

# The Tablighi Jama'at and Politics

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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 from them was on the appropriate means of attaining an Islamic state in the specific Indian context. In contrast to the Islamists, who called for the capture of political power to establish Islamic rule, Ilyas advocated working in a gradual manner, encouraging the reform of individual Muslims in the belief that ultimately an Islamic society, crowned with an Islamic state, would be established.

That the ultimate acquisition of political power in the future was of central importance to Ilyas's own vision of Islam is evident in the reports of his association with the Islamic leaders of his time. While Ilyas saw his movement as geared particularly towards ordinary Muslims, he was not opposed to other contemporary movements struggling for Muslim political power. He believed that the TJ and such Muslim movements were complimentary to each other. 'There should be no competition or rivalry between them', Ilyas insisted. This suggests that Ilyas's understanding of individual reform and his distance from matters related to the state can be read as reflecting an underlying division of labour—the TJ focusing on the individual, and other Muslim groups working in the political sphere. This point is acknowledged by an Indian Muslim *'alim*, who claims that the TJ's aloofness from overt political involvement is simply a temporary 'pious pragmatic policy' to enable it to promote 'Islamic consciousness' even in situations where governments may place Islamist groups under strict control.<sup>2</sup>

**The Tablighi Jama'at (TJ) is the largest Islamic 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'<sup>1</sup> 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 adjustment to the reality of the absence of an Islamic political order enabled Muslims active in the TJ to come to terms with the existence of non-Islamic regimes. For Indian Muslims this meant that they could adjust to a system of non-Islamic rule, and to what was, at least in theory, a secular political system, while hoping that by abiding by the dictates of their faith, the day might dawn when God would grant Muslims political power.

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 very heart of Delhi. As the movement has expanded to other countries where Muslims live as minorities, the TJ's disavowal of any political aims has enabled 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 life 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,

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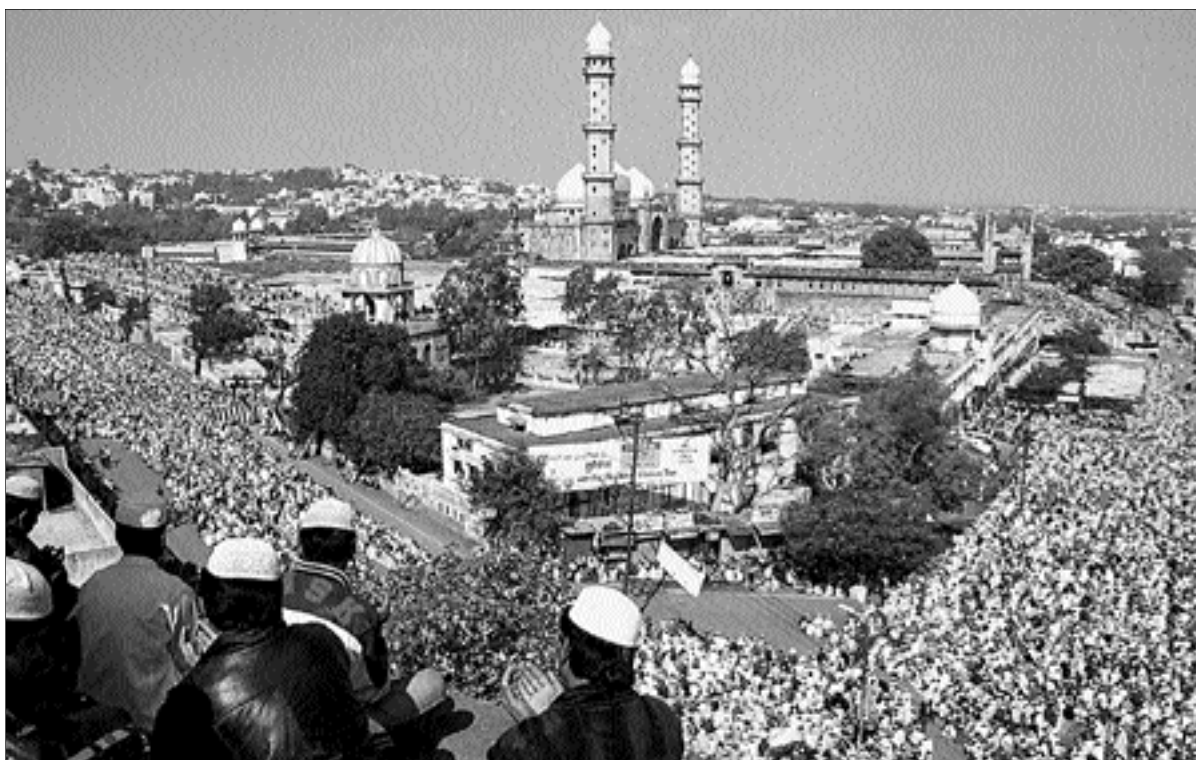
the politically quiescent nature of the TJ has won for it sharp criticism in some Muslim circles, who see this posture as calculated to serve the political interests of what are described as the 'enemies of Islam'. Some Muslims see the TJ as a tool in the hands of 'anti-Islamic' forces by helping to 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 élites 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 Jama'at-i-Islami, which, with its campaign for an Islamic political order, poses an increasingly powerful political challenge to ruling élites. 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 underground Islamic leaders to appear on the surface'. Numerous Islamist activists were able to escape state repression by joining the TJ. Recognizing the supportive role that the TJ might play vis-à-vis Islamist movements, one sympathizer writes that the TJ is silently preparing Muslims all over the world for a goal that he sees it as sharing with Islamist groups—to engage in the 'lesser jihad' or physical warfare against the 'enemies of Islam', if required, by training its activists to sacrifice their money and time for missionary work. However, he says, 'if occasion arises and if the policy is changed ... Tabligh is the Islamic movement which can call upon its dedicated followers not only to donate their time and money but also their lives to the cause of Islam'.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, another TJ supporter writes that the TJ has been 'merely laying the groundwork for a much greater mission', which includes physical jihad, if necessary, and the struggle for the establishment of an Islamic polity. In both *tabligh* and jihad, he says, one can 'perceive a congruence of aims and objectives', both being 'manifestations of the same impulse'.<sup>4</sup>

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 Jama'at-i-Islami, Rachid Ghannoushi 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-Taliban website (<http://www.almadinah.org>) also supports the TJ. Such coordination between militants and Tablighi preachers is not limited to cyberspace. Reports speak of involvement in the work of the TJ of the militant Pakistan-based Islamist Harkat ul-Mujahidin. A spokesman of the latter claims that '[o]ur people are mostly impressed by the TJ. Most of our workers come from the TJ'.<sup>5</sup>



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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.

**The Taj ul Masjid mosque, 'Tablighi Ijtema' gathering, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh state.**

## Notes

1. Muhammad Khalid Masud (ed.), *Travellers in Faith: Studies of the Tablighi Jama'at as a Transnational Islamic Movement for Faith Renewal* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), p. 97. See also Marc Gaborieau, 'Tablighi Jama'at in Politics?', *ISIM Newsletter* 3, p. 24.
2. Ashfaq Ahmad Hussain, *Maulana Wahiduddin Khan Ki Fikri Kalabaziyan*, Majlis-i Ihya-i (Hyderabad: Tauhid-o Sunnat, n.d.), p.115–34.
3. A.Z.M. Shamsul 'Alam, *The Message of Tableeg and Da'wa* (Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 1985), p. 1324.
4. <http://fx.nu/quest/movements/tabligh.html>
5. *Daghestan: Focus on Pakistan's Tablighi Jama'at—Background of Tablighi Jama'at* (<http://www.saag.org/papers/paper80.html>).

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