

STREET POWER AND ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE OF ISLAMIC PARTIES IN PAKISTANI POLITICS 1947-2002: AN HISTORICAL STUDY

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Abstract

In Pakistan, Islamic political parties have huge force and counted among the elite groups that influence political processes and decision-making in Pakistan which include the military, bureaucratic, political elites, landlord and business elite.. These parties have a immense street power. But they have not performed well in terms of votes in Pakistan's elections over the years. They exercised influence not only during the years of the Afghan jihad, but also continue to play a role in politics since independence. Despite the fact that they have never been able to do well in terms of votes in Pakistan's elections. The Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Islam (JUI) and the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Pakistan (JUP) have never got majority in the National Assembly. Yet these parties are at the forefront on issues like the establishment of Shariat Courts and legislation on subjects like ushr, zakat or blasphemy. The masses follow these parties, whether it is in denigrating, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto or Nawaz Sharif on issue of disintegrating Pakistan in 1971 or "sell-out" on Kargil, or in starting a campaign against the US attitude on various issues. This article deals to dig out the reasons that despite of having such huge following, why they could not get clear electoral support and victory. The history of only three parties i.e. the JI, the JUI and the JUP till 2002, is given.

Keywords: Afghan jihad, Political Parties, Religious Parties, Street Politics.

INTRODUCTION

The Jamaat-i-Islami is one of the most coherent Islamic political parties in Pakistan. It was founded in 1941 in Lahore by Maulana Maududi. He was an adherent of Islamic Welfare State in its true letter and spirit. JI always demanded that there should be an Islamic Law (Shariah) in Pakistan. It insisted that the head of state would rule with the consent of learned Islamic religious scholars, i.e., the JI ulema, because the

solution to Pakistan's problems lies in the enforcement of the Islamic code and the premise that Islam is more than a religion, in that it is a complete guide for life.¹

The JI members played a prominent role in Pakistan's politics since independence. The JI was active in the anti-Ahmadiyya communal disturbances of 1953. It led the opposition to the Family Law Ordinance in 1961 and participated in Opposition politics from 1950 to 1977.² During the election campaign for the December 1970 general elections, the JI and other right wing parties campaigned for support in the name of "The Ideology of Pakistan". The idea of Islamic socialism introduced by Bhutto was denounced as anti-Islam by many ulema, and JI campaigned against socialism. JI also opposed the six-point programme of Mujib-ur Rahman and declared it as un-Islamic. However, the election results showed a landslide victory for Mujib in East Pakistan and a big majority for Bhutto in West Pakistan. The Islamic parties were routed. The three Islamic parties i.e., the JI, the JUI and the JUP had secured only 13.95 per cent of votes in the 1970 elections to the National Assembly.³ The worst performance was given by the JI which won only four seats out of a total of 300.⁴

Since 1977, the JI did well and through the 1980s mainly due to Zia's policy of Islamisation. The Islamisation process begun under General Zia indicated an effort to adopt doctrinal values and practices popularised in Pakistan by JI. The JI was the only major party to contest the 1985 national elections.⁵ However, after the referendum, the Jamaat's political fortunes went downwards. In February 1985, elections to the National Assembly were held under the 1973 Constitution which had been partially retained. The elections were held on a non-party basis, but several candidates supported by General Zia-ul-Haq and his political ally, the JI were defeated.⁶ Maulana Tufail Muhammad, a former amir of the JI, and a number of other religious leaders did not endorse the Shariat Ordinance promulgated by President Zia in June 1988. The ordinance issued by Zia did not meet their expectations and fell short of the draft submitted by the committee, appointed by the president himself, headed by the chairman of the Islamic Ideology Council.⁷ The JI won only 3 per cent of the popular vote (640,000) in the 1990 elections to the national assembly, and 4 per cent, 3 per cent and 0.8 per cent of the vote in the Provincial Assembly elections in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), Punjab, and Sindh respectively. Although running for fewer seats, the Jamaat did better in these elections than in 1988. It won 8 out of 18 contested national seats (as opposed to 7 out of 26 in 1988), and 20 out of 37 contested provincial seats (as opposed to 11 out of 44 in 1988).⁸

The JI was one of the best organised parties in Sindh and the JI had considered urban Sindh, and especially Karachi, to be its power base since 1947.⁹ It had a major following among the Urdu speakers and a large number of Sindhi speaking elites, but from 1984, the Mohajir Quami Mahaz (MQM) began to claim the same constituency. The JI's support for the policies of General Zia and the role of its student wing, the Islami Jamiat-e-Tuleba (IJT)¹⁰ damaged its standing. The emergence of the second generation of Urdu speakers in Sindh saw the loyalties of the old vanguard for the JI replaced with the desire to have a new and responsive organisation based on ethnic solidarity.¹¹ The JI, until the early 1980s, remained strong in Sindh even though its performance in elections was dismal. The leaders of the JI campaigned for an Islamic solution to the ethnic problem in Pakistan. Their support for the Afghan War or the

Kashmiri activists has largely rested on the same premise which in 1971 aligned them with Yahya's troops against Mujibur Rahman whom they considered to be an Indian agent. The JI actively supported military action in Muslim Bengal through organisations like Al-Badr and Al-Shams, which were heavily represented by the Urdu speaking inhabitants of Bangladesh known as Biharis. However, while its support for Zia might have helped, the JI suffered a credibility gap among the democratic forces. ¹²

Since its inception in 1941, the JI has gone through a number of phases, but is not mass based and so its political ambitions have not been achieved through electoral politics. It has usually supported authoritarian, non-democratic regimes like those of General Yahya Khan and General Zia-ul-Haq. Its attitude towards plural forces and its aggressive role on university campuses through the IJT alienated it from the grassroots and ethnic groups. Another reason why it has not achieved popular appeal is because of its elitism and its exclusivity in terms of its theological explanations of Islam. "The JI has not been able to come to grips with the sensitive and mutually conflictive forces of nationalism, ethnicity, folk culture, democracy and Islam. Its problems with Bengali nationalists during the war in 1971 and its confrontation with ethno-regional forces in contemporary Sindh illustrate this difficulty." It has played a major role in Afghanistan and Kashmir by supporting religion based resistance movements. Under the leadership of Qazi Hussain Ahmad, who is a native Pushtun, the JI seems to have accepted a combination of Islam and nationalism, which is a unique, but not openly acknowledged, shift in ideology. In the 1993 elections, the JI despite assuming a populist stance, faced overwhelming defeat from the national parties, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Muslim League. ¹³

The Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Islam is one of the manjor Islamic parties. It was formed before the partition. It represents the Deobandi school of Islamic revivalism which emphasises a more puritanical form of Islamic government. ¹⁴ *According to Iftikhar Malik, the JUI and its various factions are offshoots of the Jamiat-i Ulema-i-Hind (JUH) which supported the Indian National Congress (INC) against the All India Muslim League (AIML) during the nationalist era and, reflect personal differences among the ulema rather than any specific ideological school.* ¹⁵ *Two members of the JUI contested the April-May 1962 elections and were elected, Maulana Mufti Mahmud as a member National Assembly (MNA) and Maulana Ghulam Ghaus Hazarvi as a member Provincial Assembly (MPA) of West Pakistan. Mufti Mahmud, while taking his oath as an MNA, vowed to have the Constitution amended to make it conform to the Quran and Sunnah and democratic traditions. In July 1962, he supported the Political Parties Bill, and demanded that only those parties which were committed to Islamic ideology, should be allowed to function in Pakistan. The Political Parties Act made provisions to this effect. When political parties started functioning, it was not difficult for the JUI to revive itself, and Mufti Mahmud, the acting amir at the time, called a meeting at Lahore on August 4, 1962 when the JUI was revived formally.* ¹⁶ *During the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War, the JUI garnered support for the government by organising jihad conferences and collecting defence funds. After the war, it urged the government to negotiate a peace settlement for a solution to the Kashmir problem in accordance with the UN resolutions on Kashmir. Although it was not satisfied with the Tashkent Declaration it refrained from joining the Opposition sponsored movements against it.* ¹⁷

The JUI split into two factions in 1969 and the more leftist faction under the leadership of Maulana Ghulam Ghaus Hazarvi, merged with the PPP in 1977. The more conservative faction under the leadership of Mufti Mahmud opposed the PPP in the 1977 election. Mufti Mahmud also headed the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA), the coalition of parties attempting to unseat Bhutto in re-election, and was assisted by a council composed of leaders of member parties including Mian Tufail Muhammad (JI) and Maulana Ahmad Shah Noorani (JUP). The JUI broke with the Zia regime due to the slow pace of the Islamisation process and did not let its members contest the 1985 elections.¹⁸ Maulana Fazlur Rahman, General Secretary of the JUI, strongly criticised the Shariat Ordinance promulgated by General Zia in June 1988, and called it an attempt to sabotage the Constitution of Pakistan.¹⁹ The JUI led by Maulana Fazlur Rehman, son of the late Maulana Mufti Mohammad, has had stronger roots in Balochistan and the NWFP with a limited constituency in Sindh.

The Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Pakistan started off as a Sunni political party with its power base in Sindh and a major following in Punjab. JUP leaders mobilised support for Ayub Khan's regime at crucial moments and during the 1965 presidential elections they supported Ayub Khan. The mashaikh organised a Jamiat-i-Mashaikh to support Ayub Khan's candidature, based on his assurance that he would bring all existing laws in consonance with Islamic injunctions.²⁰ In the 1970 elections, the JUP got the second largest number of seats in Sindh under the leadership of Maulana Ahmad Shah Noorani, but he declined to join the PPP Cabinet. Noorani was an outspoken critic of the Zia regime and refused to join Zia's Cabinet in 1978. The JUP was active in the Movement for the Restoration for Democracy.²¹ Espousing the Bareilvi school of revivalism, the JUP has several mashaikh and sajjada nishin among its members, thus, reaching grassroots Pakistan. However, Noorani's party generally lost its urban seats in Sindh to the MQM in various local, provincial and national elections, which allowed the Jamiat-i-Mashaikh, a loose group of sajjada nishin and pirs, to make direct links with the state. Noorani spent time in Africa propagating Islam, but he came to the forefront during the Gulf crisis in support of Saddam Hussein. In contrast, religio-political parties like the JI, JUI, Sipah-i-Sahaba and Ahle-Hadith have been supportive of Saudi Arabia and its policies in the region, while the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Fiqh-e-Jafria, representing Pakistan's Shias, has been supportive of Iran.²² The JUP's inability to convert a major following among the masses in Pakistan into an enduring political constituency could be due to the fact that Pakistan's citizens would rather hand over the electoral mandate to secular parties, rather than to a warring ulema who disappoint their supporters with their vagueness on Islamic order and mutual intolerance. While people might rally around in the name of Islam with the aim to topple a government, it is difficult to establish a government on the basis of Islam, enjoying a consensus from the ulema. Also, Shia-Sunni differences which often turn violent, ethno-regional divisions within the ulema and Saudi-Iranian competition in Pakistan to carve out favourable constituencies are all factors which discourage Pakistanis from making a total commitment to the religio-political parties.²³

For the JI, like most other religious parties, the scenario seemed to be much more hopeful until the end of the 1960s. The party participated in the 1970 elections with the aim of capturing power, but its hopes were dashed as it won only four seats in the National Assembly and four in the Provincial Assemblies. By entering into politics the

Jamaat lost much of its moral authority. The JUI fared much better during the 1970 elections, particularly in the NWFP and Balochistan. It was able to form a coalition government in the NWFP with its chief, Maulana Mufti Mahmud, as chief minister. The government was later dismissed by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Religious parties appeared to be at the height of their popularity during the Opposition PNA movement in 1977, launched against the PPP government. Though the movement began as a protest against unfair practices adopted in the elections, it gave a religious turn to the political discourse, forcing Bhutto to introduce some religious measures to counter the movement. The PNA movement resulted in General Zia-ul Haq's martial law, which was the most significant period for religious politics in Pakistan. The foremost in giving support to Zia's policy of Islamisation was the JI, then headed by Maulana Tufail Mohammad. The JI continued to support the Zia regime even after other religious parties distanced themselves. ²⁴

The religious parties remained in the forefront during the Afghan Jihad. These parties strengthened with the advent of Zia's martial law and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The Iranian Revolution and the Communist coup in Afghanistan, followed by the Soviet intervention there in 1979 contributed to a closer working relationship between the government and religious parties. The Jamaat had been privy to the government's Afghan policy since 1977, when, following Nur Muhammad Taraki's coup in Afghanistan, General Zia and General Fazl-i Haq met with Maududi, Mian Tufail and Qazi Hussain Ahmad to explore a role for the Jamaat in Pakistan's Afghan policy. The party had played a major role in marshalling public opinion in favour of an jihad against the Soviet Union. Soon after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Zia brought the Jamaat into his Afghan policy, using its religious stature to legitimise his depiction of the war as a jihad. The Afghan War was advantageous for the Jamaat in that it promoted close ties between the Jamaat and the security forces. This closeness to the centres of power further enabled it to press for Islamisation, along the lines of the Jamaat's perception of Islam. The jihad for Zia served as a means of making use of the Jamaat's energies and diverting them away from domestic politics. ²⁵ *Both JI ²⁶ and JUI ²⁷ came closer to the security forces.*

After the dearth of Zia, the Islamic political movement in Pakistan, has seen a gradual decline in influence. Zahid Hussain is of the opinion that their diminishing electoral support has marginalised their position in the country's politics, the paradox being that their decline began after General Zia, a pro-Islamist came to power in 1977. Almost all the major Islamic political parties backed General Zia's regime, which enforced Islamic laws for the first time. The election results of 1985, 1990, 1993 and 1996 indicated a slump in the vote bank of Islamic parties like the JI, JUI and other smaller groups. This has happened despite the fact that the main Islamist party, the JI is a well organised party with a strong ideological base. ²⁸

There are many factors which have limited the ability of the religious political parties to gather voter support in Pakistan.

- i. Firstly, very few Pakistanis would like to see their country transformed into a theocratic state.*
- ii. Secondly, the Islamic parties never focussed on the basic economic and social issues which confronted the common people.*

- iii. Thirdly, their support remained confined to a small section of the middle class, as in the case of the JI, or to a particular ethnic group as in the case of the JUI. The slogan of Islamisation also lost its charm after General Zia's imposition of the Islamic Shariat laws only succeeded in fuelling sectarian strife in the country. Also, the support of Islamist groups for autocratic military rule caused serious damage to Islamic forces and their electoral support fell drastically with the return of democracy to the country.
- iv. Another factor which caused political support for Islamic parties to wane was when they became a part of the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI) alliance, due to which they lost their political identity and eroded their political base. The alleged involvement of leaders of Islamic parties like the JUI in corruption has also damaged their political position.²⁹
- v. Another factor which has impacted the standing of these parties, is the emergence of militant sectarian groups like the Sipah-i-Sahaba and Tehrik-e-Jafria Pakistan. These organisations which divided the Islamic political forces, fuelled extremism and sectarian violence, and further alienated the people from religious politics.³⁰

After the end of Afghan War in the late Eighties, the religious parties found it very difficult to redefine themselves. When democracy was restored in 1985, the Jamaat tried populist measures to win over the masses; during the 1993 elections, its youth wing, Pasban, ran a massive campaign which did not show results, and in 1997, the Jamaat boycotted elections to save face.³¹ The JUP has been almost wiped out of the political arena. To fill the vacuum created by the collapse of the JUP, the Pakistani Awami Tehrik (PAT) emerged in the Eighties. Set up by Maulana Tahirul Qadri, the PAT took part in the 1990 elections, but lost despicably.³²

As a result of afghan Jihad and Zia's policies, different fundamentalist, religious movements of varying persuasions, like the Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan, the Tehrik-e-Jafria Pakistan, the Sipah-e-Mohammed, the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and the Sipah-e-Jhangvi emerged which led to sectarian violence in Pakistan.³³ The level of extremism became a matter of concern as people from all walks of life were affected. People were increasingly alarmed over incidents like the occupation of a hospital to be run by well known social worker, Maulana Abdul Sattar Edhi in Karachi in December 1997, by one of the religious party. Speeches were made against Edhi, calling him an infidel and defending the action of occupation of hospital and calling it a holy war against Edhi.³⁴ In another incident, the second largest parliamentary group in Balochistan's five-party coalition government, the JUI (Fazal), decided to boycott Cabinet meetings in early March 1999, due to government action taken against JUI members responsible for ransacking the newly built Capri cinema in the provincial capital. The JUI (Fazal) celebrated Ramzan by stepping up their drive to enforce a Taliban style Shariat in Balochistan. Some of its activists attacked and ransacked video shops, and burned down the cinema. The Balochistan coalition government was eventually forced to take action against its coalition partner, arresting JUI activists and conducting raids on madrassas and the residences of JUI leaders.³⁵

Regarding sectarianism, in an interview given to a leading Pakistani newsmagazine, *Newsline*, the amir of the JI, Qazi Hussain Ahmed, stated that the Jamaat is a religious party and not a sectarian one. He further stated that it would be

very simple for them to control sectarianism because the party had in its fold Shias, Sunnis, Deobandis, Barelvis, members of the Sipah-i-Sahaba, Sipah-e-Mohammed, Ahle-Hadith, etc. and it would be possible to hold a dialogue and exchange ideas. ³⁶

The Islamic parties continue to show their ability to garner support for or against political decisions and events. Nawaz Sharif's attempt to consolidate his control over the state in the name of Islam, by moving the 15th constitutional amendment in 1998, met with unprecedented resistance. Ironically, even the religious political parties like theJI and JUI were not prepared to back the government on the issue, and declared that the bill had nothing to do with Islamic Shariat. Almost all the major political parties from the JI to the PPP referred to Nawaz Sharif's action as part of a plan to establish autocracy in the country. Some analysts suggested that the proposed bill was aimed at pre-empting the increasing political power of the radical Islamists. The increasing militancy of the extremist religious groups was evident during the countrywide anti-American and anti-government protests following the US missile attack on the hideout of Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan in August 1998. They accused the government of colluding with the Americans. ³⁷ *The US military strikes gave an impetus to Pakistani religious extremists to pressure the Pakistan government for Islamisation. Using the US military action to mobilise domestic support for their cause, the Islamist parties successfully demonstrated their street power.* ³⁸

The religious parties have enough fire-power to get governments to change their decisions has been more than evident in the past year or so, an example being the Musharraf government's capitulation in the face of protests by religious parties, on the blasphemy issue. At the same time, these religious parties were feeling threatened by what they perceived to be a change in the attitude of the army towards them due to the interior minister's statement on the possibility of banning religious groups having militant wings, in April 2000, after the sectarian killings in Attock. Also, Islamabad called upon the Taliban government in Kabul to close down camps where members of Pakistani religious groups were being trained. Plans were also announced to regulate traffic along the Afghan border. This was followed by a campaign against smugglers and traders which form a core support group for religious parties. This was the reason why religious groups with links to the Taliban supported the traders in their bid to defy the government. ³⁹ *Zahid Hussain states, "The ... alliance between the country's mullahs and the trading community presents the most serious challenge yet to the military leadership which is fast losing its goodwill and credibility." Traditionally, the Islamists have a strong political base among shopkeepers and in the bazaars. In fact, the business community was encouraged to take on the government after it backtracked on its plan to crack down on smuggling.* ⁴⁰ *Another issue which gained the ire of the religious parties was the proposal floated by the Election Commission to restore the system of joint electorates, which the religious parties have opposed since 1988.* ⁴¹

On May 8, 2000, 19 religious parties got together in Lahore to work out a united strategy against the procedural changes in the blasphemy law proposed by the Musharraf government. The other demands made at the meeting included the demand that Islamic clauses of the Constitution be made part of the Provisional Constitution Order (PCO) under which the present military government is ruling, that the system of joint electorates should not be revived, and that NGOs which are promoting western

values in the country should be banned. Of concern to the participants was the perceived threat to the Islamic militant groups. "Religious madrassas and jehadi organizations are not terrorists," stated Maulana Samiul Haq, chief of his own faction of the JUI. "They prepare Mujahideen to fight for the oppressed Muslims of the world. No action against them will be acceptable to the nation." They called for a strike on May 19, 2000, the day the traders had called a strike to protest the imposition of general sales tax on retail outfits. The government obviously felt intimidated. The Religious Affairs Ministry declared that no procedural changes would be made to the blasphemy law. It further announced that no madrassa or religious seminary had been found to be involved in terrorism and even announced a new package of government aid for the madrassas. Also on May 16, General Pervez Musharraf himself announced the government's retreat on the blasphemy law. However, the religious parties went ahead with the strike to press for their remaining demands.⁴² The religious parties will obviously keep trying to secure further concessions from the government.

No doubt about it that the religious political parties in Pakistan has huge street power. These parties have a the ability to get their demands fulfilled either by hook or crook. These parties also have huge following in the country despite of different controversies. Religious parties always remain part of the parliament either as a coalition partner or opposition. But electoral history of Pakistan shows that religious parties could not get a landslide victory.



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