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OPINION

Between Resurgence and Revisionism: Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami's Post-Hasina Strategy

Ankita Sanyal*

[Following the fall of Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (BJI) has aggressively worked towards a political resurgence. While attempting to rebrand as a moderate, inclusive party through minority outreach and “anti-fascist” rhetoric, BJI simultaneously engages in historical revisionism regarding the 1971 Liberation War and, by aligning with other Islamist factions, the party increasingly advocates for Sharia-based governance and the eradication of “man-made” laws. This dual strategy signals a significant tilt toward Islamic radicalism in Bangladesh’s mainstream politics in future, while the core ideology of BJI remains intact.]



The 13th national election is slated to be held on 12 February next year—the first general election since the fall of Sheikh Hasina. The political scenario today is vastly different from what Bangladesh has witnessed in the past. The country’s largest political party, Awami League, is banned, restricting its

electoral participation. The electoral game is now left to two main contenders—Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (BJI). While BNP has not announced any formal coalition, Jamaat is now part of a 10-party alliance which also includes the National Citizen’s Party (NCP). With the BNP leader Tarique Rahman back in Dhaka and the way Rahman was greeted by people upon his

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return, indicate that popular mood is swinging in favour of BNP, which will further boost the confidence of its leaders. Given the fall-out between BNP and Jamaat, once partners in a long-standing political bloc against Awami league, the split appears to now decide on Bangladesh's political future. Jamaat's initial electoral understanding with seven 'like-minded' Islamic parties to contest election through a seat-sharing arrangement expanded into a 11-party alliance. As per latest public opinion survey, BNP and Jamaat is in a close contest.¹ However, the Jamaat-led 11-party alliance faced a blow recently with Islami Andolan leaving the coalition (and decided to contest independently), expressing mistrust with Jamaat over its 'authoritarian attitude'. In this piece, an attempt is being made to understand the emerging political trajectory of Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (BJI) in the changing circumstances.

Resurgence and rebranding

The 2024 student-led July Uprising was a turning point for Bangladesh's oldest Islamist party. With the outpouring of popular anger towards Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League, Jamaat-e-Islami found the time ideal for its political

resurgence following Hasina's deposition on 5 August. The lifting of the ban on Jamaat-e-Islami and its student wing, Islamic Chhatra Shibir, soon afterwards opened the way for its enthusiastic political mobilisation.² The resurgence, however, was not without the party's quiet effort to rebrand itself as a progressive, tolerant, and moderate Islamic party. Its 41-reform proposal focused more on restructuring the judiciary, election, police and employment, foreign relations, limiting religious elements to education reform and moral training (police).

To shed its hardline image, Jamaat-e-Islami adopted an 'inclusive strategy' after the uprising by appealing to minority groups. Jamaat leaders, including the party chief, visited temples,³ spoke about the protection of minorities (lives, faith, property) and constantly rejected 'majority-minority divide', expressing that the new Bangladesh would be based on unity.⁴ The party established its Hindu wing⁵ in areas with a significant Hindu population (Khulna and Rangpur) and had a brief presence in Gopalganj until mass resignation by leaders.⁶ For the first time, Jamaat also nominated a Hindu candidate for Khulna-1 constituency.⁷

Another way Jamaat rebranded itself was by positioning itself as an

'anti-fascist' and 'pro-Uprising' force. Jamaat not only equated the sacrifices of 1971 with those of 2024 but also claimed the latter as Bangladesh's "second and true" independence.⁸ In a recent interview in Lahore, Jamaat secretary (naye-e-amer) Mujibur Rahman mentioned that Islami Chhatra Shibir played an important role in the "revolution against Sheikh Hasina", although not openly, but 'secretly'.⁹ Further in the interview, he mentioned that the 'razakar' label so long slapped against Jamaat under Awami League rule has been 'removed' after the July Uprising, during which students raised slogans "*Tumi ke, Ami ke, Razakar! Razakar!*" (Who are you? Who am I? Razakar! Razakar!). Perhaps this co-opting of the July spirit in 2024 is to avoid its role in 1971. Surely, Jamaat's rebranding, coupled with the interim government's warming to Pakistan, earned it some success. Notably, its student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir, scored an unprecedented electoral victory in the university elections this year.¹⁰

'Apology'

Notwithstanding the efforts at rebranding, the ghost of the past continues to creep in every time Jamaat members are confronted with questions about the party's controversial role in the 1971

Liberation War. At first, Jamaat chief (ameer) Dr. Shafiqur Rahman stated his willingness to apologise for 1971, "only if 1971 mistakes are proven beyond doubt."¹¹ He maintained usual restraint and justified party's role in 1971 as a 'political stance' which did not constitute a criminal act.¹² Following the acquittal of senior party leader ATM Azharul Islam from death penalty related to 1971 crimes against humanity, Jamaat ameer offered "an unconditional apology for any mistakes made by the party or its members".¹³ Later, he publicly sought "unconditional forgiveness" for all past wrongs since 1947, including the Liberation War, this time specifically referring to 1971.¹⁴ A similar apology was also offered in New York in October for all past mistakes "from 1947 to October 2025."¹⁵ However, every apology tendered by Jamaat leaders was ambiguous, for "past mistake", without explicitly detailing the nature of mistakes the party had committed, especially during the Liberation War. Instead, Jamaat leaders, including the party chief, have used deflection tactics, such as saying he was "not the right person" or "I was not present in 1971". Jamaat is yet to offer a formal apology explicitly for Jamaat's role in the atrocities committed in the Liberation War.

Historical Revisionism

Undoubtedly, the vague apologies have been an election gimmick, part of Jamaat's efforts to rebrand itself. Interestingly, alongside an indirect admission of its 'past mistakes', Jamaat has also persisted in its stance that International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) trials against Jamaat leaders (during Sheikh Hasina's tenure) are 'politically motivated'. Dr. Shafiqur Rahman even called former party chief Ghulam Azam,¹⁶ the man behind Jamaat's role as collaborator of Pakistan Army during 1971 War via paramilitary forces (Razakar and al-Badr), as a 'victim of oppression' who suffered the 'tyranny of fascist Awami League'.¹⁷ ATM Azharul's sentencing, too, was called 'false and fabricated', and the ICT trials were meant to attempt a 'deliberate purge' of party leadership.¹⁸ The recent ICT verdict on Sheikh Hasina, who was sentenced to the death penalty, was hailed by Jamaat chief to have met international standards, while previous trials of Jamaat leaders by the earlier ICT during Hasina's tenure did not.¹⁹

As Bangladesh was observing the Martyred Intellectuals' Day on 14 December, Jamaat secretary general Mia Golam Powar claimed 'India's conspiracy' behind the killing of the country's intellectuals during the Liberation War,²⁰ and called the

murders "part of a well-planned plot by the Indian army and Indian intelligence agencies."²¹ He further remarked that Pakistani soldiers and their paramilitary forces—Razakar and al-Badr members—were "busy saving their own lives rather than searching for people to kill" while Indian forces had already taken control of Dhaka! He said the responsibility for the murder of the intellectuals has been laid on Jamaat-e-Islami by the Delhi loyalists in Bangladesh through a new political narrative, thus giving a new twist to the Liberation War. Jamaat's Chattogram chief Mohammad Nazrul Islam even called the Liberation War a "crackdown by Pakistan on Mujib Bahini, which carried out a 'genocide' before 25 March."²² Pakistan's Operation Searchlight (25 March 1971) was, in fact, a response to such genocide. Jamaat Ameer, however, called Liberation War a 'revolt' against the injustice and discrimination by the then-ruling elite of Pakistan against people of East Pakistan, while maintaining silence on the genocide committed by the Pakistan Army and Jamaat-backed Razakar/ al-Badr. Jamaat student wing Islami Chhatra Shibir's Central Secretary General, Nurul Islam Saddam, too, called it a "large part" of Liberation War history that has been written with "false narratives."²³

It is unclear what Jamaat's previous 'apology' was for, as recent statements by Jamaat leaders reflect its desperate attempts at 'historical revisionism', attempting to downplay the party's collaborating role, and to scapegoat India for atrocities it committed in the Liberation War, greatly in line with Pakistan's narrative.

Mission Sharia

It was also not unexpected for Jamaat in its present edition to combine its attempt at curating a moderate, progressive, pluralist image, with express support for Islamic laws,²⁴ which shall be the only laws to be followed in the parliament in future, and that there should be "no place for man-made ideas or systems" in Bangladesh. Jamaat, along with other Islamic parties, rejected the report of the Women's Affairs Reform Commission,²⁵ calling its recommendations on equal rights of men and women (among others) to be "against values and laws of Allah and thoughts and beliefs of the nation."

The party also opposed government's plan to recruit music, dance and sports teachers in primary schools, calling it a "suicidal move" that prioritises "immoral subjects" and demanded for recruitment of religious (Islam) instructors in their

place.²⁶ Eventually, the interim government reversed the move amid pressure,²⁷ even at the cost of inviting backlash from civil society and rights groups.²⁸ The same rhetoric on Islamic governance continues following the electoral understanding with seven Islamist parties.²⁹ Jamaat's deputy secretary (naye-e-amer) Mujibur Rahman, in an address at a Mymensingh rally, remarked that all institutions in Bangladesh, including the secretariat, will only be governed by Allah's law and that no non-Islamic laws will be able to operate in the country.³⁰ He also called the 1971 War a failure, implying the possibility of an ideological struggle in future (indicating the upcoming election) that will eradicate any man-made ideologies or nationalism and implement the laws of the Quran and Sunnah. The party chief, too, reiterated the same, asserting that aspirations of Bangladeshi people can be realised only through "Quranic law".³¹ Naye-e-Ameer ATM Azharul Islam stated explicitly that the state would be run according to Islam if the Jamaat wins an electoral majority, as the current constitution and laws are made-made.³²

Conclusion

With Jamaat's resurgence, Bangladesh has witnessed an

unmistakable tilt towards Islamic rhetoric in mainstream politics. The country has been facing increasing mob violence due to the rise of Islamist radicalism and Jamaat's electoral alliance with seven parties, which include parties with controversial histories and ideological stands, is likely to further Islamicise the texture

of Bangladesh politics and give political currency to such violence. Despite its efforts at rebranding the party, Jamaat's efforts at historical revisionism alongside its hesitant apology and clear advocacy for a Sharia-based state leave little room to believe that Jamaat 2.0 has indeed moved past its hardline disposition.

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