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Datta, S.

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Ascendance of Jama'at-e-Islami in Bangladesh

SREERADHA DATTA

The gradual Islamization process and the increasing accentuation of the Islamic identity of Bangladesh has significantly facilitated the growth and development of Jama'at-e-Islami (JI). Even though Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the first leader of Bangladesh known for his secular moorings and commitments, initially banned all religious parties and groups, he was eventually compelled to recognize the importance of religious identity and started using Islamic symbolism. The entry of the military into the political arena following the assassination of Mujib in 1975 furthered the Islamization

process which was a prime supporter of military rule since its conservative elements supported the religious agenda. As a result, in 1976 Islamic parties were legalized and allowed to participate in local and national elections. The new constitution, introduced in 1977, replaced secularism with 'absolute trust and faith in the almighty Allah.' Two years later, Gen. Ziaur Rahman amended the preamble and introduced a salutation to Allah. JI became the principal beneficiary of the de-secularization process. A statement by JI's current leader, Ameer Motiur Rahman Nizami, aptly sums up the party's political strategic outlook. In his view, JI's aim 'is to establish a modern and progressive Islamic welfare state by mobilizing public opinion through constructive programmes and a systematic and peaceful movement.'¹

Electoral politics

Initially JI competed in the Jatiya Sangsad (Parliamentary) elections as part of a joint platform with the Muslim League, and then in 1986, having gained confidence, opted to participate in the elections on its own and secured ten seats. By the time the first truly multiparty elections were held in 1991, the Islamization process was firmly in place, and the rehabilitation of JI was complete since its previous opposition to the liberation of East Pakistan in 1971 had ceased being a political liability. In 1991 it secured 6 percent of the popular vote and eighteen seats in the 300-member Jatiya Sangsad. Its strength dwindled to three seats in 1996 but rose to seventeen seats five years later.

Parliamentary elections do not alone portray the growing influence of JI. The pressures of electoral arithmetic compelled both the secularly oriented Awami League, led by Mujib's daughter Hasina, and the right wing Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), led by Gen. Zia's widow Khaleda, to seek JI's support. In the bargain the Islamic party has emerged as a major player in coalition-building. Its strength lies in its ability to forge issue-based partnerships with diverse groups even while retaining its Islamic credentials. JI is not averse to uniting in common cause with the two principal forces in Bangladesh and has actually capitalized on the mutual antagonism and animosity between Hasina and Khaleda.

Thus in some form or another, JI has been instrumental in the formation of all three governments since 1991. The alliance with JI largely enabled the BNP to secure absolute majority victories in 1991 and 2001. Dissolution of this alliance proved costly in 1996 when the Awami League secured the largest number of seats in the Jatiya Sangsad. Al-

As a coalition partner in the ruling coalition, Jama'at-e-Islami (JI) occupies an important place in Bangladeshi politics. The party has come a long way since its opposition to the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, and has gradually established itself as a key player in national politics. Over the years, it has adopted moderate right wing positions, focused itself on social welfare activities, consolidated its political base through skillful manoeuvres, and forged successful electoral alliances. In so doing, it has expanded its influence and emerged as a key player in determining the ruling composition in Bangladeshi politics.

though the BNP is seen as the natural ally of JI, even the Awami League was not averse to reaching tactical understandings with the Islamic group. Attempts by Hasina (1996-2001) with her secular credentials, to co-opt JI during the opposition's boycott of parliament, considerably enhanced the political acceptability of JI.

The Islamization of Bangladesh and the growth of JI are manifestations of the far-reaching changes taking place in Bangladesh. Despite its vowed commitment to secularism, for example, the Awami has adopted a number of overtly religious policies to win over

mainstream voters. During the recent elections, it promised in its manifesto not to enact any legislation running contrary to the Qur'an and pledged to establish a *shari'a* bench in the Supreme Court. JI, which competed in the election as an ally of BNP, sought to regulate and institutionalize 'mosque-based education.' Other parties have also adopted overtly religious standpoints and policies in their manifestoes.

Contrary to initial expectations, the September 11 attacks in the US did not neutralize the growing power of the Islamic parties in Bangladesh. JI went on to secure more seats in Jatiya Sangsad than at any previous time. If one includes the seats won by other religious parties in the total, the Islamists secured thirty-three seats.²

Having managed to influence—and also to highly benefit from—the Islamization process, JI has opted for gradualism as its electoral strategy. The party has recognized the difficulties of securing power in a personality-dominated society through the religious agenda alone. With a long-term approach in mind it looks to students and women as its prime constituents. The two portfolios that JI currently holds in the BNP-led government underscore the rural focus of the party. While the JI leader, Motiur Rahman Nizami, was the minister of agriculture, his colleague Ali Ahsan Mohammad holds the social welfare portfolio. And in a country that is almost entirely agro-based, the importance of an agricultural portfolio is obvious, and likewise much of the Bangladeshi population depends upon the state for its welfare. This perhaps explains Nizami's shunting out to a less significant industry portfolio during the May 2003 cabinet reshuffling.

Jama'at as an alternative

Neither the BNP nor the Awami could afford to ignore JI in any future coalition-making. By contributing to Khaleda's spectacular victory in 2001 JI has acquired significant leverage vis-à-vis the BNP. Therefore, the success of any attempts by Hasina to unseat Khaleda, either at the next Jatiya Sangsad elections or through the time-tested strategy of street protests, would depend upon Hasina's ability to wean JI away from the BNP. In short, both Khaleda and Hasina would be wise to enlist the support of JI before facing the electorate, thereby further enhancing JI's bargaining powers.

Moreover, the power base of the country's main protagonists also favours JI. While the BNP is seen as an elitist party with an urban following, comprised mainly of professionals and the military, the ►

► Awami's strength lies in the middle classes of rural Bangladesh, comprised of teachers, shopkeepers and other literates. The lower strata of rural Bangladesh, which is largely comprised of agricultural labourers, provide a fertile ground for JI and its Islamization campaign. The *madrassa*-based education system, which is dominant in the rural areas, also works in favour of JI. In short, since much of the Bangladeshi population is rural, economically backward, and illiterate, neither the BNP nor the Awami League would be able to stem—let alone reverse—the growth of JI.

The growth of JI is also facilitated by the absence of any ideological divide between the Awami League and the BNP; both of these parties embrace extremely personalized ideologies centred completely on the two leading ladies themselves. JI on the contrary, does not suffer from any of these negative associations and instead enjoys the reputation of being a clean, ideologically firm and corruption-free party. Because it is cadre-based, JI is more disciplined than the mass-based Awami League

and BNP parties. As the most well organized and tightly knit party, as well as possessing such a well defined and disciplined cadre, JI is able to attract a wide section of support through a host of local networks and social welfare programmes. Calculatedly, JI knows—and exploits the fact—that the goodwill and popularity it generates through various welfare activities in the community will transform into political support and electoral gains. This mass appeal enables JI to easily mobilize financial resources without resorting to corrupt practices. Given these circumstances, it is likely that JI could prove to be a credible and corruption-free alternative to the BNP and Awami League.

*Sreeradha Datta is an associate fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, (IDSA), New Delhi, India. The views of the author should not be attributed to any institute or organization.
E-mail: sreeradha@yahoo.com*

Notes

1. Speech by Ameer Nizami in September 2003. Full text can be found at <http://www.jamaat-e-islami.org>
2. The seats won by the religious parties are as follows: JI 17; Islamic Oikya Jote (IOJ) 2; and Islami Jatiya Oikya Front (IOJF) 14. The first two parties competed in the 2001 elections under the four-party alliance led by the BNP.