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Playing Politics with the Jamaat in Kashmir



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On March 6, 2019, supporters of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) held protests in Kashmir against the ban on the Jamaat-e-Islami by the Union government. Photo: Nissar Ahmad/The Hindu

The Jamaat-e-Islami, Jammu and Kashmir, was recently banned by the Union Home Ministry for the third time in its chequered history. Oddly enough, mainstream State parties, such as the National Conference (NC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP), that had earlier not only been critical of the Jamaat's activities but also been party to previous instances of outlawing of the organisation, opposed the ban this time.

In this article, Umair Gul, a Doctoral research scholar at the Nelson Mandela Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution, Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi, traces the story of the Jamaat in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) from 1947 to the present day. He explains how the actions of successive governments at the Centre actually gave an impetus to the growth of the Jamaat; why the NC and the PDP, once inimical to the organisation, have become its defenders today, and how all this will impinge on the forthcoming five-phase parliamentary elections in the State.

On February 28, 2019, the Union Ministry of Home Affairs banned the Jamaat-e-Islami, Jammu and Kashmir, describing it as “prejudicial to internal security and public order”. Political parties in the State were quick to condemn the move by the central government. The Mehbooba Mufti-led People's Democratic Party (PDP), Farooq Abdullah’s National Conference (NC), Sajad Lone’s People’s Conference (PC) and other regional parties expressed their concern. Mehbooba Mufti and NC leader Omar Abdullah criticised the Jamaat ban in a series of tweets, with Ms Mufti also leading a march to protest against the government’s action.¹

Interestingly, the Jamaat — that has been banned twice before — has been a bitter rival of these political parties in the past. Some of these parties were in power when the previous bans were executed, or had advocated banning the Jamaat; on many other occasions, they had accused it of fomenting trouble in Kashmir.

Mehbooba Mufti and Omar Abdullah criticised the Jamaat ban and the former also led a protest march.

Today, the situation in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) continues to be critical, even as the dates for Parliament elections in the State have been announced, with the Assembly elections deferred for now. Fearing violence, the Election Commission has announced a five phase election for the six seats, with polling for the Anantnag parliamentary constituency spread over three separate days.

The ideological basis of the Jamaat-e-Islami

In 1928, Hassan al Bana, a school teacher in Egypt, founded the Muslim Brotherhood, primarily an anti-imperialist organisation whose goal was to work for

social justice. To widen its base, the organisation started by focussing on workers of the Suez Canal Company, advocating reform in the work place and pushing for higher wages. Gradually, Hassan al Bana laid the foundations of Islamic revivalism, incorporating Islamic principles along with the notions of brotherhood, equality and freedom into an amalgam that could be described as Political Islam.

Syed Abul A'la Maududi Chishti, born in the erstwhile princely State of Hyderabad in India, created the Jamaat-e-Islami, calling on the Muslims of the sub-continent to work for Islamic revival and Political Islam. After the Partition of India in 1947, Abul A'la Maududi settled down in Pakistan, and promoted the idea of an Islamic constitution that would be in accordance with the Islamic

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Sharia. Though it did not gain any significant electoral victory, the Jamaat in Pakistan became a pressure group, and also acted as a political corrective. Major debates were taking place in Pakistan at that time about the nature of the state that Pakistan would shape into, whether it would be a theocracy or a Western-style democracy, a military dictatorship or a democracy. Amidst all this, the Jamaat became an important player in Pakistan, with a strongly articulated opinion about everything. Maududi's doctrine of an Islamic state, along with the religious and social reforms that he promoted, were ideas that were to be implemented by infiltrating existing institutions, and setting up new ones. Modern education was no longer forbidden but its critique was to be simultaneously taught to the students.

Maududi was not a traditional Muslim scholar: he started as a journalist, and was not the follower of any orthodox school. Virtually self-taught, he was, however, a well-read man. His ideas were not merely inherited or borrowed — rather, they sprang from both a confluence and clash of western political thought and Islamic thought. Indeed, they were a product of the time and space that he existed in. His thoughts and writings were disseminated widely in the sub-continent, and thus the educated middle class sought refuge in his writings. The Jamaat-e-Islami Kashmir (JIK), the Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan, the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind and the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh exist as political entities, taking their inspiration from Maududi's

ideas. Currently, the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh and the Jamaat-e-Islami Kashmir are banned organisations.

The Jamaat-e-Islami in Kashmir

From 1947, the Jamaat — and Maududi's ideas — began to creep into the Kashmir valley, and with a formal structure in place, it began to gain ground, even contesting elections, though with little success. It then began to concentrate on social activities, introducing in the Kashmir Valley a new education system in which modern education and Islamic theology were taught together under one roof. These schools and other social activities popularised the Jamaat in Kashmir, with even the rural elite beginning to take an interest in its activities.

Through massive religious congregations known as *ijtimas* held annually, monthly and weekly, the people were introduced to new socio-political ideas and

Wahabism could not obliterate Kashmir's Sufi Islam, but it became a sect by itself by promoting distinct practices.

programmes. The Jamaat followed puritanical Islam, but it chose not to take the Kashmir's Sufi syncretism head-on.

Wahabism — or the Ahle-hadith school — made little progress in Kashmir because it clashed directly with Sufi practices. The Ahle-hadith could not obliterate Kashmir's Sufi Islam, but its condemnation of Sufi practices, and its own promotion of distinct practices in prayer and ritual, ensured that it became a sect by itself. To ensure its continued existence in Kashmir as a well-established and functioning organisation, not merely as a secluded sect, the Jamaat took a conscious decision not to interfere with Sufi practices or rituals of prayer or condemn local religious practices or, indeed, enter into religious polemic debates. This led gradually to the Jamaat's acceptance in Kashmiri society.

The Jamaat was the second party in Kashmir that had a religious colour, the Muslim Conference being the first. The Muslim Conference, however, directly campaigned for accession to Pakistan and believed in the two-nation theory. Maududi, on the other hand, advocated the implementation of an Islamic political system, not merely the two-nation theory. In fact, though initially opposed to the two-nation theory, he, thereafter, sought to transform Pakistan into an Islamic state after its formation.

With the Jamaat's rise in Kashmir, Maududi began to take an interest in the politics of Kashmir, and several of his essays, booklets and pamphlets focused on the State. His willingness to write and talk about Kashmir also stemmed from the political situation in Pakistan. He gave the Islamic state of Pakistan an 'existential cause' to fight for. This, in turn, would assure the building of a conscious 'united self' against a religious 'other' for the oppressed 'occupied' people of Kashmir.

In the Assembly elections in 1972, the Jamaat won five of the 22 seats that it contested, securing 23.3 per cent of the votes polled. Subsequently, in 1977, it won just one seat, its vote percentage slipping down to 13.48. In 1983, the Jamaat failed to secure even one seat, and its poll percentage plummeted to 11.03. According to Jamaat insiders, this was the result of Sheikh Abdullah's repressive policies and his crackdown on the Jamaat and its leaders. Others have described the elections as unfair and not indicative of the Jamaat's popularity. Whatever the truth about the election results, certain areas such as Sopore in North Kashmir and Kulgam in Anantnag were increasingly becoming Jamaat bastions. In 1988, more than 100 schools run by the Falah-i-aam Trust, affiliated to the Jamaat, were functional in Kashmir; by 1990, 178 schools, employing around 997 male teachers and 67 female teachers, had 15,302 boys and 9,525 girls on their rolls. Despite the many curbs, the number of Jamaat schools ballooned to 321 by 2016, with more than 80,000 students and 4,000 teachers.

The fall and rise of the Jamaat

In 1975, after the Indira-Sheikh Accord, NC Patron Sheikh Abdullah was quick to ban the Jamaat-e-Islami, fearing protests against the Accord. In 1975, Mir Qasim, the then Chief Minister of J&K, had resigned to pave the way for Sheikh Abdullah. Mir Qasim was part of the Democratic National Conference (DNC), an extension of the Indian National Congress (INC) in Kashmir. Mufti Mohammed Syed, the founder of the PDP, was a Minister in Mir Qasim's cabinet, and after 1975, the INC State chief when the Jamaat was banned.²

On April 4, 1979, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, ex-Prime Minister of Pakistan, was hanged by Zia-ul-Haq, the military dictator who had dismissed the civilian government. As news of Bhutto's hanging reached the Kashmir valley, frenzied mobs convinced that

the Jamaat-e-Islami had played a role in it, attacked and burnt the property of Jamaat members and sympathisers. The frenzy was such that at some places even the Quran was desecrated. Jamaat literature was also burnt. Since then, the Jamaat has time and again accused the then Chief Minister, Sheikh Abdullah, of being hand in glove with the rioters.

As General Zia-ul-Haq took over the reins of power in Pakistan, global political conditions in general, and in neighbouring Afghanistan in particular, had a major influence on his internal policies. The Islamisation drive in Pakistan led to the growth of a closeness between the Jamaat in Pakistan and the then establishment. As mentioned, the attack on the Jamaat cadre in Kashmir after the hanging of Bhutto was a result of its romance with Zia-ul-Haq, and the perception that the organisation was at the forefront in exercising power and politics in Pakistan. Strangely, a complete shutdown was observed years later in Kashmir after General Zia died in a plane crash on August 18, 1987.

This change in response has been explained as a rise in the legitimacy and perhaps, influence of, the Jamaat in Kashmir or by the admission of guilt by various politicians that they had been misled by ruling NC workers into attacking Jamaat activists and their property on April 4, 1979.

The Jamaat's continuous engagement with and its focus on institution building and welfare activities increased its legitimacy in Kashmiri society. This, however, was not the sole reason for the increase in the popularity of parties

Delhi's interference in the politics of J&K and the failure of secular democracy led people to the Jamaat's "Political Islam".

like the Jamaat. Delhi's continuous interference in the politics of J&K, the diluting of the State's constitutional status, and undermining the political agency of Kashmiris, contributed to an increase in the Jamaat's membership. The decay of secular institutions led people to "transcendentalism"; the failure of secular democracy in Kashmir led people to the "Political Islam" of the Jamaat.

During Dogra rule and other regimes earlier in Kashmir, the Sufi shrines had become an important space for common Kashmiris to voice their concerns, political and personal, in the absence of "self-government". After Kashmir's failed tryst with

Indian secularism and democracy, Kashmiris took refuge again in the transcendental ideas of the Jamaat and Political Islam. The Jamaat's ideology provided refuge to those disgruntled with the Indian state and its policies.

The Jamaat became “a new shrine” in Kashmir.

A new lease of life

The 1979 Iranian revolution which led to the overthrow of the Shah and the subsequent takeover by Ayatollah Khomeini was greeted in the Islamic world in general, and by the Jamaat and its sister concerns in particular, with great approbation. It was an Islamic revolution and read as the triumph of popular Islam over a puppet regime. Though radical Sunnis would later label it as a threat since it saw the rise of Shia power, the Jamaat was all praise for the Ayatollah and his “revolution”.

In fact, pamphlets and books describing the founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami, Moulana Maududi, and the father of the Iranian revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, as *do bhai* – two brothers — became popular among the Jamaat and its cadres. The message was clear: there was a future that envisioned the overthrowing of unpopular regimes by Islamic forces. This created a self-belief among Jamaat cadres that by treading a particular religious path, the political order could be changed.

Hence, the Iranian revolution as an Islamic revolution inculcated a sense of pride — and achievement— among the otherwise desperate cadres, de-motivated after the division of Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. When Ayatollah Khomeini died, a holiday was declared in Jamaat-run schools, and a three-day mourning was observed by Jamaat workers in all its State and district offices in Kashmir.

The aftermath of 1987

In the State Assembly elections in 1987, the Jamaat subsumed itself within the Muslim United Front (MUF) to contest against its traditional political rivals, the NC and the INC. After Sheikh Abdullah's death, Farooq Abdullah assumed the leadership of the NC which entered into a pre-poll alliance with the INC to counter “secessionist” and “communal forces”.

This was popularly known as the Rajiv-Farooq accord, and many political commentators believe that the election that followed was fixed in favour of the NC-INC alliance, thus becoming a trigger for the post-1987 armed insurgency. MUF candidate — and United Jihad Council (UJC) supremo — Mohammad Yousuf Shah, better known as Syed Salahudin, who contested on the Jamaat ticket from Srinagar was one of those who alleged that the elections were rigged; soon, thereafter, he was arrested.

In 1990, when the Jamaat was banned for a second time, Vishwanath Pratap Singh was the Prime Minister; Mufti Mohammad Syed, who was the Union Home Minister, had been elected on a Jan Morcha ticket not from a seat in Kashmir but from the Muzaffarnagar Lok Sabha constituency in Uttar Pradesh.

In 1996, Assembly elections were held in J&K after a gap of nine years (during which period the State was under Governor's Rule and President's Rule for around six years) and the Farooq Abdullah-led NC came to power. This was the period when the pro-government militia, Ikhwan (that consisted of surrendered militants), was carrying out killings of Jamaat members and sympathisers. These gunmen had one motive as was evident from a slogan that was written on one of their camps in Anantnag district³ "Catch them by their b**** and their hearts and minds will follow."

People with even a remote affiliation to the Jamaat — even doctors and academicians — were not spared. Teachers at Jamaat-run schools were harassed or killed, the buildings burnt, bringing them to the brink of closure. In South Kashmir, for instance, the Jamaat was wiped out.

The new *ameer* of the Jamaat-e-Islami, Kashmir, Ghulam Mohammad Bhat, who defeated hardliner Syed Ali Geelani in the party elections, declared in November 1998 that the organisation believed in a political struggle and would adhere to peaceful means. In 2004, the Jamaat severed its connections with the Hurriyat Conference, an umbrella organisation comprising more than 20 political parties, that was formed in 1993 to voice dissent against Indian rule in Kashmir. In fact Syed Ali Shah Geelani and Ashraf Sehrai, who had been more vociferous against Indian rule, separated from the Jamaat to form the Tehreek-e-Hurriyat.

In 2002, the PDP came to power in J&K, ending the NC's long run in power. The party promised to introduce a "healing touch" in the State, disband irregular government militia, the Ikhwan, make state forces accountable and decrease their presence in populated areas. However, after disbanding the Ikhwan, many of its cadres were reportedly accommodated in the Special Operations Group (SOG) of the J&K Police (JKP), the Jammu & Kashmir Light Infantry (JAKLI) and as Special Officers in the State task force. Many of them even joined political parties, including the PDP. Instead of making the government militias accountable, they were simply absorbed into the system.

On July 8, 2003, Sajad Lone, whose PC was then a part of the Hurriyat Conference, accused Jamaat leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani of "abetting" the killing of his father Abdul Gani Lone on May 2, 2002.⁴

On July 9, 2016, after Hizbul Mujahideen commander Burhan Wani was killed in an encounter in the Kokernag area of South Kashmir, the valley witnessed fierce protests for six months. Despite a heavy clampdown, curfew and restrictions, as many as half a million people attended his funeral. On August 15, 2016, when the valley was on the boil, Mehbooba Mufti, the then Chief Minister, while making an appeal for peace hinted that the Jamaat had played a major role in organising protests and rallies in the aftermath of Burhan Wani's killing. "Those people, of a particular political party, who couldn't go to their homes in the Ikhwan period are now conspiring against the peace and government, and are thankless. He who is thankful to people, is thankful to God"⁵ she said, thus bringing the Jamaat back into the limelight again. Many in the government advocated a blanket ban on religious institutions, and this also resulted in the arrest of many Jamaat leaders under the Public Safety Act.⁶

Scapegoat or Victim?

This time, the Jamaat has been banned just months ahead of State Assembly and Parliament elections. The BJP needs to cater to its vote bank in the Jammu region for the State Assembly elections, and build a nationalist/hyper-nationalist narrative for elections to the Lok Sabha across India.

In the Assembly elections in 2014, the BJP managed to win 25 seats, all in the Jammu region, riding on the “Modi wave”, even as it used its pet themes — the need to “protect” Hindus and cows who are in danger, while hyping up the threat of Islamic terror — to polarise society along religious lines. The BJP wants to once again whip up resentment against Kashmiri Muslims by suggesting that they wish to secede from India; this would result, the party’s narrative continues, in the balkanisation of the country, making the Hindus of Jammu an endangered species.

The BJP needs to cater to its vote bank and build a hyper-nationalist narrative for elections to the Lok Sabha across India.

The BJP wants to consolidate not just the votes of Hindus in Jammu for the State Assembly elections; it also wants to do the same with the votes of Hindus in other parts of India for the Parliament elections. If the “bearded *wazwaan*-relishing Kashmiri Muslims” are clearly the “other”, the scapegoat is the Jamaat-e-Islami, while the martyr is the BJP, after it broke its alliance with the PDP on June 19, 2018.

The PDP, the NC, and the PC believe the Jamaat-e-Islami is a “victim”, not a “scapegoat”. These parties have now opposed the ban on the Jamaat, because they hope to raid their vote bank. The PDP, in fact, in its campaign in the 2014 Assembly elections garnered votes by promising to “keep the BJP out”, and then went on to ally with it. Sajad Lone’s PC had a pre-poll alliance with the BJP, and the NC, too, has been an ally of the BJP in the past. Hence, the ban on the Jamaat and its condemnation makes for a win-win situation for all these political parties.

The PDP, the NC, and the PC see the Jamaat as a “victim” and oppose the ban as they hope to raid their vote bank.

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