YOGINDER SRIRAND

Contrary to what Tablighi Jama’at activists insist, the movement does have a political vision, and is, through the various political roles that it plays, deeply engaged in questions of power and authority. While the movement’s immediate focus has been on the reform of the individual, this does not mean that the TJ has nothing at all to do with politics. If we shift our attention from the affairs of the state and see politics in comprehensive terms, as the dynamics of power in society, the notion that anything can be apolitical in a political world strikes one as absurd. In this sense, the TJ can hardly be said to be apolitical.

Ilyas’s approach to politics

Maulana Ilyas was born in 1885 at Kandhla in northern India. In 1908, he enrolled at the Dar-ul ‘Ulum madrasa in Deoband, where he took an oath of jihad against the British. Ilyas believed that the Muslims’ loss of political power owed entirely to their having abandoned the path of Islam. Muslims were promised that if they faithfully followed the example of the Prophet they would ‘dominate over non-believers’ and would be ‘destined to be the masters of everything on this earth’. ‘Political power’, Ilyas declared, ‘can never be’ the objective of a Muslim. However, ‘walking in the path of the Prophet’, he said, ‘if we attain political power then we should not shirk the responsibility’. Hence, political power was not to be shunned, but neither was it to be directly pursued. Rather, it would be granted as a blessing by God to the Muslims once they became ‘true’ believers, after which the Islamic state would be established.

In this regard, Ilyas did not differ from Islamist activists as to the final goal. Where he departed was the only way in which the movement’s disavowal of any political aims has enabled it to function without provoking the state and aggressive Hindu forces. Yet, the TJ’s activities continued to have serious political implications. Indeed, there was no way in which they could not, for the TJ’s concern with Muslim identity and faith have had a crucial bearing on how Muslims relate to the wider society.

The Tablighi Jama’at movement in the world today. Its founder, Muhammad Ilyas, believed that Muslims had strayed far from the teachings of Islam. Hence, he stressed that Muslims should go back to their faith, which alone, he argued, would move God to grant them ‘success’ in this world and in the hereafter. Ilyas’s political views have been the subject of considerable debate. Most writers on the TJ tend to see it as apolitical, taking its aloofness from involvement in party politics as proof of this. TJ activists also insist that they have nothing to do with politics. While some scholars have questioned their claim to being apolitical, no detailed analysis of what Masud calls the TJ’s ‘political vision’ has as yet been undertaken.

TJ and politics after Ilyas

A distinct shift seems to have been witnessed in the TJ after Ilyas’s death in 1944, a trend that became particularly noticeable in the aftermath of the Partition of India in 1947. In post-1947 India, with Muslims now a beleaguered minority, the aggressive communal politics of groups such as the Muslim League were no longer a feasible option. Thus, the TJ began presenting itself as completely apolitical—in itself probably a well thought out political strategy to accommodate itself to the new context. The TJ, under Ilyas’s son, Muhammad Yusuf, believed that this was the only way in which the movement could carry on with its activities without provoking the state and aggressive Hindu forces. Yet, the TJ’s activities continued to have serious political implications. Indeed, there was no way in which they could not, for the TJ’s concern with Muslim identity and faith have had a crucial bearing on how Muslims relate to the wider society.

The movement’s growing aloofness from direct involvement in political affairs in post-1947 India has helped the TJ flourish in an environment characterized by considerable anti-Muslim hostility. Thus, for instance, in the period 1975–1977, when the Indian government declared a state of emergency and banned several religious organizations, the TJ was spared and was allowed to carry on its activities unhindered. It is a mark of the politically quiescent theology of the TJ, which is quite acceptable to the Indian state, that the TJ continues to have its global headquarters in the heart of Delhi. As the movement has expanded to other countries where Muslims live as minorities, the TJ’s disavowal of all political aims enables it to function relatively free of state control. In this way, the TJ enabled its followers to come to terms with the secular state by personalizing Islam, making a de facto distinction between religion and politics.

The TJ sees present-day Muslims living in a situation similar to that of what it calls the Prophet’s ‘Meccan period’, when the Prophet’s followers in Mecca were still learning about their faith. This is contrasted with the later ‘Medinan period’ when the Prophet established an Islamic state. In this way, while not denying the centrality of the Islamic state, the TJ effectively postpones its establishment into the indefinite future, when Muslims would become ‘so firm in their faith as to bring back to the days of the Companions of the Prophet in Medina’. For the present, however, it allows for Muslims to adjust themselves to a situation of non-Islamic rule while remaining committed to their faith. This accommodation to secularism is, however, ambiguous and not free from tension. On the one hand, the TJ’s advocacy of global Muslim unity represents an implicit critique of the nation-state system. Likewise, its efforts at building a sense of Muslim identity, bringing Muslims all over the world together in a common mission, maintaining a strong sense of separate cultural identity and superiority, and condemning the popular culture that Muslims in local contexts share with others, has important political consequences in religiously plural societies. On the other hand,
the politically quiescent nature of the TJ has won for it sharp criticism in some Muslim circles, who see this posture as calculated to serve the political interests of what are described as the ‘enemies of Islam’. Some Muslims see the TJ as a tool in the hands of ‘anti-Islamic’ forces by helping to de-politicize Muslims by preaching otherworldliness and disdain for power.

In some cases the TJ has acted to counter the influence of Islamist groups and enable Muslims to come to adjust to non-Islamic state structures, while in others it has lent support to Islamist groups, indirectly, by promoting an environment in which Islamist groups can flourish, as well as more directly. In such cases, participation in the TJ can be seen as a critique of existing political systems. It also represents an implicit questioning of the legitimacy of corrupt ruling elites with their ‘un-Islamic’ ways.

**TJ and politics in Muslim majority countries**

The diverse political roles that the TJ has played can be seen in the dynamics of its relations with the state and with Islamist forces in several Muslim countries. In Pakistan, where it has strong presence, the TJ has been encouraged by the authorities as a counter to the Islamist Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen, with its campaign for an Islamic political order, poses an increasingly powerful political challenge to ruling elites. On the other hand, the TJ has helped promote commitment to an activist vision of Islam conducive to the growth of Islamist movements. Thus, for instance, in Bangladesh, following the suppression of pro-Pakistan Islamist groups in the wake of the country’s liberation struggle, the TJ helped keep ‘Islamic sentiment alive’ and ‘created conditions for the training of activists to combat the enemies of Islam’. If required, by training its activists to help keep ‘Islamic sentiment alive’ and ‘created conditions for the training of activists to combat the enemies of Islam’. If required, by training its activists to help the ‘enemies of Islam’, others welcome its role in promoting Islamic sentiment, being responsible for the formulation of Pakistan’s policy in the Afghan war. The former prime minister of the country, Nawaz Sharif, once arranged for Tariq Jamil, senior Tablighi leader, to address his cabinet on ‘the responsibilities of rulers in the light of Islamic teachings’. In his lecture, Jamil appealed to Sharif to ‘enforce an Islamic system’ similar to that in Afghanistan under the Taliban. In this way, TJ activism has not desisted from occupying important political posts and using access to power to further the cause of their movement.

Several individuals originally associated with the TJ have been inspired by the movement to assume more assertive political positions in other Islamist organizations. Some leading Islamist activists have had their first exposure to Islamic revival in the TJ. These include Ghulam ‘Azam, amir of Bangladesh’s Jamaat-e-Islami, Rachid Ghannouchi of the Tunisian Islamic Tendency Movement, and Farid Kassim of the Hizb ut-Tahrir. In Britain, Islamists, thus, enjoy an ambiguous relationship with the TJ. While some condemn it for allegedly being apolitical and thus helping the ‘enemies of Islam’, others welcome its role in promoting Islamic awareness among Muslims and so helping the cause of Islamist movements. Thus, for instance, some Muslims associated with the Taliban in Afghanistan, which, like the TJ, has its roots in the Deobandi reformist tradition, see the TJ as playing a complimentary role. A pro-Tajul Masjid mosque, ‘Tablighi Ijtema’ gathering, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh state.

In some Muslim countries, the TJ counts among its activists several government officials, who play an important role in furthering the aims of the movement and promoting a gradual Islamization of state structures and civil society. In this way, too, the TJ has served important political functions. Thus, in Bangladesh the TJ is active among the country’s armed forces. In Pakistan, Rafiq Tarar, a TJ activist, served as president for a considerable period until he was deposed in June 2001. Mufti Mahmud, khalifa of the leading Tablighi ideologue, Muhammad Zakariya, was elected chief minister of Pakistan’s Frontier Province, playing a leading role in the agitation for the ‘prophetic system’, which led to the toppling of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Another senior TJ activist, Javed Nasir, served as the head of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence, being responsible for the formulation of Pakistan’s policy in the Afghan war. The former prime minister of the country, Nawaz Sharif, once arranged for Tariq Jamil, senior Tablighi leader, to address his cabinet on ‘the responsibilities of rulers in the light of Islamic teachings’. In his lecture, Jamil appealed to Sharif to ‘enforce an Islamic system’ similar to that in Afghanistan under the Taliban. In this way, TJ activists have not desisted from occupying important political posts and using access to power to further the cause of their movement.

As this survey suggests, the ways in which TJ activists have been implicated in politics demands a reconsideration of Tablighi apoliticalness. A more nuanced understanding, that goes beyond the level of verbal TJ discourse to reveal the political roles that it has played, shows that the TJ might well be impelled by a long-term political agenda.

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