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Bangladesh: The Jel- Change of Heart or Change of Tactics?

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Current media reports in Bangladesh indicate that the Jamaat-e-Islami is seriously considering changing its name and enter into politics afresh though it should be aware that mere changing the name will not bring in the desired legitimacy they are now desperately seeking.

One reason could be that since Hasina has won a third term and would definitely go against the Jel 'hammer and tongs' for its past misdoings, opinion among the younger ranks appears to be to make amends, apologise to the nation for its involvement in the 1971 genocide and start afresh.

The Jamaat is also said to have formed a five-member High Powered Committee to devise a strategy for emerging as a new political party with a different name.

In this process of reassessing its strategy, the rift between the young and the senior leaders has widened further over renaming the Party and apologising to the nation for its role during the Liberation War.

Many of the post-Independence cadres who had nothing to do with Pakistan want the Party to apologize for its role in 1971 war of Independence and rebrand itself with a new name as a Pro Bangladesh Party. They have also rightly assessed that the Party had also become an underground Party with many of its leaders and activists in jail or underground to escape law. The younger leaders want to get out of that underground mentality and openly work as a political party.

It may be recalled that on Aug. 1 2013 on a writ petition, a three member High Court Bench held a majority view that the registration of

Jamaat as a political party was illegal. This was followed by Election Commission declaring the party as ineligible for contesting the elections.

In the same year the Jamaat filed an appeal and a leave to appeal petition with the Appellate Division challenging the High Court verdict.

Soon after the High Court verdict, the Jamaat cadres went on a rampage destroying public properties and the houses and establishments of the Hindu minority were vandalized all over Bangladesh.

Worse was to follow in the aftermath of the National elections 2014 when its mentor the BNP boycotted the elections. Riots followed, buses with innocent passengers were burnt and public properties were vandalized. In hundreds of cases filed, many of the leaders, cadres and activists have been spending their time in jail, in visiting courts in attending the trials and going underground to escape arrest!

The original Jamaat was established in pre partition days by Syed Ab'ul Ala Maududi, as a movement to promote social and political Islam. After Partition, the party split into two wings, with an Indian wing and a Pakistani Wing. Over a period of time the Party strayed from its ideals and in Bangladesh it was always in the forefront where violence as a political policy was used to further its objectives.

It was at this point, the party that was the largest Islamic party in Bangladesh strongly opposed the breakup of Pakistan and on that score collaborated with the Pakistan Army in its operations against Bengali nationalists and pro-liberation intellectuals. One cannot forget nor forgive the Jel's role in the execution of pro liberal activists and intellectuals. The ghastly murder perpetrated on innocent intellectuals who were dragged and tortured on December 12 in 1971 is a blot on the Jel that cannot be erased so easily.

The Attorney General has pointed out that assuming a different name will still make the Jamaat an "underground Party" and that the State has no obligation to give any facility to such parties. Obaidul Quader the Secretary General of the Awami League called the change as "old wine in a new bottle". There are indications that the present Government would still go ahead with those who were complicit in the genocide perpetrated by the Pakistan Army.

In 2013, the Jamaat still called for unification with Pakistan and expulsion of non- Muslims from Bangladesh!

An editorial in Daily Star said that the demand for the Party is to come clean and start a new chapter in its political history is the demand of the time for its political survival

Will this be enough? Certainly, the post independent party leaders need a chance to break away from the hold of the senior Islamists who have no regrets and who would continue their way. Unless and until the younger elements take over from the Seniors and start with a clean state, the party is unlikely to survive in its present form and become a legitimate and credible political party like other political parties in Bangladesh in the near future.

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