

# THE VANGUARD OF THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION: THE JAMA'AT-I-ISLAMI OF PAKISTAN

*Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, University of California Press,  
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This book offers an explanation. In the wake of the events that unfolded during the previous couple of years on the Pakistani political scene, this explanation was much needed. Especially at a time when Islamic revival movements in many countries make head lines and the changes in the strategies of Jama' at-i-Islami --- one of the oldest and most influential Islamic revival movements--- and responses to contemporary issues are being constantly debated in various circles.

Opinions keep oscillating between pious platitudes about the “return of the golden age of Islam/pristine glory of early Islam” and the cut and dry processes of the social scientist that analyze revivalism in terms of socio-economic factors and pressures of geopolitical influences. Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr strikes a balance. Faithful to his training as a social scientist at the MIT he has examined the origins, historical development and political strategies of Jama' at-i-Islami from its inception uptill 1993. As he himself explains in the preface: “Central to any effort to understand the Jama' at is an examination of its ideological foundations, social basis, organizational structure, and politics. We need to discover what led the Jama' at to embrace revivalism and what promoted and sustained the party's political activism, charted its development, and determined the nature and scope of its impact on Pakistan's politics. The nature of the state's reaction to Islamic revivalism, from confrontation to accommodation to incorporation, is also of direct relevance. This hook probes how Mawdudi's vision was articulated and how it shaped the Jama' at's political agenda and plan of action, influenced the development of the Pakistani state, and changed in the face of political imperatives”.

Accordingly, the book is divided into three parts. Part one **History** and Development traces the history of the jama'at, with reference to the ideology

of Mawlana Mawadudi, in two chapters entitled “The quest for a Holy Community” and “From Holy Community to Political Party”. Part two **Structure and Social Base** largely provides information about the “Organization” and “Social Base” of the Jama’at. Part three **Politics** forms the most important, and to a certain extent, controversial body of the text.

Founded in 1941, the Jama’ at-i Islami, or Islamic Party, soon became the most prominent political party in Pakistan. As the first political movement to develop systematically an Islamic ideology and agenda for societal transformation, the party became active during the partition of India and it continues to be a potent force in Pakistan and throughout the Islamic world. The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution offers an insightful analysis of the Jama’ at-i Islami, focusing on the inherent tension between its central idealized vision of the nation as a holy community based on Islamic law, and its political agenda of socioeconomic change for Pakistani society. Nasr identifies the significant issues in the politics of India’s Muslim community that inspired the Jama’ at-i Islami on the eve of Partition, and he goes beyond the exploration of a single party to examine the diverse sociopolitical roots of contemporary Islamic revivalism. He informs us:

“The unity of this book is not purely chronological, though it relies on chronology. It is conceived rather in consideration of those themes that explain the phenomenon of the jama’at, namely, its historical development, organization and social base, and politics. After a brief history of the party and a discussion of the pattern of its historical development, the analytical narrative takes up specific themes of importance in explaining both the power and political limitations of the Jama’ at: its organization and social base, and the nature of its political activism as reflected in its relations with successive governments. The story of the Jama’ at is told here as the implications of each of these for the sociopolitical role of that party are identified.”

The book is based on personal interviews and archival research in Pakistan, India, Britain, and the United States and its detailed account provides a wealth of new material and original analysis. Nasr’s work challenges many of the standard interpretations about political expressions of Islam: For example, “ever since the advent of the Iranian revolution Western scholarship has been convinced that revivalism is inherently antistate. This is

not necessarily the case. The Jama'at is the first instance of Islamic revivalism that participates in the political process, rather than trying to topple it. Its development tells much about how Islamic revivalism will interact with democratic forces across the Muslim world in the coming years. Western scholarship has also assumed that Islamic revivalism, once unleashed, will control Muslim political choices. This again is not supported by the facts at hand. The Jama'at's ideology and activism have been important in Pakistani politics and to revivalism across the Muslim world, but the party has failed to seize power in Pakistan. It can be credited with forming a national alliance that has been advocating the cause of Islam in Pakistan for four decades; it has helped create a distinctly Islamic voting bloc; it has institutionalized religiopolitical action, and sacralized national political discourse. It has contributed to the Islamization of Pakistan and has helped shape Pakistan's history since 1947; it has had a role in the outcome of social movements and political events and is likely to continue to do so. Still, it has been unable to capture power. This is significant, because Islamic revivalism is not supposed to suffer from political constrictions of any sort. That the party has not been the principal beneficiary of the Islamization it has encouraged does not detract from its role in determining what change occurred in Pakistan, nor does it relegate the Jama'at to the status of an anachronism. This suggests that Islamic ideology, in and of itself, does not explain what place Islamic revivalism has in the politics of contemporary Muslim societies. Whatever accounts for the rise of revivalism, it is not the same as what sustains, or expands, its influence. One set of factors bears on the preconditions for the rise of revivalism as an ideology; a different set of factors controls its transformation into a social movement and the direction that movement subsequently takes".

The author distinguishes those factors that account for the Jama'at's strength from those that account for its limited success as a political power. The corollary, of course, is to determine why the first set favored, while the second hindered, its rise. The set of factors are the events and historical processes that produced the Jama'at and later led to its enfranchisement and participation in the political process: the nature of the state's reaction to the Jama'at's drive for power; competition with other Islamic parties in the political arena; and the incongruities in the Jama'at's ideology and organizational structure. In examining these variables, four inter-related

concerns have governed the heuristic aim of this study. They are the nature of the linkage between ideology and politics in the theory and practices of revivalist movements; the extent and nature of the influence of socioeconomic imperatives on social action and political change; the implications of revivalism for political change; and the dialectic of the historical and teleological development of ideological movements, especially within the political process. These four also relate the findings of this study on Islamic revivalism to larger theoretical concerns in the social sciences.

The book grew out of the Ph. D. thesis of the author which also contained a detailed description, and of course analysis, of the life and works of Mawlana Mawdudi. This part made up the companion volume which, we have been informed, is also forthcoming under a separate title. Mawlana Mawdudi has three distinct, though interdependent roles; a scholar of Islamic studies, a revivalist leader and a thinker who offered a new vision or interpretation of Islam. This interpretation differed a great deal from the two earlier visions that had dominated the Muslim intellectuality ever since the advent of Islam, namely, the legal-jurist and the philosophical--mystical visions of Islam. The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution has offered us glimpses of that new interpretation through its operations and applications in the arena of political activity. Let us hope that the forthcoming volume would provide us with a much needed direct and detailed analysis of this extremely important aspect of Mawlana Mawdudi's thought which has proved to be pervasive all over the Muslim world and which has served as the world view which informed the revivalist movements and lent them their drive and motivating force.

**Muhammad Suheyl Umar**