Harsh Mahaseth   Sadqua Khatoon   October 1st, 2024

There are challenges and opportunities to reforming Sharia-education in Egypt

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In Egypt, traditional education helps preserve Islamic culture. But its focus on rote learning hinders the development of critical thinking skills, writes Harsh Mahaseth and Sadqua Khatoon.

Egypt is a nation of approximately 102 million people. Approximately 90 per cent of its population is Sunni Muslims, with Coptic Orthodox Christians making up the remaining 10 per cent. For two centuries, Egypt has been a focal point for the struggle between preserving traditional Islamic culture and adapting to the forces of modernity. This tension has

been exacerbated by secularism, which was often imposed through European imperialism and perceived as one of the greatest challenges to Islamic identity.

Egypt's educational landscape has seen significant shifts with each change in power, from the Ottoman Empire to the French colonization, followed by Muhammad Ali's reforms, and later British colonial influence. The resurgence of Islamic thought, particularly with the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, has led to an increased emphasis on Sharia in the curriculum.

Sharia principles are deeply woven into Egypt's educational framework, reflecting the nation's Islamic heritage and identity. However, this integration also brings forth challenges, particularly regarding the system's capacity to cultivate critical thinking, innovation, and the practical skills necessary for students to thrive in an increasingly interconnected and globalised world. Finding a way to harmonise religious tradition with contemporary educational practices is essential for Egypt's future development.

One of the primary challenges in reforming Sharia-based education in Egypt lies in its reliance on traditional pedagogical methods that emphasise rote memorisation over critical engagement. This approach, a hallmark of Islamic education, focuses on the recitation of Quranic verses, Hadiths, and other religious texts. While effective in preserving religious teachings, this method can hinder intellectual development and limit students' ability to apply learned principles to real-world scenarios. This heavy emphasis on religious instruction often comes at the expense of secular subjects, reducing students' exposure to a well-rounded education and potentially constraining their future career opportunities.

The curriculum's substantial focus on religious education is evident from the primary level, where students spend 3 hours per week on Islamic studies, decreasing to 2 hours at the preparatory and secondary levels. This is the same number of hours as spent on science and social studies, but core subjects such as Arabic and maths get 10 hours .

This emphasis on rote learning is associated with higher rates of absenteeism, dropout, and academic underachievement, as students may become disengaged from an education system that does not fully address their intellectual and practical needs. Egypt's primary schools suffer from 36 per cent absenteeism and a dropout rate of 10.8 per cent. Countries such as Finland and South Korea, which prioritise critical thinking and problem- solving, have much lower dropout rates (less than 1 per cent in Finland and less than 2 per cent in South Korea) and consistently rank high in academic performance.

Despite these challenges, significant opportunities exist for reforming Egypt's Sharia-based education system. By integrating Quranic verses with scientific interpretations, the curriculum can bridge the gap between religious instruction and modern scientific knowledge. For example, Surah Yunus (10:5) describes the precise creation and movements of celestial bodies, which can stimulate reflection on astronomical principles. Similarly, Surah Ar-Ra'd (13:2) references gravitational forces, and Surah al-Mu'minun provides insights into embryonic development. Studying these verses with intellectual curiosity can foster a deeper understanding of the Quran's relevance to contemporary scientific and educational discourse, demonstrating how religious texts can complement and enrich modern knowledge.

Comparative insights from other Islamic countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan, provide valuable lessons for potential reforms in Egypt's

Sharia-based education system. In Saudi Arabia, the education system has successfully integrated Islamic values with secular disciplines, striking a balance between preserving cultural heritage and meeting modern educational needs. The Kingdom's education reforms, exemplified by the Tatweer project, an educational reform initiative launched by Saudi Arabia aimed at modernising the country's education system, highlights a commitment to learner-centred approaches and comprehensive curriculum updates. These reforms demonstrate how to adapt to contemporary educational demands while honouring cultural and religious values.

Jordan's education system effectively blends Sharia and secular subjects throughout primary and secondary education, ensuring that students receive a well-rounded education. This dual approach has helped students maintain their cultural identity while equipping them with the competencies needed for higher education and the workforce, locally or globally.

However, implementing reforms in Egypt faces considerable challenges. Resistance from conservative Islamic groups and concerns about foreign influence are significant barriers to educational reform. These groups often view educational changes as threats to national security and cultural identity, leading to cautious, incremental, and sometimes inadequate implementation of reforms. Additionally, Egypt's educational landscape is fragmented, characterised by tensions between secular and religious education, traditional and modern teaching methodologies, and conflicting ideological paradigms. This fragmentation complicates efforts to develop a coherent educational philosophy that can guide effective and meaningful reforms across the country.

Reforming Sharia-based education in Egypt demands a thoughtful and comprehensive approach that balances respect for the country's cultural and religious heritage with the need to equip students with the intellectual and practical skills essential for success in the modern world. The challenges associated with this reform are substantial, but the opportunities for progress are equally significant. By modernising pedagogical methods to Egypt can address the complexities of educational reform. Such efforts will help create a more inclusive and effective educational system for future generations. Tackling these challenges is not only crucial for enhancing educational outcomes but also for fostering societal cohesion and ensuring that Egypt continues to be both culturally rich and intellectually advanced.

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About the author

Harsh Mahaseth

Harsh Mahaseth is an Assistant Professor at Jindal Global Law School, O.P. Jindal Global University, India, and a Visiting Faculty at Mahindra University, India.

Sadqua Khatoon