
Grass-root Activism and Political Islam: A Comparative Analysis of Islamic Revivalist Movements in Jammu and Kashmir, and Turkey

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Abstract:

This paper examines Grass-root Activism as the decisive factor in determining the fate and practical achievements of political Islam and the Islamic revivalist movements. However, the point of focus will be mainly on the Islamic movements of Turkey (Welfare Party, Virtue Party and AKP) and Jammu and Kashmir (Jama'at-i-Islami Jammu and Kashmir). Within a comparative framework, the paper traces the methodological trajectories which act as the tool of success or failure of these two movements to gain a social momentum.

Key words: Grass-root Activism, Political Islam, Social movement, AKPT (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi Turkey), JIJK (Jama'at-i-Islami Jammu and Kashmir).

Grass-root Activism, in the political terminology, can be understood as a method of campaigning or politics at its most fundamental level for gaining the majority public support in order to change the political climate existing at the upper level. It is a methodology of activists 'combining different strategies

and tactics to win people's hearts and minds and then their votes.¹

Grass-root activism has proved to be a decisive factor in determining the fate of Political Islam or Islamic Revivalist movements across the globe. The same will be substantiated by analyzing the methodological trajectories of Islamic revivalist movements in two regions i.e., Jammu and Kashmir, and Turkey. It will be studied how variation in the application of grass-root activism of these movements has been directly proportional to their achievements and failures.

Political Islam is one of the important and energetic phenomenon of twentieth century as numerous Islamic revivalist movements sprang across the globe. The key ideological foundation of theirs is 'establishment of Islamic State.' However, while pursuing the same goal, they have been adhering to different methodologies. Some of them clicking to fundamentalist trends, while the others opting for moderate and democratic methods. Some believing in non-transformation of ideology and methodology, while the others making tactical methodological transformations, but maintaining ideological consistency. The movements under the study belong to the latter category.

Nevertheless, their different methodological trajectories and variation of Grass-root activism resulted in the difference in their practical achievements. While on the one hand, JIJK's dearth of grass-root activism making it comparatively less effective social movement and failing in becoming a mass movement even though influencing a committed cadre from literate section mostly from rural areas and also failing in coming into political power. On the other hand, the phenomenal credentials of Turkish Islamic movements for becoming mass movement has been mainly because of their effective nature as

¹ Kayhan Dalibas, "Conceptualizing Islamic Movements: The Case of Turkey", *International Political Science Review / Revue internationale de science politique*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Jan., 2009), P. 98.

social movements and for gaining political power in recent years, due to their strong grass-root activism.

While comparing the two, it can be admitted beyond doubt that JIJK highlighted the social issues like unemployment, food and electricity problems of the people of the state. They also raised their voice against the social evils like the free sale of alcohol in the state.² However, barring few cases, JIJK could not practically do strong influential contribution in terms of grass-root activism and as an effective social movement as compared to the Islamic movements in Turkey.

Social movements are a key feature of modern and post-industrial societies. From a structural-functionalist perspective they are defined as "collective attempts to restore, protect or create values [or norms] in the name of a generalized belief."³ By and large JIJKs' social works lacked consistent field work approach and mostly remained confined to resolutions, Assembly walk outs, *Ijtemas* (conferences).

It was only few occasions when JIJK on ground performed social role, for instance in 1963, a vast area of the central District of Kashmir valley, Budgam was rocked by a series of earthquakes. The JIJK moved forward to provide relief in cash and kind, collected through donation raising campaign, to the victims without any discrimination whatsoever. The volunteers of the Organization came forward and set up shelters for those whose houses had been badly damaged.⁴

Similarly, during the year 1978 mysterious fires which continually broke out for months together destroyed hundreds of residential houses thus rendering thousands homeless. In that situation also the JIJK rose to the occasion and, collecting

² Sarwat Jamal, *Qisa-i-Dard*, (Srinagar: Mizan Publications, 1986), p. 62.

³ Neil Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behaviour* (New York: Free Press, 1962), p. 303. Cited in Kayhan Dalibas, "Conceptualizing Islamic Movements: The Case of Turkey", *International Political Science Review / Revue internationale de science politique*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Jan., 2009), p. 91.

considerable relief in cash and kind, distributed it among the sufferers to help them rehabilitate. The relief in kind included cloth, bedding, building material, household commodities and medicines. The recipients of Jama'at relief as usual included the non-Muslim residents of Sangrampora, Sopore.⁵

In the same way, in 1973, the JIJK through its volunteers distributed relief among the victims of the destructive floods of that year. This relief, a matter of social and religious obligation, was also provided to the non-Muslim brothers of Kaloosa Bandipora whose houses had been washed away.⁶

In the severe floods of September-October, 1988 in the valley, JIJK distributed 100 Quintal rice among flood stricken people irrespective of any religious and sectarian discrimination.⁷ Similarly, on 12 October 1988 it distributed 2500 Quintal rice as kind and 45000 rupees in cash among the affected masses irrespective of religious distinctions.⁸ Furthermore, JIJK's sub-wing at Pulwama distributed 35 Quintal rice and 10,000 rupees among the flood stricken people.⁹

However, the above mentioned on-field social work conducted by JIJK were the only such cases where JIJK was involved in ground level social work. It was only on these few occasions that JIJK practically tried to mitigate sufferings of the people by providing them relief. Except the above stated instances, by and large JIJK failed to use such strategies on consistent and full-fledged basis.¹⁰ JIJK failed in converting

⁴ Younus Rashid, "The Mission to Enlighten People", in Op-Ed, Greater Kashmir, Srinagar, Wednesday, 13 May 2009.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Azan, 7 October, 1988.

⁸ Ibid., 13 October, 1988.

⁹ Ibid., 12 October, 1988

¹⁰ An observation based on an extensive study of the official Organ 'Azan' of JIJK, which as a primary source substantiates that JIJK social work, except very few instances, mostly remained confined to their resolutions, conventions, conferences etc. and lacked field work and grass root activism.

people's grievances into mass agitation movements which could have helped JIJK to further penetrate deep down the society.

Syed Ali Shah Geelani while acknowledging the fact of comparative failure as an effective social movement of JIJK said, "As compared to Turkish Islamic Movements and Ikhwan-ul-Muslimun of Egypt, JIJK could not do an effective social work in terms of practically solving the problems of people as a result of non-availability of resources due to continued state repression."¹¹

Role of JIJK pertaining to women on practical grounds has remained too little. Though they highlight sometimes the rights of women in their official organ, Azan and, organize occasional women conferences.¹² But, by and large, JIJK practical contribution regarding women has not been that much substantial as during the period of the study JIJK had only three female *Arkans* (primary members) namely Fatimah, Aabida Firdoos and Farida Jan. It is surprising that at least the wives of the Male Arkan should have been brought under the circle. Throughout, the JIJK remained solidly a male bastion, although some attention seems to have been devoted to bringing women into the movement but practically no substantial achievement was attained perhaps also due to prevailing conservative social system.

Even Jama'at run schools could not maintain their standards of quality education with the passage of time. Due to its continued lower fee scale it could not catch industrious, high qualified and dedicated teachers. In the words of Syed Ali Shah Geelani, "With the passage of time, it was the rejected lot from the other school who filled the posts of JIJK schools on low pay scale and in the subsequent times Jama'at schools felt a real paucity of such teachers who earlier on had been enthusiastic despite their low pay". In an interview with Suhail Ahmad Wani, an ex-student of Noor-ul-Islam, a Jama'at run school at

¹¹ An Interview with Syed Ali Shah Geelani, Srinagar, on 15.10.2013.

¹² Azan, 7 Feb. 1980, May 22, 1980; 18 June 1980; 3 July 1980; 9 April, 1981.

Baramulla, he while speaking on the standard of JIJK schools recapitulated his school days and in a disappointed expression recounted that, “despite being taught Arabic up to tenth standard students of Jamaat schools including me could not get any command on Arabic except knowing few Arabic names of certain objects and JIJK schools lagged behind in extra curriculum activities”.¹³

The ‘Always with you Approach’ pertaining to people was missing on ground level, which proved to be one of the serious methodological short comings in JIJK. As it could never become a social movement in real sense as compared to Turkish Islamic movements which penetrated deep down as mass movements in their respective countries as they successfully maintained their social character.

Now turning towards the Turkish Islamic movements, it can be said in the contextual background that since the early 1980s Turkey has experienced mass migration accompanied by high level unemployment and inflation, with rampant corruption. While urbanization began in the 1950s, the process was accelerated with the political adoption of an economic privatization program on the basis of International Monetary Fund restructuring projects in the 1980s.¹⁴

As a result of the implementation of neoliberal restructuring policies, especially the privatization of public companies, millions of workers lost their jobs, wage-earners experienced a drop of over 50 percent in real income, and the GDP contribution of the agricultural sector (employing 43 percent of the workforce) fell from 28 to 14 percent. The *gecekond* (slum) areas expanded as a consequence of intensified rural migration to the cities. By 1995 it was estimated that 10 million people (35 percent of the total urban

¹³ An interview with Suhail Ahmad Wani (ex-student Noor-ul-Islam), Baramulla, on 05. 02. 2014.

¹⁴ For more details see, Danielson, N. Michael and Keles, Rusen (1985). *The Politics of Rapid Urbanisation: Government and Growth in Modern Turkey*. London: Holmes & Meier.

population) lived in *gecekondu* areas¹⁵ and faced unemployment and poverty, poor housing, and inadequate schooling and health services. These economic and social outcomes, affecting the most vulnerable groups in society, reflect the fact that most governments failed to solve the country's serious socioeconomic problems.¹⁶

The consequence of economic liberalization policies, a series of economic crises and the inability of the political system to adapt to the changing political dynamics, led to increasing support of the marginal Islamic parties.¹⁷ The Welfare Party (WP) emerged in this context, replacing the banned National Salvation Party (NSP) in 1983 as the voice of political Islamism. Public support for the WP was manifest for the first time in 1987, when it won a modest 7.5 percent of the vote, rising to 9.8 percent in the 1989 local elections.¹⁸ At this time, the Turkish party system was highly fragmented on both left and right. In the 1994 local elections, the WP emerged as a significant political force, winning 19.1 percent of the vote. In the general election the following year (1995), the WP won 21.4 percent of the vote, and formed a government with the center-right secularist party, True Path Party (TPP), which lasted for a year. While in government, the WP came into increasing conflict with the military and was charged with anti-secular activities. This resulted in the party being banned in 1998 by the Supreme Court for violating the principle of secularism and breaking the rules governing political parties. Its place in the political spectrum was quickly filled by the Virtue Party (VP), which garnered 15.5 percent support in the 1999 general

¹⁵ Emre Kongar, *21. Yüzyılda Türkiye* (Turkey in the 21st Century) (Istanbul: Remzi Kitapevi, 2000), p. 566.

¹⁶ Dalibas, op. cit., p. 97.

¹⁷ Meliha Benli Altunisik, "The Turkish Model and Democratization" in the Middle East, *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. ½ (winter/spring 2005), p. 49.

¹⁸ For a brief introduction to Turkey's Islamist political parties, see URL (consulted 27 July 2008): <http://meria.biu.ac.il/journal/1999/issue3/jv3n3a4.html>.

election. The VP suffered the same fate as the WP, and was banned for anti-secular activities in 2001. Within the VP, a struggle for power had taken place between progressive and conservative factions. The successor Islamist party, the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (or AK Parti, the Justice and Development Party) was founded by the progressive wing, under the leadership of ex-Istanbul Mayor Recep T. Erdogan.¹⁹

The pro-Islamist WP/VP emerged from the 1980s onward as the champion of the poor, uprooted migrants of the *gecekondu* and the lower middle class. It developed socioeconomic policies that voiced the concerns of the urban under classes, artisans, merchants, and small shopkeepers. From the early days of its founding, the WP and its successors made ingenious use of the traditional religious networks and cultural resources, tapping into deep-rooted solidarity organizations that had survived for many generations. In discourse, for example, WP activists used the language of Islam in their everyday interactions, corresponding with the daily vocabulary of local communities. Their use of references to God (Allah), his Prophet, or other religious persons, and their citation of passages from the Koran, resonated with the belief system of shanty town residents. This also reconfigured the traditional political culture, especially in relation to religious issues, social justice, and equality, and was articulated through the party's "Just Order" socioeconomic policies. Its successor party, the VP, was later to appropriate this culture in "Just Society" policies putting a greater emphasis on Islamic brotherhood.²⁰

The WP/VP, then, voiced demands for equality, justice, and democracy for the millions of urban poor badly affected by the neoliberal agenda promoted by the globalization process. As the neoliberal restructuring policies undermined Turkey's economy, the urban poor became increasingly politicized and

¹⁹ Dalibas, op. cit., p. 97.

²⁰ Dalibas, op. cit., pp. 97-98.

sought to protest against this process. The pro-Islamist WP/VP emerged as the champion of the urban poor and disaffected..... The WP/VP, with its vast and well-organized grassroots organizations, emerged as the major winner in the reconfiguration of Turkish politics. Support for the party doubled from 15 percent in 1999 to 34 percent in 2002, when it won 64 percent of parliamentary seats.²¹

Since coming to government in 2002, the Islamic party AKP has mostly taken palliative steps to address income inequality, unemployment, and poverty. These measures have taken the form of organizing charity work, distributing coal in winter, and donating occasional food rations in the poorest neighborhoods.²²

In 2006 the committee created within the State Planning Office to develop poverty reduction policies suggested that they might utilize *zekat* (alms) as one means of poverty reduction.²³ Their activism is a year round activity. They visit households on all social occasions and offer help in times of crisis, showing solidarity, compassion, and sympathy. The provision of material benefits is the primary activity (37 percent) of the VP's neighborhood committees. These benefits include the supply of food, coal, clothing, bursaries for school children, health care and medical aid, assisting people to find jobs, or solving problems in the government offices, reflecting the dire socioeconomic conditions of the urban poor.²⁴

It appears that grassroots activists effectively combine social work and political activism. Due to their community work the activists are viewed as compassionate people, sincerely caring about the problems of their local community and acting

²¹ Ibid., p. 98.

²² Milliyet, "İs,te AKP yardımlarınının faturası" (Here Is the Cost of the AKP's Charity Works), URL (consulted Feb. 12, 2007): <http://www.milliyet.com/2007/07/21/siyaset/axsiy03.html>, July 21, 2007.

²³ Sabah, "Yoksulluğ'a çözüm: Zekât market" (The Solution for Poverty: Alms Market), March 12, 2006, URL (consulted Dec. 9, 2007): <http://arsiv.sabah.com.tr/2006/03/24/eko130.html>.

²⁴ Dalibas, op. cit., p. 98.

as spokespersons for that community while engaging with officialdom. With this combination of social work and a caring image, the WP/VP has been elevated to the level of “a messiah in the making.”²⁵

One of the most important characteristics of the WP/VP is that it combines both modern and traditional means of communication, which has effectively created such a positive political results.²⁶

With the exception of a few Islamic organizations (such as Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and Islamic Jihad), Islamic movements are not driven by religious zealotry, bigotry, or hatred of the West or the US. In most cases, they are organizations reacting against the consequences of globalization, neoliberal capitalism, political problems, and the lack of accountability and democracy in Muslim countries, and they are not terrorist in nature.²⁷

The Islamic movement in Turkey shows that it was grassroots activism rather than religious fundamentalism that led to the ascendancy of political Islam to power in the 1990s. The WP/VP as a modern mass party made its way into government neither by simply being Islamic fundamentalists, nor by exploiting religious values and rhetoric, but by winning the hearts and minds of millions of voters with its effective and efficient election campaigns, carried out by its local party organizations. It has been observed that party organizations and grassroots activists are highly influential in improving the party's electoral fortunes.²⁸

Thus the success of political Islam in Turkey was also an expression of people's dissatisfaction with the performance of the parties in power. The incapability of the nationalist development project and social democratic parties to satisfy the needs of the impoverished and marginalized classes and

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 98-99.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 99.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 100.

eliminate economic imbalances together with high inflation, increasing unemployment, and corruption also contributed to the success of the Islamist parties, which promised social justice, economic efficiency, and cultural autonomy.²⁹ WP, expanded its constituency horizontally and vertically into the ruling institutions by stressing identity and social justice.³⁰

To conclude, it could be said that the Grass-root Activism is a significant tool in determining the success or failure of political Islam. This has been substantiated by the comparative analysis of Islamic revivalist movements of Jammu and Kashmir, and Turkey. The relative dearth of grass root activism in case of JJK becomes a stumbling block for it in order to gain mass acceptability and to be in the driver's seat of the political state. On the other hand, the effective grass root activism has not only helped Turkish Islamic movements to become mass movements, it has also been instrumental in getting them the political keys.

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²⁹ Ziya Onis, "The Political Economy of Islamic Resurgence in Turkey: The Rise of the Welfare

Party in Perspective," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (1997), p. 745.

³⁰ M. Hakan Yavuz Political Islam and the Welfare (Refah) Party in Turkey *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Oct., 1997), p. 80.

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