

The case for Jamaat's apology

by Kazi ASM Nurul Huda

SHOULD Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami be permitted to engage in politics without first addressing its role in the 1971 liberation war? This question takes on heightened significance in light of the 2024 mass uprising. If Jamaat is sincere about its desire to participate in the current political landscape, offering an apology appears essential. Without such a gesture, can the party genuinely claim moral authority to demand accountability from the Bangladesh Awami League for its actions during the 2024 uprising? This might explain why Jamaat's amir, seemingly without provocation, suggested that the Awami League should be forgiven for its involvement in recent events, though he later denied making such a statement. Perhaps he recognised the inherent contradiction in calling for accountability while Jamaat itself remains unrepentant about its past. If this stance is a strategic manoeuvre, it appears Machiavellian at its core, designed more to deflect criticism than to advance genuine reconciliation. However, I contend that this approach ultimately undermines Jamaat's long-term interests. I will outline four intertwined reasons — ontological, epistemological, ethical, and socio-political — to support this claim.

Ontologically, Jamaat must apologise for its role in 1971 if it wishes to avoid being categorised in the same way Awami League is now being criticised for its role in the 2024 uprising. The distinction between the two events is important. The 2024 movement is a protest against an increasingly authoritarian government, where the line between party and state has blurred. The uprising has been a call for good governance, founded on the collective will of the people.

However, 1971 was a different matter entirely. It was a fight for independence, a fight for a homeland for Bengalis and other ethnic minorities, sparked by the denial of power transfer

after the 1970 elections. This is fundamentally different from the fraudulent elections of 2014, 2018, and 2024, which were carried out under the supervision of the Awami League-led government. While 1971 birthed a nation based on promises of social justice and freedom from discrimination, the 2024 uprising has raised hopes for liberation from authoritarianism. Yet, despite the importance of 2024, its significance pales in comparison to 1971. If I were to create an equation, it might look like this: 1971 (= independent land + potential for good governance) > 2024 (= potential for good governance).

Any political party that opposes the collective will for good governance by committing mass atrocities must apologise if it wishes to remain in politics. By this logic, the Awami League should indeed apologise for its actions in 2024. Without such an apology, reintegrating the Awami League into mainstream politics would risk repeating the post-1971 scenario where Jamaat never apologised for its liberation wartime atrocities. If the Awami League owes the nation an apology for 2024, then Jamaat owes it several times over for its active collaboration with Pakistan in 1971. Without an apology, Jamaat should not be allowed a political platform.

That said, Jamaat's apology should not depend on whether the Awami League apologises, for two reasons. First, even if we strip away the potential for good governance from both 1971 and 2024, 1971 still results in an independent country. A party that fought for independence and one that fought against it are not, and never will be, equal. Their wrongs are not equivalent. Second, the wrongs of 1971 pre-date those of 2024. Even if the 2024 uprising had never occurred, Jamaat would still need to apologise for its role in 1971.

Epistemologically, Jamaat's failure to apologise brings into question the legitimacy of the state and public trust.

A genuine apology acknowledges past wrongs, takes responsibility, and expresses remorse. In 1971, Jamaat not only opposed Bangladesh's independence but actively participated in atrocities, signalling its rejection of the very legitimacy of the new nation. The people of the then East Pakistan, by contrast, bestowed legitimacy upon Bangladesh. Without admitting their wrongdoing, Jamaat cannot convincingly claim that it now respects Bangladesh's legitimacy. How can they participate in politics in a country whose legitimacy they opposed? Moreover, politics requires public trust, which can be earned if Jamaat acknowledges its past and expresses genuine remorse. Until they do, questions about state legitimacy and public trust will persist.

This naturally leads to the ethical and political dimensions of the argument. Ethically, an apology is essential for healing a nation. Apologies are owed by those who have caused harm. Jamaat's role in 1971 was not merely a human error; it was intentional and strategic. This makes them ethically accountable. A genuine apology, one that recognises their responsibility and expresses a commitment not to repeat the same mistakes, is essential for Jamaat to continue as a political actor in the country where they caused such profound harm. During the 2024 uprising, Jamaat refrained from similar transgressions, which could indicate an intention to avoid past errors. However, merely refraining from wrongdoing is not enough; it is also necessary to accept responsibility and explicitly commit to avoiding similar transgressions, as sometimes words are as important as actions. Without such acknowledgement, it is difficult to trust that they will not repeat their mistakes in the future.

Moral responsibility arises when one fails to act according to their capacity. By refusing to apologise, Jamaat is failing its moral responsibility as a political party. This failure is twofold:

first, their betrayal in 1971, and second, their current refusal to accept responsibility for it.

Socio-politically, reconciliation is impossible without redemption, and redemption requires a sincere apology. Reconciliation is crucial for a society still grappling with the legacy of conflict. A genuine apology must meet certain conditions: acknowledging wrongs, accepting responsibility, expressing regret, and committing to avoiding future wrongdoings, among others. This is how a guilty party gains public trust, which is essential for political participation. Without public trust, there can be no reconciliation, and without reconciliation, a post-conflict society cannot move forward. Jamaat's apology is not only necessary for the nation's healing but also for their own survival as a political entity. Without it, they cannot regain the trust needed to re-enter mainstream politics, where they are still viewed with suspicion for their role in the mass atrocities of 1971.

In fine, the question of whether Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami should engage in politics without first addressing its role in the 1971 liberation war is critical for the country's political future. A sincere apology is not just a moral obligation for Jamaat but a prerequisite for its legitimacy and effectiveness in contemporary politics. By failing to acknowledge its past, Jamaat risks undermining its own position while also perpetuating a cycle of distrust and division within society. As Bangladesh grapples with the legacy of its turbulent history, reconciliation demands accountability. For Jamaat to regain public trust and promote genuine political engagement, it must confront its past with honesty and integrity. Only then can it hope to play a constructive role in a democratic Bangladesh.

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