The unprecedented success of the November 7 strike called in Karachi by a number of religious parties testifies to their growing influence in the city. This victory also points to another alarming trend—the spread of madrassah culture throughout the country.

On a corner of the bridge which links Gulshan-e-Iqbal with Federal B Area in Karachi, there stands a small wine shop. On November 7, a group of bearded young men, clad in white shalwar-kameez suits and black turbans attacked the store. Smashing bottles of liquor on the road, they set the shop ablaze. The entire neighborhood watched this act of hooliganism from the safe distance of their homes. This was the day when students from the various religious schools, or madaris, across Karachi brought the metropolis to a virtual standstill. It marked the first time that the religious lobby had been able to orchestrate such a widespread shutdown throughout the city. The strike had been prompted by the murders, five days earlier, of Maulana Habibullah Mukhtar and...
Mufti Abdus Sami, two scholars from the Jamiat-ul-Uloom-ul-Islamia, a madrassah in the Binori Town area. Religious students had already responded to the double murder by taking to the roads near their madrassah, erecting road blocks with burning tyres, smashing the window panes of passing vehicles and setting fire to one shop and a bank. But the November 7 strike call was taken as an opportunity to protest all things un-Islamic.

Hordes of turbaned and bearded students from the roughly 2,500 religious seminaries all over the city assembled at the Binori Town mosque. Brandishing bamboo sticks, they vowed to wage jihad against the infidels. Out on the streets, they went on a rampage to make good on that promise. “Give us wide coverage or else,” an emotionally charged young man threatened reporters at the Guru Mandir roundabout.

Following this warning, he and his brethren went on to burn down a video shop plastered with posters of Madhuri Dixit, Urmilla and Kajol. “We will not sit idle,” said Abdur Razzaq, a teenager who is enrolled in a madrassah. “Do not think of us as weak. We have ousted Soviet troops and the infidels from Afghanistan,” he warned. “We can do the same in Pakistan.”

Burning with such ambition, hundreds of thousands of students are biding their time in the religious institutions of Karachi alone. Teachers at these schools claim that they are educating these young men to become ulema, or religious scholars. But fired with the desire to wage jihad, wherever it may be, too often they believe that the road to salvation runs through the battlefield.

The madaris have much to offer in the way of inspiration for a young adventure seeker. Every madrassah is fed with an ample supply of pro-jihad literature. The institutions receive books on jihad as well as newspapers reporting from war fronts inside Afghanistan, Chechnya and Kashmir. Once Bosnia was a hot topic of discussion, but no longer. The walls of these institutions are are now plastered with posters glorifying the Afghan jihad.

This network of religious seminaries took root and received encouragement during the era of General Ziaul Haq. Since then it has spread rapidly and today there are at least 8,000 registered and another 25,000 unregistered religious schools in Pakistan. In Karachi alone, there are at least 29 such institutions with over 2,000 students enrolled in each one of them. From Korangi and the Defence Housing Authority to Nazimabad and Clifton, children from the lower income groups of society and some students from other Muslim countries study in these institutions. But of late, students from the educated middle classes have also started to trickle in.

Dar-ul-Ifta-ul-Irshad, in Block 4, Nazimabad, has been one of the foremost religious institutes inculcating the spirit of jihad amongst its students. This is the main centre of congregation for aspiring mujahids. The madrassah is so heavily guarded from the outside that it is impossible to photograph its main gate. Right across the street sits a small shop that sells the
Inside the Madrassah

The Binori Town mosque is one of the most respected religious seminaries in the Islamic world.

Living in far-off Philippines, Abdur Rauf first heard about the madrassah in Binori Town, Karachi, from a couple of friends and a cousin, all of whom had studied there. He was obviously impressed by their reports. Today, the 23-year-old is himself a student at the Jamiat-ul-Uloom-ul-Islamia, one of the most respected seminaries in the Islamic world.

Rauf is among the thousands of young Muslims from all over the world who want to improve their knowledge of Islamic principles. For them, the Binori Town mosque is a veritable mecca of Islamic learning. The second-largest madrassah in Pakistan, this mosque and its affiliates impart comprehensive Islamic education to some 8,000 students at a time.

The sprawling marble-floored, red-minaret mosque cum madrassah is run by a trust established by the late Allama Yousuf Binori. Since its inception, the mosque has been busy spreading Deobandi Sunni ideology all over the world. Initially, its influence remained confined to Karachi. But gradually, the institution drew the attention of two prominent groups of the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam, the Maulana Fazlur Rehman group and the Maulana Samiul Haq group. Today, this centre influences the policy decisions of, among others, the Taliban. The institution has developed a reputation all over the Islamic world as a centre of Islamic ideology and attracts students as well as donations from as many as 45 countries, including Britain, France, the Philippines, the United States, Germany and Switzerland.

"The funding we get is a blessing from Allah," says Mufti Jamil, a teacher at the mosque. "People give us money out of their love for Islam. Even we do not know how much we get." But all this generosity may not be as selfless as it sounds. The graduates, and even students, from this "university" travel to wherever they are needed to serve the Islamic cause, more specifically, to wage jehad. "We impart purely Islamic teachings in our madras, not military training," says Mufti Jamil. But the very fact that important members of the Taliban receive training here, something that is flaunted by teachers at the madrassah, serves to establish a close link between jehad and this institution. "We are proud that we teach the Taliban and we always pray for their success as they have managed to implement strict Islamic laws," says Mufti Nizamuddin Shamzai, a teacher at the mosque.

The current 'Amir ul-Momineen' of Afghanistan, Taliban chief Mullah Omar, personally expressed his grief over the death of the two scholars from the mosque who were murdered on November 2 in Karachi. "They [the Taliban] treat us as state guests," says a proud teacher. "They always honoured the recently martyred scholars whenever they visited Afghanistan," he adds.

The centre boasts a huge, well-organised library that houses thousands of books dealing with Quranic translations, hadith, fiqh and other religious issues. Taliban sponsored literature from posters to booklets to encyclopaedias is also abundantly available in the mosque, as is all the material produced by the Jamiat Ulema-e Islam, Harkat-ul-Ansar and Sipah-e-Sahaba. Outside, in the main hall, from morning to evening, children memorise verses from the Quran, while mosque elders periodically engage in earnest discussions about the various tenets of Islam. Meanwhile, notice boards invariably carry an invitation from the Taliban to join in the jehad.

"My aim is jehad," says Mohammad Wakil, one of the several students at the madrassah who claim to live for this purpose. "In my three years here, I have learnt something that I could not have learnt anywhere else," says Abdur Rauf. "Now I want to put it into practice." —O. Tohid
recounted to the impressionable minds at these schools. "We do not send our students to Afghanistan," explains Maulana Samiul Haq, who heads the Jamiat Ulema-e Islam in Akora Khatak, the largest religious seminary in Pakistan. "They go on their own, following their own destiny."

On one occasion, when Taliban leader Mullah Omar needed reinforcements at the war front, he sent a call for these students to come and join his lashkar. "Mullah Omar rang me up personally, asking me to grant leave to these students," admits Samiul Haq. But he claims that permission was given only to Afghan students. "We do not encourage our students even to leave our premises," says Abu Huraira, administrator at the Jamia Islamia in Clifton, Karachi.

These teachers also insist that their institutions do not impart any military training. "Once you are in the field you learn everything," says Abdul Aziz, a 22-year-old Afghan. "All these institutions do is fuel a passion for jehad."

"The western propaganda against us is prompted by their fear of Islamic forces," says Maulana Haroon Qasmi of the Sipah-e-Sahaba. "It is not that we have swords in our hands. But there is a rekindling of the spirit of Islam."

And this spirit was quite evident on November 7 when cries of "Inqilab, inqilab, Islami inqilab" (revolution, revolution, Islamic revolution) reverberated in the air. ■

Show of strength: supporters of the religious groups take to the streets
The New Recruits

An increasing number of students at madaris across the country are making their way to Afghanistan.

When Munna cleared his class eight examinations, he opted to study science. After all, his mother and brothers wanted him to become an engineer. "At the time, we had no idea of what the future held," says his elder brother, Mushahid. Sporting a long beard and turban, Munna is today a zealous Muslim committed to the cause of the Taliban.

The stocky Munna now follows a strict 'Islamic' dress code, wearing his pyjama trousers no lower than his ankles, along with a kurta. His conversation is peppered with phrases from the Friday sermon, even when he is talking about the life he has now abandoned. Gone are the days when he used to play cricket in the streets of Karachi’s Federal B Area. He is no longer the street brat who got up to mischief with his friends.

The revolution in Munna’s life can be traced to the day that he attended a Sipah-e-Sahaba rally addressed by party chief Maulana Azam Tariq. "This was the first time I learnt what jehad was all about," he recalls. "Maulana saheb spoke in great detail about the importance of jehad in a Muslim’s life. He really opened my eyes. Now I know life is only for Allah. Worldly goods come second." Soon, the young man started attending religious gatherings. He found new comrades from the Sipah-e-Sahaba, and later from the Taliban. "He had started avoiding home," recalls Mushahid. "But we knew he was attending some religious madrassah. His tastes had changed, he stopped watching TV, his friends, too, had changed. And then, one day, he was gone."

Not surprisingly, Munna’s family panicked, fearing that he had fallen victim to violence in the city. His worried relatives made their way to the madrassah at which they thought he was enrolled. Here, they were told that he had gone to Afghanistan along with some friends. After a fortnight, Munna returned. He had been to Afghanistan, and, yes, he had gone there of his own free will to witness the jehad. "Here, in the madrassah, we had learnt about jehad only through speeches," says Munna. "There, I had the opportunity to see jehad with my own eyes." From Karachi, Indoctrination begins early: young boys at a madrassah

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the boys had taken a bus to Quetta. From there onwards, the Taliban had arranged a journey to Qandahar, where Munna and his friends could study the Taliban's brand of administration first-hand. "The system that the Taliban have established is excellent," says an effusive Munna. "Smoking is totally banned. Even those Taliban who want to smoke cannot do so publicly."

He goes on to tell stories of purdah and the Islamic system of justice, as interpreted by Taliban, and of course the jihad. He has seen the war from close up, people killing each other in the name of Islam. "But I never laid my hand on a weapon," he clarifies.

The most memorable aspect of the trip, however, was Munna's meeting with the "legendary" Osama Bin Laden, the world's most wanted radical Islamist. "Twenty guards surrounded him as he sat among his several children," narrates Munna. "I didn't know he was Osama Bin Laden, not until my friends told me. It was an honour to meet him."

By now, Munna has travelled to Afghanistan on three occasions. He is firmly entrenched in the madrassah culture and has extensive knowledge about the workings of this labyrinthine network. His brothers want the old Munna back. "I want him to live like an ordinary boy of 19," says Mushahid. It is now common knowledge that minors from various madaris in Pakistan have been visiting Afghanistan on a regular basis without the permission of their parents. And while the institutions continue to categorically deny any hand in recruitment for jihad, some parents now feel otherwise.

In another incident, 13-year-old Maroof visited Afghanistan along with his colleagues from the Jamia Islamia, Clifton, without his parents' knowledge. "I had handed over my son to the school so that he would learn the Quran, not the handling of guns," says the boy's father, Farooq Ahmed Awan. The Jamia Islamia authorities insist that the boy left of his own accord, but Awan believes that the school encouraged his son's decision. "I wish to be martyred in jihad in Afghanistan," Maroof had said on his arrival from the war-ravaged country. "I was introduced to jihad only through the speeches of my teacher. But now I know what it actually means. I have seen the Taliban fight their enemies."

At such an impressionable age, it is fairly easy to inspire students like Maroof or Munna to join the jihad. Stories of the battle-front seem like epic tales of a world inhabited by heroes battling the forces of evil. What these boys are not prepared for are the psychological effects of war. Maroof now spends sleepless nights with the thunder of artillery fire still pounding in his ears. "I was sent to Afghanistan by a teacher at the madrassah," he now admits. "I know them. They are a real threat for my family and my own life."

Maroof's father has lost much of his business since he was forced to lie low in the face of threats to his family if he continued to speak out against the madrassah. "I do not say that people should not send their children to these schools," says Awan. "All I am saying is that one should check up on a madrassah before sending one's child there."

"It is the responsibility of the parents to find out what is happening to their children in these institutions," says Zia Ahmed Awan, lawyer and human rights activist, who handled Maroof's case. Meanwhile, Sharifuddin Memon, deputy chief of the Citizens-Police Liaison Committee, confirms that "some six to seven hundred Pakistani students from Karachi were sent by various religious schools to Afghanistan in the month of May alone."

— O. Tohid

Praying for a revolution: religious supporters find solace in numbers

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