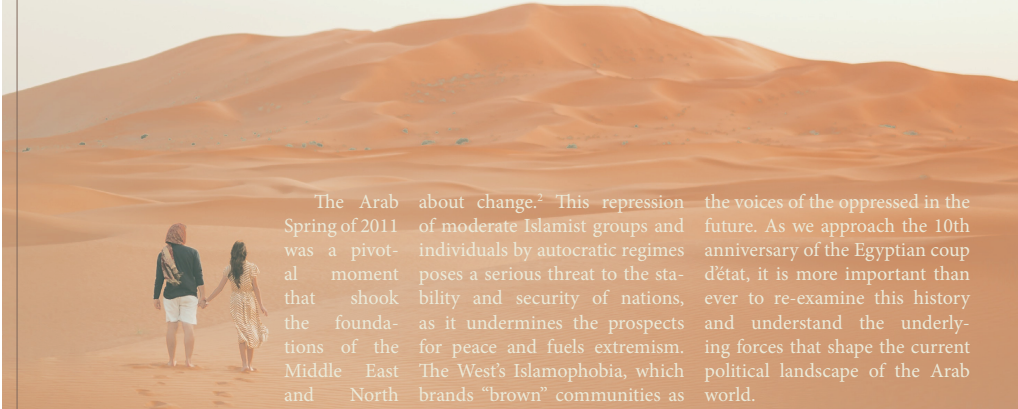


The Aftermath of the Arab Spring From Egypt to Bangladesh

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The Arab Spring of 2011 was a pivotal moment that shook the foundations of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The Egyptian Revolution, in particular, was a seismic event that marked a turning point in the region's political landscape, with the overthrow of then-president Hosni Mubarak leading to a wave of political upheaval from the Maghreb to Bengal.¹ However, the aftermath of the revolution was marred by a relentless wave of political suppression aimed at silencing the moderate Islamist movements and leaders who sought to bring

about change.² This repression of moderate Islamist groups and individuals by autocratic regimes poses a serious threat to the stability and security of nations, as it undermines the prospects for peace and fuels extremism. The West's Islamophobia, which brands "brown" communities as "terrorists," as well as the Muslim world's tendency to associate "terrorism" with anything Islamist, demonstrates the impact of colonialism on the politics of postcolonial states. This parallelism reflects the way these two worlds perceive Islam and Muslims. Those who truly consider themselves social reformers and progressive thinkers should take a hard look at the dawn of the Arab Spring and consider what went wrong, and how to protect

the voices of the oppressed in the future. As we approach the 10th anniversary of the Egyptian coup d'état, it is more important than ever to re-examine this history and understand the underlying forces that shape the current political landscape of the Arab world.

To understand the rise of Islamism, or political Islamic activism, in South Asia and the Middle East, it is important to consider the historical context of both regions during the colonial years of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Under British rule, South Asia and the Middle East were melting pots of various cultures and religions, with the Muslim population being a significant minority in the Indian subcontinent.³ The marginaliza-

tion of Muslim communities by the British spurred anti-colonial Muslim nationalism.^{3,4} In South Asia, Islamist organizations such as Jamaat-e-Islami have faced systematic repression and political imprisonment well into the modern era, as a means of neutralizing their influence.³ Similarly, in Egypt, the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent colonization by the British led to the formation of political parties that sought to expel foreign presence.⁴ The Muslim Brotherhood, the most prominent opposition group in contemporary Egypt, has also faced repression and political imprisonment throughout its existence. Despite these efforts, both organizations have remained resilient, continuing to fight for a freer and more representative society.

The groups in question have been bound together since the inception of their existence. Hassan al-Banna, who founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, was a major influence on the intellectual development of Abul A'la Maududi, the founder of Jamaat-e-Islami. Maududi was inspired by al-Banna's ideas on the integration of Islam in all aspects of society and the need for an Islamic revival.

Both organizations are also known for providing social services such as free clinics, libraries, and schools as a means of so-

cial welfare.⁵ This organizational model became popular among scholars and went on to influence political leaders of other countries like Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Maududi went on to develop his ideas on the role of Islam in society, which he outlined in his numerous writings and speeches.⁶ Specifically, his activism had a significant impact on the development of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, as he called for the establishment of a just society based on Islamic principles. He argued that the implementation of Islamic law was necessary for the preservation of justice and the promotion of welfare in the country, and those ideas continue to shape the political and cultural landscape of South Asia to this day.⁷

Jamaat-e-Islami in particular played a crucial role in unifying the relationship between East and West Pakistan. East Pakistan, which was geographically separated from West Pakistan, had a majority Bengali population and its own distinct language, culture, and history. However, West Pakistan dominated the political and economic power in the country, which led to feelings of neglect and discrimination among East Pakistanis. The Bengali language movement, which emerged in response to the promotion of Urdu as the national language in Pakistan, sparked calls for indepen-

dence from Bengalis in East Pakistan.⁸ Jamaat-e-Islami, however, did not support the effort and instead saw it as an elitist ethnocratic struggle for power in Bengal.⁹ In 1958, Jamaat-e-Islami became highly critical of the Pakistani government, largely in response to the policies of Ayub Khan, the country's second president. Khan was known for favoring the military and the elite while suppressing political opposition and civil liberties, which Jamaat-e-Islami believed went against the principles of justice claimed by the "Islamic Republic."¹⁰ During the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, Jamaat-e-Islami opposed independence for East Pakistan on the grounds of Muslim unity and the fear of a violent war, as well as India's full support and funding of the separation, which he believed would lead to a neo-colonial relationship between India and Bangladesh.¹¹ Namely, if India were to provide substantial support to Bangladesh, it could potentially exert significant influence over the new state's policies, such as trade agreements and deployment of military or economic aid; this has in fact been the case since independence.¹² Despite their unwavering support and significant contributions to the nation since its birth, Jamaat-e-Islami has been targeted by a ruthless political crackdown, fueled by unsubstantiated accu-

sations made by Hindutva India of war crimes committed during the Liberation War. This is a relentless pursuit aimed to silence any intersection of justice and activism, threatening the very essence of the organization's existence.

After Bangladesh gained independence in 1971, its government targeted Jamaat-e-Islami as a political opponent, much like the Egyptian government's targeting of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Jamaat-e-Islami leadership was arrested and the party was banned.¹² Likewise, in the 1950s in Egypt, Gamal Abdel-Nasser, the second President of Egypt who was known for his nationalist policies, took power and initially maintained a cordial relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood. However, as time passed, he perceived them as a threat to his autocratic rule and banned all political parties, cracking down on individuals he deemed political dissidents.¹³ Zainab Al Ghazali, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, shared her experiences of this period in her memoir, *Ayam min Hayati* ("Days of my Life"). In her book, she exposed the harsh crackdown on the Brotherhood and other groups, including the arrest of the Brotherhood's leadership, as well as Sayyid Qutb, a close associate of Abdel-Nasser.¹⁴ Zainab was also arrested in 1965 and exposed the violence and brutality she and other activists faced in prison.¹⁴ She characterized the crackdown as targeting "anything

Islamic," which challenged Abdel-Nasser's secularist-nationalist ideology.¹⁴

However, the crackdown achieved the opposite effect, instead galvanizing the members of the Brotherhood over time. In 2011, the Arab Spring—a series of pro-democracy uprisings supported by the Brotherhood—swept across the Arab world and had far-reaching consequences. In Egypt, it led to the election of Mohamed Morsi—a Muslim Brotherhood candidate—as President in 2012. However, his tenure was short-lived, as he was removed from office through a Western-backed military coup in 2013.¹⁵

From 6,000 kilometers away, Sheikh Hasina, the current Prime Minister of Bangladesh and the daughter of the founding leader of Bangladesh, began taking notice of the revolutions in the Arab world and initiated her own crackdown to prevent a rebellion in her lands. This crackdown in Bangladesh primarily targeted Islamic groups, just like in Egypt, where "anything Islamic" was seen as a threat to Hasina's rule. She sought to use her party to start a smear campaign during the general elections and pledged to try war criminals, which coincidentally included leadership from the opposition coalition. This was enacted through the Parliament's amending of the International Crimes (Tribunal) Act of 1973 to try 195 war criminals from the 1971 War. This act was previously not executed due

to the Delhi Agreement, a tripartite agreement signed to officially end the Bangladesh Liberation War and facilitate the repatriation of Pakistani prisoners of war from India.¹⁶ The original list did not include any leadership from Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, but an "updated" list in 2013 did. The trials resulted in several convictions and sentences, including life imprisonment and the death penalty, such as the hanging of 73-year-old Motiur Rahman Nizam (the leader of Bangladeshi Jamaat-e-Islami from 2000 until his execution).

The 2013 International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) in Bangladesh faced significant criticism both domestically and internationally. The trials were proved to have been politically motivated, with a lack of due process and fair trial.¹⁷ The verdicts were based on circumstantial evidence, and the prosecution relied heavily on hearsay, which was rejected in other fair trial jurisdictions.¹⁸ The corruption in the trials was exemplified by the infamous Skype scandal, in which one of the judges was caught having private conversations with a prosecution witness through the online platform about critical information regarding the case.⁹

Following the trial and during Nizami's time in jail awaiting his death sentence, he was reported to have been heavily mistreated, including being denied access to proper medical care and being held in inhumane conditions.¹⁹ Around the same

time in Egypt, Mohamed Morsi was arrested and placed in prison, where he would die on June 17, 2019.²⁰ Despite being shuttled between court cases and not being found guilty of any charges, Morsi maintained his position as the constitutionally legitimate and democratically elected President of Egypt.²¹ Throughout his imprisonment, he also reported being denied medical treatment, visits from his family, and access to legal representation. International observers believe that these conditions contributed to his death.²²

The repression by political authorities extended beyond opposition leaders to also target the general population. Targeted activities ranged from committed membership and local leadership in political groups to mere sympathizers and protestors against the regime. For example, one committed Brotherhood member, who was arrested in 2013 after the Rab'aa massacre—in which over a thousand people were killed by Egyptian security forces—detailed how he was targeted by security forces on false charges. He explained that he was charged with handling explosives during protests, with no evidence presented to him, to which his reaction was a sarcastic retort: "Do you think if I was handling explosives any of you would be here today?" In Bangladesh, Human Rights Watch reported similar incidents of government authorities using "arbitrary arrests, detentions, and enforced

disappearances" against opposition party supporters, including Jamaat-e-Islami members.²³ The Bangladesh Rifles massacre, during which 74 people were killed, has been widely criticized as politically motivated, with many of the victims being supporters of Jamaat-e-Islami and its student wing.²⁴ Additionally, journalists who have reported critically on the government's actions have been targeted, with some being arrested or disappearing.²⁵

These stories of activists in both Egypt and Bangladesh provide insight into the brutal military policing by authoritarian regimes, which learned these techniques of violence and suppression from their colonial predecessors. In British-occupied Egypt and British India, those who rebelled against colonial rule were often subjected to brutal treatment in prisons. This included the use of torture, solitary confinement, forced labor, physical abuse, and starvation.²⁶ Over a century later, similar tactics were used in 2013 by both countries' governments, with little being done to hold them accountable.

To this day, many autocratic regimes continue to target pro-democracy groups and individuals who oppose their rule, owing to their domestic popularity and potential to establish an alternative system of governance. While the legal spaces of each country had enabled limited activism in the past, the level of brutality and repression has reached

an extreme high since the Arab Spring. Thus, the disproportionate crackdown on moderate and democratic parties by militaristic regimes is a threat to the stability and security of these nations and will only fuel extremism in the long run. By targeting moderate groups, these regimes risk pushing citizens towards more violent and radical organizations, ultimately undermining the prospects for peace and stability in the region.

The disparate and unjust treatment of activists in these countries serves as a reminder of the long-term effects of oppressive regimes, as well as the continued struggle of those seeking freedom and justice in the Arab world and beyond. Through the torture and criminal conditions of these prisoners and martyrs, the movement lives on in the hearts of those who stay loyal to the oppressed.

