council, with its mainly advisory functions, was renamed Northern Areas Legislative Council,⁶¹ it is not comparable to a real parliament. All security-related aspects are out of their hands and their legislative and financial powers are restricted.⁶² Thus, their high social position as elected representatives, in accordance with the lack of executive powers (they cannot be held responsible for the security measures) ascribes to them a strategic position as mediators. However, these members represent the entire population of their constituency only nominally. In the elections, the religious affiliation of the candidates has become a decisive aspect (see Sökefeld 1997:226–231). In the “peace deal” of February 2005, (former) members of NALC acted as representatives of their religious communities. Thus, to some extent at least, they are involved in the conflict, not as neutral mediators, even if they are not actively taking part on the side of one of the opponents.

The regional context

In the Northern Areas, nearly 100 percent of the population is Muslim. However, these Muslims are divided into four different denominations, which are mostly called “sects” in Pakistan: Sunnites, Isma’ilis, Shi’ites (Imamites), and Nurbakhshis.⁶³ Nurbakhshis settle only in the eastern part of the area, Isma’ilis dominate in the west and Shi’ites in the central and eastern part. Sunnites form a majority only in the south. Contrary to many published statements, however, with few exceptions, the areas (on the administrative level of subdivision) are far from being

tons” (“Paki Abuse Against Shia Muslims. Why, Who and How – Shaheed Agha Zia Uddin Rizvi Got Killed?”, 27 March, 2005 [<http://www.balawaristan.net/PkiConspiracy.html>; retrieved 23.03.2007]).

60 They did not even hesitate to torture school boys and to heavily damage a mosque (see Human Rights Commission of Pakistan 2005:27–29).

61 First elections for the new Council were held 1999, the second elections in 2004. Twenty-four seats are distributed by election and five additional seats are reserved for women, one for each district. (According to “Northern Areas Legislative Council: PKL candidates cruise to top posts”, *Daily Times*, 24 November, 2004, however, six seats are reserved for women and six for “technocrats”). The Federal Minister for Kashmir Affairs and the Northern Areas is council member because of his function (Raman 2005).

62 In January 2007 newspapers report the announcement of a further increase of responsibilities of the council by the Minister for KANA, however, without stating details (“Northern Areas Council will be made assembly: minister”, *Daily Times*, 18 January, 2007).

63 According to the numbers estimated by Rieck (1997:215), (Twelver) Shi’ites account approximately for 50% of the population, Isma’ilis for 16%, Nurbakhshis for 10%. The rest, 24%, are Sunni.

religiously homogeneous, but in many places minorities of other denominations are to be found (cf. Kreuzmann 1995). This pattern is a consequence of several factors, especially the history of Islamisation and migration processes.

Despite local legends, which postulate earlier dates, Islam came comparatively late into this mountainous area, and even today relicts of former belief systems are to be found.

- Possibly as the first school of Islam, the Nurbakhshi form of Sufism with strong Shi'ite tendencies established itself in the area in the early sixteenth century, coming from Kashmir.
- After the sixteenth century, Nurbakhshism was slowly and partly replaced by the (Twelver) Shi'a, which was brought to Baltistan by Shi'ite missionaries from Kashmir. The principalities of Baltistan, Gilgit and Nager became Shi'ite strongholds. Living in relative isolation for a long time, in the twentieth century contacts to the outside world grew. Especially after the Iranian Revolution, the contacts to Shi'ite centres in lowland Pakistan and Iran increased manifold, while *ulama* educated abroad started to introduce strict conceptions of religious behaviour in the mountains (Riek 1997:221–223).
- Probably in the late eighteenth century, the Isma'ili faith reached the Karakoram Mountains from the Afghan province of Badakhshan and found its followers especially in the principalities of Yasin to Hunza. Traditionally the disciples attached themselves to different *pirs*, until in the 1920s the then Aga Khan started to reorganise the Isma'ili community structure. Over recent decades, the religious affiliation was successfully used to spur development in the region.⁶⁴
- The Sunnite missionaries approached from the south in the nineteenth century, first Pathans from Swat,⁶⁵ then others.⁶⁶ The acephalous communities – or “republics” as the British called them – in the Tangir and Darel valleys became strongly attached to the Sunnite faith, especially in its Deobandi form. The British colonial officers already complained about it, as no central secular power controlled the communities, which lay open to politico-religious mobilisation.⁶⁷ This became important several times in the history of the Northern

64 Organisations of the Aga Khan Foundation like the AKRSP (Aga Khan Rural Support Programme), AKHS (Aga Khan Health Service) and AKES (Aga Khan Education Service) are very active in the areas settled by Isma'ilis, but have extended their activities to other regions as well (cf. Holzwarth 1994; Kreuzmann 1989:149–165; Stöber 2001:56–62, 223–255).

65 These missionaries brought not only the Sunnite faith. Interwoven with religion and legitimised as “Islamic”, aspects of Pathan social practice were introduced in the newly converted areas, such as the *wesh*-system (the regular reallocation of land) (cf. Nayyar 1986:93; on the practice of *wesh*, see Barth 1972:64–66).

66 See e.g. Holzwarth (1994:19–28); Rieck (1997:217–220); Sökefeld (1997:178–179).

67 Thus, the Gilgit Diary (1 Sept. 1894, India Office Library and Records, London, L/PS/7/77) mentions “Mujahidin (the Hindustani fanatics)” who try to gain a foothold in Tangir. The following year (21.10.1895; L/PS/7/83), a Pathan is referred to being on his way to Darel to study the Koran. Another aspect seems to point to a growing influence of religious leaders. To settle some of their abundant internal conflicts, around 1900, the Darelis approached the British Political Agent for mediation (which was refused). Later, foreign notables were asked, who tried to use the position for their own goals. In 1926 and 1927, however, it is mentioned that their religious leaders, “mullahs”, try to settle disputes (Gilgit Diary September 1926, September 1927, L/P&S/10/973). A strong influence on the religious

Areas, from the “freedom struggle” (*jang azadi*) (see Sökefeld 1997) to the recent time. In the time of Zia ul-Haq, the number of *madrasas* in the region increased considerably, propagating a militant Islam in a Deobandi or Wahabite version (Raman 2005). Their students participated in the demonstration against any change of the “anti-Shia” syllabus mentioned above.⁶⁸ Wahabite missionaries also became active in the other parts of the Northern Areas. A new Sunnite mosque in Skardu, for example, was built with money from Saudi Arabia (Sagaster 1989:17).

Any conversion process initiated by missionaries will take time and might not reach the entire population. Most important for the religiously mixed pattern, however, is migration. This is not a modern process, restricted to recent decades. Throughout the centuries, military activities, settlement policies of regional rulers, slave trade and flight by individuals and groups have affected population distribution.⁶⁹ The search for new opportunities (in form of labour migration, for example) became more and more important during colonial times and especially after independence. In the twentieth century, particularly the town of Gilgit, which evolved into the administrative and trading centre of the whole region, became a focus of immigration from the Northern Areas and beyond.⁷⁰ Politically motivated settlement schemes of the last decades, as mentioned by Raman (2005), might have added to the mixed pattern, but are not its dominant cause.

Regarding the relations between the religious groups, many locals and observers today depict the past as golden days.⁷¹ Though not as deteriorated as they are today, however, it can be proved that these relations were at least ambivalent. For example, the Sunnite Khoshwaqteh family of Chitral had seized power in Yasin,

orientation of the people in Tangir and Darel is attributed to one “Haji Mian Mahamad Yusuf” from Peshawar district, a former police officer, who turned to religious studies and became anti-British. He came to Tangir as a religious preacher in 1910, was employed there and introduced religious practices like the Friday prayers that the inhabitants had previously regarded as irrelevant (Note by Rai Sahib Lala Gobind Sahai, Native Assistant Chilas, regarding Haji Mian Mahamad Yusuf. 1916; India Office Library and Records, London, R-2-1082/274). He had to leave Tangir in 1917 (*Jammu and Kashmir State – List of Ruling Princes, Chiefs and Leading Personages*, Calcutta 1925; L/PS/20/275/1: 31).

68 In 2004, several non-religious schools in the Diamer district were destroyed. Officials suspected that the reason behind this was a decreasing enrolment in the *madrasas*, and the “religious clergy [...] felt threatened with losing ground in the district” (Ibrahim Shahid, “Another school damaged in Diamer”, *Daily Times*, 21 February, 2004).

69 Cf. e.g. Kreuzmann (1996) about the Wakhi; Stöber (2001) about Yasin. Many biographical notes of inhabitants of Gilgit are to be found in Sökefeld (1997). To some extent, the religious affiliation affected the search for a destination. In other cases, individual migrants converted to the denomination of their host locality. However, there are many examples, where migration increased religious heterogeneity.

70 This holds true despite restrictions for new settlers during the Kashmiri and British period (cf. Sökefeld 1997).

71 Only one example should illustrate this kind of discourse, which, however, is to be found in the print media and semi-academic articles: “There is an ages old history of all religions in Gilgit-Baltistan and there is no trace of any even small worthwhile religious bellicosity [*sic!*], religious wars, sectarian hatred and sectarian conflict among Muslims in the entire history of Gilgit-Baltistan before the unfortunate arrival of Wahabi-Qadiani Punjabis/Pathans” (Azad Hussain Shah, “Paki Abuse Against Shia Muslims. Why, Who and How – Shaheed Agha Zia Uddin Rizvi Got Killed?”, 27 March, 2005 [<http://www.balawaristan.net/PkiConspiracy.html>; retrieved 23.03.2007]).

a valley west of Gilgit, with its predominantly Isma'ili population. This led to a growing Sunnite influence there. In 1903, British reports refer to clashes between Isma'ilis and Sunnites about religious topics.⁷² In 1913, the sources describe a conflict between the most influential Sunnite and Isma'elite Sheikhs (*pir*). In this context, both declined to eat meat slaughtered by the other, that is, they treated one another as unbelievers (*kafir*).⁷³ The motivation might have been personal and their behaviour not representative. However, the language of exclusion commonly used today was not altogether absent in the past.⁷⁴

Inter-denominational marriages among “common people” were, albeit not widespread, not a real exception two generations ago. They have or have not led to the conversion of one of the partners (not always the wife). In 1990, however, those marriages were regarded as disqualified. Family contacts to the (former) relatives ceased some time ago and the people regarded these kind of mixed marriages as impossible.⁷⁵ The same situation I experienced in Yasin is to be found in Gilgit. If exceptionally a marriage is planned today between different denominations, one, generally the female, has to convert (Sökefeld 1997:183–184).

The relations between Shi'ites and Sunnites in Gilgit became tense in the 1970s. In 1972, a conflict over the *ashura* procession occurred. In 1975, a Sunnite preacher is said to have declared Shi'ites to be *kufr* (unbelievers) and Shi'ites were shot at from the Sunnite mosque. The preacher was detained. To support the Sunnites in Gilgit, a large gang of armed men from the valleys of the south (Darel, Tangir etc.) set off, but was stopped by Gilgit Scouts⁷⁶ before they could reach their destination. In the following years, differences increased especially during Muharram. Sunnites accused Shi'ites of having offended the “companions of the Prophet”, that is, the first three Khalifs, or they responded negatively on the way Shi'ites used to celebrate specific festivals (by lighting fires on the slopes of the hills). Reconciliation committees were founded without lasting impact.⁷⁷ In the 1980s, religious affiliation became an additional factor in local politics and elections. Then, in 1988, after *Id ul-fitr*, a massacre occurred. On this date, hundreds or thousands of armed men from the southern valleys set off “to teach the Shi'ites a lesson”. As a trigger, a violent incident between Sunnites and Shi'ites about the

72 Gilgit Diary, 7.3.1903 (India Office Library and Records, London, L/PS/7/153).

73 See Stöber (2001:100).

74 In other parts of the Agency, too, conflicts between religiously defined groups occurred, even if the cause might not have been “religious”, but political. Thus, the Gilgit Diary, the official report of the British resident in Gilgit, mentions demonstrations and activities of Shi'ites against the (Isma'elite) *mir* of Hunza in 1937 and in 1941; in November 1939, Sunnites clashed with Isma'ilis there (Gilgit Diary, March 1937; November 1939; February – June 1941; India Office Library and Records, London, LP&S 12/3285). In Gilgit, in 1936, Shi'ites are said to agitate for a site for a new mosque. However, “the agitation, if it may be so called, is not acrimonious” (Gilgit Diary, June 1936; LP&S 12/3285). In 1937, the Kashmiri minister (*Wazir-i wazarat*) is accused to exploit (religious) differences to harm British administration.

75 Mixed marriages between different language groups, on the other hand, were quite frequent (cf. Stöber 2001).

76 The Gilgit Scouts, auxiliary troops from the valleys of the Gilgit Agency organised by the British, were disbanded in the mid-1970s. Instead, Northern Light Infantry was set up.

77 Committees to settle disputes between religious groups in Gilgit were already set up during colonial times, e.g. when Sikhs and Hindus conflicted in 1938 (Gilgit Diary March 1938; India Office Library and Records, London, LP&S 12/3285).

ending of Ramadan is sometimes mentioned. (In this year, Sunnites and Shi'ites disagreed over the decision as to whether the new moon had been seen or not, as is sometimes the case, and the Shi'ites were eating and smoking whereas the Sunnites continued fasting). However, the fact that this large-scale operation needed time for preparation and that military checkpoints on the road did not intervene gave rise to the belief that the operation had been planned beforehand and that the government was (at least passively) involved. The gangs were not allowed by the military to enter Gilgit, which was under curfew and cut off from all communications, but nobody intervened when they ravaged, raped and murdered in the Shi'ite villages of the area. Then, after some days of "work", they were forced to return to their valleys (see Sökefeld 1997:203–217).⁷⁸ The number of casualties and the numbers of gunmen estimated differ widely, from a few dozen⁷⁹ to several hundred⁸⁰ for the former and from over a thousand to "hundreds of thousands"⁸¹ for the latter. The Shi'ite victims received later compensation from the state, but the Shi'ites were given hints to take the incident as a warning.

The massacre was the worst but not the last incident in the course of Sunnite-Shi'ite tensions in Gilgit. During the 1990s, several incidents gave an impression of *déjà vue*: murders and shooting with deaths on both sides (including people not involved) took place, and several curfews were imposed, through which the government tried to stop the killing and to control the situation.

One denomination that was not involved in these tensions were the Isma'ilis. However, it is not that they were totally uninvolved. Apart from religious differences, the Shi'ites, especially those clerics educated in Iran, condemn their activities in the fields of health and education, and evoke rising immorality. In Baltistan, the activities of AKRSP, AKHS and AKES, which are not communalistic,⁸² were severely hampered by the opposition of the clerics (Khan 1998). Opposition is also felt from Sunnites. After relations deteriorated from 1977 onwards, in 1982, a violent campaign was mounted against Isma'ilis in Chitral bordering the Northern Areas, mostly committed by Pashtuns from outside (Holzwarth 1994). Also in Chitral, Isma'ilis were murdered in December 2005, shortly after the settlement of the Islamiyat issue, and Islamist circles in Pakistan started a campaign against activities of the Aga Khan Examination Board. Against this common "enemy", Sunnite and Shi'ite radicals joined hands and arguments.

We have seen that practices that were used during the syllabus/textbook crises were in fact already well-known and had been applied for several years by all

78 There are a lot of conspiracy theories about this affair. The death of Gen. Zia ul-Haq (and the US ambassador) some months later, too, is connected with this incident, as the pilot of the plane that crashed is said to have been a Shi'ite of the area.

79 The former commissioner of Northern Areas, K.M. Ahmad, is cited placing the number of deaths at 40 (Khaled Ahmad, "Second opinion: Sectarianism is the death-wish of the state", *Daily Times*, 25 April, 2003).

80 Behuria (2004:163) e.g. speaks of "almost 700 Shias" being killed by "a huge army of 80,000 extremists".

81 This kind of number, of course, does not have an exact meaning but only indicates the huge size of the attacking group.

82 The Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, Aga Khan Health Service and Aga Khan Education Service of the Aga Khan Foundation are not restricted to the Isma'ili community but open to all people. The Aga Khan Foundation is managing funds for developmental aid from manifold international sources.

sides, including the activities of the “security forces” and the attempts to find a way out of the crises by establishing reconciliation committees and the like. From this perspective, the textbook issue is only part of a wider conflict in which religious and political facets intermingled. Religion, however, is only one of the plural identities of the inhabitants, even if it has become an important one (Sökefeld 1997). Pakistani policy, with its attempt to establish a national identity based on Islam, shares a considerable part of the responsibility for this.

“Nation building”, textbooks and geopolitics

When Pakistan became independent, it was perceived by political leaders as a state for Muslims, but not as an Islamic state.⁸³ However, a religious rhetoric was brought in when the young state was confronted with divergent interests in its provinces and conflicts between the centre and peripheries. Against these loyalties defined by region and “ethnicity”, the central powers resorted to religion as the common identity of (nearly) the entire population (Alavi 1990). Under the heading “Ideology of Pakistan”, the recourse to Islam entered mainstream political discourse around 1970 as a response to Bengali nationalism (Alavi 2001).⁸⁴ With no essential change in meaning, the term was turned into a national dogma and merged with the ‘Two-Nations-Theory’ (Hoodbhoy/Nayyar 1985). This has still not changed today. In 2005, a newspaper reported on a meeting of the Senate Standing Committee on Education, claiming that,

“There was no doubt that the ideology of Pakistan was sacrosanct and would not be touched in curriculum review. ‘It will be upheld at any cost but there are certain things which are against other religions and we will remove those items’, he [the Education Minister] said”.⁸⁵

However, over recent decades, developments occurred that transformed this reference to religion, which is meant to create a discourse of inclusion and integrate the country, into a discourse of exclusion. Not only non-Muslims are excluded. With the non-acceptance of the Ahmadiyya as a denomination of Islam by Sunnites and Shi’ites alike,⁸⁶ the door was opened to define Islam in a specific sense according to the perspective of a particular group. The Islamisation process under Zia ul-Haq (see Malik 1989) fostered specifically Sunnite positions, even if Shi’ites managed to challenge this successfully by applying public pressure in the *zakat* campaign. During Zia’s reign, religious (Sunnite) positions among the military and bureaucracy as in other parts of the society became stronger than before (cf. Giunchi 2007).

83 In opposition to the Muslim League, religious forces mostly had argued against the establishment of a separate Muslim state on Indian soil.

84 The term was previously used by the *Jamaat-e Islami*, a party that regarded the *shari’a* as the overall principle for social organisation (Azis 1993:168–170; Hoodbhoy/Nayyar 1985).

85 “Javed Qazi criticises NRB’s devolution policy on education”, *Daily Times*, 23 February, 2005.

86 In 1974, the Pakistani Parliament declared the Ahmadiya a non-Islamic minority (Ahmed 1990:419).

This is reflected in the school textbooks in various ways that cannot be discussed here.⁸⁷ The books were criticized abroad,⁸⁸ but more so in Pakistan itself, especially by Hoodbhoy/Nayyar (1985), Aziz (1993) and Saigol (1998). In 2003, that is, when the conflict in Gilgit became virulent, a study was published by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute and edited by Nayyar and Salim, analysing Urdu, English, Social Studies and Civics textbooks: *The Subtle Subversion*. Herein, Nayyar criticises the “insensitivity to the religious diversity of the nation” (pp. 9–62). That means other religions (Christians, Hindus), but is relevant for denominational distinctions as well. There was a public debate in the media, and the liberal positions of the authors were criticised from the Islamist side. The stance of the Minister of Education cited above can be seen as the attempt to reassure the religious and conservative forces, because the ministry (like the whole government) is under strong pressure from different sides. More than internal liberal arguments, however, international pressure seems to be important, especially from the USA (cf. Coulson 2004), and defining points of conflict in today’s Pakistani educational policy.⁸⁹ In particular *madrassa* education and the propagation of *jihad* in schools aroused the concern of the critics, despite the fact that the Americans fostered this as long as the Russians were in Afghanistan.

Thus, geopolitical factors influence (educational) policy in Pakistan but also the specific situation in the Northern Areas directly or indirectly. The developments in Afghanistan, the American relations towards Iran and especially the Kashmir conflict have to be regarded as the international background for local/regional developments in the mountains and the conflict discussed.

After the Russians invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, Pakistan not only became the host country for several millions of Afghan refugees, but also supported Afghan resistance actively. Radical groups operating in the south in particular took the NWFP as their operational base. In the course of this policy, the Islamist political parties in Pakistan, which were not impressed by Zia ul-Haq’s Islamisation policy at the beginning, came closer to the centre of power and increased their influence. Pakistan became an arena for militant radicals and their networks from inside and outside the country. Additionally, Pakistan increased its international stand.⁹⁰ In their Cold War attitude, the USA had supported the *jihad* against the Soviets from the beginning, as did Saudi Arabia. The Pakistani secret service ISI coordinated and distributed this financial and military aid – especially to radical Islamist groups. “*Jihad*” entered education in the *madrassas* as in public schools deliberately to mobilise fighters against the Soviets. The influence of this war on the Islamisation and radicalisation of Pakistan’s society cannot be overestimated.⁹¹ The sectarian tensions in the Northern Areas as well as in other parts of Pakistan⁹²

87 See among others Sökefeld 1996.

88 E.g. Coulson (2004) from a US or Rosser (2003) from an underlying (Hindu) Indian perspective.

89 See also the report by the International Crisis Group, “Pakistan: Reforming the education sector” (2004), which devotes several pages (16–21) to the religious/Islamist influence on education.

90 The execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his Islamisation efforts had discredited the reputation of Zia and his military government especially in the West.

91 For more details on the Afghanistan conflict, see e.g. Maley (2002).

92 See Behuria (2004).

are related to this.⁹³ And the radical attitudes make it difficult to compromise or to implement decisions based on compromise, which could have ended the syllabus and textbook conflict before it developed into a real crisis.

In 1979, not only the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, but a revolution created the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was a red cloth to the Americans from the beginning. Thus, in the Iraq-Iran war (1980–1988), the US supported Saddam Hussain. Although the US was an ally of Pakistan (and the *mujahedin*-forces), the Shi'ite population was positively inclined towards Iran and developed an anti-American attitude.⁹⁴ Especially the active Imamiya Students' Organisation expressed this openly. This seems to have contributed to the suspicion which "down-country's" politicians as well as their Sunnite neighbours feel against Shi'ites.⁹⁵

The Kashmir conflict with India⁹⁶ with two wars, several severe clashes and frequent exchange of fire across the Line of Control (LoC) hampers economic developments and diverts major resources into the military field, but it is also a considerable source of income in the area, as a significant part of the population finds employment especially with the irregular troops deployed near the LoC. After Afghanistan ceased to be a major battleground, the Kashmir conflict also attracted *jihadi* fighters to the Northern Areas. Agitation by extremist organisations increased.⁹⁷ In the Kargil operation 1999, which was presented as an activity of "freedom fighters", the Pakistan Army and especially the Northern Light Infantry accompanied by *mujahedin* crossed the LoC and took over Indian positions left vacant over the winter months. The Indian reconquest led to heavy Pakistani losses especially among the Northern Light Infantry, which, however, were not recognised by the government; the families were not compensated for the deaths. This provoked outrage and protest among the inhabitants⁹⁸ (Raman 2005) and added to their alienation.⁹⁹

The prevailing Kashmir conflict influences the political situation in and the status of the Northern Areas. With independence, after Kashmir's officials and troops

93 There are views which postulate an active and target-oriented involvement of *jihadi*-groups and leaders into the 1988 massacre as well as into the assassinations of Shi'ites in Gilgit afterwards.

94 However, the attitude towards Iran seems not to be without ambivalence. Agha Ziauddin Rizvi himself is said to have characterised this relation thus: "only cold winds blow from Iran side. Iranians are nationalists and they have not even moraly [*sic*] supported the plight of Shias in Gilgit-Baltistan" (Azad Hussain Shah, "Paki Abuse Against Shia Muslims. Why, Who and How – Shaheed Agha Zia Uddin Rizvi Got Killed?", 27 March, 2005 [<http://www.balawaristan.net/PkiConspiracy.html>; retrieved 23.03.2007]).

95 See, e.g., Sökefeld (1997:209–210).

96 For the history of the conflict see, e.g., Lamb (1991).

97 The SSP (*Sipah-e Sahaba Pakistan*), which was renamed *Millat-e Islamia* after the ban of the SSP, is especially active, and its main targets are the Shi'ites, as the objective of the organisation is the transformation of Pakistan into a strict Sunnite state (e.g. Strategic Foresight Group 2005: Chapter 2). Their activists organised the first demonstrations in the textbook affair directed against any change.

98 Some interpret this against the backdrop of the Sunnite-Shi'ite conflict: "95% of those NLI soldiers killed and wounded in Kargil war were Shias, but the cunning rulers of Pakistan were giving their credit to the ISI sponsored Wahabi so-called Jihadis" (Azad Hussain Shah, "Paki Abuse Against Shia Muslims. Why, Who and How – Shaheed Agha Zia Uddin Rizvi Got Killed?", 27 March, 2005 [<http://www.balawaristan.net/PkiConspiracy.html>; retrieved 23.03.2007]).

99 The Report of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (2005:37) does not mention the soldiers and fighters killed but civilians, inhabitants of the region, who lost houses, livestock and land but received only very little compensation.

had to leave Gilgit, the former Gilgit Agency sought integration into the newly founded state of Pakistan. However, provincial status was not granted; a Pakistani Political Agent replaced the British one merely extending the colonial status. Up to the present day, there have been persistent attempts to reach such an integration with equal rights of the population as Pakistani citizens, including appealing to the High and Supreme Courts in Islamabad. However,

“The Shi’i demand for provincial status – supported by Isma’ilis and Nurbakhshis – has been fiercely opposed by Sunnis who have branded the spectre of a ‘Shi’i state’ in this strategically important borderland as one that might even become a tool in the hand of hostile foreign powers” (Rieck 1997:228).

Thus, it is not (only) the internationally contested status of the Northern Areas, whether they are part of Kashmir or not, and the unsolved conflict in general that explains the situation today but (also) an internally Pakistani perspective that views the Northern Areas in relation to “down-country”: as a source of power and water and as a strategic area controlling connections to China. Here, a province controlled by a non-Sunni majority seems to be a risk to main political forces in Pakistan.

This rejection paves the way, in the opposite direction, to concepts not of inclusion but of exclusion. The high mountain area is conceived as a specific entity with a common history and shared culture. A “nation” separate from its neighbours (including Kashmir) is constructed, given the name “Balawaristan” (see Sökefeld 1998; 1999).¹⁰⁰ Nationalistic discourses are becoming more powerful with the “colonialist” attitudes of “down-country”, as they are perceived. Meanwhile, several groups have political independence on the agenda, even groups which formerly demanded provincial status.

This kind of perspective also makes its mark on the perception of the textbook conflict in the Northern Areas. Here, it is quite often regarded as a conflict between the region and its Shi’ite inhabitants and the government of Pakistan, which applies a divide-and-rule strategy, causing dissent among the population for its own ends.¹⁰¹ The focus is a political one, pointing more towards the peripheral status of the region and its marginalisation than any religious content.

Conclusions

In this article we have discussed a conflict surrounding textbooks and curricula which bewilders because of its violence and severity. Only when we consider that the issue is embedded in the context of a broader conflict can we explain its escalation. This is a conflict that defines opponents according to religious lines; its out-breaks are quite often triggered by religious issues. But is it a religious conflict?¹⁰²

100 Cf. [<http://balawaristan.net>], the website of the movement.

101 The author is grateful to Martin Sökefeld for this information.

102 Commentators in Pakistan, also in the Northern Areas themselves, mostly do not concentrate on the religious aspect, but stress the economic “backwardness” and political deprivation of the region, in which the religious discrimination of the Shi’ites is only one aspect. (See, e.g., Azad Hussain Shah, “Paki

The fact that these issues started to raise tension, and that the (religious) differences polarise people, is due to political developments with national as well as international facets. Introduced in Pakistan as the main criterion for the formation of a general national identity to overcome particular loyalties, “Islam” came to be used in the specific political contexts of the last decades as a means of mobilisation. Mobilisation tends towards extreme positions. Besides increasing violence, extremist views claim the power of definition of, for example, “real Islam”. Resistance to these claims likewise reinforces boundaries, often in an escalating spiral, since against a common foe group identity and solidarity are strengthened. Perception is forced into the same pattern. The multitude of identities of the individual is narrowed towards a dominant one. In this context, the syllabus and textbook issue was part of “boundary defence” and of the struggle for the recognition of this boundary. Moreover, the interpretation of the conflict in the Northern Areas as a political (between Shi’ite inhabitants and government) rather than a religious (between religious groups) one challenges a focus on the religious aspect.

However, the curriculum and textbook issue is not yet history. On their recently (February 9, 2007) updated website,¹⁰³ the *Millat-e Jafaria Gilgit Baltistan* deplors “the delay caused by ministry of education in changing the controversial curriculum” and demands the complete implementation of “the decisions taken at Islamabad meeting” [*sic*]. And the group accuses the administration of not prosecuting the real culprits behind the murder of Ziauddin Rizvi but of molesting and arresting “large numbers of innocent people without any charges”. But even if the ongoing curriculum revision and the new textbooks do not give rise to new complaints, and even if Shi’ites relate “peace in Gilgit” to that issue,¹⁰⁴ the basic conflict that polarises religious identities employed in the political power struggle seems far from any solution.

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103 [<http://www.shaheedrizvi.com>].

104 “In order to make the northern areas peaceful, it is necessary that the syllabus issue should be properly addressed. Otherwise the dream of making Gilgit as peaceful city [*sic*] will go in vain” (Markazee Shia Tulbah Action Committee Gilgit; “Curriculum Conflict” [<http://www.geocities.com/msogilgit/curriculum.htm?200712>] (retrieved 12.02.2007).

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Zusammenfassung

Schulbücher und die zugrunde liegenden Curricula werden oft eingesetzt, um spezifische Identitäten zu verbreiten, die nicht die Identität eines großen Teils der Bevölkerung sein müssen. Wenn dies auf bereits existierende Spannungen trifft, können auch Schulbücher gewalttätige Ausbrüche provozieren, die nur im Kontext der zugrundeliegenden Konflikte verständlich werden. Der Artikel analysiert ein solches Beispiel und stellt es in den Zusammenhang der Schulbuchpolitik in Südasien.

In Gilgit (Northern Areas, Pakistan) führten im Jahr 2004 Proteste gegen die Darstellung religiöser Praktiken in Schulbüchern zu Aufruhr und Toten sowie zum Schließen von Schulen für ein Jahr. Obwohl das Problem im Mai 2005 gelöst schien, hielten die Spannungen an. Die Bevölkerung der Region ist religiös heterogen, wengleich muslimisch. Entwicklungen in der islamischen Welt (Iran, Afghanistan) verstärkten das Trennende. Die Region leidet seit

beträchtlicher Zeit unter “religiösen Zusammenstößen”. Die Behörden scheinen unfähig oder unwillig dies zu kontrollieren.

Der regionale Fall ist verbunden mit der allgemeinen (nicht nur Erziehungs-) Politik Pakistans, besonders mit der Propagierung der “Ideologie Pakistans”. Trotz einiger Kritik wird dieses Konzept nicht nur eingesetzt, um das “pakistanische Selbst” vom – besonders indischen – “Anderen” abzugrenzen, sondern auch, um innere Unterschiede zu überdecken. Dieser Versuch einer Homogenisierung ist jedoch kontraproduktiv, wo er als gegen spezifische Gruppenidentitäten und -interessen gerichtet aufgefasst werden kann.

Résumé

Les manuels scolaires et programmes d’enseignement servent souvent à promouvoir des identités spécifiques qui ne sont pas nécessairement majoritaires au sein d’une population donnée. Quand ils se heurtent à des tensions antérieures, les manuels scolaires eux-mêmes peuvent provoquer de violentes réactions qui ne peuvent être comprises que dans le contexte de conflits sous-jacents. L’auteur de cet article analyse un exemple qu’il replace dans le contexte de la politique des manuels scolaires en Asie du Sud.

A Gilgit (« Northern Areas » du Pakistan), des manifestations contre les modes de présentation de pratiques religieuses dans les manuels scolaires ont entraîné en 2004 des émeutes et des morts, ainsi que la fermeture des écoles pour un an. Cette question semblait être résolue en mai 2005, mais les tensions ont néanmoins persisté. La population de cette région est religieusement hétérogène, bien que musulmane. Les évolutions du monde islamique (Iran, Afghanistan) ont accru les divisions. Cette région du monde souffre depuis un certain temps de « conflits religieux » que les autorités sont inaptes ou réticentes à contrôler.

Ce cas régional est lié à la politique générale du Pakistan (et non à sa seule politique éducative), en particulier à la propagation de « l’idéologie du Pakistan ». En dépit de certaines critiques, ce concept sert non seulement à démarquer le « moi pakistanais » de « l’autre » – surtout indien –, mais aussi à masquer des divergences internes. Cette tentative d’homogénéisation est cependant néfaste, là où elle peut être perçue comme étant dirigée contre des identités ou intérêts de groupes spécifiques.

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