

Bangladesh – Things Change and yet Remain the Same

When the student revolution ousted dictator Sheikh Hasina in August 2024, many believed it marked the beginning of a new era of change for Bangladesh and a potential model for the wider Muslim world. Across many Muslim nations, the hopes of the Ummah are often crushed by rulers who excel at maintaining the status quo. Yet, the results of the recent elections proved a familiar adage: things change, but they remain the same.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) now holds power, securing over two-thirds of seats in Parliament. The runner-up, Jamaat-e-Islami, achieved its highest-ever seat count, winning 68 seats after forming unlikely alliances.

The BNP, founded in 1978 by President Ziaur Rahman, aimed to unite people through nationalist ideology. After Rahman's assassination in 1981, his widow, Khaleda Zia, took over until her imprisonment in 2018. Since then, her son Tarique Rahman has run the party. Tarique returned to Bangladesh from exile in London just two months before the elections.

Despite their return to power, the BNP offers little hope for meaningful change. While the party has governed Bangladesh in the past—winning presidential elections in 1981, 1991, and 2001, and parliamentary elections in 1979, 1991, 1996, 2001, and 2026—it has been consistently criticized for corruption, political violence, and poor governance, particularly during its 2001–2006 tenure. High-profile controversies like the August 21 grenade attack, the 10-truck arms haul, and the alleged role of Hawa Bhaban as a parallel power center further tarnish its reputation. Thus, the BNP's return signals more of the same, a reflection of the country's enduring colonial political structure.

Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, in contrast, has long positioned itself as distinct from the BNP, but its ideological stance also falls within the colonial design. In a recent Al Jazeera interview, Jamaat leader Shafiqur Rahman outlined the party's dilemma—how to maintain an Islamic identity while operating within a secular, colonial-based system. Rahman expressed a commitment to both Islamic principles and democratic processes, but this dual approach alienates both secular and Islamic factions.

Bangladesh's secularism was shaped by the liberal order, which formed a circle of elites benefitting from the status quo and opposing any Islamic reforms—however modest. For the masses, however, there is a different aspiration: one that challenges the political framework established since the country's creation in 1971. This new wave of political change has attracted the youth, including children of the very elites who once upheld the colonial order. In Dhaka, students from top schools have rallied for the establishment of a Caliphate, a call that Hasina's regime banned but was not reversed even in the Yunus caretaker period. This bold shift should come as no surprise: colonial powers historically sought to steer the Ummah away from such political aspirations. Yet, the youth of Bangladesh are undeterred, holding the hope for a new future.

This new political wave reflects growing fraternity with Muslims worldwide. A massive pro-Palestine rally in Dhaka on April 12, 2025, attended by over 100,000 people, displayed solidarity with Gaza amid ongoing violence. Even more remarkable was the thawing of the historical animosity with Pakistan from which it broke apart leading to the

formation of Bangladesh; while such sentiment was the adrenaline for Bangladeshi Nationalism. This suggests that nationalism no longer holds the same appeal in Bangladesh. Such political movements are a challenge to the hegemonic Western world, which fears their growing momentum.

At this crucial juncture in Bangladesh's political evolution, Jamaat-e-Islami has re-emerged, attempting to capitalize on the changing landscape. However, its efforts appear to be little more than a repackaging of its old formula—operating within a democratic system while claiming an Islamic identity. This hybrid positioning, balancing contradictory ideologies, fails to resonate with the evolving political aspirations of the population.

Jamaat's leadership maintains that it will abide by the country's existing laws and will not act against the will of the people, promising anti-corruption measures, transparency, and human rights - as evident from the chief's interview mentioned earlier - **“party will operate under the existing laws of the country and will not act against the ‘will of the people.’”** While the party still enjoys support in rural areas, its inability to effectively address the economic challenges facing women—such as the potential impact of limiting working hours—has led to backlash, especially among female workers in the garment industry. Jamaat's cultural aspirations appear out of touch with the needs of the working class, leading many to question its relevance in today's political climate. A political vision must address society's comprehensive challenges, not just cultural or religious concerns.

Jamaat-e-Islami's failure to adapt to the current political moment is evident in its recent electoral defeat. The party's historical trajectory sheds light on this disconnect. Following the partition of British India and the creation of Pakistan, Jamaat-e-Islami split along national lines. The party's Pakistani wing continued to grow in Pakistan, while its Indian counterpart, Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, took on the form of an NGO. When East and West Pakistan separated in 1971, Jamaat's East Pakistan wing, which had supported Pakistan during the war, faced lasting repercussions. Following Bangladesh's independence, the East Pakistan leadership reorganized itself as Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, but the party's ideology and structure continued to operate within the nation-state framework, rather than transcending borders.

This national framework has constrained Jamaat-e-Islami's potential as a truly transnational movement. While the party's early ideology espoused Muslim unity, its behavior, structure, and political actions reveal a prioritization of national concerns and restriction within the nation-state framework. True transnational movements would have a unified leadership operating across borders, not separate national entities. In practical terms, Jamaat's split along national lines was shaped more by the realities of the nation-state system than by the preservation of a borderless political structure previously envisioned in its foundational thought.

Their debacle in this election is attributed to their confusion about implementing Islamic values within the secular system. Jamaat-e-Islami's manifesto in the 2026 elections included controversial proposals, such as limiting women's working hours, which alienated working-class women. This focus on cultural issues, rather than addressing economic concerns, contributed to the party's poor showing at the polls. In addition, the Jamaat does not address the new wave of political aspiration driven by Islam, which has been gaining momentum as more and more Muslim intellectuals are

graduating towards it, in the backdrop of the chaos created in the world order and which captured the primary focus in the latest World Economic Forum in Davos.

This aspiration is not grounded in the feasibility of current political systems but in the collective failure of Muslim nations to overcome their challenges. The growing desire for a return to a unified, Islamic political system governed by divine law has gained momentum in response to the failures of the existing world order. The promise of such a return offers hope for the Ummah, providing a vision for emerging out of the political quagmire.

The Ummah must seek clarity of thought and action, as the real change comes from those who are dedicated to this cause. The early Muslims, led by the Sahaba (ra), exemplified this commitment. Despite the overwhelming odds, they remained resolute in their vision, knowing that true success and reward come only from Allah (swt). Their unwavering dedication to their cause, despite oppression and adversity, serves as a model for those striving for change today.

The call for change in the Ummah is not simply a reflection of secular disillusionment but a demand for a return to a political system that aligns with Islamic principles. As democratic experiments continue to fail, the clarity of this new political vision will become ever more apparent. The Ummah must identify leaders who possess the determination, courage, and clarity to deliver this change. When the right leadership emerges, it will be poised to guide the Ummah towards taking its rightful place on the world stage.

This is a time for Dawah Carriers to reflect, persevere, and be patient, as true change comes only through the method of our divinely guided Prophet (saw).

Allah (swt) said, ﴿وَعَدَ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ لَيَسْتَخْلِفَنَّهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ كَمَا اسْتَخْلَفَ الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ وَلَيُمَكِّنَنَّ لَهُمْ دِينَهُمُ الَّذِي ارْتَضَىٰ لَهُمْ وَلَيُبَدِّلَنَّهُمْ مِنْ بَعْدِ خَوْفِهِمْ أَمْنًا﴾ **“Allah (swt) has promised those of you who believe and carry out Saalih actions that He will certainly grant them succession to authority in the land, as He did with those before them; and will surely establish for them their Deen which He has chosen for them; and will indeed change their (situation from) fear into security...”** [TMQ Surah Al-Noor: 55].

Dawah carriers must positively recognize that these mandates reflect a demand for change, not secular allegiance, though their full clarity has yet to be widely understood on mass scale. The Ummah should reflect that democracy's failure will eventually lead to clearer political aspirations. The Ummah must identify the right leadership with determination, courage, clarity and the will to bring true change. Supporting Hizb ut Tahrir, which is rightly poised to lead the Ummah, will enable the journey to global leadership, bringing success in this world and the Hereafter, Bi-idhnillah.

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