
ISLAM AND ELECTORAL POLITICS: A CASE STUDY OF JAMA'AT E ISLAMI IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between Islamism and electoral politics has received considerable attention in the academia. However, the focus on Jama'at e Islami of Jammu and Kashmir and its relationship with and participation in elections—although for a limited time—has gained scant focus. As an Islamist organization, Jama'at e Islami participated in the electoral process from 1969 to 1987 in the Indian administered Kashmir and contested for both the parliamentary and local assembly seats. The reason d'être provided by the organization was that it wanted to islamise the law making elections as part of its larger Islamisation project. However, lapses in the administration of democracy meant that Jama'at failed to gain power and with the elections of 1987 such lapses paved way for a protracted popular insurgency in the region. Contesting elections also meant that Jama'at created a state of conflict with the regime. This paper looks at the tactical shift that Jama'at e Islami in Jammu and Kashmir brought to its program and seeks to engage with the larger debate on the in/compatibility of Islam and democracy.

Keywords: Islam, Islamism, Democracy, Kashmir, Elections, Jama'at e Islami.

INTRODUCTION

How do societies democratize themselves? Much of the literature on democracy and democratization agree that it is through representation where people periodically express themselves and elect their leaders and representatives.ⁱ Thus, a close connection is established between elections and democracy. However, there is a western liberal bias in the above theorization especially since the 'end of history' times. This bias essentially sees democracy in terms "of an unambiguously liberal, electoralist, elitist, capitalist, and minimalist model of democracy"ⁱⁱ or in other words, a western liberal model.ⁱⁱⁱ

The bias then inevitably leads one to question the electoral ambitions of Islamists—those who subscribe to the view that polity and society should be organized according to Islam.^{iv} Since Islamism challenges the modernization and secularization thesis closely associated with the

notion of western liberal democracy, it also becomes, to put it lazily, a thorn in the hegemonic discourse of democracy theory.^v The question about the relationship between Islam and democracy is then inevitably framed in ambiguous terms. Can religious values and ethics guarantee an idea of democracy that is inclusive and representative, believes in universal suffrage and puts constitutional constraints on the limits of power exercised by the government? More precisely, whether Islam is compatible or incompatible with democracy is a question that is then increasingly asked.

However, Irfan Ahmad's (2001) assertion that such a debate around Islam and democracy operates in the realms of normativity is a pertinent observation. Within these realms, there are two major groups of scholars who either support the compatibility or incompatibility paradigms. With scholars like John Esposito, John O. Voll and Asef Bayat arguing that Islam is compatible with democracy while others like Bernard Lewis, Bassam Tibi, and Martin Kramer insist that Islam lacks a democratic quotient.^{vi} Both these views are being challenged as Ahmad (2011) argues that "Both the Incompatibility and the Compatibility Paradigms are premised on the notion that it is the unitary, reified normative impulse of religion that is the ultimate variable. This premise takes both democracy and Islam as self-evident. Consequently both get reified."^{vii}

A meaningful way to engage with the debate is to look at the democratic practices happening in Muslim lands or in the name of Islam. Rather than accusing Islamists turning into democrats as a threat to the secular-liberal agenda or to the regimes, democratic practices of Islamists especially through electioneering should be seen as attempts by them to challenge authoritarian, patrimonial politics of the regimes.^{viii} Moreover, regimes often appropriate the economic capital and use it for grabbing power; Islamists therefore take a different course by focusing on the moral capital.^{ix} Taking these arguments further, this paper looks at the electoral participation of Jama'at e Islami of Jammu and Kashmir for both the parliamentary and legislative (local) assembly seats. It was a tactical shift by the organization where they came from a position of opposing Indian Republic to embracing one of its most important institution i.e. democracy. What led to this shift in the strategy of the organization and how it was different from the electoral participation of Jama'at e Islami Pakistan or Jama'at e Islami Hind? In the first section of the paper, the programs and ideology of Jama'at e Islami of Jammu and Kashmir will be introduced. In the second section of the paper, the electoral politics of the organization will be spelled out. In the final section of the paper, Jama'at e Islami's relationship with democracy will be critically analyzed to understand the reasons which led it to shun electoral politics.

ISLAMISM IN KASHMIR

The emergence of Islamism is closely associated with the fall of Ottoman Empire and colonialism in the Muslim lands by the Western imperialist powers.^x In the same period, the

Muslim dominated region of Kashmir was ruled by a Hindu Dogra king whose rule was increasingly hinduised.^{xi} One could argue that the socio-political atmosphere prevalent in that period was ripe for the emergence of an Islamist movement. However, the ideology of Islamism was imported from the Indian subcontinent from its theorization by influential Muslim revivalist Abul A'la Maududi and from the organization he formed Jama'at e Islami.^{xii} The primary reason for this importation of ideology was the kind of politics that was seen in Kashmir since 1931 with the rise of Sheikh Abdullah.

The continued denial of social and political rights to Kashmiri Muslims under the Dogra Regime (1848-1947) resulted in a political movement against the regime. Further, the events of July 1931 offered this political movement a launching pad with a goal of liberating Kashmir from the oppressive rulers. The political language used in this Movement was overtly Islamic and the battle was pitted against the Hinduised Dogra regime.^{xiii}

However, in 1939, the Movement changed its leanings from 'Muslim' to 'National' when Sheikh Abdullah changed the name of the party that he had helped to found to National Conference from Muslim Conference. In other words, the party and Movement was secularized to accommodate the Hindu and 'leftist' minorities who were equally against the Dogra rule. The influence of Indian National Congress on Sheikh Abdullah further consolidated the secular leanings of the Movement. Abdullah continued to use the language of Islam to further his socialist goals.^{xiv} The leaders who opposed Abdullah took political sabbaths and when they finally emerged again on the political scene, they associated themselves with the politics of Muslim League and channeled their resources towards the formation of Pakistan.^{xv}

Thus, a movement forged under a Muslim identity shaped by the political language of Islam against a non-Muslim ruler could not culminate itself into an Islamist Movement. Islamism was established in a different way. Shortly, after the formation of Jama'at e Islami by Abul Al'a Maududi in 1942, a like-minded group of Kashmiri Muslims sow the seeds of Islamism in Kashmir.^{xvi} In 1946, they came together and provided an organizational structure directly under the command of Maududi himself and elected Saad ud din Tarabali, a teacher, as their first *Amir* (chief). During the years of Partition much is not known about the organization except that it invoked Islamic revivalism and proselytization.^{xvii}

Most of the Islamist theoretical considerations in Kashmir have been formed under a dialogical process they have with the Indian State. It is substantiated by the Islamic conception of creating binaries where Islam or Islamist movement is always pitted against its impure 'other.' In Islamist thought, this 'other' is conceptualized in terms like *Jahilliyah* and in Kashmir, a specific Quranic term *Taghut* is employed to denote the Indian State.

Thus, in 1953, Jama'at e Islami of Jammu and Kashmir decided to cut its ties with Jama'at e Islami Hind and create an independent organization.^{xviii} It was done mainly to divorce Jama'at from the workings and pressures of Jama'at e Islami Hind and also to challenge the "forced accession with India" and "to resist the Indian rule in Kashmir" on its own.^{xix} Jama'at also accepted that the disputed nature of the Kashmir conflict can only be resolved through the United Nations resolutions and called for the Right to Self Determination for Kashmir.^{xx}

In the initial years, Jama'at e Islami was non-reactionary and non-violent but much of its program centered on challenging the secularity of the Indian State which meant that Jama'at branded the State as Hindu majoritarian and in response the State branded the organization communal.^{xxi} On the social front its schools, libraries where they distributed literature and *Ijtimas* (annual general congregations of the organization) tried to bring a silent revolution by trying to change the internal dynamics of the society.^{xxii}

However, the silent revolution that Jama'at wanted to bring created a backlash. In societies where religion is a primary factor influencing cultural productions the rise of a 'subversive' revivalist/Islamist movement initiates a prolonged conflict between the people who have adopted such a culture and the agents that further the ideology of the movement. For the society, the movement in itself is a threat not only to the established notions of culture but to the whole society. Same can be argued about Jama'at e Islami of Jammu and Kashmir who acted against the 'Sufi traditions of Islam' in Kashmir and regarded them as contradicting to the notion of Islamic Monotheism.^{xxiii} This essentially meant that Jama'at was challenging the centuries old traditions of Kashmiris. In response, the society fought equally well to the 'different' interpretation of Islam as propagated by Jama'at e Islami. It accused them of committing heresy, of denying the Prophetic traditions, of being communalists and obscurantists, and many other accusations.^{xxiv}

In 1979, in the new wave of Sheikh Abdullah's growing popularity, Jama'at was challenged further. The decades of anti-Jama'at sentiment forged by the Indian State and Sheikh Abdullah's re-arrival at the political scene converged; ably supported by the political developments in Pakistan led to political violence against Jama'at in an incident known as Black April. On April 4, as Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was hanged people in Kashmir reacted to it in the most unusual way and went on a rampage for a week destroying Jama'at property, killing and injuring people associated with Jama'at, burning 'Jama'at books' in the name of religion.^{xxv}

This was the lowest ebb for the Islamist movement in Kashmir but certain events around the world had a direct influence in reviving it in early 1980's. The Iranian revolution and the Afghan Jihad were particularly influential. Moreover, in 1980 Jama'at organized an international Islamic

conference which brought it back in the limelight. This led to a mushrooming of Islamist organizations in Kashmir.

When the popular insurgency started in Kashmir in the summer of 1988, these Islamist organizations were latter entrants but the people associated with them had already joined the insurgent ranks. Pakistan also supported almost all of these Islamist groups in procuring arms and provided material and financial assistance. By 1993, when the Indian State launched a massive counter-insurgency offensive the main targets were Islamists. It pushed Islamists back to a position where they decided to shun violence. Jama'at's declaration that they had no ties with the Islamist militant group Hizbul Mujahedeen in 1997 can be read as a collective statement of Islamists shunning violence.^{xxvi} Moreover, it can be argued that it was a 'survival strategy' from them. From then on Islamists have changed their modus operandi, have evolved their politics in the sense they talk in a different framework of their own politics, and have largely concentrated in providing social services to people marred by three decades of violence.^{xxvii} The changing posture does not mean that Islamists have become irrelevant rather it shows their flexible approaches regarding the contexts in which they work. This is true of other Islamists around the world and truer of Islamists of Kashmir.

ELECTORAL POLITICS, ISLAMISM, AND JAMA'AT E ISLAMI IN KASHMIR

In 1969, Jama'at e islami of Jammu and Kashmir decided to contest elections under the ambit of Indian constitution and it blurred the lines between its own islamicity and the secularity of the State. How could an Islamist organization which believes in the sovereignty of God (Allah) function directly under a constitution which upholds the sovereignty of people? Unlike its parent party in Pakistan which did not face such a dilemma as it regarded that in Pakistan sovereignty belongs to God (Allah)^{xxviii} Jama'at e Islami had to respond to this conflict in a more intellectual manner. A similar dilemma was faced by Jama'at e Islami Hind which, as Irfan Ahmad has showed, slowly transformed itself to recognize the plurality of views in the organization, and also accommodated the secular-democratic nature of the Indian State so much so that it moderated itself.^{xxix}

Since Jama'at e Islami in Jammu and Kashmir declined to give any legality to the Indian state, their position regarding electoral politics was more precarious. Thus, to justify their participation in elections Jama'at e Islami in Jammu and Kashmir asserted that one can have relationships with non-Muslims and invoked the early Islamic period especially the treaties that were signed by Prophet Muhammad with other Jewish tribes and pagans of Mecca.^{xxx} More than anything else, Jama'at e Islami thought of elections as part of their Islamist project where they could islamise the society and spread their ideas.^{xxxi} Much like Islamists belonging to Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, elections for Jama'at e Islami was a way of educating the people about the

virtues of the Islamist movement. If they win, then they would have better chances of islamising the law but if they are unsuccessful, then, at least, they can manage to disseminate their value system and hone their oratory and communication skills.^{xxxii}

In this endeavor, Jama'at e Islami began to seriously think of elections in its *Majlis e Shura* (Consultative Council) meetings from 1962. Even though most of the members did not support such an idea but it was the sheer persistence of the *Amir* of the organization Saad ud din Tarabali that in 1969 Jama'at decided to contest the Panchayati elections. More than participation, Jama'at e Islami intended to correct the practices that are usually associated with politics. It argued that politics was marred by machinations and that it lacked morality.^{xxxiii} Such a posture clearly reflected Maududi's initial engagements with how he envisioned the members of Jama'at e Islami.^{xxxiv} Through its foray in politics, Jama'at tried to demonstrate that their politics was not a practice of simply gaining power by dubious methods; rather, their principles should echo the larger principles of morality in religion. To demonstrate this, Jama'at asked its members to resign if they did not win comfortably or win with a big margin.^{xxxv} The organization even claims to have asked two of its members to resign when they found that they had won because members from a pro India political party Indian National Congress had supported them to defeat another party.^{xxxvi}

In its February 1970 meeting, the *Shura* decided to enter elections on a larger scale by contesting the upcoming Assembly elections. However, as the parliamentary elections were announced to take place before the elections for Jammu and Kashmir legislative Assembly elections, Jama'at decided to contest the parliamentary elections first. It nominated candidates on the four Muslim majority seats of the state; however, nomination papers of one of the candidates were rejected on the grounds that he had refused to take oath and that he was part of the Plebiscite Front. Finally, as the results came out, Jama'at e Islami lost on all the seats they had contested.^{xxxvii}

However, the bigger battle was to follow with the announcement of elections for the Legislative Assembly held in 1972. In the *Shura* meeting before the elections, the organization decided to field twenty-two candidates and ultimately won five seats. The organization won more than seven percent of the overall vote and more than 23 percent of the votes in the constituencies it won.^{xxxviii} These elections also provided a reality check for Jama'at as deposits of nine of its candidates were forfeited as they were unable to gather the minimum number of votes. It showed how minimal was Jama'at's penetration in the society. But it is in this context, one has to understand the electoral politics of Jama'at e Islami as it was through elections that it believed it could extend its reach. Now directly involved in the workings of legislation, Jama'at continued to do what it called moral politics. It brought bills to make Jammu and Kashmir a dry state.^{xxxix} It

criticized the State's militaristic character in Kashmir and raised the issue of Kashmir dispute often staging walkouts in the assembly.

The 1972 elections also set a stage for Beigh-Parthasarathy talks which finally culminated into Kashmir Accord between Indira Gandhi, the then prime minister of India and Sheikh Abdullah. The Stage was set in such a way that Plebiscite Front was banned and elections were rigged so that Abdullah does not speak from a position of power when negotiations between Indian State and him will happen.^{x1} With the announcement of Accord in the Indian Parliament, Abdullah became the new leader of the Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly and also the chief minister of the State. However, the coming of new leadership in the Assembly gravely affected the electoral politics of Jama'at e Islami as it was the only party which put candidates against Abdullah and his close companion Mirza Muhammad Beigh in the bi-annual elections. Abdullah began to think of Jama'at as his personal nemesis.

In 1975, when emergency was declared by Indira Gandhi throughout India, Abdullah extended the emergency to Jammu and Kashmir. Many Jama'at leaders including all of its five members in the assembly were arrested. Its schools were permanently closed, newspapers seized, publications banned and other leaders also jailed. As the Emergency was lifted, Jama'at decided to contest the 1977 Parliamentary elections but lost on both the seats it contested. As Janata Party formed the government in Indian Parliament, Congress withdrew support from Abdullah and new elections were announced. In the 1977 elections, only Syed Ali Shah Geelani could retain his seat. In the 1983 elections, Jama'at could not even retain this one seat.

In between these elections for the Legislative Assembly, Jama'at continued to contest parliamentary, Panchayati and Urban legislative bodies. However, neither was the impact of Jama'at such they could make an impact on the overall election process nor did they fare particularly well. In parliamentary elections they won not a single seat, in fact. In 1973, Jama'at even tired to form coalitions with Plebiscite Front and some religious parties to strengthen its electoral politics.

1987 ELECTIONS: DE-DEMOCRATIZATION OF THE ELECTORAL LANDSCAPE

So far, two things have been argued; first, Jama'at thought of its electoral process as part of its Islamisation project and second that regime tried to hamper this process by influencing the election results through rigging and other mal/practices. The second argument is amplified with the elections of 1987 Legislative Assembly and here the concept of de-democratization is invoked to explain why Jama'at stopped participating in the elections. Charles Tilly lists eight processes to ensue democratization of the society and if one of these processes is reversed, he argues, de-democratization is promoted in the society. The eight processes include two which are

closely associated with electoral politics a) broadening of political participation and b) equalization of political participation. Looking closely at these two processes and also examining the other six processes which broadly deal with relations between citizens and government agents and categorical inequality in public politics one can argue that de-democratization was promoted in Jammu and Kashmir.^{xli}

Consider this: during the years preceding the elections of 1987, Islamist movement was in resurgence in Kashmir. The Iranian revolution and the Afghan Jihad were the two major factors influencing this resurgence which also led to the formation of many Islamist parties on the lines of Jama'at e Islami. Finally, certain other events during these years like Abdullah's death, his son Farooq Abdullah's dismissal by the Governor (a direct appointee of Delhi in Jammu and Kashmir), emergence of Hindu right in India, and the policies of Governor Jagmohan's administration had a profound influence on the elections. The policies of the administration were especially perceived as anti-Muslim and a "conspiracy against the majority" under the fear of growing Hindu Right in India. Tilly argues that governments often produces inequality by "protecting the advantages of their own major supporters", by establishing their "own systems of extraction and allocation of resources" and also by "redistributing resources among different segments of their subject population."^{xlii} Focusing on these mechanisms of categorical inequality, much like Tilly one can argue that in the pre-1987 political climate, de-democratization was already happening.

When a coalition of certain pro-Pakistan and pro-Independence parties merged in the form of coalition Muslim United Front under Jama'at e Islami and the political mood of the population suggested that this coalition was a force to be reckoned with, de-democratization was made an institutional practice. Fearful that pro-India parties cannot win enough of number of seats to claim government, the regime resorted to election rigging on a high scale.^{xliii} However, as the mood was against the regime, the regime resorted to crackdown and curfew where hundreds of Jama'at and coalition members or sympathizers were arrested or detained as a damage control exercise. This effectively turned democrats into insurgents and started the current phase of insurgency in Kashmir.^{xliv}

It was the last time Jama'at e Islami participated in elections in Kashmir though there are allegations that the party sympathizers supported the pro-India political party Peoples Democratic Party (PDP).^{xlv} Two years later in 1989, two Jama'at members and two other members from the coalition resigned from the capacities as sitting Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA). In their resignation letters they cited lack of democracy and freedom of expression, government atrocities, attacks on Islam and invoked the anti-democratic and unconstitutional nature of government policy.^{xlvi} Wildham argues it was the breakdown of

democracy which led these leaders to resign and support violence.^{xlvii} It was after this moment that many in Jama'at believed that elections won't be able to provide an amiable solution to the issue of Kashmir. Further, the increasing confluence of elections with the Right to Self-determination vote to create a status quo in favor of India meant that Jama'at never actively participated in elections.^{xlviii} In fact, it supports the election boycott campaign of Hurriyat Conference.

CONCLUSION

Given that there is enough evidence to prove that the government has often manipulated the election process in Kashmir, the Islamist participation in these elections from 1969 to 1987 offered them a position to distinguish themselves from the undemocratic regime. However, elections were also regarded by Jama'at e Islami as an activity with ideological ramifications and as a long term process for establishing themselves permanently in the society. How far they have been successful is a question that needs serious enquiry but if one looks at elections as part of the Islamist project then Jama'at was more or less successful in penetrating the society. It came, however, at the cost of their social services project.

This paper briefly discussed the thesis about in/compatibility of Islam and argued that such a debate is flawed if one does not look at the democratic practices of Muslims especially Islamists. Taking the cue, the paper then moved forward to briefly discuss the Islamism in Jammu and Kashmir focusing on Jama'at e Islami. Even though Jama'at e Islami seriously challenged the worldview as offered by the Indian State, it still engaged with them through elections. It was not that Jama'at e Islami was forced to participate in elections because, as the argument goes, that there was disavowal of Jama'at ideology and people celebrated Indian democracy. Rather, this strategic shift came from imagining elections as a genuine democratization platform where Jama'at could expose public to their ideology. However, Jama'at undermined the reach of the State through its various institutions and Jama'at had to continuously fight the manipulation in the election process which sometimes, ironically, was in its favour.

This manipulation reached its pinnacle in the elections for Legislative Assembly in 1987 when massive rigging saw Jama'at win only four seats including two by its coalition partners. The fear that Jama'at e Islami can hamper the liberal-democratic traditions or the general belief that Islamists should not win more than what they deserve often leads governments to control and manipulate elections leading to de-democratization. Such de-democratization, in the case of Kashmir, has led to a popular but violent insurgency and also stopped Islamists in taking part in elections thus contesting the very plurality of the liberal democracy.

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