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Syed Serajul Islam and Md. Saidul Islam. *The Jamaat Question in Bangladesh: Islam, Politics and Society in Post-Democratic Nation*. New York: Routledge, 2024. 278 pp. ISBN 9781032316383.

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The student revolution in Bangladesh successfully ousted the authoritarian regime of Sheikh Hasina Wajid. However, the supporters of the old regime and its regional allies are still trying to manipulate the long-held fear of Jamaat-e-Islami to undermine the revolution's credibility and its goals. They argue that the revolution would allow the dominant Islamist party, Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, to come to power and transform the country into a theocratic state, which would be detrimental to minorities in the country (Mojumdar, A., 2024). Even during the revolution's early days, the previous regime claimed that the revolution was a conspiracy orchestrated by Jamaat-e-Islami to overthrow the ruling secular government (Chaudhury, R., 2024). Although this claim gained little support after the revolution, fears surrounding the party/movement persist. In this context, the book *'The Jamaat Question'* published during the previous authoritarian regime, remains relevant as it helps us understand why and how Jamaat became a contentious issue in Bangladeshi intellectual and political circles as we witnessed a glimpse of it during and after the revolution. What makes the book even more intriguing is the central question it aims to address: how has Jamaat remained resilient despite significant repression, discrimination, and scrutiny from the ruling regime over the past 16 years? (p. 2). In addressing this driving question, the editors of the book, Serajul Islam and Md. Saidul Islam, did an impressive job of bringing experts on Bangladeshi politics and society to reflect on the history, evolution, changes, and impact of Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh. The comprehensive coverage of themes in the book shows that it has succeeded in situating the movement within the broader socio-political and economic landscape of the country. With that note, let's explore the main contributions of the

book.

Everything starts from the point of Jamaat-e-Islami being one of the leading religious parties that opposed the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 due to religious and geopolitical concerns. However, the country was born, putting the movement on ‘the wrong side of history’ (p. 3). Although the movement accepted the new reality and substantially contributed to the nation’s democracy, society, and economy ever since, Saidul Islam, in his introductory chapter, mentions that the secular establishment continues to push the people ‘to view the party from the retrogressive and reductionist lens of 1971’ (p. 8). The Jamaat is ‘expected to carry forward the sin of opposing liberation from generation to generation’ (p. 4). (p. 4). Jamaat is a ‘national problem’ to deal with, a potential enemy to fight against, and a possible adversary to blame for all national owes (p. 3). Examining these narratives through the concept of governmentality by French philosopher Foucault, Saidul Islam argues that the root of the problematization of the Jamaat’s existence in Bangladesh is the construction of a discourse that projects the movement as ‘other’ and ‘internal enemy of the nation’ that needs to be diagnosed, examined, studied, problematized, and surveilled (p. 4). Saidul Islam expands on his theoretical analysis in chapter eight of the book, co-written with Anwarul Wadud, documenting how the problematization of the movement at the level of discourse led to actual violence against its members and leaders during Hasina’s regime (p. 166-179). Although Jamaat is often portrayed as the ‘religious other’ who corrupted the ‘secular’ nature of Bangladesh, Serajul Islam’s chapter shows that religion has always played a significant role in Bangladeshi politics. Interestingly, most political parties have turned to religious sentiments and religious parties to bolster their legitimacy. This trend began with the nation’s founder himself, who resorted to religious discourses when facing socio-economic challenges. It continued under subsequent leaders, including General Zia, Erased and Khalida Zia. Even Sheikh Hasina’s supposedly secular regime sought support from Hefazat Islam, a Deobandi movement, and their network to counter the growing influence of Jamaat-e-Islami since 2018 (p. 52-55).

Besides these dominant secular narratives, Moniruzaman’s

contribution emphasizes that Jamaat's internal political and social policy-making process is partly responsible for the party's marginalization in post-independent Bangladesh. While acknowledging its contribution to the development of democracy in the country, one crucial point he makes is that the party's past activism was overly focused on defending and glorifying personalities such as Ghulam Azam and other Jamaat senior leaders who openly took an anti-liberation stance before 1971. This strategic error negatively impacted the public perception of the party, as it allowed the entire blame for being an 'anti-independence force' to be squarely placed on it. Furthermore, the political, legal, and social stigma that Jamaat has been formally labeled with after 2010 is a direct consequence of such activism (p. 91). This was further exacerbated when the movement failed to make a concerted effort to explain its anti-liberation stance with credible evidence. Moreover, Moniruzaman criticizes the movement for its failure to produce capable Islamic intellectuals who can work beyond party-political lines due to its excessive involvement in electoral and social welfare activities over the last fifty years (p. 93-94). To a certain extent, Nazmus Shakib's chapter can also be seen as an extension of Moniruzaman's analysis about the failure of Jamaat to produce quality Islamic intellectuals. In his chapter, he correctly argues that many of the significant ideational changes within the movement were the direct outcome of an external shock, such as the impact of the war on terror, rather than the consequence of internal intellectual evolution and debates (p. 72). The subsequent chapters go beyond the political and intellectual aspects to analyze the socio-economic contributions and welfare programs of Jamaat as an Islamic movement. These chapters provide a comprehensive understanding of the significant scale and scope of its socio-economic intervention in a nation with a population of over 170 million people. Additionally, they reveal the unique conditions of the country, where reliance on the services of NGOs has significantly increased in the past, shaping the movement's core more than its political and ideological aspects. Moreover, those chapters make clear that any reader of the country's socioeconomic development history cannot overlook the contributions of Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh in uplifting

the daily life of the neglected poor and marginalized (p. 100-145).

Finally, Mahruf Billah addresses the war crime allegations against senior Jamaat leaders, often considered the 'elephant in the room'. In this regard, he thoroughly documents the initial efforts to hold accountable those involved in crimes against humanity during the liberation struggle under Mujib Rahman's regime. On this hotly debated issue, the author's main line of argument to question the credibility of the popular accusations against Jamaat leaders is that while there is no doubt that Jamaat-e-Islami supported the united Pakistan and stood against liberation, none of the previous cases filed against the criminals who involved in crimes against humanity during Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's premiership ever included any Jamaat leaders. He further notes that the first prime minister, Mujibur Rahman had all the power and authority to bring Jamaat leadership into the court of justice for their alleged involvement. Still, none of the investigations during his period on war crimes led to such a conclusion in 1970s (p. 186). Furthermore, he shows that those legal terms and laws were twisted during Hasina's regime to allow the government to take revenge on Jamaat-e-Islami for its political affiliation with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party under the slogan of bringing criminals to justice. Thus, for Maruf Billa, the Hasina regime's decision to execute the popular Jamaat leaders for their alleged involvement in war crimes, is clearly driven by political calculations to reinforce the regime's secular authoritarian tendencies in the country (p. 198-199). Although this line of argument is crucial for proving the innocence of the Jamaat leadership on legal grounds and emphasizing the politicization under Sheikh Hasina, one might feel that it falls just a little short of challenging the narratives in the public domain. In this case, if the author had included statements and writings from Jamaat leaders condemning the atrocities of the Pakistan Army during the early days of the liberation struggle or its immediate aftermath despite their support for united Pakistan, the legal approach to the issue might have been strengthened and solidified.

Overall, *'The Jamaat Question in Bangladesh'* offers a timely exploration of the history of Islamism in the country while providing insights into its future in a post-revolutionary context. It is a critical

addition to the growing studies on the Islamist phenomenon in the subcontinent. There has been extensive and exclusive research on Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan and India, but not as much when it comes to Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh.¹ This is surprising considering its significant success in building civil society institutions, contributing to democracy, and holding ministerial positions in the government. *'The Jamaat Question'* fills this scholarly lacuna. The book's primary strength lies in its comprehensiveness, providing an analysis of the socio-religious, political, and economic dynamics of the movement and attempting to theorize the Jamaat question. However, a notable limitation is the absence of a dedicated chapter on Jamaat's contribution to the discourse about gender, Muslim women, and women empowerment, which is essential for understanding the movement's commitment to gender inclusivity in Bangladesh context. Despite this limitation, *'The Jamaat Question'* is a must-read work for scholars interested in the Islamist phenomenon in the subcontinent, especially in Bangladesh.

¹ I. Ahmad, *Islamism and Democracy in India: The Transformation of Jamaat-e-Islami* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); R. Nasr, *The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution: The Jama'at-Islami of Pakistan* (California: University of California Press, 1994); H. Iqtidar, *Secularizing Islamists? Jama'at-e-Islami and Jam'at-ud-Da'wa in Urban Pakistan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011); Abdul Rashid Moten, *Revolution to Revolution: Jama'at-e-Islami in the Politics of Pakistan* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2002); A. Jamal, *Jamaat-e-Islami Women in Pakistan: Vanguard of New Modernity* (Syracuse University Press, 2013); M. Islam, *Limits of Islamism: Jamaat-e-Islami in Contemporary India and Bangladesh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

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