International Journal of Social Science Research and Review

http://ijssrr.com
editor@ijssrr.com
Volume 9, Issue 4
April, 2026
Pages: 177-195

Politics of Pakistan's Single National Curriculum: Insights from Multiple Streams Analysis

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http://dx.doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v9i4.3261

Abstract

This article provides insights about why, how and under which conditions policy change transpires in Pakistan's political, religious and social settings, using the adoption of the Single National Curriculum in 2021 by Imran Khan's government as a case study. Kingdon's multiple streams analysis is applied to explain how this policy came into existence despite vagueness in constitutional mandate and opposition from many policy actors. Although a single curriculum as a policy idea to tackle inequality in education was already in the public domain, Imran Khan's party used politically-charged terms like "education apartheid" and "class divide" to bring it to prominence. This framing was impeccably aligned with Imran's own beliefs and his party's varied criteria to gain public support. This also led to alliances with hegemonic religious alliances to broaden the public support. The party's victory in the 2018 election created a 'window of opportunity' in which the problem of class-divide in the education system, the policy idea of a single curriculum, and politics converged perfectly to let the political power override all forms of opposition to this idea. The article highlights the potential of the multiple streams analysis for its general application in policy studies.

Keywords: *Curriculum; Multiple Streams Analysis; Policy Analysis; Class Divide*

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Introduction

Curriculum reflects a country's choices about values, knowledge, and skills that children should be taught at different stages of their educational journey. These choices are underpinned by ideas and interpretations of those in power about the philosophy of life, historical facts, cultural metaphors, narratives on enemies, friends, heroes of the nation state, and requirements of the contemporary world. All these constituents come together to produce a learning process in which values and beliefs of children are shaped and transformed. Therefore, curriculum design is always the product of a political process in which ideology, power and policy actors negotiate the objectives of an education system (Giroux 2001, cited in Chimirala et. al., 2025, p. 152; Apple, 2004; Lall, 2008; Lim and Apple, 2018).

In Pakistan, design of curriculum and textbooks has been a highly contested topic. Neo-liberal critics argue that the State uses curriculum as a device to promote the ideology of the ruling elite and fundamentalist factions. Rosser (2003, p. 6) has noted that in the case of Pakistan, "curricular changes have been, more often than not, top-down mandates, issued by martial law administrators. Bureaucrats at the textbook boards usually unquestioningly incorporated these mandated changes into the textbooks". A narrative like this tends to suggest that curriculum policy is an outcome of a simple process in which powerful stakeholders and fundamentalist factions influence policy, and the bureaucrats accept those decisions and enact them into actions. I assert that this is a reductionist view of the curriculum policy because it brings only powerful actors to prominence and ignores the role of many policy actors and the complexity of their contestations with power, ideas and conditions in which any attempts to transform policy succeed or fail.

In August 2021, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) party, headed by the former cricket star Imran Khan, launched the Single National Curriculum (SNC). It was rolled out over three years in phases, starting with pre-primary and grades 1-5, followed by grades 6-8, and finally grades 9-12. All textbooks from government and private publishers were required to be aligned with the new curriculum for which processes of reviews and approvals have been established. The idea of a single curriculum as a policy solution, in theory, was about a common framework that will standardize intended learning outcomes in all types of educational institutions for the rich and the poor alike. PTI's manifesto (2013) claimed that this policy was in response to the problem of "an apartheid education system" and a burgeoning class divide caused by parallel systems that co-exist in the country: state schools that cater to the educational needs of children from lower socio-economic strata; low-cost private schools and religious seminaries which serve low and lower middle-income segments of the population; and the so-called elite English-medium schools serving the affluent class (PTI, 2013).

This article applies Kingdon's (1984, 1995) multiple streams analysis (MSA) framework to explain how this change came about in Pakistan's complex political, religious and social settings. Chow (2014) has applied MSA for analysis of curriculum policy in Hong Kong. He argues that this framework is useful to explain how a policy problem is constructed in various policy contexts. He contends that the framework is not thoroughly prepared to accommodate Eastern politics. This paper will show that the main elements of this framework provide a compelling method for tracing the construction of problem, policymaking and political ideas even in Eastern politics.

The article is divided into four parts. The first part summarises the key elements the MSA framework. I draw mainly on this framework to explain SNC as a policy change process, along with insights from other policy theories such as the garbage can model of organisational choice (Cohen, March and Olsen, 1972). The second part briefly describes Pakistan's curriculum sub-system and alliances of policy actors. I found Apple's (2004) taxonomy of hegemonic alliances and typology of *neo-liberals*, *authoritarian populists*, *neo-conservatives* and *professional and managerial* as a useful framework for distinguishing among different belief systems and agendas of policy actors in the curriculum sub-system. I then explain the evolution of three streams, namely the problem, the policy and the politics, and how

they came together at the same time into a 'window of opportunity'. In the end, it reflects on use of this approach for understanding the nature of policy change in Pakistan.

Theoretical Framework: The Multiple Streams Analysis

There are many theories that explain how policies are made, changed, implemented, or discarded. Cairney (2019) provides a succinct overview of key theories such as rational-choice theory, bounded rationality, punctuated equilibrium theory, advocacy coalition framework, institutionalism, and multiple streams analysis framework, to name a few. While abstract concepts in these theories can be applied universally, the genesis of most of these theories is grounded in scholarship on politics and policymaking in the global North. For example, the advocacy coalition framework is more suitable for contexts in which lobbying groups operate systematically to influence policy. Similarly, the punctuated equilibrium theory emerged to explain policy changes in the United States. I draw on Kingdon's (1984, 1995) multiple streams analysis (MSA) framework because, as Cairney (2019, p. 195) asserts, it is one of the most-used approaches to policy studies. The framework is highly flexible to explain policy changes without use of overly complex abstract concepts that make sense only in certain countries.

The MSA framework draws on elements of several policy theories to identify a "window of opportunity" which, put simply, is a confluence of three separate streams that come together at the same time: (a) attention rises to a problem, (b) a feasible solution is available and the political conditions are favorable for action, and (c) policymakers have the motive to select it. These three streams – problem, policy, politics – must come together at the same time to open a 'window of opportunity'. Ideas, defined as shared beliefs, thoughts, or ways of thinking (Cairney, 2019, p. 190), and persuasion and argumentation are central to explanations of policy.

Kingdon's multiple streams framework is inspired by Cohen, March and Olsen's (1972, as cited in Cairney, 2019, pp. 195-96) "garbage can model of organizational choice". This theory suggests that decision-making is not a linear process in which solutions could be ranked in an order based on evidence, logic and rationality. Therefore, outcomes often depend not on 'organizational goals', but on which actors become most involved in setting the agenda and persuading policymakers to accept a solution. Therefore, the policy process is as accidental as it is a rational process. Therefore, Kingdon argues that, rather than three linear stages, we should think of three separate streams which are not chronological and based on pure rationality. Let me outline some of the key nuances underpinning this framework here to set the context for the discussion that follows in subsequent sections.

The 'problem' stream about drawing attention to a policy problem or agenda setting involves a complex interplay of ideas, exercise of power, argumentation, and persuasion. In a situation where policymakers are confronted with an infinite number of problems, policy entrepreneurs use all kinds of tactics to limit attention to a single or fewer issues. This may involve forming coalitions with the like-minded and exercise of their own position and influence to prove the worth of their ideas and beliefs over those of others. I did not see much discussion of the timeframe in which this stream becomes "mature" to join the "window of opportunity." The common sense would dictate that the timeframe could range from several decades to a few days or even a moment, depending on the net outcome from the contestation of the force of resistance from those whose beliefs, thinking and behaviors are to be influenced, and the power of ideas and persuasion of the policy entrepreneurs.

The 'policy' stream, which is not necessarily sequential to the first and can be in motion in parallel, is about the availability of a feasible policy solution to the problem identified. Solutions take time and effort of multiple actors to evolve and develop. Kingdon uses the metaphor of 'policy primeval soup' in which proposed solutions float around, evolve and mutate, and are modified by a large number of policy participants such as researchers, parliamentarians, officials of planning and budgeting offices, academics, and interest groups. The extent to which solutions stand a chance of success depends on two categories of

feasibility: technical and political. The former is about implementation as per design, and the latter is about public acceptability, costs, and receptivity within policymakers. Kingdon asserts that production of feasible solutions is a protracted process.

The 'politics' stream emphasizes that policymakers must have the motive to select the policy solution. The motive can take several forms: alignment with the beliefs of the policymakers, ideology of the political leadership, credibility associated with the use of evidence, material interests and so on. This may involve framing an issue in a way that aligns with beliefs and motives of the policymakers, heresthetic and storytelling" (Hall, 1993, pp. 291-92). Cairney (2019, p. 190) argues that some ideas could be so powerful that they are taken for granted and are like 'viruses' which can 'infect' the political system.

How do these streams come together to open a 'window of opportunity'? "Separate streams come together at critical times. As Diagram 1 illustrates for the case study, a problem is recognized, a solution is developed and available in the policy community, a political change makes it the right time for policy change, and potential constraints are not severe … these policy windows, the opportunities for action on given initiatives, present themselves and stay open for only short periods" (Kingdon, 1984, p. 174). He argues that policy entrepreneurs can influence this process, but as 'surfers waiting for the big wave', not controllers of the sea (Kingdon, 1984, p. 173). The interest groups either create enough interest or support to lobby for a solution, or they wait for the right moment in politics when their solution is most likely to be accepted. What makes the multiple streams analysis a comprehensive policy framework is that it considers any explanation of policy change in terms of power, influence, and material interests only as incomplete. The exercise of power to use ideas for setting the agenda and persuading policymakers are essential for explaining a policy change. However, a key limitation of this hypothesis is that this theory does not have enough predictive power because the confluence of the three streams is hard to anticipate.

Contemporary scholars have made attempts to synthesize different policy frameworks in a way so as to preserve the appeal and strengths of each and overcome their shortcomings and limitations. Howlett, McConnell, and Perl (2016) propose a new five-thread/streams model of policy process which combines Kingdon's multiple streams with Harold Lasswell's (1956, 1971) policy cycle model. They use a "weaving" metaphor to extend the logic of streams into each stage of policymaking. Each stage is described as a distinct "critical juncture", namely (i) agenda-setting, (ii) end of formulation, (iii) end of decision-making and transition to implementation, (iv) transition from implementation to evaluation, and (v) end of evaluation and return to agenda-setting. At each of these five critical junctures, the problem, policy and politics streams weave into these critical junctures to varying degrees and forms. This article relies on the original conceptualization of the multiple streams but this account of new scholarship provides a more nuanced context for the case study. For example, I focus on the first two critical junctures, namely agenda-setting and end of policy formulation. The other three stages are not within the scope of this paper.

Education Curriculum in Pakistan: The Case Study Context

As the fifth most populous country and with over 71 million children in school-age population (PAMS, 2021), Pakistan has one of the largest education systems in the world. The basic education comprises pre- and primary (grades 1-5), middle or elementary (grades 6-8), and secondary (grades 9 and 10). The state-run public schools co-exist with a sizeable non-state education system that comprises of the so-called English-medium "elite schools" serving children from the affluent class, and low-cost English- and Urdu- medium private schools, non-governmental schools and religious seminaries serving children from low- and middle-income social groups.

I have chosen the most notable recent change in Pakistan's curriculum policy as the case study. This topic is fascinating for many policymakers because it reflects critical choices about values,

knowledge, and skills that children should be taught at different stages of their educational journey. These choices are underpinned by ideas and interpretations of those in power about the philosophy of life, historical facts, cultural metaphors, narratives on enemies, friends, heroes of the nation state, and requirements of the contemporary world. All these constituents come together to produce a learning process in which values and beliefs of children are shaped and transformed. Therefore, in Pakistan and elsewhere, curriculum design is always the product of a political process in which ideology, power and policy actors negotiate the objectives of an education system (Giroux 2001, as cited in Chimirala et. al., 2025; Apple, 2004; Lall, 2008; Lim and Apple, 2018).

In Pakistan, the design of curriculum and textbooks has been a highly contested topic. Neo-liberal critics argue that the State uses curriculum as a device to promote the ideology of the ruling elite and fundamentalist factions. Rosser (2003, p. 6) has noted that in the case of Pakistan, "curricular changes have been, more often than not, top-down mandates, issued by martial law administrators. Bureaucrats at the textbook boards usually unquestioningly incorporated these mandated changes into the textbooks". A narrative like this tends to suggest that curriculum policy is an outcome of a simple process in which powerful stakeholders and fundamentalist factions influence policy, and the bureaucrats accept those decisions and enact them into actions. I assert that this is a reductionist view of the curriculum policy because it brings only powerful actors to prominence and ignores the role of many policy actors and the complexity of their contestations with power, ideas and conditions in which any attempts to transform policy succeed or fail.

The issue of who controls education has been contentious between provincial and the Federal government (Ali, 2023). The latter has always tried to control and define the curriculum for all educational institutions, though private schools and religious seminaries have largely managed to operate under minimum government control. Prior to the devolution of education, the overall responsibility for the development of curriculum rested with a Curriculum Wing within the Federal Ministry of Education. However, each province had a textbook board which was responsible for managing the production of manuscripts from authors and private publishers, reviewing and approving textbooks in line with the Curriculum Wing's guidelines. Each textbook prepared by the provincial boards would undergo a review by the Curriculum Wing "where the historical narrative is strictly edited to adhere to the nationalist discourse based on the "Ideology of Pakistan" (Rosser, 2003, p. 33). A No Objection Certificate (NOC) was necessary before any textbook could be allowed for use in schools. Thus, the Federal Ministry of Education was shepherding the translation of State's ideological dispositions into curriculum and textbooks.

This curriculum policy sub-system underwent substantial shifts from 2010 onwards due to the constitutional devolution of education to the provinces, including curriculum. This meant that the Federal government handed over powers to provinces which could now develop their own curriculum as well as textbooks without the need for an NOC from the Federal government's Curriculum Wing. However, for convenience and coherence, the provinces decided to accept the pre-devolution National Curriculum 2006 and the National Education Policy 2009 in the short term. At the same time, they also felt the need to adopt common Minimum National Standards, allowing some standardization of provincial curricula in the future so that any egregious differences in ideology and values did not undermine social cohesion. The provinces agreed to establish a National Curriculum Council (NCC) in 2014 "as a professional, advisory, and consultative national body to steer and guide the development of curriculum in close collaboration with all the federating units" (MoFEPT, 2018, p. xi) The NCC comprises of 58 members with the Federal Minister of Education as the Chairman. It replaced the Curriculum Wing, but with a truncated mandate to focus on common standards and frameworks rather than developing a national curriculum. NCC co-exists with the provincial curriculum and textbook boards, all of which have a slightly different nomenclature.[3]

[3] The Punjab province has recently established the Punjab Education Curriculum, Training, and Assessment Authority (PECTAA) by merging the curriculum and textbook board with teacher training and examination bodies.

The curriculum sub-system has always been open to a complex mosaic of influences and pressures from multiple institutions and actors, but the post-devolution situation changed the fundamentals of power relationships, and hence, control over curriculum. Prio to devolution, the ruling party in the centre was in charge, de facto and de jure, with nearly veto power over any changes in curriculum and final approval of textbooks. This is no longer the case after the devolution of education. In theory, the political party or coalition in power in a province can make changes in curriculum in sharp contrast to the dominant ideology that the State has been fostering through curriculum for years. For example, a province can give more prominence to indigenous heroes and ethnic groups while ignoring the national heroes or diversity. The need for common standards was felt for such issues, but the provinces can still choose to opt out or ignore any steers or guidelines by the Federal government because they are not legally binding on them.

The above description of the curriculum sub-system is incomplete without insights into who gets involved in curriculum changes and why. I find Michael W. Apple's (2004) work on ideology and curriculum particularly useful to understand the nature of actors and their agendas because his contentions resonate with Pakistan's curriculum sub-system. He interrogated "the supposed neutrality of education and contested the notion that knowledge is above politics" (Nichols, 2009, p. 201). In his seminal book titled *Ideology and Curriculum*, Apple (2004, pp. 174-78) describes a taxonomy of 'hegemonic alliances' who want to influence the core objectives of education: *neo-liberals* who want the education policy to be centered around economy and 'paid work'; *neo-conservatives* who want 'cultural restoration' as the main agenda for education, and a tighter control over knowledge, morals and values, including through a single or state-controlled curricula; *authoritarian populists* who want a return to religious tradition as the basis of knowledge, sacred texts, and sacred authority, and the fourth group comprises of *professional and managerial* new middle class who do not have their own agenda, and are hired by the State for their technical administrative knowledge.

Although Apple framed his concept of 'hegemonic alliances' in the context of education in the United States, his taxonomy provides an equally useful framework to conceptualize key actors and influencers in Pakistan as well, though the ideological positions of each alliance and who is in the leadership position would vary in the local context. There appears to be the case that all the four types of alliances are actively engaged in the curriculum policy sub-system in Pakistan.

The *neo-liberal*s demand modernization of education in line with global standards and economic imperatives. They represent voices from international financial and development institutions, progressive academics and politicians, and rights activists who are critical of control through curricula. I would put the State actors into *neo-conservative* category due to strong tendencies within the ruling elite, military, and other institutions to control knowledge, morals and values, including through curricula.

To some degree, the State actors swing on both sides of neo-liberal and neo-conservative ideologies with calls to make curricula and education relevant for economic modernization alongside cultural restoration and tighter control. For example, General Pervez Musharraf during his military rule coined the term "enlightened moderation' to promote a 'moderate Islam' vis-à-vis a fundamentalist Islam (Aziz & Khalid, 2017). In 2006, his regime attempted a reformed curriculum to embody his vision of enlightened moderation. However, the textbook boards did not adhere fully to the guidelines, and as a result, the textbooks did not reflect the guidelines (Hussain, Salim, and Naveed, 2011, p. 13). There is also a significant body of *professional and managerial* experts such as consultants, subject experts, teachers, and publishers who may not necessarily have their own political agendas, but they render their services to the State and private sector.

The category of *authoritarian populists* deserves a special attention because their influence has dominated Pakistan's curriculum policy, often through a nexus with *neo-conservatives*. Religious

nationalization has been a constant factor in the curriculum. Lall argues that "today's textbook and curriculum reforms have simply entrenched what has been an increasingly Sunni Islamic view of the nation across the Pakistani population, building on the changes made in the late 1970s." (Lall, 2008, p. 104). This has prompted debates about how the State has always accommodated the *authoritarian populists* and forced interpretations of Islamic history in a certain way, and an integrated curriculum that failed to pay much attention to religious minorities in textbooks. They include fundamentalist Islamic scholars and entities such as the *Muttahida Ulema* Board in Punjab. The Council of Islamic Ideology (CCI) as a constitutional body also exerts pressure for integration of Islamic principles into education, but it swings on both sides of authoritarian populism and neo-conservative ideology.

An "Apartheid Education System": The Problem Stream

Let us first examine the problem that SNC was supposed to address the factors that drew attention to that problem. PTI's move to launch SNC was built on the narrative that Pakistan's three-tiered education system, and particularly the English-medium schools with western-oriented curriculum, was causing a social apartheid and a class divide in Pakistan (PTI, 2013). Literature, however, limits the attention of readers to this problem in reference to PTI's ideology and politics. I argue that this is a key shortcoming in the literature because a paradigm about the association between the so-called 'elite' private schools and class divide existed even long before PTI was established as a political party in 1996. It is possible that this paradigm influenced PTI leadership's perceptions about the problem because key members in Imran's cabinet brought long-standing knowledge and experience in Pakistan's political system.

The paradigm in which private schooling, especially the English-medium schools, embraced a connotation of "elitism" existed even before the partition of India in 1947. The British colonial policy enabled missionaries to establish English-medium schools for Anglo-Indians and upper-caste Indians who could serve in the lower ranks of the imperial administrative service (Waldrop, 2015, as cited in Kalyanpur, 2020, p. 301). This article focuses on this issue after Pakistan came into being. I conceptualize the evolution of this paradigm in four waves.

The first major wave arose in the early 1970s with the populist leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's controversial nationalization of private educational institutions.[4] The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government under Bhutto's leadership as the Prime Minister took over the control of over 3500 schools and colleges. The nationalized institutions also included Missionary English-medium schools which were offering western-oriented curricula. This policy, along with the nationalization of all major industries, was partly driven by an intent to address the grievances of working-class in private sector such as teachers and laborers who were being exploited due to low wages (Jones and Jones, 1977).

Egalitarianism was another key reason behind Bhutto's philosophy of nationalization. Drawing on his 'socialist' ideals, he believed that private education was promoting class differences (Mahmood, 2022). He wanted to make schooling more readily available to those children whose families could not afford private schooling (Korson, 1973). This policy had a short life until the military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq reversed it in 1977 and handed over most of the nationalized educational institutions to the previous owners.

The genesis of the second wave about the question of class divisiveness goes back to the United States -Soviet Cold War era when Pakistan-based *deeni madaaris* or religious seminaries were accused of acting as a conduit for the Taliban militancy in Afghanistan[5]. Alongside a growing perception about their

[4] Some authors accuse the education system of the British India for class-based differences (Whitehead, 2005). This timeframe is outside the purview of this article and hence is not discussed here.

[5] Recent data published by the Pakistan Institute of Education shows there are 64,417 *madaaris* in Pakistan with an enrolment of over 3 million.

role in radicalization, between 1977 and 1988, General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policy transcended deep into mainstream education with a huge emphasis on teaching of religious content in textbooks. His Islamization programme was based on the ideals of Maulana Maududi, the founder of the right-leaning political party Jamaat-e-Islami (Lall, 2008, p. 110). The 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States again drew attention to the link between religious seminaries and militancy with calls to secularize their teaching content.

In the Western media, these developments were seen as a perfect recipe for youth's radicalization and promotion of extreme ideologies (Giunchi, 2007). This debate gradually morphed into one for bringing religious seminaries under government control by introducing modern subjects and a uniform syllabus. This was considered a silver bullet for tackling extremist interpretations of religion and sectarian violence (Chandran, 2003). In subsequent years, several critics of the textbooks like Pervez Hoodbhoy, A. H. Nayyer, K.K. Aziz, and Ahmad Salim drew attention to "omissions, errors and distortions, incitement to violence and intolerance, thus constituting tools of indoctrination rather than of knowledge and critical thinking" in Pakistani textbooks (Giunchi, 2007, p. 376).

The question of social class was central to the indigenous versions of this debate. This is because the seminaries grew more rapidly in poor neighborhoods that were deprived of mainstream schools. A well-known Pakistani scholar, Hasan Askari Rizvi, argues that religious schools acted as a suitable alternative for people because they promise food, shelter and education, and "attract a large number of students, mostly from the impoverished classes of society" (Anwar, 2018). There was clear recognition that the graduates of seminaries were failing to compete with their peers from mainstream public and private schools in the job market. The idea to introduce Science subjects was to bring students of seminaries at par with those in mainstream public and private schools. In reality, registration and mainstreaming have been only partially successful in face of strong resistance for seminary reforms from authoritarian populists and the federation of religious seminaries, namely the *Ittehad-e-Tanzeemat-Madaris*. The debate about mainstreaming of the seminaries is still alive.

In the early 1980s and 1990s, low-cost private schools grew rapidly beyond a handful of the so-called 'elite' English-medium schools. A new class of 'edupreneurs' emerged who set up private schools in both urban and rural areas. While accurate data is not available, estimates suggest that private schools account for over 40 per cent of school enrolment in Pakistan (Qureshi & Razzaque, 2021). This picture gradually begun to shift the nature of the prevailing debate about class divide. Economists like Tahir Andrabi, Jishnu Das and Asim Ijaz Khawaja produced a wealth of new data as part of the famous Learning and Educational Achievements in Pakistan Schools (LEAPS) project. Their findings (2006) showed that the private sector was catering to a wide variety of class groupings and was charging fee accordingly to suit different income groups. Thus, barring high-fee school chains, most private sector schools were serving the lower social strata as well. Under the Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE), Qureshi and Razzaque (2021) wrote a blog to argue that private schools were, by no means, only for the elite in Pakistan. Most of the new private schools were actually opening up in rural areas. Criticism on private schools did not subside despite the emergence of this new evidence.

A third contemporary and more intense wave of the debate emerged which blended religious and political rhetoric of egalitarianism and apartheid. In 2009, the former Federal finance minister, Sartaj Aziz, called for a uniform education system. He thought that the three categories of Pakistani education system, namely the English-medium, the Urdu-medium and religious seminaries, were "based on the class system and rich-poor divide, which was dangerous for country's future" (Dawn, 2009, August 20). Prominent journalist Mujibur Rahman Shami endorsed his view, noting that "the present education based on class system portended very dangerous future and if this gulf between the rich and the poor was not eliminated, it would be disastrous for the country", "The islands built by the rich in the form of their separate colonies, educational institutions and even graveyards would be swept away by the sea of the poor around them" (Dawn, 2009, August 20). Some papers published in local journals also discussed

implications of private sector schooling on equality and social justice (Memon, 2006; Ullah and Ali, 2018; Zafar and Ali, 2018).

Neo-conservatives such as the right-leaning Islamist political party, Jamaat-e-Islami, were arduous supporters of the arguments about the class divide due to a multi-tiered education system. This was in alignment with party's ideology of Islamic egalitarianism. The party leaders were building a narrative that the public education system was failing children's future and the elite and the rich did not care about this because they sent their children to high quality private sector schools. Imran's PTI party shared this belief with Jamaat-e-Islami and raised the same issue, albeit with stronger political overtones. It was the first time that English-medium schools were labelled as a source of "education apartheid." PTI's election manifesto (2013, p. 13) noted:

> Quality education has become an exclusive preserve of the elite thus forcing the majority to perpetual ignorance and poverty. While the rich send their children to expensive English-medium schools, the majority poor are forced to send their children to antiquated Urdu medium public schools or Madrassahs. As a result, despite the huge increase in population, the proportion of students attending government primary schools declined, particularly in the urban areas where the private sector now accounts for almost half of primary enrolments.

The next iteration of PTI's manifesto ahead of 2018 election recognized that the critical matter of equity in education was neglected after devolution. After it won the election and formed government in three out of the four provinces, the narrative about class divisiveness came to prominence in many statements of Imran Khan and the Minister for Education, Shafqat Mahmood. In his maiden speech in the National Assembly on 19 August 2018, Imran drew a comparison of two classes of society including the ones who had no resources to spend on their children and were deprived of basic facilities, and the ruling elite who were leading luxury lives. This narrative was repeated in meetings on education chaired by Imran as the Prime Minister. For instance, a meeting held in March 2020 stressed that "the current "class-based" education system had not only divided the educational institutions, teachers and students but was also serving the interests of a particular class" (Ghilzai, 2020). A paradigm about the problem of class divide had emerged in mainstream politics, and its framing did not see any counter narrative even from PTI's rival political parties such as the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz and the Pakistan People's Party.

Uniform Education System Through a Single Curriculum: The Policy Stream

I argue above that the attention to the problem of class divide grew over a long time and much before PTI was established as a political party, but Imran Khan and his team used a more intense political rhetoric of 'education apartheid' to bring it to prominence. Contrary to Jamaat-e-Islami and other major political parties, PTI was known for its aggressive use of social media, and this may have contributed to making their narrative more visible. This sub-section is framed within Kingdon's 'policy' stream to explain how a policy solution was produced to address the class divide. As it would become apparent below, it is hard to disentangle the problem and the solution as two distinct processes in this case because both were being framed and articulated at the same time.

The political parties which were raising the problem of class divide were also demanding a uniform education system for the poor and the rich alike at the same time as a panacea to this problem. Islamist parties were the forerunners in this debate. Ahead of 2002 general elections, *Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal* – a coalition of six religious political parties – called for a uniform education system in the country as part of their election campaign. Although this political alliance won 63 seats in the National Assembly (ECP, n.d.), it was unable to form a government, and hence, this agenda could not proceed further from this collective platform. However, Jamaat-e-Islami, which was an active member of the alliance, continued to push this agenda. Jamaat's chief, Munawar Hussain, was against any provincial control over syllabus, and called for a uniform education system and syllabi all over the country to eliminate provincial and ethnic

biases and class distinctions. This narrative was consistent with the party's political ideology of social justice, a fair distribution of wealth and eradication of poverty.

Although it is logical to think about a uniform system to tackle the problem of parallel education systems for different social classes, I argue that there were two fundamental shortcomings in the framing of this solution. Firstly, the term 'uniform education system' was being used vaguely without deciphering how this uniformity could be achieved. Literature on this topic does not document any meaningful detail, except a few references to common syllabus. Secondly, there was no discussion about any alternative solutions to a uniform education system.

PTI was able to address directly one of these two shortcomings. In relative terms, it offered more explanation of the idea of a common curriculum. PTI's 2013 election manifesto included a proposal to abolish educational apartheid by introducing a common core syllabus for all schools (PTI, 2013, p. 13). The party won the election in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and formed a coalition government with Jamaat-e-Islami as a coalition member. During ministerial portfolio distribution, the Education department was given to Jamaat which kept insisting on the integration of Islamic principles into curriculum and textbooks.

The Jamaat's new chief, Siraj-ul-Haq, lamented education ministers of all the provinces for failing to send their children to government schools. He believed that such divisions not only led to a class-based society but also divided people on sectarian grounds. "In our Islamic Pakistan, a uniform, modern and quality curriculum will be introduced to allow the sons of the poor and the elite to sit together [in a classroom] [Tribune, 2015, December 2]. The demand for a similar policy was coming from other parties as well, notably the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM). MQM's Karachi Mayor, Syed Mustafa Kamal, also believed that Pakistan could not make progress without a uniform education system (The World Times, 2012). MQM also tabled a Motion in the National Assembly in 2014 to "discuss the situation arising out of non-existence of uniform education system in the country". This Motion was not debated though (FAFEN, 2014). Some academics were also calling for a uniform system for everyone (Zafar and Ali, 2018).

The next iteration of PTI's manifesto, ahead of the 2018 election, recognized that the critical matter of equity in education was neglected after devolution, but interestingly, there was no reference to a uniform education system or a common curriculum. Instead, the manifesto promised establishment of a new Commission to issue 'Minimum Standards' and initiate consultations on language policy. It referred to the introduction of literacy and mathematics teaching as formal subjects within the Madrassah curriculum rather than using the speak of a single curriculum for all educational institutions. PTI won the election and formed government in the centre as well as in three out of the four provinces, namely Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Shafqat Mehmood, the Federal Minister for Education, immediately began work on SNC as soon as he took over the charge. Some statements by the Minister indicate that China's single curriculum may have inspired this move as well (The Nation, 2018).

Policy Ideas, Personal Beliefs and Party Ideology: The Politics Stream

What does explain the motive behind PTI's choice of SNC as a policy solution to tackle the "education apartheid"? I argue that the idea of SNC was consistent with Imran's own political beliefs on one hand and fulfilled PTI's broad-based criteria to attract people from different social groups, on the other hand. The latter also included an informal alliance with *authoritarian populists* who commanded influence over faith-based voter constituency. The explanation I offer below is summed up in Guinchi's observation: "what is peculiar to this country [Pakistan] is also the coincidence between government interests and the Islamists' desire to increase their popular appeal" (Guinchi, 2007 p. 376). This coincidence was visible even to a naked eye in the process that led to the adoption of SNC policy.

Belonging to a prominent family with Niazi and Burki Pashtun ancestry, Imran Khan pursued a lengthy career in cricket and then entered into politics in 1996 by establishing his own political party. His ancestral history found huge prospects of mass following in the Pashtun-dominant Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, but his strategy to consolidate PTI's power base was based on a varied criteria to attract people from all walks of life and ideologies (Bangash, n.d.). Imran's own public communication was rooted in populist themes such as corruption, youth, revival of Islamic glory, and a Naya or new Pakistan.

Shakil and Yilmaz (2021) provide a succinct overview of Imran's beliefs and ideology based on discourse analysis of a collection of his speeches, tweets along with news reports, press releases, manifestos, PTI forged bills or laws, and policies, between January 2013 and August 2021. His initial populist ideology targeted the "elite" class for dynastic politics and corruption, mainly referring to the Pakistan People's Party and the Pakistan Muslim Leage-Nawaz. His speeches drew attention of masses towards lack of rights and deprivation from education and health. After he won his first seat in the National Assembly in 2008, Imran turned to Islamism guised under "human rights" (Shakil and Yilmaz, 2021, p. 6). He opposed General Musharraf's pro-Western stance against Taliban and blamed the West for Afghanistan's problems.

Shakil and Yilmaz (2021) argue that PTI holds the distinction of successfully coupling the two ideas of populists and Islamists to construct a narrative of Islamic civilisation under attack from others. He promised a revival of the old golden age of Muslims on the lines of the Holy Prophet's *Riyasat-i-Madina* or the State of Madina which will be a role model for *Naya* (new) Pakistan. He portrayed PTI as a political party with Islamist welfare to lift the oppressed and neglected people out of poverty. Equity in education sector was an integral part of Imran's stated vision about Naya Pakistan (Shakil and Yilmaz, 2021, p. 12). Over time, policy perspectives of PTI, Jamaat-e-Islami and *authoritarian populists* who were at the helm of religious seminaries had converged as far as education is concerned. In 2013, PTI formed the government in coalition with Jamaat-e-Islami and handed over the charge of Education Department to them. Prior to the PTI government, the Awami National Party had expunged some content related to principles of Jihad, theory of universe's creation as in Quran and emphasis on the Two-Nation Theory. Jamaat made calls to re-include this content in curricula and succeeded to some extent. Quran classes were made mandatory in schools. The government also provided grant-in-aid to *Darul Uloom Haqqania* which is sometimes labelled as a major jihadist seminary in Western media (The Washington Post, 2016). In 2014, PTI also joined forces with Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri, which symbolised Khan's willingness to form coalitions with Islamist right-wing parties.

The convergence of policy perspectives discussed above was to lay the ground for what I refer to as "reverse mainstreaming" of madrasshas. As PTI wanted SNC to apply to public, private as well as madrassahs, religious leaders insisted on adding more Islamic content in curriculum and textbooks. Nayyar (as cited in Paracha, 2020) observed that, "to make the madrassahs agree to accept the teaching of non-religious subjects, the government has decided to bring the madrassahs to public and private schools."

Further research (Hanif, 2023; Ali, 2023) confirmed that demands of *authoritarian populists* were accepted. A separate book on Islamic studies was introduced from grade 1 whereas previously, general knowledge subjects had a portion of Islamic studies for the early school years. The amount of Islamic content was increased in the curriculum with addition of 40 Ahadith (sayings of the Prophet) from grades 1-8. Ali (2023) in her doctoral dissertation noted that the government was able to successfully coerce all schools into incorporating more religious instruction. Two additional subjects of *Muamilaat* (social matters) and Islam *aur daure hazir ke taqazay* (Islam and requirements of the modern world) were added to the SNC (Hoodbhoy, 2020). These two courses were designed after close coordination with *Ittehad Tanzimat Ul Madaris* Pakistan (the central board of Pakistani madrassahs). In Punjab, *the Muttehida Ulema Board Punjab Act (2022)* was passed which empowered the Board consisting of Muslim clerics to oversee educational content. All textbooks required a No Objection Certificate from the Board in order to

be approved for teaching. Thus, instead of mainstreaming madrassahs, SNC policy allowed their education philosophy to permeate through the entire education system as a result of political bargain over this policy.

This nexus between PTI and *authoritarian populists*, which was not formalized in a systematic way, but it was explicit in many ways, overshadowed the imperative for any alternative solutions. Many critics questioned the usefulness of SNC as a valid pathway to achieve a uniform system. Shaikh and Benedetti (2024) argue that SNC is "a centralized system of education which has little to do with improving equity or quality in education. Rather, it is another way of Islamising the country's syllabus in a populist civilisationist fashion" (Shakil and Yilmaz, 2021, p. 12). A long-time critic of Islamization of curriculum and textbooks, Hoodbhoy (2020) believed that SNC "prioritizes ideology over education quality and acquisition of basic skills". Despite all criticism, PTI had made up their mind to go ahead.

Triumph of Political Power: The Window of Opportunity

How did the three streams – problem, policy, and politics – came together to open a window of opportunity in which SNC policy became a reality? The turning point was the 2018 general election in which PTI emerged as the triumphant political party (see Diagram 1). It formed the government in the centre and all the provinces except Sindh. Thus, PTI was able to make policies and pass legislation with little resistance at least at the Federal level and in the three provinces. Given that a uniform education system through a common curriculum was already a part of PTI's own agenda and it did not require convincing by others, the time had arrived to do it.

The complication which required delicate handling was the matter of legality. As education, including curriculum, was devolved to the provinces in 2010, the Federal government needed to satisfy at least two conditions to change the curriculum. First, it was to claim a legitimate role to intervene and find a strong justification in a sector that was devolved. This claim was to be grounded in the Constitution or an interpretation of it or in a "grey area" where jurisdictional boundaries overlapped between the Federal and provincial governments. Second, it was to work with the reality of interdependence with federating units, thereby requiring negotiation with a much larger group of actors within the provinces.

PTI was willing to pay some attention to the second condition, but without satisfying the first requirement. Understandably, there was no resistance from the Federal and the three provincial governments in which PTI was in a position of power. The government defended the policy by arguing that consultations with around 400 representatives of different stakeholders contributed to the creation of the curriculum. The Federal government's statement about objectives of SNC said:

> "One system of Education for all, in terms of curriculum, medium of instruction and a common platform of assessment so that all children have a fair and equal opportunity to receive high quality education. Single National Curriculum is a step in that direction." (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, as cited in Ali, 2023, p. 17).

Some academic and education professionals were actively involved in consultations and supported the new policy, dismissing criticisms from various directions (Chughtai, 2021). The province of Sindh, however, publicly refused to accept SNC policy. Despite Sindh's decision to opt out, PTI went ahead and launched SNC. A day after Imran Khan launched SNC for grades 1-5, Sindh Education Minister, Syed Sardar Ali Shah, told media that this move was tantamount to "imposing martial law in the field of curriculum" (Samar, 2021). He believed that the Federal government lacked constitutional authority to do so, and it is the provinces which have the constitutional right of adopting curriculum and making the decision to choose a language as the medium of instruction in schools. The SNC declared Urdu and English as the two languages for instruction for different subjects, which was against Sindh's policy of teaching in Sindhi language. Subsequently, the Pakistan People's Party agreed to lend conditional support

for science subjects only, but retained provincial autonomy in general science subjects such as Social Studies and History.

Severe criticism led the government to change its position partially. Initially, it was introduced as the same curriculum for all educational institutions without any exceptions, but in the face of pushback, it was rebranded as minimum standards (Ghias, 2023). In non-governmental spaces, many actors were challenging the prudence of SNC as a solution to tackle the class divide from multiple angles: lack of clarity in objectives (Irfan, 2021), pushing a reform just for political point-scoring, potentially violating the Constitution (Tahir, 2022), lack of flexibility (Afzal, 2015), perceived by many as a power grab by the Federal Government (Ali, 2023), and a top-down attempt to homogenise and assimilate the diverse cultures of Pakistan (Torwali, 2020). Shaikh and Benedetti (2024) criticise SNC for its inherent characteristics that may reinforce existing power structures and marginalisation, and for failing to promote pluralism, inclusivity and tolerance. In a newspaper article published on 31 July 2020, Nayyer insisted that "what has been approved and notified is a uniform curriculum, not a system of uniform education." He further added, "But the government has not put forward any plan for uniform education yet. And it is unclear if it ever will" (Nayyer, 2020).

Despite opposition from many circles on legal and technical grounds, Imran's own personal beliefs, the party ideology, the nexus between PTI and authoritarian populists, and the configuration of political power after the 2018 election had paved the way for adoption of SNC as a policy solution.

Conclusion

This case study highlights the generalizability potential of Kingdon's (1984, 1995) multiple streams analysis to explain why and how ruling parties introduce changes in curriculum policy. It allows to conveniently extricate or integrate threads of policy debates and events to analyse the framing of the problem, the development of solution and the political manipulations that lay the ground for decision-making. The integration of these streams within the five-threads model proposed by Howlett, McConnell, and Perl (2016) could further enrich the analysis because it allows to weave the streams into different stages of policy-making as well. I did not use this integrated model in this case study in depth. However, a reference to the five stages or critical junctures of this model was useful to make the point clearer to the readers that the article covered only the first two stages of the policy cycle i.e. agenda-setting and formulation. A key shortcoming of MSA framework, however, is the lack of its power to predict when the change will happen because the 'window of opportunity' is random and accidental. I also realised that it works well for explaining a single policy, but its structure of streams is not sustainable for contexts of systemic reforms in which multiple policy changes occur simultaneously in an integrated way. A multiple case study design can overcome this shortcoming, but this assumption warrants testing in future research.

Conflict of Interest: None

Acknowledgements: This paper was originally produced as part of research under my Professional Doctorate in Policy Research and Practice at the University of Bath, UK. I would like to thank Dr Theodore Papadopolous, Director of Centre for the Analysis of Social Policy at the University of Bath and an anonymous reviewer for their suggestions and feedback.

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