
Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh: Past, Present and Future

Introduction

Jamaat-e-Islami is the largest Islamic political party in Bangladesh. Despite its history of being an active anti-liberation force in Bangladesh during its *Liberation War* in 1971, it enjoyed political power through its alliance with both of the major political parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) at different periods of time. The Jamaat-e-Islami eventually ended up with the BNP as its primary ally whereas the AL became its rival. The party continued to enjoy political power until the AL started the War Crimes Tribunal in 2008, delivering on its promise made in its election campaign. Many top leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami, who were actively involved with the Pakistani Army against Bangladeshi nationalists during the liberation war of 1971, were convicted of war crimes and were put under war crimes trials. This ushered in the fall of Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh. This study paper discusses the history of Jamaat-e-Islami; its role in the liberation war of Bangladesh as well as in independent Bangladesh; and the impact of war crimes trial of its leaders globally and in South Asia.

The inception of Jamaat-e-Islami

The Jamaat-e-Islami was founded in India as an Islamic organization by an Islamic Philosopher, Abul Ala Maududi in 1941. The inception of Jamaat-e-Islami was as a social organization with the motive to change societies according to Islamic values. The main motive of the organization was to create a unified Indian State of Islamic values. Being a social organization, Jamaat-e-Islami realized the necessity of government reforms to achieve its goals. Hence, in the course of time, the organization evolved to become a complex social as well as political organization. Despite adopting this political role, the organization remained sceptical of core political principles such as secularism and democracy to such an extent that they considered these concepts to be '*Haram*' (Islamic for '*forbidden*').

Beginning of Jamaat-e-Islami's journey in Bangladesh

The Jamaat-e-Islami's dream of creating a unified Indian State was shattered when there was a partition of the Indian State in 1947, and two independent nations (India and Pakistan) were created. Pakistan became a predominantly Muslim State, whereas India became a secular nation with a Hindu majority population and a large Muslim minority. The partition did not merely bring out two independent nations; it also brought two different States based on two significantly different ideologies. Although the Indian State was divided into two nations, the Jamaat-e-Islami did not give up its dream of a unified Muslim state. Two separate wings of this organization were established in both countries. Present day Bangladesh, being a Muslim majority area, remained a part of Pakistan regardless of its geographical distance to Pakistan. It was named East-Pakistan. Thus began the journey of Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh. The growth of Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan was more convenient since it was a Muslim majority country. Hence, the organization started participating actively in the politics of Pakistan with the intention to bring about an Islamic revolution.

The Role of Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh's Liberation War

Despite being predominantly one Muslim state, there were several and significant differences between West-Pakistan (present day Pakistan) and East-Pakistan (present day Bangladesh). In addition to the massive geographical distance, some of the major differences were cultural and linguistic. Further, the people of East-Pakistan were politically and economically exploited by their West-Pakistani compatriots, which added to their discontent with the West-Pakistani Government. Therefore, it was not long before the people of East-Pakistan started feeling the need to create a state of their own.

The discontents of the people were first expressed when civil unrest broke out after the Government of Pakistan demanded that Urdu become the national language, despite East-Pakistan being Bengali-speaking. People of East-Pakistan reacted with protests on the streets against such a decision. The protest, which started initially as a language movement took the form of the liberation war of Bangladesh following the election in 1970. The nationalist movement of East-Pakistan led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of the AL political party of East-Pakistan, forced the West-Pakistani Government to hold free elections. AL won this election, but was denied power by West-Pakistan. This denial of the lawful rights of a legitimately elected government led to the liberation war of Bangladesh in March 1971.

The war continued for nine months until Bangladesh achieved its independence on 16 December 1971. The Jamaat-e-Islami played a vital role during this war. The Jamaat-e-Islami's reaction to the liberation war was along the line of their mission, which was to keep the Muslim community united. The members of Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh provided full support to the Pakistani Army in their efforts against the freedom fighters of Bangladesh/East-Pakistan. The West-Pakistani Government created the "*East-Pakistan Central Peace Committee*" (known as Shanti Committee or Bahini in Bengali) which was a vital part of their military operations against the Bengali nationalists. Ghulam Azam, the '*Ameer*' ('*leader*') of Jamaat-e-Islami during this period in East-Pakistan, was one of the founding members and top leaders of the Shanti Committee.

Shanti Bahini

Shanti Bahini, along with West-Pakistani forces, actively participated in committing war crimes against their own East-Pakistani brothers and sisters. Their activities included killing hundreds of thousands of non-combatant East-Pakistanis, including children, raping East-Pakistani women (especially non-Muslim women), kidnapping and killing scholars, doctors, scientists, amongst others. The Jamaat-e-Islami also created other groups such as the "*Al-Badar*" and "*Al-Shams*" (known as the Rajakar Bahini in Bengali) to support the military efforts of the Pakistani Army. Al-Badar was created by Islami Chhatra Sibir, the student wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami in East-Pakistan. One of the main operations of Al-Badar during the liberation war was to specifically kill "*the intellectual people*" (known as Budhijibi in Bengali). During the liberation war, under the military rule imposed by West-Pakistan, civilians in East-Pakistan were forbidden from organizing any rallies/protests and carrying weapons. However, this law was not applicable to the Shanti Committee. Initially, the responsibility of the Shanti Committee was

to create lists of people such as supporters of the AL, non-Muslims, and Bengali freedom fighters. Gradually, they extended their assistance in military battles as well. Their pro-Pakistan combatant groups such as the Al-Badar, Al-Shams, Mujahid and East-Pakistan Civil Armed Force also recruited members from other Islamic groups. Jamaat-e-Islami, however, retained full control over these members from other Islamic groups and were in charge of distributing weapons and organizing military training for these combatants.

One of the most hideous crimes committed by the Shanti Bahini was capturing hundreds of thousands of Bengali women and keeping them as hostages in military camps for the entertainment of the Pakistani military. Even though their particular interest was in non-Muslim women, Muslim women were also not spared. During the liberation war, around 200,000 to 400,000 women became victims of rape and sex slavery. The proportion of Muslim women in this tragedy was almost half. Even though the rape victims who survived were declared “*War Heroines*”, re-integrating them into society has proven extremely difficult. Many of these women were rejected by their own families (parents and husbands).

Establishing the actual number of East-Pakistanis who were killed during the liberation war has been a topic of debate. However, as per Bangladeshi authorities, around three million Bangladeshis or East-Pakistanis were killed by West-Pakistani forces and their supporters, specifically the Jamaat-e-Islami and its affiliates, during the liberation war.

Post-liberation position of Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh

Jamaat-e-Islami’s journey in independent Bangladesh is an extraordinary one. Regardless of the organization being an active agent of anti-liberation, it managed to revive as a political entity in newly created Bangladesh.

As can be imagined, there was no place for Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh at the initial stage. Many top leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami who supported the Pakistan Army and survived the war fled to Pakistan. Many continued to live in Bangladesh. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, known as the Father of the Nation, became the first Prime Minister of independent Bangladesh on 12 January 1972. He did not delay in taking initiatives to eradicate extremist religious parties. As part of this initiative, the first Constitution of Bangladesh was formulated based on four principles; Secularism, Nationalism, Socialism, and Democracy. In this Constitution, under Article 38, political parties based on religious affiliation or motives were banned in Bangladesh. Hence, Jamaat-e-Islami lost its platform to operate as a political party in Bangladesh.

Additionally, the International Crimes Tribunal Act 1973 was passed to authorize the State “*to provide for the detention, prosecution and punishment of persons for genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and other crimes under the international law*”. It was passed with the intention to hold trials against the crimes committed by the Pakistani military and their affiliates, such as the combatant groups created by Jamaat-e-Islami.

However, politics in South Asia remains full of surprises. Shortly after these initiatives were taken, the three neighbouring South-Asian countries, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh realized the necessity of

mutual peace agreements for the future progress of all three nations. With regards to the peace of the subcontinent, Bangladesh signed the tripartite agreement with India and Pakistan in 1974. This agreement included Bangladesh's consent to the repatriation of 195 Pakistani prisoners of the 1971 war. Thus, the international crimes tribunal act of 1973 was left with promises of forgiveness.

Resurrection of Jamaat-e-Islami

Jamaat-e-Islami did not have to wait long to resume their journey as a political party in independent Bangladesh. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman along with most of his immediate family members was assassinated in August 1975, in a military coup by some army personnel. In the same year, four other prominent national leaders who had the potential to replace Sheikh Mujib, were assassinated. Bangladesh experienced a series of coups following the one in 1975.

Throughout these military coups one significant change occurred when Major General Ziaur Rahman became the President of Bangladesh in 1977. He paved the way for political participation for Jamaat-e-Islami through the Fifth Amendment to Bangladesh's Constitution. The Fifth Amendment abolished the provisions of *Secularism* and *Socialism* and provided the provision for forming political parties based on religion. Ziaur Rahman resurrected Jamaat-e-Islami to perform as a functional political party in an independent Bangladesh. Ziaur Rahman's wife, Khaleda Zia, continued this legacy after his death. Military General Ershad followed Ziaur Rahman's path and continued supporting Jamaat-e-Islami during his reign. Jamaat-e-Islami utilized its alliance with BNP, the political party of Ziaur Rahman and Khaleda Zia, to regain its lost power and glory. It gained access to and control of vital economic sectors of Bangladesh such as the well-funded NGO sector and the Islami Bank (one of the largest Islamic Banks in Bangladesh).

During this period, the very people who had been against the creation of Bangladesh reached positions of leadership and started to rule over the people of Bangladesh. During the leadership of BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami, non-Muslims and ethnic minorities became extremely vulnerable and this found reflection in frequent incidents of communal violence. Major atrocities against minorities included destruction of places of worship, killings and rapes. It was as if history was being repeated all over again.

The original history remained buried under political power play and the youth remained in the darkness of ignorance about the truth of their country's independence. History books were manipulated; ordinary people were manipulated by political agendas. The anti-liberation forces gained more power than ever and freely voiced their arguments asserting that the war in 1971 was merely a civil war.

Even though the AL played an active part in the power play of Bangladesh politics since independence and was in power during the 1970s and the 1990s, the party was too involved in maintaining its status quo and demands for punishing anti-liberation forces for war crimes continued to remain un-acted upon. It were the victims and families of the victims of the liberation war who remained active and committed in their efforts to punish anti-liberation forces. It was difficult for these people to tolerate that the people who were against the creation of Bangladesh were in leadership positions of the

Bangladeshi Government instead of being punished for their crimes. Even though these activists organized several protests since the entrance of Jamaat-e-Islami in politics, it took four decades for them to achieve their just, desired results.

Fall of Jamaat-e-Islami

The most notable protests demanding punishment of anti-liberation forces were “*Ekattorer Ghatak-Dalal Nirmul Committee*” (committee to exterminate the killers and collaborators of 1971) by Jahanara Imam and the social revolution of 2013, by the youth of Bangladesh. Jahanara Imam is known as the mother of martyrs as her eldest son and husband were killed by the Pakistani Army in the 1971 war. Due to a series of military coups and the abolishing of secularism in Bangladesh, democratic movements were extremely difficult to pursue. However, Jahanara Imam stood up against the BNP-Jamaat alliance in protest when Jamaat-e-Islami elected Ghulam Azam as ‘*Ameer*’ of their party in December 1991. Ghulam Azam, who was the leader of Jamaat-e-Islami during the liberation war and one of the founders of Shanti Committee, was sent to Pakistan in exile after the independence of Bangladesh. Nevertheless, the Ziaur Rahman government allowed him to return to Bangladesh in 1978 and his citizenship was reinstated in 1994.

Jahanara Imam along with hundreds of other people (social activists, freedom fighters, intellectuals and journalists) formed the Ekattorer Ghatak-Dalal Nirmul Committee demanding that Ghulam Azam be deported from Bangladesh and trials of war criminals be held. Even though the movement was a huge success in terms of attracting people’s attention, it could not bring the desired outcome immediately. The committee continued its activities despite several difficulties. The leader, Jahanara Imam, died in 1994 and several members of the committee were arrested and tortured when Jamaat-e-Islami was in power. The Jamaat-e-Islami also burned almost all of the books published by the committee on liberation war and the politics of Jamaat-e-Islami.

The situation started changing radically against the Jamaat-e-Islami again when the AL party led by Sheikh Hasina (daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman) made its election agenda in the 2008 election campaign that it would hold trials to punish war criminals. Following her electoral victory, the promise made was fulfilled when Sheikh Hasina established the International Crimes Tribunal in 2009 and amended the original act of 1973. The most significant amendment to the original act was that it was made applicable to “*organizations*”, besides “*individuals*”. The act was put into action when a series of arrests were made from June to December 2010. The act finally made a statement when for the first time a significant Jamaat-e-Islami leader, Abdul Quader Molla, was tried and executed in December 2013. The social revolution of 2013, led by the Bangladeshi youth had a part to play in encouraging the eventual decision to go ahead with this execution.

Shahbag protests

Initially, Quader Molla was only sentenced to a lifetime in prison. This outraged the youth of Bangladesh who had eagerly been awaiting justice for four decades. Thousands of protesters assembled and expressed this at the Shahbag Square in Dhaka, and the effect spread across the whole

country in a matter of days. The protesters demanded capital punishment for Quader Molla and other war criminals. They also demanded a ban on Jamaat-e-Islami from politics. They believed that the existence of such a religion-driven political party was against the basis of the creation of Bangladesh, which was secularism. Social media played a crucial role in the success of this movement. The initiative was taken forward by bloggers and online activists.

Awareness among the youth was created through instant sharing of information and agendas. Even though people of all age ranges gathered in protest, the Bangladeshi youth became the face of this revolution.

The Shahbag protests were peaceful demonstrations, but they outraged supporters of Jamaat-e-Islami who responded against the Shahbag protests with violent means. The irate supporters of Jamaat-e-Islami torched police cars, public vehicles, prayer mats in mosques, worship centres of religious minorities and tore the national flag of Bangladesh. Their violent response only made the Shahbag protest stronger, and peaceful nationwide protests continued amidst all the chaos. Following the execution of Quader Molla, several other significant Jamaat-e-Islami leaders were tried and executed. They include Mohammad Kamaruzzaman on April 2015, Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed on November 2015, Motiur Rahman Nizami on 11 May 2016 and Mir Quasem Ali on 3 September 2016. Ghulam Azam was sentenced to 90 years of imprisonment on 15 July 2013; He died of a stroke on 23 October 2014.

Even though Jamaat-e-Islami was initially able to orchestrate protests against the execution of its leaders, gradually its power weakened in the face of a spirited response by government security forces. Presently, with several Jamaat-e-Islami leaders lodged in prison and many others on the run from the police, it has become difficult for the party to organize protests. Despite this pressing situation for the party, violence in secret continues against people such as intellectuals, minorities and social activists. Five people, including a university teacher, a Hindu, and two gay activists were recently killed in April 2016.

War Crimes Tribunal and its impact

The trials against Jamaat-e-Islami leaders for war crimes have attracted worldwide attention. Initially, international organizations expressed support and offered to help Bangladesh with the war crimes trial. However, subsequently some of these organizations urged the Bangladeshi Government to ensure compliance with international standards in the trials while others, such as Amnesty International, protested against the executions on account of their opposition to the death penalty.

The trials have sparked protests in some Muslim countries, like Pakistan and Turkey. A Turkish group of the Anatolian Youth Association (AGD) protested against the execution of Matiur Rahman Nizami in 2016. The Turkish President also withdrew his Ambassador from Dhaka as a protest against this execution.

Initially, Saudi Arabia being one of the significant donors of Islamic organizations in the world, attempted to lobby against the executions of Jamaat-e-Islami leaders. However, they stepped away

later to sustain their political relationship with Bangladesh and to ensure Bangladesh's support for its power struggle against Iran.

The Sheikh Hasina government has repeatedly rejected claims that the judicial procedures were flawed and that the executions were politically motivated.

In South Asia, Pakistan, for obvious reasons, has been protesting against the Bangladeshi Government's trials of war crimes since the very beginning in 2009. During a special visit to Dhaka by Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari in 2009, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was requested not to reopen cases of war crimes. This was construed by Bangladesh as a direct and deliberate attempt by Pakistan to interfere in its internal affairs. Sheikh Hasina was also warned that such an attempt would adversely affect the political relationship between Pakistan and Bangladesh. However, the hollowness of the threat was exposed when it was ignored by Bangladesh and the Hasina government continued with the trials. When Pakistan failed to influence the decisions of the Bangladesh Government, it switched track to demand that the international community oppose the executions. Bangladesh responded quickly and aptly by describing Pakistan's support to those who committed atrocities during the 1971 war, as only serving to precisely demonstrate Pakistan's own direct involvement in perpetrating those atrocities.

The war crimes trials have refreshed the wounds of the 1971 war between Bangladesh and Pakistan. The recent terrorist attacks by Islamist terrorist groups in Bangladesh have further worsened the relationship between these two countries. Based on interrogation of detained Islamist terrorists as well as forensic evidence, the Bangladesh Government is convinced that Islamist terrorists in Bangladesh are supported by Pakistan-based terrorist groups. The relationship has therefore worsened to such an extent that Bangladeshi diplomats skipped the *South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)* meetings held in Islamabad in late 2015. In 2016, Pakistan's National Assembly passed a unanimous resolution condemning the war crimes trial. Additionally, it claimed that the execution of Jamaat-e-Islami leaders contradicted the tripartite agreement of 1974 between Bangladesh, Pakistan and India.

In contrast to Pakistan's concern about war crimes tribunal, India has declared to extend full support to Bangladesh in the war crimes trial. In September 2016, the spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs of India declared the position of India regarding the war crimes tribunal in Bangladesh. The ministry also published a note of this declaration on its website. This support is also an expression of India's concern over growing Islamic terrorism in Bangladesh and the region. India's Foreign Secretary during a visit to Bangladesh in 2016, averred that India will strongly support Bangladesh in its battle against extremism and terrorism.

Conclusion

Jamaat-e-Islami has been the most successful Islamic organization in terms of creating a strong social and political foundation in Bangladesh. Being an Islamic organization with branches in more than one country, it also managed to gather international support. Its alliance with the BNP in Bangladesh strengthened its foundation in Bangladeshi society, especially in the majority Muslim community.

Nevertheless, Jamaat-e-Islami has gathered resentment from the minority communities in Bangladesh because of its adverse impact on the lives of these communities. Perhaps Jamaat-e-Islami could have managed to sustain itself in Bangladesh in spite of this resentment if it had not chosen the side of Pakistan during the liberation war of 1971.

Given the present situation in Bangladesh, it is evident that the past has caught up and the future of Jamaat-e-Islami looks grim. With most of its top leaders and financiers gone, it is almost certain that the backbone of Jamaat-e-Islami has been crushed. The Jamaat-e-Islami will need a miracle to make its way back to the political and societal structure of Bangladesh.



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